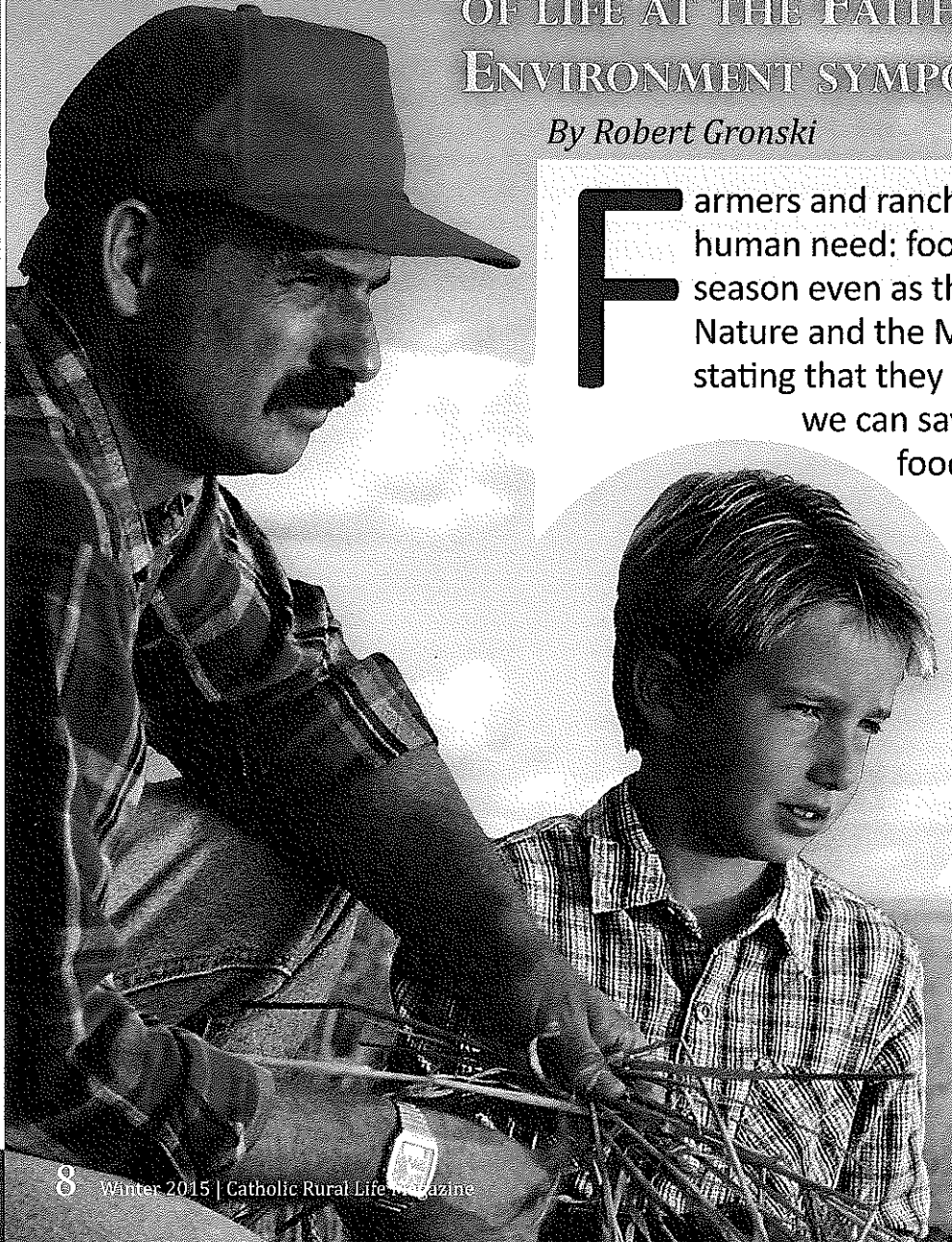


# The VOCATION

## of the Agricultural Leader

REDISCOVERING FARMING AS A WAY  
OF LIFE AT THE FAITH, FOOD AND THE  
ENVIRONMENT SYMPOSIUM

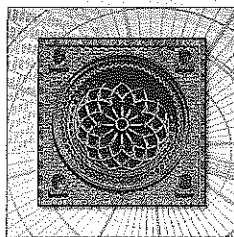
*By Robert Gronski*



**F**armers and ranchers grow and produce a basic human need: food. They do this season after season even as they endure uncertainties of Nature and the Market. We hail our farmers by stating that they “feed the world.” To this end, we can say that farming and producing food is a sacred calling. But in the constant struggle to stay in business, farmers may wonder if they are still in line with the divine plan.

