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Food: God's Gift to All People. Case Study from Croatia

Żywność – dar Boga dla wszystkich ludzi. Studium przypadku z Chorwacji

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Abstract: In the light of the biblical message, food is God's gift to all people. Church's documents emphasize that food is a natural human need, and every human has a natural right to food. This, however, presents new challenges to humanity today, because market-oriented agriculture often prevails, which does not focus so much on the quality and availability of food for all people, especially the poor, but puts profit at the center. The first part of paper attempts to concisely present the attitude of the Holy Scriptures towards food, which contribute to today's reflection on solving the problem of production and availability of healthy food. The second part presents church's guidelines, aimed to overcome today's injustices in the world and provide everyone with access to food, and highlights the importance of producing healthy food for the protection of health. The third part of the paper deals with certain decrees on food production and control and the promotion of ecological production in the Republic of Croatia. Nevertheless, adopting the legislation of the European Union and accepting its guidelines on the development of agriculture has brought a certain shift in recent years. This legislative framework will contribute to the strengthening of the Croatian rural community, the encouragement of small family farms, and the increase of food production, especially healthy, ecologically grown food.

Keywords: food, God's gift, natural human need, encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, ecological agriculture, healthy food, Republic of Croatia, religion and ecology

Streszczenie: Żywność, w świetle przesłania biblijnego, jest darem Boga dla ludzi. Dokumenty Kościelne podkreślają, że żywność zaspakaja naturalną potrzebę człowieka i że każdy człowiek ma do niej naturalne prawo. To założenie jednak, w dniu dzisiejszym, niesie ze sobą nowe wyzwania dla ludzkości, jako że rolnictwo jest obecnie często sterowane przez rynek, który nie jest skupiony na zapewnieniu wysokiej jakości i dostępności żywności wszystkim ludziom, w tym zwłaszcza biednym, ale na pierwszym miejscu stawia zysk. W pierwszej części artykułu podjęto próbę zwięzłego przedstawienia stosunku Pisma Świętego do żywności, który wpisuje się w dzisiejszą refleksję nad rozwiązaniem problemu produkcji i dostępności zdrowej żywności. W drugiej części przedstawiono wytyczne Kościoła, mające na celu przezwyciężenie niesprawiedliwości występujących we współczesnym świecie, tak by zapewnić wszystkim dostęp do żywności, a dodatkowo, podkreślono znaczenie produkcji zdrowej żywności w ochronie zdrowia ludzkiego. Trzecia część artykułu dotyczy kwestii legislacji regulującej produkcję i kontrolę żywności oraz promocji produkcji ekologicznej w Republice Chorwacji. Przyjęcie prawodawstwa Unii Europejskiej oraz jej wytycznych dotyczących rozwoju rolnictwa przyniosło w ostatnich latach pewne zmiany. Nowe ramy prawne przyczynią się do wzmocnienia społeczności wiejskich w Chorwacji oraz zachęcą do tworzenia małych rodzinnych gospodarstw rolnych i zwiększenia produkcji żywności, zwłaszcza zdrowej żywności uprawianej ekologicznie.

Słowa kluczowe: żywność, dar Boży, naturalna potrzeba ludzka, encyklika *Laudato Si'*, rolnictwo ekologiczne, Chorwacja, religia i ekologia

Introduction

From the very beginning of mankind, finding and producing food has been at the center of human activities. Man cannot survive without food, which belongs to his basic natural needs. Conflicts over food were not rare either. Even today, food is at the center of human needs, and the right to food as one of the fundamental human rights is increasingly emphasized. Therefore, production and access to food, especially in poor countries, is no longer just an economic issue but also a moral and political one, especially because the number of people on Earth is increasing day by day, which requires an ever-increasing amount of food production. Unfortunately, this is often to the detriment of the quality and production of healthy food, and there is increasing demand for control of food production and sales.

