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Shake the hand that feeds you

NCR Editorial Staff | Mar. 15, 2012

The unholy alliance between the nation?s industrial farming and food systems, dominated by fast food chains and big grocery stores offering processed, chemical-burdened food, wreaks havoc with the environment, our health, farmers and workers. Despite nutritionists? warnings, every day 75 million Americans feasting at uniform franchises ?supersize? their meals and undermine their health.

More than 40 percent of our meals now are purchased and consumed outside the home, consisting mostly of high-calorie, low-nutrition soft drinks, low- quality meat packed by immigrant labor, food laden with fat, cheap sweeteners, chemical additives, excessive salt and pesticide residues. Three-fourths of America?s food comes through national grocery chains, big-box stores, or those fast food emporiums.

The good news: The other quarter now comes to us through community-based, independently owned and operated innovations in food and farming, an alternative system that has developed over the last two decades and continues growing, one that supports family farms, sustainable, humane practices, and keeps profits at home.

The number of farmers? markets has tripled since 1995, with an increase of 16 percent more markets a year. Community-supported agriculture projects (CSAs) have grown from 60 in 1990 to more than 4,000 now. Backyard, school and community gardens sprout everywhere, along with entrepreneur efforts that add value to basic foods -- sausages, salsas, pesto or jams, for example. Even home canning has made a comeback.

Another piece of this system links local small farms as supplier to nearby institutions -- farm to schools, farm to restaurants, and even farm to religious congregations.

It?s an ?occupy? movement, as citizens become aware then wrest back control of their food from agribusiness.

Catholics, from top to bottom, have been a part of this growth.

A year ago, the U.S. bishops? Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development launched a program called First Fridays for Food Security. The idea is for people on the first Friday of each month to eat meals that cost only as much as the USDA?s Modified Thrifty Food Plan would allow for a family of your size. That plan is how the USDA calculates assistance under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly called food stamps. It?s $19.74 a day for a family of four, two adults and two children under the age of 12 or a bit over $11 a day for two adults.

A pamphlet from the bishops? department explaining the program notes, ?Many individuals or families may notice a disparity between the cost of their normal meals and the amount allotted in the food plan. The ?cutting back? that will likely be required in order to stay ?in budget? can be considered a form of fasting.?

The upcoming spring issue of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference?s *Catholic Rural Life* magazine will focus on their longtime and popular campaign, ?Eating is a moral act.? Part of the issue will highlight parishes that support family farms and sustainable agriculture in food purchasing decisions.

Many parishes go even further. Two in Madison, Wis., offered events in January that explored the connections between food, faith and farming. Markets were held at St. Thomas Aquinas and at Our Lady Queen of Peace that featured local farmers selling their goods, including eggs, cheese, maple syrup, preserves, produce, soaps and meats. A portion of proceeds benefited an emergency fund for Wisconsin farm families. Chef Steffi Culberson of Sustainable Bites served brunch, creating the meals using many of the local products available at the markets.

At St. Giles Parish in Oak Park, Ill., St. Rose of Lima in Murfreesboro, Tenn., St. Mary in Corvallis, Ore., and St. Albert the Great in Sun Prairie, Wis., farmers? markets and other food events offered parishioners meat and poultry, apples, honey, sauces, salsas and fresh produce. At St. Elizabeth Parish in Wyandotte, Mich., parishioners can sign up for shares in a locally raised, grass-fed cow and a food buying co-op supplied by Amish farmers.

The pancake breakfast ranks with the ice cream social as a reliable fundraiser. St. Sebastian Parish in Milwaukee this month featured a breakfast made with locally-sourced ingredients washed down with fair-trade coffee. After the breakfast, attendees could browse a farmers? market featuring parishioner growers and a miller of organic grains. ?Shake the hand that feeds you? was the motto at their CSA sign-up table.

?If we are to have a more just and sustainable food system,? says Fr. Charles Morris, pastor of Detroit?s St. Elizabeth Parish and a contributor to *NCR*?s Eco Catholic blog, ?and if we are to be the sermon we preach, our parishes can take the lead demonstrating how a different world might look.?

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