Catholic Rural Life, along with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a number of farm organizations and academic institutions, organized a symposium in St. Paul, Minn. this past November

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL  
FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE



VOCATION OF THE  
BUSINESS LEADER  
A REFLECTION

The *Vocation of the Business Leader* helped to provide a framework for thinking about the work of farming through a vocational lens.

to examine how faith can inform our natural connections to the land, plants, and animals, in a way that raises mundane business to the level of a vocation, or a calling.

One of the symposium presenters, Dr. Christopher Thompson, academic dean of the Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity and a board member of Catholic Rural Life, framed things aptly on the first day. "Agriculture is a unique human enterprise," he said, "for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns of the grammar of the Creator."

Long-time members of Catholic Rural Life will likely agree that there is something about agriculture – the most fundamental connection between Nature and Culture – that

calls the humble farmer to contemplate the mind of God. This is not a lyrical overstatement. In the presentations by speakers at the *Faith, Food & the Environment* symposium, their conclusions always led to this elevated point of view about the true place of humans in the world and our relationship to nature.

### The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader

Representing the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Fr. Michael Czerny, SJ, Chief of Staff to the President, Cardinal Peter Turkson, brought forth a message that presented a moral framework that could guide

the vocation of leaders in agriculture and food production. His comments were based on reflections offered in *The Vocation of the Business Leader* issued by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought.

"Despite the challenges facing agribusiness leaders today – economic globalization, information technology, financial speculation – the Church urges those in agriculture and food industries to promote sustainable practices that provide for a hungry world while preserving the land and natural resources," Fr. Czerny said. "The Church also has particular concern for family farms, small farmers and farmworkers."

As Fr. Czerny explained to sym-

posium participants, the Bible can enrich our thinking as we consider agriculture as a vocation. "From the very beginning, the Creator asks us to 'till' the earth and to 'keep it' (Gen. 2:15). It is part of our assignment as human beings. It cannot be 'just a job' if we treat it as part of God's plan of love in history."

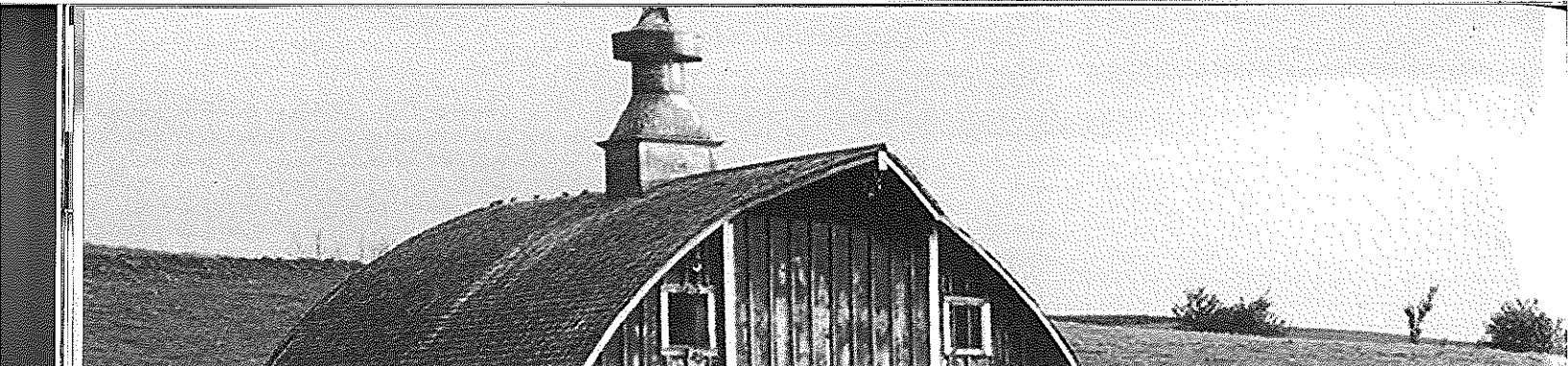
Dr. Michael Naughton, interim director of the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, discussed the framework of the *Vocation of the Business Leader*. It was not a hard sell to convince symposium participants that this reflection, published in 2012, could inform a similar vocational guide for agricultural leaders. His presentation set forth the two main questions to be addressed by symposium participants: "How does one's vocation inform the complexities and challenges of the agricultural marketplace? How would one manage such complexities as if faith mattered?"