Pope Francis has unequivocally condemned food waste as one of the many injustices in today's world and pointed out that throwing away food is the same "as stealing from the table of the poor" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 50). This presents new challenges for the states, especially the increasingly frequent demand for producing ecologically healthy food. In order to encourage integral ecology and integral human development, it is necessary to recognize "a great variety of small-scale food production systems which feed the greater part of the world's peoples, using a modest amount of land and producing less waste, be it in small agricultural parcels, in orchards and gardens, hunting and wild harvesting or local fishing. ... Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 129).

Therefore, this paper first aims to concisely present the attitude of the Holy Scriptures towards food as God's gift to all people, as well as natural human needs, and God's requests that he has placed before man, which contribute to today's reflection on solving the problem of production and availability of healthy food. Then, the second

part presents Church's guidelines in the light of the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, aimed to overcome today's injustices in the world and provide everyone with access to food, and highlights the importance of producing healthy food. Lastly, the third part of the paper comments on the *Letter of Slavonian Bishops* in which they talk about the causes that led to the difficult social and demographic situation in the eastern part of Croatia in the light of Social Teaching of the Church. In the end, certain decrees on food production, control, and the promotion of ecological measures in the Republic of Croatia are considered in the light of the document "Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home. Five Years After *Laudato Si'*".

1. Holy Scripture about Food as a Gift and Man's Obligations

Without going into all the complexity of the biblical discourse on food, it is enough to point out what the Pontifical Biblical Commission provides in a concise way in the document "What is a man?" (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022). Namely, the entire second chapter of this comprehensive document, entitled "The Human Being in the Garden," points out the biblical attitude towards food and man's tasks entrusted to him by God. Placing man in the "garden" that God "planted" for His creature, defines man's natural habitat, and indicates his tasks concerning the earth. Among these tasks is man's obligation to produce food from the earth, that is, to draw from the earth what sustains his daily existence (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 69). In addition, man is called to work for the preservation and development of the received heritage. This primarily refers to the promotion and maintenance of the quality of life of human beings. Placing man in the garden determines, among other things, his relationship with animals that also contribute to food and human labor (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 71; Pope Francis 2015, no. 69).

God, while planting a garden, allows beautiful and good trees to grow, and thus He becomes a farmer (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 72). As the master of the garden, God generously provides for his creatures all sorts of goods necessary and useful for life and then gives the garden to man and entrusts him with responsibility for the earth. Besides the trees that bear fruit given for food, plants are added, and the rivers ensuring the fertility of the soil (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 74; Pope Francis 2015, no. 70). "The divine work of the beginning has as its first intention that of providing the living beings with food necessary for survival and growth: the fruits of the trees are 'good for food' (Gen 2:9), and man is given freedom to eat from every tree (Gen 2:16)" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 71). Food is presented as the Creator's permanent gift to His creatures, and God's original blessing is expressed as a paternal act that ensures food for life, in such a way that man can understand this universal and permanent gift and is ready to express his gratitude to God for this gift (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 78).

Food is necessary for human survival and development, and it is interesting to note that the "call to feed" is inscribed in the body and "manifests itself in the symptoms of hunger and thirst that reveal the powerful survival instinct that every human being is endowed with. This reveals the radical difference of the creature in relation to the Creator, the only Being who possesses full and everlasting life, and therefore does not need to feed (Ps 50:9-13)" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 76). The need for food and drink, therefore, characterizes man and these are his natural needs, which makes him resemble animals. However, man's relationship to food is specific, because animals feed on what grows naturally, while man is called to sow and reap and to feed himself not only on the natural product of the land but also on the fruits of his labor (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 77). Furthermore, unlike animals, humans do not "devour" food with

the sole purpose of satisfying their appetite. Humans are capable of savoring food, and they make an effort to choose food, prepare it, and enjoy it. The Holy Scriptures warn that every form of insatiable gluttony and every manifestation of bulimia, as well as excessive obesity, destroys the human organism, and warn that every frantic search for the pleasure of the palate represents a vice harmful to the individual and the community (Sir 37:29-31) (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 77). On the other hand, anorexia, as a serious eating disorder, "actually expresses not only the refusal of food but also difficulty in accepting life" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 77). Therefore, many places in the Holy Scriptures call for moderation, that is, for controlled and limited consumption of food and drink (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 85).

