

**PulledQuote:** Rural life is so much a part of our diocesan culture that it deserves our attention, prayer, and support.

**Headline: A celebration of Rural Life**

One of the more pleasant duties I have as bishop is traveling throughout our diocese for confirmations, parish visits, and a variety of other events. On July 12, I traveled to Napoleon for our third annual Rural Life Mass and Celebration, sponsored by the people of St. Philip Neri Parish and hosted on the farm of Frank and Helen Braun. It was a warm, sunny day, and people from throughout our diocese came together to pray and celebrate the beauty and goodness of rural life. There were horse-drawn wagon rides, games for kids, a wonderful lunch, and lots of conversation between friends. But the heart of the event was our common prayer and the celebration of Mass.

We began with blessings of seeds, soil and the land to remind us that God brings forth the good things of the earth for our use, and we depend on his providence. We also blessed farm animals, creatures placed on earth for our use and also for our companionship. With their voices, they too give praise to our Creator. And finally, we blessed farm machinery, marvels of human ingenuity that help us work the land and bring in a great harvest. My intention was to include all our farmers and ranchers in those blessings, and I trust that our Lord heard our prayers.

We celebrated Mass and participated once again in the Lord's Eucharistic sacrifice. The word Eucharist literally means "thanksgiving," and it was fitting that we should give thanks on that occasion for the saving love of God and his glorious creation. By a happy coincidence, the gospel passage for that day was the Parable of the Sower, a perfect image to recall God's own spiritual planting and harvesting in our human hearts, and a mirror of what happens every day in rural life. The Mass is our highest act of worship, but we also give worship to God through our work on the land. Our work in the fields and among the herds is a participation in God's work of caring for his creation, and really is an act of worship and praise if we set our hearts on his purposes.

At the conclusion of our Mass, we held a Eucharistic procession around the farm. The custom of a Eucharistic procession is ancient and solemn, a reminder that Jesus Christ is among us, and comes to us with his grace and mercy. The elements of the Eucharist come from the fruits of the earth, so it makes perfect sense to bless the earth and all those upon it with the sacrament of our Lord's real presence. Jesus walked the fields of Galilee and often taught with agricultural imagery, so it's good to remember that he still walks among us and accompanies us in our lives and work.

During our procession, we prayed the Rosary, asking our Blessed Mother to intercede for all farmers, ranchers, and rural families and communities. As Mother of the Church, Mary has a special place in our family of faith, and a place in heaven with her Son. We can always turn to Mary in our need, and ask her to lead us more surely to Jesus. We also prayed to St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers, who with his wife, St. Maria de la Cabeza, was an example of steadfast faith, charity, and trust in God's assistance. He was diligent in his work as a farm laborer, and gives good example to all who are stewards of the earth and collaborators with God in the work of creation.

It was a full and spiritually rich day, and it brought to mind the noble calling of rural life. During this growing season, we can't help but think of the hard work of so many farm and ranch families who dedicate themselves to cultivation of the earth and all God's creatures. They have a special connection to creation, an awareness that they are united with God in this very special

work of tilling the land. There are very serious challenges in rural America today, and many farmers have been forced to walk away from this life. It isn't easy to be always at the mercy of adverse weather and unfavorable economics. Too often our farmers feel isolated and even powerless to make it all work. Just a few months ago, I wrote of the very difficult crisis affecting our farmers, a crisis that continues now, and it remains to be seen if things will improve this year.

Rural life is so much a part of our diocesan culture that it deserves our attention, prayer, and support. Most of us have at least some connection with rural families, and we should all remember that the well-being of our communities and parishes is tied to the health of rural life. In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, issued five years ago on the care of our common home, Pope Francis urged all the faithful to be more aware of our bond with God's creation. Respect for the land and its resources is a way of life for those who live and work in rural North Dakota, and the Holy Father's teaching is an excellent encouragement to remember the sacred gift of creation that God has placed in our care. The spirituality of rural life aligns beautifully with our Catholic faith, and I look forward to our next annual celebration in another region of our diocese. May the Lord of all creation bless all those who live and work in the country and prosper the work of their hands.