Dr. Thompson built-upon Naughton's presentation with a more precise look at the faith foundations of the agricultural vocation. "Bent low in respect of the soil, he or she enters into a relationship with the order of creation that is itself already ordered and whose wisdom becomes the norm," he said. Thompson's argument succinctly captured the theology of Church statements on agriculture and the environment: that our view of farming, whether we are aware of it or not, implies a particular understanding of nature and the divine.

As other presenters would concur, this understanding shapes our

*"Agriculture is a unique human enterprise, for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns the grammar of the Creator."*  
– Dr. Christopher Thompson, Catholic Rural Life





relationship as human beings to the physical world, to other human beings, and to God the Creator. Many participants at the symposium did not hold back in questioning if conventional agricultural practices are in harmony with the physical, moral and spiritual world around us.

### Providing a Sustainable Food Supply

On the second day of the symposium, the presenters delved more explicitly into the nature and culture of modern agriculture. They made explicit the challenges we face as a nation and society in producing sufficient food in the years ahead. Fred Kirschenmann, distinguished fellow of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, began the day by setting the problem we face in "Providing a Sustainable Food Supply."

Kirschenmann said the question of "how to feed a population of nine billion by the year 2050" is the wrong one, as it puts things in terms of gross food production. The agricultural conundrum, as it might be called, is this: "While tremendously productive, our current agricultural food system causes many environmental problems, often trading off

long-term stewardship of the environment for short-term agricultural production."

Biodiversity loss, massive soil erosion and degradation, and compromises to hydrological cycles are a few of the resultant impacts and potential calamities we face. Kirschenmann pointed out that although agriculture produces a food surplus at the global scale, problems of hunger and food insecurity persist while environmental harms will only be exacerbated if current trends in urban growth, energy consumption, and food waste continue.

Kirschenmann spoke of the need to develop an "ecological conscience" so that our rightful concern for humanity is met by preserving the health of the land and its capacity for self-renewal. He said this is not going to happen overnight, but the ecological crisis is upon us and a new conscience is urgently needed.

Eco-theologian Thomas Berry has written that "moments of crises are moments of grace," Kirschenmann said by way of encouragement.

"The pain of the crisis motivates us, it pushes us to develop, adapt and be creative." We have this moment of opportunity now to engage the human community and make

the changes needed in agriculture, the economy, and our culture.

### The Culture of Agriculture

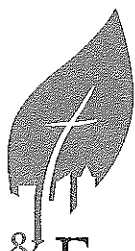
Roger Johnson, president of the National Farmers Union, spoke during the symposium luncheon and clarified the meaning of sustainable agriculture. "A sustainable food supply," he said by way of basic definition, "is one that takes into account environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity."

He went on to explain that he preferred to avoid the debate between organic versus conventional agriculture, although he recognized how important this is to some groups. Rather, his substantive point was to cast sustainable agriculture into a deeper understanding of family farms and rural community. "Over the long-term," he said, "our way of farming must do several things besides satisfying human food and fiber needs." Crucial ones are:

- Enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends.
- Integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls.
- Sustain the economic viability of farm operations.
- Enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole.

As opposed to specifics about production methods or styles, Johnson made clear that sustainable agriculture refers not only to the viability of farm operations and operators, but also to rural communities.

"Rural America prospers when farms do well," he said. "Family farmers not only support all of the



Faith, Food & the Environment  
*The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*

businesses that provide them with agricultural inputs, but also the banks, restaurants, and stores in rural America.”

### Knowledge, Ethics, and Action

By the end of the symposium, it was becoming clear that a new way of looking at agriculture and food production was in order. More specifically, contemporary society needs a new way of speaking about agriculture that is less in the language of agribusiness and industrial efficiencies and more in line with agricultural ethics and community sustainability.

Dr. Calvin DeWitt, professor at the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a noted writer and speaker who presented his work on how Biblical teachings can lead us to a sound environmental ethic. After noting a number of scriptural passages from Genesis and the Psalms, he explained how such faith-inspired teachings, or Ethics, connect to “Scientia” (knowledge of creation) and “Praxis” (putting into practice). This “Science-Ethics-Praxis” triad, according to DeWitt, will help us tie together how the natural world works, how we ought to be, and what we must change to regain harmony with nature.

