

# The Baptismal Call

Fourth in a continuing series

## A life-long farmer plants the seeds of hope for justice

By Teresa A. Parsons

Asking Thomas Dermody what faith has to do with farming is like asking how he knows the seed he plants will sprout in the earth. If one dared to ask and he deigned to answer such a question, he would probably respond, "It's all by the grace of God."

Like his father and his grandfather before him, Dermody is a farmer, a Catholic and an American of Irish descent. For all of his 73 years, the Bergen bachelor has lived on the same 113-acre farm his grandfather purchased when he came to this country from County Meath, Ireland. There, with his brother George and two nephews, Dermody raises wheat, corn, dairy cattle and Belgian draft horses.

His father and grandfather preceded him on the land and as two of the living rocks on which the parish community at St. Vincent's Church in Churchville was built. In fact they even hauled the stone used to build the first St. Vincent's Church in 1844. It was through their example that Dermody learned it takes more than old-fashioned neighborliness or Sunday Mass attendance to live the message of the gospels.

From service as an altar boy he advanced to the roles of eucharistic minister, lector, delegate to the local council of churches, agricultural advocate and adviser. It is in the latter capacity that Dermody has gone farthest beyond the path worn by his father and grandfather to integrate faith and farming most fully.

Tom Dermody is an activist on economic and agricultural issues. As such, he has shouldered concerns broader than those which affect his own livelihood or even than the needs of farmers in general.

"If it injures my neighbor, it injures me — not to be able to live or to educate their children, to buy their food or shoes or whatever. Everybody's in this together," he explained. "We've got to make people understand that it's to their own advantage to help their neighbor."

Agricultural and economic issues are indisputably moral issues as far as Dermody is concerned. "Since Vatican II, we've been taught that sin is a community proposition," he said. "If somebody's drunk or beats his wife or leaves her in adultery or anything, that's a community problem. It's just the same whether or not the people that work for the implement companies I use get a living wage so they can buy my stuff."

Over the years, working for justice has become as natural a part of life to him as is bringing in the harvest. "As Monsignor Rice, that great Pittsburgh labor priest, told newsmen once: 'Boys, if you're not in politics working for social justice, you're dead today,'" he quoted.

Dermody came to economic awareness thanks to a year he spent at Cornell University during the Depression. That taste of higher education combined with the experience of farming during hard times generated a life-long commitment to working for economic justice.

"The way things went, my dad got sick, and less than six years after I left Cornell, he passed away," Dermody said. "He left a lot of debts, like every man did at that time."

But the Dermody family pulled out of the crisis together. "My mother kept house, my sister lived here until she married, and my brothers and I went out and within eight years we paid off that \$10,000 worth of debt," he recalled. "While that was hard, I don't feel I was deprived or underprivileged to do that. We've raised a lot of things, a lot of crops."

That comment betrayed Dermody's shy

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Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Thomas Dermody pauses in the midst of morning chores at Locust Hill Farm in Bergen. Behind him is the barnyard, which became a virtual bog as a result of recent heavy rains.

pride at being chosen to live on the land, to be the one to pick the sweet corn, to get the hay in before it rains, to help bring another bay Belgian foal into the world. Despite more than 70 years at this distinctly unromantic, back-breaking, life-giving work, he still considers "the urge to conserve the harvest" as God's blessing to him.

It may also be by God's grace that his Locust Hill Farm is not yet endangered by the present-day crisis among small-family farms. But Dermody's definition of neighbor doesn't allow him to accept a world or a nation divided into two camps — "the have's and the have-nots." He doesn't even care who the have-nots are.

Since 1910, he noted, farmers have received an increase of only \$1 per bushel for their wheat. "Wheat was \$2 a bushel in 1910 and now, well, it's just a little bit better than \$3 a bushel. And the expenses — well we get bigger yields but the expenses are bigger," he said. "We're not in any danger of starving or having bread rationing, but it's a case of the farmer going to the marketplace and getting paid a just, living price."

His views are often met with the assertion that those farmers being driven out of business were marginal anyway. "There're people who say we should let it get real bad and the ones who are weak, they'll fall by the wayside and the ones who are left will prosper," he said. "That's not so because the ones that supposedly think they're strong, it might come onto them. Well the whole business is liable to go down. Nobody knows what will happen. Anyway, that's against democratic principles and against the equality of all people."

At stake in the life-and-death struggle of small, independent farms is the future of democracy as our form of government, Dermody believes.

"Everything in this country comes from the land. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and later, Abraham Lincoln, understood that there's a relationship between the land and freedom," he said.

"If the family farm disappears — pray God that this does not happen — you will see in your lifetime and maybe in mine, an attempt made to change the government. That's a staggering thing, isn't it?"

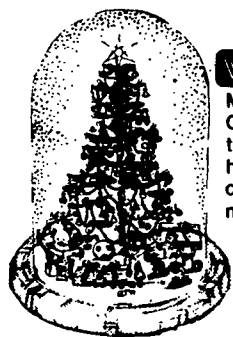
As an example, he pointed to the feudal system in Europe during the Middle Ages. By controlling the means of food production, landowners in England became kingmakers, removing James II and putting William and Mary of Orange on the throne. If the trend toward agribusinesses and superfarms continues at the expense of independent farmers, Dermody pointed out that control of food production would again reside in relatively few hands. Then, like oil or any other indispensable commodity, farm products could be exploited.

"If we drop back into that system of peasantry, it will be bad for everyone in the United States," he said. "On those great big estates, the fellows that dug in the ditch and herded the sheep weren't getting anything."

The fact that many farm workers already live a near-peasant existence is a disturbing reality to Dermody. "I don't hire anybody, but we must admit this is just a pitiful condition. You see the poverty level is \$3,500. A hired man has got to get a minimum of \$4,000 — that's over \$300 a month — just to live fair."

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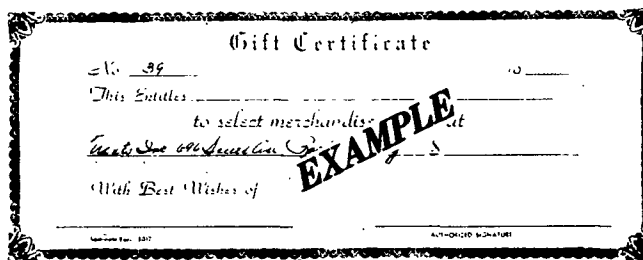
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