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The beauty of rural life

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On June 24, the Diocese of Fargo will hold its first annual Rural Life Celebration on the Schmitz farm near Harvey. With our many rural communities and parishes, it seems only fitting that we should celebrate the natural bond between our Catholic faith and rural life, and I hope many will come and join the celebration. I also intend to move this celebration around the diocese, in a different deanery each year, so that the faithful from every corner of our diocesan family will have the opportunity to attend.

Rural life has always been and always will be an essential part of the character of this diocese. From its earliest days, the faithful have formed rural communities and worked the land, and the Church has always recognized in rural life a special calling from God. Rural life presents a unique spirituality to those who live and work on farms and in small communities. As they engage in the work of sowing and harvesting, raising livestock, or any of the other areas of work that support our rural communities, they find themselves very near to God, our Creator.

One cannot ignore the beauty of creation, which is a small glimpse of the one who fashioned our earth. Simply by observing the crops, the animals, the land, the sky, the weather, the seasons, and the beautiful balance that ties it all together, we see traces of God's creative work. Pope Francis extolls the beauty of creation in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, and he urges us to be mindful of God's unfolding plan in the world around us. In fact, farmers are true collaborators in God's work of creation, and through their hard work and ingenuity, they cooperate with that plan and bring it to fruition.

Those who live and work on the land have a unique call to be stewards of God's creation. Perhaps more than others, our farmers recognize the fragility of nature and the need to care for the earth, to carefully reap its abundant fruits, and to preserve it for succeeding generations. From their unique vantage point, farmers can recognize the many threats to our environment, and they also know from experience how to work the earth respectfully.

We may own land and property, but ultimately we are only stewards in the plan of God. He has entrusted the land and its resources to us for our use and for the common good. A time will come, however, when this rich land will pass to others and we will have to give an accounting of our stewardship. With a clear understanding of God's place in our work, our stewardship becomes a privilege, a way of life, and a way of sanctification.

One of the key virtues of rural life is learning to depend on the Divine Providence of God. So many external factors affect the work of agriculture, some from the natural world and others from the forces of commerce. The farmer and rancher can teach all of us what it means to trust in God, who blesses the work of their hands even when things seem to go against them. Some years are abundant and others are less so, but in all cases, God's providence is present to those who look to him with faith. Of course, people work hard in every walk of life, but the work ethic of the farmer is demanding and impressive, especially when it is joined to faith in God's grace.

In my experience of rural life, first from my family background but also as a rural pastor, I have seen the strong ties that bind families and neighbors together. In our small towns and rural communities, neighbors know each other well and reach out to help when there is a need. Families are close-knit and always there for each other. There is a necessary spirit of cooperation that can bring the members together in a common effort and deepen relationships of love and respect.

This is also true in our rural parishes. The members of our small town and country parishes have a strong sense of connection to their church family, and their family history is often tightly woven into the history of the parish. The rural faithful work together to sustain and build up their parish community, and they have a keen sense of devotion to the parish that often was built up by their own ancestors.

Some of my happiest days as a priest were spent in the small communities of Nebraska, in places like Syracuse, Avoca, Palmyra, Douglas, and Seward. But I also know that rural and small town life has its challenges. There is growing rural poverty, which often remains hidden from view. There is the possibility of isolation, both physical and spiritual. The rural population in many places is aging and

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shrinking, and fewer people are expected to do more to keep things going. The pressures and challenges of the rural economy are heavy and complex. It would be a fantasy to pretend that all is ideal and cheerful in our small communities, but even with its, challenges rural life has a unique grace and blessedness for those who live it.

Jesus himself often uses rural imagery to illustrate the truths of his Gospel, and some beloved figures from his parables are distinctly rural in character: the shepherd, the sower, the farmer. Rural life, whether in town or in the country, can put us in touch with our Lord and offers a quiet space for prayer that we all could use. I hope our rural communities and parishes will continue to flourish, and that our rural faithful will continue to share the wisdom and richness of their way of life with our entire diocesan family.