Food also has a cultural aspect because it is a vehicle for relationships between people whereby eating together expresses alliance and fraternal communion. Namely, from birth, humans connect with their parents and other people through food. "The child receives from his parents food 'prepared' specifically for him and accompanied by words that invite him to taste it; every bite is a gift, and this develops the principle of relational trust, based on the experience of repeated gestures of accommodating love" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 77). On the other hand, with the development of trade and the meeting of cultures, the human race has been enriched with diverse forms of food that are the fruit of man's wisdom and ability to improve the nutritional value of individual products and the knowledge to offer food in such a way that the moment of dining and table fellowship becomes more pleasant and lived in shared love. The Holy Scriptures, especially Jesus in the Gospels, strongly condemn the waste of food and useless gastronomic pleasures, especially when many poor people are left to starve due to selfish indifference (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 77).

When we talk about the biblical discourse on food, we cannot fail to mention man's sin, because it not only disturbed

the relationship with God, other people, and nature, but it also brought injustice in the distribution of food among people and called into question God's gift to all people and His great generosity. Because of sin, man experiences hunger and limited nutrition, and now he must obtain bread for himself with pain and toil. Man is also faced with drought and other natural disasters, and the division between the poor and the rich is growing and there is inequality between people (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 78-79). However, despite the increase of sin in the world, God does not abandon man and does not deny him His generosity and benevolence. On the contrary, through the experience of hardship and hunger, God calls man to convert and gain wisdom through this difficult experience and change this situation into an opportunity to do good. God judges people according to their hospitality and corporal works of mercy, which include feeding the hungry (cf. Papinska biblijska komisija 2022, no. 80-81). Bright examples are Abraham feeding travelers (cf. Gen 18:1-16) and Joseph of Egypt (cf. Gen 41:56). "Instead of being a curse, poverty becomes a factor in ethically precious relationships, expressing the flourishing of good through the righteousness of the merciful. This special responsibility for feeding the hungry is entrusted to the reader of the Bible as a permanent program of life (Is 58:7; 2 Chron 28:15; Prov 25:21; Sir 4:1-6; Tob 1:17; Mt 25:35-36; Rom 12:20)" (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 80).

However, perhaps the most useful text for this reflection about food is the Jewish people's forty-year walk through the desert when they experience hunger and the austerity of the desert. On the one hand, being in the arid desert is a consequence of the sin that manifested in the rejection of the good land that God had given them, that is, rebellion against Moses and God's commandments, and idolatry. However, despite the rebellions, they did not lose God's favor and experienced God's permanent providence, especially through the miracle

of water that flowed from the rock and the gift of manna. God gave them food from heaven that they just had to collect and cook. Thus, despite man's sin, God shows himself as the Father of life who will always feed the hungry and invite them to a "holy meal" where man will express his gratitude. Therefore, we can say that certain dietary restrictions, that is, bans on the consumption of certain foods that are considered impure, had the purpose of showing obedience to divine norms because they contain the source of life (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 83). Ultimately, we can say that eating food is "a pleasant assimilation of the fruit of one's work and, at the same time, as an acceptance of what God has bestowed upon His creatures" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 84).

Food in people's lives can, therefore, take on a symbolic dimension, that is, people can give food a higher, spiritual dimension. In the spirit of the Good News and the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the broken bread becomes a sign of a new covenant and Eucharistic communion. The lamb sacrificed on the altar "is understood as a sacrifice of oneself to God, the renunciation of fasting expresses the hunger of the heart, and the most desirable realities of the soul are compared to delicious foods and choice drinks (Is 55:2; Ps 119:103; Prov 9:3-6)" (Pope Francis 2015, no. 77).

