

Rural ministry as varied as life itself

Rich Heffern | Sep. 1, 2009



Mary Klauke, former rural life and community development director for the Dubuque, Iowa, archdiocese

Ministries

Mary Klauke is former rural life and community development director for the Dubuque, Iowa, archdiocese. She is also a farmer, operating a small family operation near Dorchester, Iowa. The Klauke farm raises organic vegetables, beef and sheep.

Klauke was rural life director during the May 2008 U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid in Postville, Iowa. In that raid, 389 people who worked at a meat-packing plant were arrested. Klauke helped to coordinate a relief effort that was offered through the local parish, St. Bridget.

In 2005, she and her late husband Don won the Isidore and Maria Award from the National Catholic Rural Life Conference for "providing courageous leadership and serving their faith convictions on behalf of social justice and support of the family farm." Sts. Isidore and Maria, a married couple who farmed in Spain in the 12th century, are the patron saints of farmers.

NCR: The recent documentary film "Food, Inc." details how our food supply is controlled by a handful of corporations that tend to put profit ahead of food safety, farmers' livelihoods, the safety of workers and the environment. The film delves into the unintended consequences and hidden costs of our current system of producing food. As former diocesan rural life director and as a farmer yourself, what have you personally witnessed as this food system continues to affect rural and farm life in your corner of Northeast Iowa?

Klauke: It's amazing to see how many people who are actually involved in farming do not see the consequences and hidden costs of the current system. They believe what they are taught, and their teachers are spokespersons for the corporations with which they do business either by employment or through schools doing industry-funded research for those corporations. The farmers' lives are busy doing the work they love to do, and it's good, too good to question until it begins to fall apart. Why would they question while it's still working for them?

While farmers are still able to pay their bills or borrow enough to meet current bills, it looks like it's working

and that those falling by the wayside evidently didn't do it right. The funder, whether it's a bank or the corporation holding the debt, is the one able to determine the direction the producer takes, most often to the advantage of the funder rather than the producer.

Early in our own farming business, our lender determined that in order to meet our obligations we need to increase our sow operation, which meant that we also needed to increase our debt in order to accommodate the increased numbers of pigs, which of course we did. We wanted to be able to continue farming and if this is what it took, this is what we were going to do.

We often thanked God for the farm advisor that our lender contracted to assist in yearly plans. He was able to show us, and the lender, that we were losing money on hogs and making money on truck-farming vegetables. Why we could not see that doing more of what was costing us money was just going to cost us more money, I'll never figure out, except that when you are down and out, nothing is clear. An unscrupulous lender would have insisted that we stay the course because it would have been to his/their advantage to have our land, and that is exactly what has happened to many people.

Lenders can only advise according to the best information they have. When their information comes from corporations controlling farm inputs and/or farm markets, or from the schools that use this same information, it will be slanted accordingly. Actually, many local lending institutions have fallen prey to this same information and no longer control the farm loan portfolios.

Information is critical on every level. I was having a conversation recently with a fellow rural advocate about the dangers of genetically modified organisms and the control of corporations over our seeds, the genetic pool of our food supply. He vowed to do some research among farmers in his church to determine their level of concern. He got back to me a few days later and said that there is nothing to worry about. He visited with three farmers who all said it's very safe, it's helpful to the farmers and it's important to our continued ability to grow enough food to feed the world. He then said that these farmers are the experts. They are all seed corn salesmen.

We need to ask where the information is coming from, who stands to benefit from it, and who is going to pay.

NCR covered the raid in Postville, Iowa, at the kosher meat processing plant last year and particularly the role of the local church in that community during a stressful time. There are other meat-processing plants in Iowa. Is there any church ministry that is targeted specifically at these workers?

Meat-processing used to be a great job for rural people -- well paid, with benefits -- something people were proud to do. With greater concentration in the industry -- fewer companies owning and controlling the meat industry -- there is greater incentive to lower operation costs to maximize profits for owners. Since labor is a major expense, a system that keeps workers powerless and more susceptible to abuse is a great advantage. Our broken immigration system is perfect for company owners who want cheap labor, workers that have no legal rights, that cannot come forward with stories of abuse for fear that they will be jailed or deported, that cannot organize.

Any church ministry that works to change the immigration system in a way that respects the rights of workers, that allows immigrants to be recognized as people with dignity, that stands with the poor and powerless when they come to this country is performing a much needed service to the workers.

More specifically, the archdiocese of Dubuque has an active Hispanic ministry program that ministers to the community in areas of the archdiocese where there is a concentration of Hispanic people. That coincides with places that have meat-processing plants or other aspects of agriculture that greatly benefit from the presence of cheap labor.