Despite the inspiring and persuasive presentations during the symposium, participants remarked during open discussions how these principles of the common good and earth stewardship needed to gain traction beyond church statements and aca-

demic philosophy departments. In the end, do we defer to dominant economic forces that say industrial progress must continue, regardless of impact? Does society in general no longer feel that ethics have much say in the real world?

“What we often find is that many people have faith, but they don’t see how that faith applies in their agribusiness world, whether they are a family farmer or work for General Mills,” said Jim Ennis, executive director of Catholic Rural Life. “Therefore, it is necessary to have this dialogue with those who deliberately address how to solve them. If we understand properly our role in creation, maybe we won’t be so compulsive about increasing production without addressing other concerns, such as the stewardship of the land and truly providing food for all.”

Ennis explained that focus group discussions are continuing in early 2015 and a second major symposium will take place in mid-2015 in Milan, Italy. The proceedings from November’s *Faith, Food & the Environment* dialogue will be used to develop a set of faith-based resources that will offer practical guidance to agricultural leaders.

“In the end, our main objective is to reach agribusiness executives, policymakers, and organizational directors who are in a position to shape the structure of agriculture and food production as we know it,” Ennis said. “This may be through business practices, legislative policies, or even civic-mindedly through healthy food and environmental campaigns.”

In the long tradition of Catholic Rural Life, now entering its tenth decade of service and mission to farm families and communities, we can attest that the vocation of farming is more than a feeling. It is a true and deep sentiment to be sure, but American farmers and livestock producers are clear-eyed and practical when it comes to developing the special skills, knowledge, and capacities required to keep a farm in operation, all the while aspiring to fulfill the divine plan of God’s work on earth.

### Interested in learning more about the Faith, Food & the Environment symposium?

Well then check out the dedicated symposium website: **[FaithFoodEnvironment.org](http://FaithFoodEnvironment.org)**. We’ve archived transcripts and video from the presentations given throughout the three day event, and you can also find write-ups and reflections on the symposium proceedings. Additionally, this website will be the hub for all future developments related to *The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* project, so make sure to stay tuned!



# Symposium

*One symposium, many perspectives*



*MFU president Doug Peterson at the public lecture*

**T**he challenges facing rural communities and contemporary agriculture are diverse. As a result, it makes sense that solutions to these challenges must be informed by a variety of perspectives and areas of expertise. This is a fact that was recognized at the Faith, Food & the Environment symposium, where 70 leaders with a range of backgrounds—from philosophy to farming, public policy to theology—gathered to address the same set of questions. Here are some of their stories from the symposium:

## The Farmer – Eric Bergman

As the saying goes in Montana regarding farming, you either married into it or inherited it. Neither is the case for Eric Bergman and his wife, Audra, who have been farming for about five years and own and operate Groundworks Farms. Before that, Bergman had worked in environmental education and his wife was a forest ranger. “Farming sort of represented the confluence of many different things in my life,” says Bergman, explaining his attraction to a way of life he had never before experienced. “It brings together energy, ecology, and economy.”

As a relatively new farmer, Bergman says he was impressed with the symposium’s focus on the need for a more diversified agricultural market, with opportunities for newcomers to not only gain entry, but flourish. “That

was definitely a point of consensus at the symposium, and it’s a very consistent theme across farming.”

Bergman says he was also inspired by how the Catholic Church was represented at the symposium, and he especially appreciated the Church’s focus on justice in the food system. The connection between faith and its integration to environmental and agricultural questions has always excited him, and he was glad that this was not only understood by Church leaders like Fr. Michael Czerny, SJ, of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, but passionately articulated.

As a farmer, Bergman is looking forward to the development of *The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*. “I think it will be very practical and very valuable, and farmers will enjoy reading and gaining wisdom from it.”

# Snapshots

## Feature Story

### The Philosopher - Dr. Deborah Savage

Dr. Deborah Savage admits that her participation in the *Faith, Food, & the Environment* symposium was partly professionally motivated. After all, her colleague at the Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, Dr. Christopher Thompson, was a keynote speaker and had asked her to attend. So Savage, busy with a multitude of other commitments, thought she'd make a brief appearance before slipping out.

"I ended up going for the whole time," she says. "I couldn't leave."

For Savage, the symposium helped remind her that many of the challenges facing contemporary agriculture have their roots in philosophical ideas that have divorced man from nature and rejected the idea of any objective order or purpose. She shared this insight on the final day of the symposium, and found many farmers interested and intrigued with her observations.