2. The Importance of Healthy Food Production

In the light of the biblical message, the *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church* clearly pointed out that the "demands of the common good are dependent on the social conditions of each historical period and are strictly connected to respect for and the integral promotion of the person and his fundamental rights," (Papinsko vijeće Iustitia et pax 2005, no. 166) which certainly include protection of the environment and provision of those essential services to people, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education, and access to culture,

transportation, health care, free circulation of information, and the protection of religious freedom. the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that life and physical health are precious gifts from God and we should take reasonable care for them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good. "Concern for the health of its citizens requires that society help in the attainment of living conditions that allow them to grow and reach maturity: food and clothing, housing, health care, basic education, employment, and social assistance" (Katekizam 1994, no. 2288).

In light of the fundamental human right to food and its full realization for all members of the human family, from 2013 to 2015, the World Caritas Confederation carried out the campaign "One Human Family, Food for All," which "aimed to counter unequal access to food and to raise awareness of the importance of food (where it is produced, who produced it and in what conditions) while also working to prevent food waste" (Tavolo interdicasteriale 2020, 118). At the same time, governments were asked to be aware of their internationally accepted commitments and adopt the necessary policies that guarantee access to food. The document "Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home. Five Years After *Laudato Si'*," issued by the Interdicasterial Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology, warned of the problem of food losses occurring at all post-production stages (during processing, storage, transport, and sale), which creates serious difficulties and loss of income of small producers. "Such losses are a consequence of an overdeveloped market-centered food system and must be addressed through an approach to human development that is integral, social, and ecological" (Tavolo interdicasteriale 2020, 116). It was also pointed out that international statistics report multiple forms of malnutrition in the world, that is, along with the increase in obesity, there is an increase in undernutrition. "In light of this, there is an urgent need to promote a nutritional education

that is healthy and quantitatively, qualitatively, and culturally appropriate. It is even more important to understand the impact of environmental degradation on those who depend particularly on the land and water for their food" (Tavolo interdicasteriale 2020, 116-117).

It is evident from this that today we are facing two big problems that are mutually related. On the one hand, there is prevailing market-oriented food production that is often to the detriment of small producers and often leads to malnutrition in poor regions where food becomes too expensive and difficult to access. On the other hand, putting profit at the center of food production most often causes the production of lower quality food, which then also leads to health problems, that is, the regular appearance of obesity and various diseases. In light of what has been said, there is an increasing number of demands in the Republic of Croatia to switch from conventional to ecological production of food and beverages and to ban the use of artificial fertilizers (nitrates), herbicides, glyphosate, arsenic, and GMO products. They point out that this will prevent diseases and save tens of thousands of Croatian citizens. Namely, with an economic-social and market-ecological sustainable transition, along with the advantages provided by membership in the European Union and by investing available European funds in the real economic sector on social and ecological principles, poisoning and many diseases can be prevented. Ecological associations point out that increasing the ecological production of healthy food will reduce financial allocations for healthcare.

In 2022, the Association Croatian Economic Ecological Club MIR sent the *Letter to Croatian bishops, priests, religious brothers and sisters* in which it asked for their support in a project aimed at preventing mass poisoning caused by the use of artificial fertilizers and various pesticides, which leads to illness and death from difficult-to-treat diseases of more than 7,000 people,

mostly young and middle-aged, every year in the Republic of Croatia. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that more than 1.5 billion euros are currently spent on treatment in Croatia. Ecological associations are convinced that the ecological production of food and beverages can reduce up to 60% of various diseases: from mass poisoning to difficult-to-treat diseases. They are convinced that in more than 50% of cases, the cause of death is poisoning from the food and drink they consumed because it contained chemical preparations that protect and nourish plants, and at the same time poison and kill people (cf. MIR 2021).