As *NCR* reported over the last year, this has been the case in Postville. St. Bridget's Church Hispanic ministry

has been coordinating church response to meet the basic needs of people who were forced to stay in Postville and not allowed to work or otherwise care for themselves and their families. Our government's broken immigration system benefitted the plant owners at the expense of poor people, and then mandated that those people stay in the community at the pleasure of the judicial system with no provision for their basic needs, and therefore at the mercy of the church and people of goodwill.

?Food, Inc.? shows the woes of contract farming, where the average chicken farmer invests a half-million dollars setting up facilities and then makes only \$18,000 a year.

Most Iowa chicken farmers had already lost their independence by the time we started working in rural life ministry. We worked hard with our attorney general's office and advocates from Iowa and other states to have some protections built into the contracts for the benefit of not only the chicken growers, but also the hog farmers as that industry was becoming more integrated. It was common practice to have a clause that prohibited growers from discussing what was in their contract. This prevented farmers from organizing or, in some cases, from getting help when they suspected the company of shorting them or not fulfilling their part of the agreement.

Obviously, we didn't stop the corporatization of either the chicken or the hog industry. But hopefully, we helped to benefit the growers who carry the risk, at least a little bit. When an industry is as concentrated as the food industry, either in its parts or as a whole, it is very hard to protect the interests of the workers. All the power goes to the owners who are often far removed from the local community and the labor in the plant or the field. The challenge for us with food is to also protect the eater and the local community.



Can you describe your own farm operation?

We decided to buy our farm in 1980 because of what we saw coming in the food industry. It was a difficult time to buy and we went through some changes through the years. As I mentioned earlier, what worked best for us was growing food for local consumption, something that we now see as critical for local economies and for food security. Our farm is small and diversified with sheep, beef and organic crops.

During the last few years as we have been so active in ministry with the archdiocese, we have worked out an arrangement with other family members who are farming nearby to help with much of our operation. Now as that work winds down, we are again in transition as our daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law are preparing to take over the farming operation and make whatever changes will work for them and for the community they build around them.

Women own nearly half the farm- land in Iowa. In fact, more than 30 percent of farm operations in the United States now are women. What are the implications of that for agriculture and rural communities?

I believe that many of the women who are actively operators have a strong sense of community and of the relationship between the health of the land, plants, animals and people. That, however, comes from thoughtful reflection and can come to anyone who sees the land as a gift from God for the benefit of all. Women often have a charisma for caregiving and that can easily translate to caring for the land and for those who eat the food they grow.

One concern I have about this land ownership statistic is the realization that much farmland is, at any given time, changing hands, and much of it comes into ownership of people who are far removed from the land. Some of those people hire farm management firms to manage their land holdings for the most profitable bottom line. I've often wondered who these firms listen to for the information they use to make management decisions. That is something I have never checked.

Some who become landowners see the land itself as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder or developed in a way that removes it from food production. I fail to see how that can be seeing the land as a gift from God for the benefit of all.

What are the particular demands and challenges of rural life ministry?

Rural ministry is as varied as life itself. One of the biggest challenges is getting people to even think about the fact that it makes any difference what they eat, to realize that every food decision we make impacts people in our own communities and around the world. It is difficult to watch farmers lose their farms or even lose the hope that would allow them to want to see their own children farm and to know that the only way to change all that is to get all those who eat to understand and to change the system.

The biggest reward for me is in helping people recognize what is not working and make the connections they need to change what is holding them back. It is the realization that what I am working on is a most basic gift of God. It deals with the stuff of life itself -- earth, water, food, community -- all those things that determine how people live, how they see their God and their neighbor. In my mind, it is the most important work we can do.

Why should people care about how their food is produced?

Eating is definitely a political and moral act. Every bite of food we eat has done something to the world before it came to our plate. It may have caused a farm worker family to labor long hours with little pay, or if it was grown in your backyard, it may have helped your child appreciate the gift of food that God gives us from the soil and taught him/her that something fresh tastes really great. It may have caused illness from laboring in chemically sprayed fields and water that is contaminated, or it may have contributed to erosion control and healthy streams. It may have been picked green and traveled long distances to get to its destination, or it may have been picked fresh this morning and be at the height of its nutrition and taste with little expenditure of petroleum fuels.

The way we grow and buy our food determines to a great extent what happens to the economic and social life of a rural community. In fact, as much as \$100 million can leave one county in a year according to some local economic analysis reports.

Food issues are complex. Besides the economic and physical health issues, people of faith bring another whole dimension. We see food as a gift of the Earth, a gift from God that belongs to everyone. It nourishes us in body and spirit. It nourishes community. It is much easier for people to experience this gift when they have a connection to the land and to the farmer who grows their food, when they take the time to collect, prepare and eat the food with family and community members, when they participate in community prayer surrounding their food and in efforts to be sure all are fed.

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