"The assumption that farmers can't think in philosophical terms is such crap," she says. "Farmer can absolutely think in these terms. There's a natural metaphysics that's accessible to everyone, especially farmers, who know that there is an order and a nature to things."

Dr. Savage believes that philosophy needs to play a role in discussions of food systems and environmental stewardship, because modern society operates under destructive philosophical assumptions that are rarely examined.

"So many people are disillusioned with modern agricultural practices, but they don't realize that the framework they're looking for is found in St. Thomas Aquinas!" she noted. "If the Catholic Church can convince Millennials and environmentalists of this truth, then we can take the culture by storm."

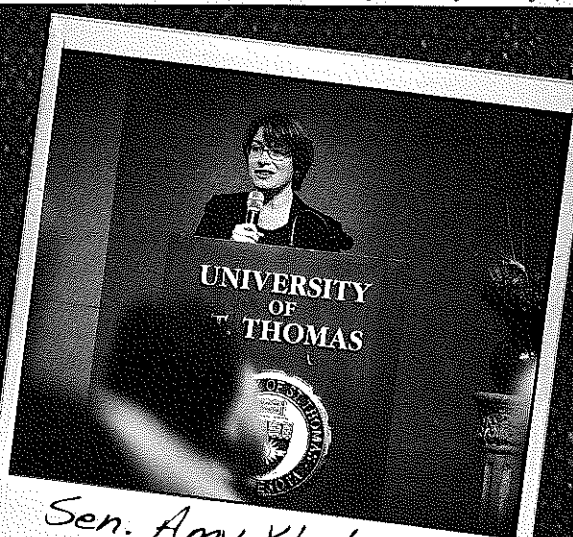
### The Rural Advocate - Mike Callicrate

He may make his living as the owner and operator of Ranch Foods Direct, a meat packing facility and local farmer's retail market in Colorado Springs, Colo., but Mike Callicrate has made his name as a rural advocate and defender of family farms. For years he has been drawing attention to the need for a more just farming and food system, but has admittedly had difficulty conveying the importance of these issues to faith leaders. "I came to the symposium looking for better ways to engage with the faith community," Callicrate said. "I was thankful for the opportunity to inform the group about how predatory the marketplace is and the importance of law enforcement and a shift in government policy."

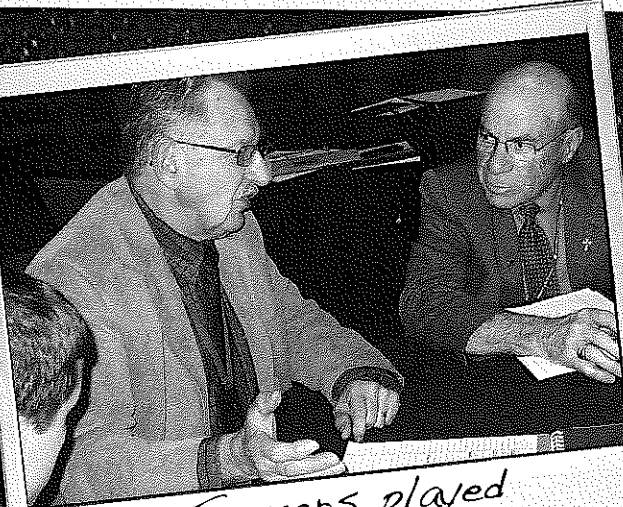
He also appreciated the chance to engage in dialogue with representatives from major food producers. Although the two-sides didn't always see eye to eye,

Callicrate says the opportunities for conversation are infrequent; the symposium was a rare forum for such discussions.

Callicrate believes that disconnect between the average person and the way in which their food is produced is the biggest underlying challenge to a more just and equitable food system. In his opinion, the symposium furthered a deeper understanding of how interconnected our faith and ethics should be with our approach to food and farming. "Without people of faith supporting fair markets for farmers, agriculture will continue to focus on maximum profits; not a vocation and not a way of life," he said. "Young people interested in farming need to know they have a chance for success. I pray that with faith and understanding, good actions will follow."