The document "Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home. Five Years After *Laudato Si'*" in the light of Social Teaching of the Church proposes, therefore, certain measures to make food available to all people and encourage the production of healthy food:

1. "Promote the realization of the right to food for all human beings and promote it as the basis of the entire production-distribution-consumption food cycle.
2. Contribute to world food safety by providing adequate support to small-scale farmers, primarily in the areas of ecological agriculture, livestock farming and subsistence fishing, particularly on a family basis, with attention to the environment, employment, the dignity of work and legality.
3. Promote adequate access (especially for women and young people) to land ownership and land use, fishing permits, seed purchase, responsible credit, training and insurance, giving priority to land use for direct food production, rather than to the production of non-food products or fuels, countering land-grabbing and deforestation and favoring the cultivation of native and diversified seeds.
4. Support rural populations to increase production on their lands, train them to acquire new skills, encourage community organization and participation in local institutions, promote food production that respects the environment, soil biodiversity, and the regeneration time of the various natural resources.
5. Invest in the restoration and protection of agricultural landscapes and in the sustainable use of forests as a means of resilience and adaptation to climate change, for example, by encouraging the development of producer cooperatives, seed banks, micro-credit institutions and decentralized training, data collection and analysis systems and information sharing at the service of rural communities.
6. Link rural and peri-urban areas to commercial intersections through efficient infrastructure, to reduce as much as possible potential food losses.
7. Improve the care of animals on farms, particularly animals used in agricultural work and in breeding livestock. Train competent operators in terms of productivity and quality, who can then help producers, especially the poorest, with simple but effective methods to contribute to a meaningful increase in production, quality of work, and income.
8. Invest in important advanced sectors such as permaculture, agroforestry, small-scale agricultural projects, and the production of organic fertilizers and pesticides; the enhancement of soil quality and of its micro-biodiversity; diversified and sustainable agriculture as a contribution, for example, to the survival of pollinating species and of certain migratory species and to the fight against desertification in certain regions; the protection of varieties of seed traditionally cultivated in poor countries, and the promotion of appropriate seeds for the technical, economic and ecological conditions of each area.
9. Identify and counter the large polluting agro-industrial projects involving

extensive and highly mechanized cultivation, sometimes intended to grow products that are not considered as priorities for human consumption, and which often unfairly occupy the territories of the local populations that at times engage in violent expulsion and large-scale deforestation.

10. Promote inclusive debates with all the parties involved in agri-food innovations resulting from genetic research (GMOs – genetically modified organisms) and finance a variety of independent and interdisciplinary research projects that can bring new insights.
11. Pursue a fair international trade system, thus enabling agriculture in poor countries to be strengthened and diversified through the exportation of both raw materials and processed products; ensuring sufficiently high prices for producers in the poor countries; protecting small producers who operate in poor countries from the production of the richest countries or from rich countries' companies operating in poor countries; avoiding excessive and unjustified dependence on suppliers and patents.
12. Curb speculation on foodstuffs since it endangers the food security of the human family.
13. Counter irregular and undocumented fishing through international cooperation" (cf. *Tavolo interdicasteriale* 2020, 120-123).

Pope Francis, namely, strongly encouraged governments and politicians to first seek solutions at the national and local level suitable for promoting diverse and sustainable agriculture, especially by investing in rural areas, encouraging national and local markets, and supporting and investing in cooperatives and associations that defend small producers and natural resources (cf. Pope Francis 2015, no. 174-175), while encouraging ecological food production and circular economy "from field to table."

3. Food Production and Control in The Republic of Croatia

Croatia is rich in natural resources, and, in addition, it has excellent arable land with a low degree of pollution and sufficient water resources. "Arable areas amount to 1.3 million hectares (ha), which includes 22.8% of the Croatian territory. However, only 30% is used, while 70% or 910,000 ha is not cultivated" (Jakupec 2011, 837). In this sense, "they mainly produce cereals, oilseeds, and sugar beets – products that do not require a lot of labor. All the listed species can be grown in about 20 working days per year. Only 2.8% of cultivated areas are for fruit production, mainly apples, and only 0.41% for vegetable production. The livestock sector is also poorly developed. Pork is mainly imported as frozen goods; often from Asia and overseas countries. Retail chains and processors are only looking for a low price and only occasionally quality. All this results in the fact that Croatia, which is not an industrial country, imports food worth 2.1 billion US dollars" (Jakupec 2011, 838).

