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Headline: Rural challenges and thoughts for Christmas

Autumn is typically a time for harvest, but for many of our brothers and sisters in rural areas, this year is a season of crisis. The wet weather of summer and fall have made this year’s harvest particularly difficult, and in some places nearly impossible. Despite their heroic efforts, many of our farmers have been unable to get into the fields and reap the fruits of their labors. The more recent cold weather has opened the way for some harvest work, but sadly some of the crops have already been lost. Compounding this challenge from the weather is the challenge of poor commodity prices, which makes it even more difficult for our farmers and ranchers to make a living.

Needless to say, this is a time for prayer and solidarity with our farmers, who work so hard to raise a crop and support their families. I encourage all the faithful to remember our farmers in prayer as they struggle against the elements and the marketplace. Their vocation is a noble one, and they are an integral part of our national and global economy. Even more importantly, they are an essential part of our local communities, our parishes, and our Church. Farmers and ranchers have been steadfast in their faith and their participation in the life of the Church, and our diocese would be a very different community of faith without them. This difficult year reminds us all of the need to support one another in times of crisis, both spiritually and materially.

Without being naïve about the very real challenges they face, I want to offer my encouragement and that of the whole diocese to our farmers and ranchers who are struggling to make a go of it this year. Sustained by our faith, we continue to trust in God’s providence and his nearness to those who work the land, even when things look bleak. And when the stresses of rural life seem overwhelming, I urge our farmers to stay connected to their parishes, the local faith communities throughout our diocese. More and more frequently do we hear of farmers giving up to despair and suffering the effects of hopelessness. I encourage those who do struggle to consider talking to a pastor, a spouse, a trusted neighbor, or even a counselor. Carrying the burden alone can be a lonely journey, but just knowing that others are with us can make the burden a little lighter. I know that our pastors and counselors with Catholic Charities of North Dakota (800) 450-4457 will do all they can to offer support, and I assure you of a regular remembrance in my daily prayers and Masses.

PulledQuote: “In so many ways, Christmas can bring out the best in us, if we let it.” –Bishop John Folda

We find ourselves also in a season of preparation, the season of Advent that will lead us to Christmas. In a few short days, the entire Church and the whole world will remember again the glorious birth of Jesus, our Savior. It’s a time of unbridled joy for the faithful, but it’s also a time for prayerful reflection. With the coming of Christmas, we celebrate once more the entry of the Son of God into our troubled world. And even as we observe so much sadness all around us, the liturgy of the Church tells us, “By his birth he brought renewal to humanity’s fallen state.”

Even after all these years, the birth of Jesus is still a miracle of God’s love for each of us, his children. Christmas tells us again each year that God is with us and among us; he loves us so much that he became one of us! When things all around us seem out of control or even hopeless, we can look on the newborn child of Bethlehem and know that God’s love will never fail. His coming among us is irrevocable, and he has made his choice to be with us to the end.

Sometimes Christmas is criticized for all the external festivity and self-directed celebration. The commercial culture encourages a desire for “getting” rather than “giving.” But it’s always beautiful to see the many examples of generosity that burst forth in this holiday season. In so many ways, Christmas can

bring out the best in us, if we let it. In fact, I am convinced that our celebration of Christmas will be all the more joyful if we extend ourselves to others a little more, especially those who are alone and have little to celebrate. That's what Jesus did: he came to us in our sinfulness and "brought renewal to humanity's fallen state."

An indispensable part of our celebration of Christmas will always be the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass. Coming together on that holy night or in the early light of Christmas morning, we adore the newborn King along with the shepherds, and we join our voices to the song of the angels. Every celebration of the Eucharist at Mass is a continuation of the Christmas mystery. He is Emmanuel, "God with us," the Word made flesh who makes his dwelling among us. I hope you and all your family will gather around the manger at Mass once again this year to give thanks and adoration to the infant Son of God. It wouldn't really be Christmas without him!

Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that your Christmas celebration will be a time of peace and happiness. May Christ who was born to renew and save us, be always with you and your families, and may we be filled with joy at his unfailing love. Have a most blessed and Merry Christmas!