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## **Land Use: Rights and Responsibilities of Land Ownership through the Prism of Catholic Social Teaching**

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The dependency of all people on the land and its yield implies the special relationship which exists from creation between humanity and the land. Throughout history, that relationship has been embodied in various economic and social structures most of which incorporate some form of private property ownership. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) has traditionally upheld Catholic Social Teaching of the individual's right to own property.

This right, however, is not without limitation. The earth is the heritage of all humankind. Its wise use and stewardship is the ultimate responsibility of every person. At the same time the wealth of the land, the sea and the air -- all of creation's resources -- is due each person according to his/her need. Justice must prevail for the labor rendered in developing the goods of the earth. It is the right and duty of society to evaluate the fulfillment of these responsibilities of development, to provide assistance when the demands of stewardship exceed resources of the people and when necessary to insure that a few do not accumulate wealth at the expense of the many.

These are principles which must be applied today in the current debates over land use legislation. Many of these proposals are being put forth in response to abuses of private ownership. Uncontrolled suburban growth, energy resource exploitation, recreation developments and other overconsumptive demands on the land have fed a market for speculation in land, driven land values beyond the reach of average citizens and threatened the productivity of the land upon which we all depend for our survival. The resulting pattern of land ownership favors corporate interests and wealthy individuals and constitutes a threat to a stable and healthy society.

In NCRLC's judgment, these trends have advanced to the point where people must exert their rights over decisions regarding land ownership and use. Our national, state, and local governments should be responsive to the needs and rights of all its citizens, and indeed, when considering the use of the earth -- should be responsible to the needs and rights of all earth's inhabitants as well as future generations. Thus, public agencies must be made to monitor trends in land ownership and use and to recommend policies for controlling and redirecting those trends where abuses occur.

**The use of the land should be reevaluated and, where necessary, action taken**

**to insure that land ownership and land use patterns will be in line with social justice.**

Our Federal government should undertake a comprehensive land inventory, assist in the coordination of the land use planning efforts of state governments particularly as they affect the administration of public lands, and establish criteria for the protection of areas of critical environmental concern. Citizen organizations, especially those which unite rural and urban peoples, should be encouraged to participate fully in land use planning. Federally-funded development and government buildings should be placed in areas that do not require the paving of farmland or the increased diminishment of green spaces. Government monies should not be used for the development of farmland or for "trophy" homes, but to inner city improvements and housing efforts that foster community development.

All efforts, federal, state and local should be focused on community development, not the isolation of individuals. Strip malls and gated business complexes lack something vital, a heart or a meeting ground where people can connect with each other and the natural environment. Growth boundaries are being used in a number of cities to control unplanned development and the ravaging of green spaces and farmland. Developers are learning that it can be cost efficient to plan more effectively how to develop land to include denser housing, more green space, with less infrastructure. Tax dollars can be saved with careful ecological and social sensitivity. A key insight from Catholic bishops in "Renewing the Earth" is that social and natural ecology need to be considered together. "The web of life is one."

These measures are a first step toward effective stewardship of our nation's natural resources. Restrictions on land ownership itself are needed to bring land speculation and the search for windfall profits under control. The Church must set an example in this regard. For the Church, as for others, wise stewardship of the earth means the possession and use of only what is essential and the divestment and return to the people of unnecessary land holdings.

In words as well as deed, the Church must be a source of education in this most important matter. Ultimately our lands and practices regarding the land will be a reflection of basic attitudes toward God's creation. Churches, in partnership with the community at large, have a moral responsibility to engender values that encourage a right ordering between humans and nature.

The land is a sacred trust and our fulfillment of that trust demands constant evaluation. Responsibility to the land and people demands effective action now.

**Catholic Social Teaching Related to Land Use Principles:**

1. We are moral as well as economic creatures; creatures who think and love, who act and are not merely acted upon.
2. The responsibility of stewardship embraces not only the measured right to use the wealth of our world for the common good, but the corresponding obligation to respect and preserve its richness as a sacred trust for generations yet unborn.
3. Land is sacramental; we have a moral responsibility and sacred trust to "treat the land well." (John Paul II, Des Moines, 1979)
4. Authentic growth is never merely economic, it is always primarily moral. It is directed toward the common good, the sum of those social conditions, goods, and

services that persons and communities jointly pursue -- clean air and water, green spaces, quality education, public transportation, quality jobs -- all enable persons and communities to flourish.

5. Every economic venture must attempt to ensure the spiritual dignity of all persons whom it will affect, and the proper identity of each community where it takes root. Land development that displaces the poor or buys out the elderly or displaces prime farmland from its proper use is not "development;" it may build houses, but it destroys communities.

6. We can redirect the forces at work to model justice by applying our God-given intelligence in the search for fair solutions. Sustainable development must be participative.

7. Growth must be prudent, varied, and sustainable. Growth must be calibrated to remain in balance with nature. We must pay attention to the consequences of development to ensure the well being of present and future generations.

### **Scripture and U.S. Catholic Bishops Speak to Land Use**

"The earth is the Lord's." Ps. 24:1

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants." Lev. 25, 23

"The earth, though divided among private owners, not thereby to minister to the needs of all; for there is no one who does not live on what the land brings forth." *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII

"God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and people. Thus under the guidance of justice together with charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in an equitable manner." *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II

"Individualist competition should not undermine community solidarity, nor should collectivist bureaucracy smother individual creativity. The market needs to be rooted in the creative community or the local web of life. Its rooted place not be eroded by government or corporate bureaucracies. Similarly the market needs to be guided by human dignity and by social and ecological community. An economy which fails to remain rooted in these values does not reflect the plan of the Creator who, after all, is the great economist." *At Home in the Web of Life*, The Bishops of Appalachia

"We uphold social justice as a foundational principle guiding regional planning and the creation and implementation of public policy. It requires first of all that all persons in society insofar as they are able, be active and productive participants in the life of the community." *Principles of the Land Use Task Force*, Diocese of Cleveland.

"Community, spiritual and educational needs must be provided for. The moral foundations of our shared life and our care for the environment must be rooted in conscience and purity of heart. We are stewards of the land. We are stewards of one another's well-being and rights. The ultimate guiding norm for any development is safeguarding the transcendent dignity of the human person as the visible image of the invisible God." *The Height of the Mountains Are His*, Archbishop J. Francis Stafford

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is a membership organization grounded in a spiritual tradition which brings together the Church, care for creation and care for community. The NCRLC fosters programs of direct service and systemic change. As an educator in the faith, the NCRLC seeks to relate religion to the rural world; develops support services for rural pastoral ministers; serves as a prophetic voice and as a catalyst and convener for social justice.

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