The reason for such a situation is that those responsible in the country, especially former Croatian governments, did not recognize the importance of the agricultural sector. Croatian farmers are faced with poorly developed irrigation, insufficient support from political parties who do not see agriculture as an important economic sector, a lack of cold storage and warehouses, outdated technology, a lack of processing industry, huge food imports, and production that is predominantly focused on crops production and insufficient production of fruits and vegetables, as well as the decline of animal husbandry. In addition, only 8% of the area is under ecological production, and 1.5% of the products are ecologically certified.

3.1. Inherited Mentality and Letter of Slavonian Bishops

It is, therefore, worth emphasizing that the independence of the new Croatian state was defended mostly "in rural areas, and in that struggle, the village paid a high toll

in manpower, material goods, and the loss of time and energy needed to catch up with the countries of the European Union” (Salaj 2013). However, immediately after the end of the Homeland War in 1995, and the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region in 1998, when it was time to remove the worst consequences of the war, it became clear that due to the absence of lustration, the inherited state management apparatus remained and, perhaps, it was a bigger problem than the war destruction itself. The public sector, and especially the state administration, continued to act based on experiences from the past communist system and did not understand their new role (cf. Salaj 2013).

All this was particularly felt in the field of agriculture and food production. Many agricultural areas, since they were minefields for many years, and as such remained uncontaminated by pesticides, have not been used for ecological production. The village and agriculture were not recognized as strategically important areas for the development of the Croatian economy and society as a whole. As a result of such a policy, the Republic of Croatia became increasingly dependent on importing food, often of dubious origin and quality. According to some indicators, at the beginning of the third millennium, Croatia lost 2 to 3% of the growth of the social product annually due to the lack of production in the village. All this led to the impoverishment of the rural population, a demographic crisis, and increasing emigration to the countries of the European Union. Therefore, we can say that the policy that was conducted for decades, that is, earlier in Yugoslavia, continues in a certain way in democratic Croatia, and it makes it difficult for family farms to grow, and for the villages continue to exist on an already small and often parceled out land (cf. Salaj 2013a).

In 2016, the bishops of Slavonia addressed the faithful, the socio-political and economic public, and all people of goodwill with the Lenten epistle *Poverty and the demographic situation in Slavonia, Baranja*

and Srijem. The bishops were driven by the desire to stop the growing trends of poverty and, based on the mission of the Church and its social teaching, they spoke about the causes that led to the difficult social and demographic situation in the eastern part of Croatia, which is also felt in other parts of the country. In the Epistle, they emphasized that the problems of the “Croatian village and this part of Croatia are not only of an economic nature but penetrate deeply into the life of families and their demographic future, and are also connected with the issue of economic and food independence of the country, care for the environment and national security because large areas along the border remain without population” (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 2).

In the Epistle, it was pointed out that due to the lack of care of those who assumed responsibility for the common good, “a clear agrarian policy and rural development strategy was missing, farming work became very cheap, and family agricultural production became dependent on the inherited industrial policy... The role of the state and expert agencies was also absent to protect as much as possible, directly and indirectly, domestic cultivation and production. Therefore, it is a sad fact that our regions, with all their wealth and tradition, have been brought to their knees” (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 4).

The bishops pointed out that “agriculture is of fundamental importance for every society because it not only provides the community with the necessary goods for daily food but also has an important social, cultural, and economic role” (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 8). The bishops, therefore, emphasized the need for necessary reforms to stop the uncontrolled import of food and enable domestic food producers to successfully meet the needs of the domestic market (cf. *ibid*, no. 8). The bishops emphasize that it is necessary to urgently adopt a strategy for the development of agriculture, with a clear vision to open new perspectives and become capable of playing an important role in

the social and economic life of the Republic of Croatia. We should particularly stimulate the development of animal husbandry, dairy farming, arable farming, vegetable growing, fruit growing, and viticulture, because, as emphasized in the Letter, our regions must not be allowed to become exporters of cheap raw materials, instead of refining the products and bringing the final product to the market which will give them more profit. In the spirit of the Church's social teachings, the bishops emphasize that it is necessary to develop industry in the villages, especially food processing and wood industries, to ensure the lifelong education of farmers and the application of the latest production technologies in the cultivation of land (cf. Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 9).

