

## *Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness*

### **The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore the relationships between food and social justice**

One sentence in our last article scared the living daylight out of us: “The Peace and Social Justice Committee hopes to provide you with more information regarding the policies that govern our food system in future bulletin articles.” We knew we were getting in over our heads, but it had also become apparent in our research that a basic knowledge of food policy is essential for our parishioners to exercise their faith in the public realm, which is, after all, the mission of social justice and part of Christ's call. A basic knowledge of food policy is also essential for putting into proper context the various intersections between food and social justice that we intend to address this year. So, we put on our thinking (or rather, learning) caps, and we invite you to do so, too, as we take a brief look at an area of public policy that impacts everyone, everywhere, every day.

The first obstacle to understanding food policy in the United States is, in the words of food advocates Mark Bittman, Michael Pollan, Ricardo Salvador, and Olivier De Schutter, "we have no food policy." Despite the enormous and far-reaching impact of food production and food consumption, government policies related to food are often made piecemeal and oversight is spread out over several federal agencies. In the interest of space and time, we are going to deal with the "mother" of all food legislation in the United States, the law commonly known as "The Farm Bill." This law deals with almost all areas of food policy, from farm to fork, and it is a law our Church leaders recognize as highly important to the Catholic conscience.

The Farm Bill is what is known as an "omnibus" piece of legislation. That's a fancy way of saying it is large in size and broad in scope. We might do better to think of it as several laws smashed together into one big law. The most recent Farm Bill contained twelve titles- Commodity Programs, Conservation, Trade, Nutrition, Credit, Rural Development, Research, Forestry, Energy, Horticulture and Organic Agriculture, Crop Insurance, and Miscellaneous. The Farm Bill can create new programs, as well as modify, do away with, and/or reauthorize programs originating in separate laws. In general, the Farm Bill requires reauthorization every five years, and each time it is reauthorized, it gets a new name. Thus, there have been many "Farm Bills" since the "Agricultural Adjustment Act" (AAA) of 1933, which is commonly thought to be the first "Farm Bill." The most recent Farm Bill is officially titled "The Agricultural Act of 2014." For convenience, we'll refer to it here as the "2014 Farm Bill."

During the extended development of the 2014 Farm Bill, which took about two years (it should have been the "2012 Farm Bill") and was overshadowed by budget concerns, a coalition of Catholic leaders including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Rural Life, Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services made sure a moral voice was heard on the following Farm Bill issues:

1. Farm subsidies- The very first Farm Bill, the AAA, was passed in large part to support struggling farmers during the economic depression of the 1930s. This support has continued and has taken various forms. Catholic leaders urged Congress to redirect these subsidies away from large, wealthy producers, toward small and medium-sized producers, and others who truly need

the support. Our leaders also urged Congress to make sure the support provided to our producers did not disadvantage poor farmers abroad.

2. Conservation- Even before Pope Francis made headlines with *Laudato Si'*, Catholic leaders were urging Congress to use the Farm Bill to encourage food producers to be responsible stewards of their land and common waterways.

3. International nutrition assistance- It may account for a small portion of our government spending, but our efforts to increase food security in vulnerable communities abroad can help them survive acute disasters, and build resilience in the face of environmental and other pressures. Accordingly, Catholic leaders encouraged Congress to include strong international nutrition assistance programs in the Farm Bill.

4. Domestic nutrition assistance- Our leaders were particularly vocal regarding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called “food stamps”), and other domestic nutrition assistance programs that provide a lifeline and a leg-up for our most vulnerable neighbors. Our Catholic leaders vigorously defended these programs in the face of large proposed cuts, asserting that agricultural policies must be evaluated according to whether or not they provide our most vulnerable brothers and sisters with sufficient nutritious food.

5. Rural development- Along with urging Congress to redirect farm subsidies toward those who truly need them, our leaders also urged Congress to include programs that provide loans, grants, loan guarantees and technical assistance aimed at ensuring the rural communities that produce our food have the housing, economic and business opportunities, health care, first responder services and equipment, and infrastructure (water, electric and communications) they need to thrive along with the rest of our nation.

When the 2014 Farm Bill was finally signed into law on February 7, 2014, Catholic leaders saw mixed results in all of the above policy areas. Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, chair of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, summed up much of the coalition’s response thus: “While we are disappointed that the final compromise continues to call disproportionately for sacrifices from hungry and poor people in this country and around the world, especially when large industrial agricultural operations continue to receive unnecessary subsidies, we are glad to see support will continue for domestic and international nutrition and development aid, rural development and conservation.” Furthermore, in evaluating the 2014 Farm Bill, it is important to bear in mind that many Farm Bill programs do not receive mandatory funding. A *mandatory* program is a program that generally is not subject to the appropriations process; by contrast, a *discretionary* program is a program that depends upon the “discretion” of Congress during the appropriations process to get the funding it needs to operate, even if its scope of operations is authorized in the Farm Bill. Thus, many of the programs our Catholic leaders supported in the 2014 Farm Bill are at the mercy of Congress’ increasingly contentious appropriations process, and require the continued support and advocacy of all concerned if we want them to exist in actuality, and not just on paper.

Confused? That may be a good thing. Most of us should never assume we’ve got a handle on U.S. food policy. It’s just way too complicated. In fact, many food policy advocates argue that it’s too complicated for its own good. However, all of us eat, so none of us should assume we aren’t a part of it all—the good and the bad. Thus, we are called to be aware of our food system, and take part in shaping it. Several organizations are waiting to help you answer this call, including Catholic Rural Life ([catholicrurallife.org](http://catholicrurallife.org)), the USCCB ([usccb.org/issues-and-](http://usccb.org/issues-and-)

action/human-life-and-dignity/agriculture-nutrition-rural-issues), the Catholic Campaign for Human Development ([povertyusa.org](http://povertyusa.org)), and Catholics Confront Global Poverty ([confrontglobalpoverty.org](http://confrontglobalpoverty.org)). Finally, the Peace and Social Justice Committee owes a debt of gratitude to Food Policy Action ([foodpolicyaction.org](http://foodpolicyaction.org)) for answering our questions and guiding us in our research for this article. At their website, you can find the National Food Policy Scorecard, which provides easy-to-understand information about food legislation considered by the House and Senate, as well as how all members of Congress voted on those issues.

Now that we have a better picture of food policy in the United States, and the Farm Bill in particular, we will have an easier time contextualizing, and thus, an easier time understanding the food-related social justice issues we will be discussing this year. In the meantime, let us be grateful that although the food policies crafted by humans can be maddeningly complex, the most important food policy, the one offered by God, is simple and echoed at every celebration of the Eucharist: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my body, which will be given up for you.” It is the love offered in this food policy that gives us the courage to learn and speak about worldly food policies, in order to find ways to start setting the table for God’s heavenly banquet.