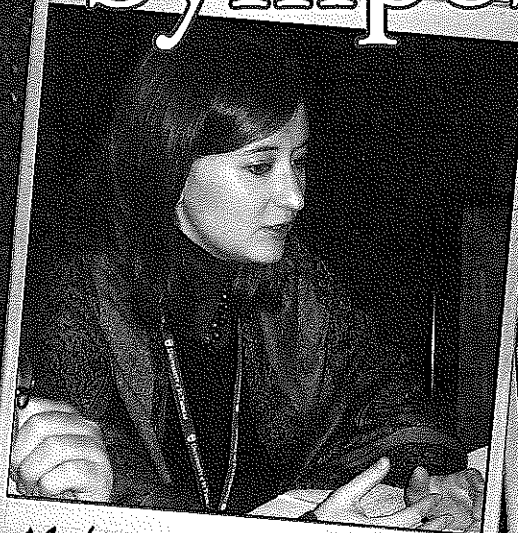
Sen. Amy Klobuchar addresses attendees



Farmers played a central part



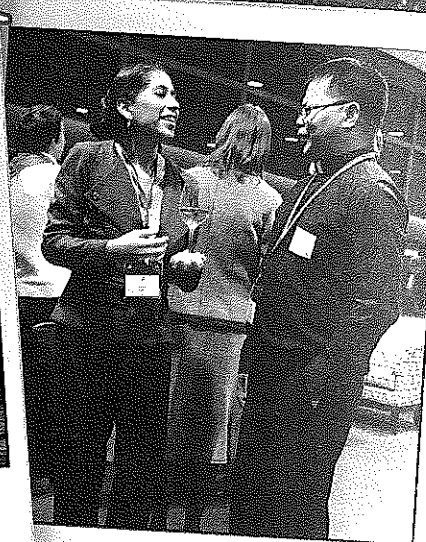
# Symposium Snapshots



*Making a point during table discussions*



*Engaged tables follow the proceedings*



*Reception connections*

## The Priest - Fr. Gregory Mastey

Fr. Gregory Mastey wasn't sure what he was getting himself into when he agreed to participate in the Faith, Food & the Environment symposium. "This was really the first of its kind, so it was kind of hard to get an appreciation for how significant it was beforehand," he said.

However, he certainly left with a great appreciation of the discussions and presentations that took place in St. Paul in early November. "I actually preached about the ideas raised at the symposium at all of my Masses that weekend, and talked about it on my half hour radio shows," says the parish priest of the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minn.

Fr. Mastey says he left the symposium appreciating the sacredness of farming—and its importance to the well-being of everyone else. "I'm a priest in a farming area, but I think we take farmers for granted some-

times," he said. "In my homilies, I made a point to let all my farmers know how incredibly thankful I am for their work, but also how greatly the Church values their way of life."

But it works both ways, he says. Just as the Church needs to be more appreciative of farmers, farmers themselves need to think more deeply about how their work relates to their faith.

"The symposium helped me realize that we need to get back to the basics," he said, noting that too often attention and energy is focused on addressing "practical problems" instead of more deeply rooted philosophical errors. "I told my parishioners that we really need to be more intentional about thinking about farming as a sacred vocation. It was an 'Aha!' moment for many of them; I saw a lot of lightbulbs go on."

## The Policymaker - Anthony Granado

As the US bishop's policy advisor on agricultural and rural issues, Anthony Granado appreciated immensely the opportunity to meet with and hear from such a diverse crowd. "I thought it was an excellent idea to not only bring together the faith community, but also others as well, especially farmers who are in the trenches," he said. "Without them, a symposium can be just an abstraction, an academic exercise."

Granado says that the symposium provided him with new information and stories that will help him convey

the significance of the issues discussed to the bishops he advises at the USCCB. He also said it helps that a number of Catholic bishops were participants in the symposium itself, and will be able to relate the pressing need for Church leadership on issues of food production and environmental stewardship.

Granado noted that many of the problems in modern agriculture stem from a "consumer mentality" that views natural goods as merely commodities, which can be manipulated to maximize profit and pleasure. "When we

*Continued, next page*

### The Policymaker – Anthony Granado, continued

talk about agriculture, we need to focus on promoting the flourishing of human society globally,” he said. “Our current system doesn’t operate under the right assumptions.”