Referring to the experience of the European Union that shows how cooperative management can achieve enviable economic results, the bishops in the Letter call on all those responsible in the country to adapt the laws to the regulations of the European Union that encourage the development of small and fragmented producers. In addition, with the amendment of the legislation, it is also necessary to "work on joining small and fragmented farmers by promoting cooperatives, which are at the same time generously incentivized by the EU funds through our funds for rural development. This would help avoid cases in which farmers are deprived of the possibility of using the mentioned funds due to the disharmony of our legislation (laws, acts, and regulations) with the EU regulations" (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 11).

The bishops also warned about the consequences of the communist era when the land was nationalized, and peasants were forced into state cooperatives. Thus, large state agricultural combines were created, while peasants were left with small and fragmented plots of land. The bishops, therefore, point to the need for consolidation of agricultural land "to create a more competitive production, so that precisely encouraging the association of small family farms and

a cooperative culture of work can contribute to greater consolidation of agricultural land" (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no.12).

At the same time, the bishops point out, it is also necessary to refine the laws on the allocation of state land "to enable, in the name of fairness, for small producers to compete equally for obtaining state land in a concession" (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 12). Namely, after the fall of communism and the establishment of democracy, the state land was often allocated according to political suitability to only a few, because they accepted the policy of farming large-land agriculture to the detriment of small family farms. It was not a rare case that "suitable" individuals received concessions of state land at preferential prices, and the bishops pointed out that this was unfair to small producers, but at the same time, that farming policy was against the agricultural policy of the European Union. The bishops also warned of the difficulties arising from the application of the law on incentives and believed that they should be regulated more fairly and clearly. The system of allocating incentives to agricultural land must not become a form of social assistance, "but a real support for the development of agricultural production" (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 12). The bishops, therefore, call on all farmers not to run away from self-organization and cooperative work culture, "but to try to overcome the inherited mentality according to which everyone is self-sufficient and to jointly invest in mechanization that is not commercially profitable for them individually" (Slavonski biskupi 2016, no. 12).

3.2. More Significant Shifts

In recent years, however, things have taken a turn for the better. This year, in accordance with the guidelines of the European Union, the Croatian Parliament passed the *Food Act* that prescribes provisions at the national level that regulate: competencies for the establishment and implementation of safety policy for food and animal feed; competencies in the field of risk

analysis; general rules of rapid alert system for food and animal feed at national level; general rules of crisis management in the field of food and animal feed safety; general rules for combating fraud; establishment and coordination of a network of institutions; providing scientific and professional opinion and providing scientific and technical assistance; national measures necessary for the implementation of food and feed safety policy (cf. Act 2023, 3).

In addition, certified organic farming is increasingly encouraged, although it does not have a major effect for now. In this sense, a pilot project of voluntary green public procurement of agricultural and food products was launched. In the Report of the Croatian Parliament, it is pointed out that “certain groups of public clients – hospitals, schools, kindergartens, retirement homes – have significant needs for the procurement of seasonal, fresh agricultural food products and food with emphasized qualitative and nutritional features. If you add to that the kitchens of employees in public and state services, public procurement of food represents a significant segment of the market for the placement of domestic agricultural and food products. Through green public procurement, quality and fresh products from short supply chains can be especially valued” (Report 2023).

The adopted regulations concerning the field of public procurement thus enabled public contracting authorities to have transparent criteria for the selection of offers, considering the needs related to the quality of agricultural food products and food. Therefore, at the 14th extraordinary session, held on December 16, 2022, the Croatian Parliament adopted a conclusion in which the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development commit themselves to initiate the procedure of inter-departmental coordination to adjust the green public procurement procedure. “This adjustment, according to the Conclusion of December 16, 2022, should ensure a minimum representation

of 20% of ecological and integrated agricultural and food products, products from quality systems registered at the national and European level, and products from short food supply chains” (Report 2023). However, since green public procurement has not yet gained momentum in Croatia, for the purpose of its successful implementation, education was organized to raise awareness and the level of expertise in the public sector (cf. Report 2023).