Granado views the conversation started at the symposium as an important part of getting this understanding

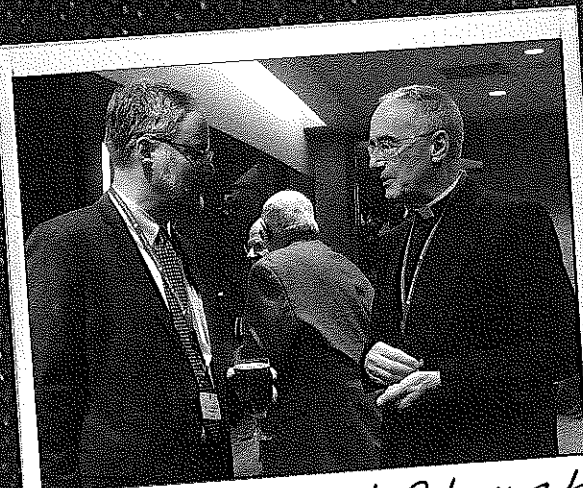
right. “It left me feeling confident,” he said. “This is a unique time. There are great challenges, but between the development of *The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* and Pope Francis’s attention to the environment and the economy, we’re on the right path.”

### The Millennial - Katelyn Roedner Sutter

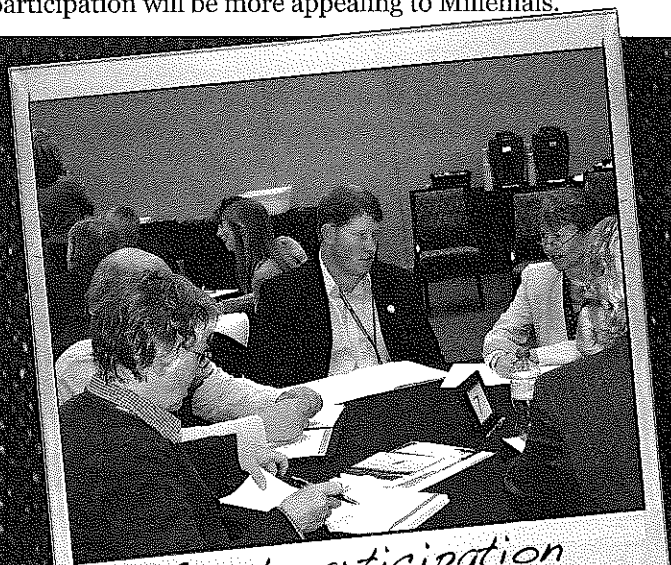
At 27 years of age, Katelyn Roedner Sutter may have been one of the youngest attendees at the symposium, but she certainly brings her own impressive qualifications. She is the director of the Diocese of Stockton, Calif.’s Environmental Justice Program, an initiative that focuses on the connection between environmental degradation and vulnerable communities, while also educating parishes about the application of Church teaching to ecological issues. Roedner Sutter says the symposium presentations affirmed the connection between faith and environmental stewardship, while the table discussions provided her with “concrete knowledge” that will help her with her role at the Environmental Justice Program.

However, Roedner Sutter was representing more than just the Diocese of Stockton—she was representing her generation, the “Millennials.” During reflections on the final day of the symposium, she stood before her fellow participants—most in their forties and fifties—and underscored the importance of including young adults in discussions pertaining to food and faith. “We’re the ones who will live out the impacts of decisions made now,” she pointed out.

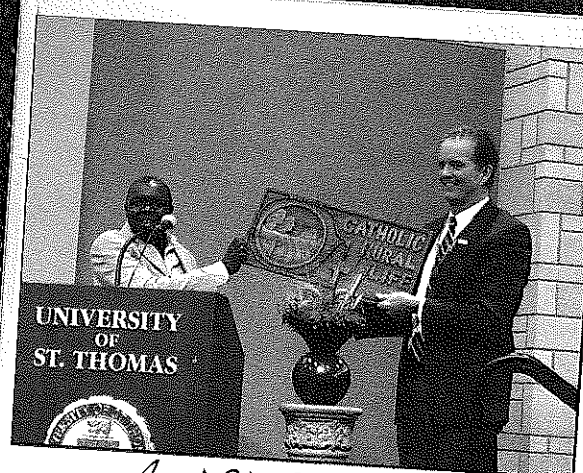
Roedner Sutter also said that while many people her age may be falling away from religion, they still maintain a deep-seated care for social justice issues and issues related to the environment and food production. She suggests that the Church has an incredible opportunity to reach out to this “lost generation” simply by articulating its own teachings concerning the environment and social justice. “If young adults see that the Church really does care about these issues (and it does!), church participation will be more appealing to Millennials.”



*Academic and Church Leaders connect*



*Great participation during breakouts!*



*A gift for CRL from Uganda!*