It is worth mentioning that at the session held on December 14, 2022, the Croatian Parliament also passed a resolution instructing the Ministry of Agriculture to initiate, within six months from the entry into force of the *Law amending and supplementing the Law on agriculture*, the procedures for drafting and adopting general requirements/quality standards for agricultural and food products intended for end consumers that have not yet been covered by national regulations that prescribe quality requirements, as well as to approach the assessment of the need to adapt the current regulations (cf. Act 2018).

Food quality standards/requirements include one or more of the following parameters: classification, categorization and name of food, physical, chemical, physicochemical and sensory properties and food composition, type, physicochemical and sensory properties of certain ingredients used in food production and processing, procedures applied in production and processing, and additional food labeling requirements. Food categories for which quality standards are not prescribed must comply with prescribed food safety requirements and food labeling requirements. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture established a voluntary national quality system for agricultural and food products “Proven Quality” to highlight the higher quality of Croatian products and achieve even greater recognition and promotion of domestic agricultural and food products on the market (cf. Regulation 2023).

It is worth mentioning that the Committee for Agriculture of the Croatian Parliament,

to obtain additional information about the experiences of other member states, in April 2022, sent a query to the European Commission about the practices of prescribing/determining the maximum period in which frozen products of animal origin can be placed on the market (expiration date). It was observed that there is no legal framework that would regulate the shelf life of frozen products of animal origin at the European Union level, which favors unfair trade practices and causes consumer concern. The member states are in doubt whether and in what way they can prescribe/determine at the national level binding maximum periods after which frozen products of animal origin must be withdrawn from the market, and which regulations would also apply to products placed on the market from other member states, as well as from third countries (cf. Letter 2023).

The *Act on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides* was also adopted, which seeks to achieve sustainable use of pesticides, reduction of risks and negative effects from the use of pesticides in a way that ensures a high level of protection of human and animal health, as well as protection of the environment and preservation of biological diversity, introduction of mandatory application of the basic principles of integrated protection of plants to control harmful plant organisms and alternative approaches and techniques such as non-chemical plant protection measures to achieve sustainable and competitive agriculture (cf. Act 2022, 3). The Republic of Croatia joined the European Commission's initiative to limit the use of glyphosate and reduce the use of pesticides by 50% by 2030 (cf. Petir 2017). In addition, in 2021, the Parliamentary Committee for Agriculture adopted the *Declaration on the GMO-free Alps-Adriatic-Danube Region*, which opened additional space for strengthening ecological production in Croatia, since certified organic farming excludes the use of GMOs (cf. *Declaration* 2021). In addition, they asked for stricter controls on the import of fruit and vegetables, especially from third

countries, particularly due to the use of pesticides that are banned in the European Union. Namely, excessive, or inappropriate use of pesticides can negatively affect soil, water, and agricultural biodiversity, and they also harm the health of plants, animals, and people (cf. Petir 2017a).

Instead of a Conclusion

In the light of the biblical message and Christian anthropology, food is, above all, God's gift to all people. From this recognition follow certain obligations that man must adhere to, particularly the attitude of gratitude. In this sense, unlike animals, man not only enjoys food, which is, above all, the fruit of his work and effort, but he is obliged to be solidary, hospitable, and generous. Food, therefore, also has an important cultural aspect because it is a vehicle for relationships between people, and eating together expresses alliance and fraternal communion. Church's documents emphasize that food is a natural human need, and every human has a natural right to food. This, however, presents new challenges to humanity today, because market-oriented agriculture often prevails, which does not focus so much on the quality and availability of food for all people, especially the poor, but puts profit at the center. Therefore, there are increasing demands, especially in the light of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, for achieving a fairer distribution of food and encouraging the production of healthy, ecologically produced food to protect human health and the natural environment.

The Republic of Croatia, as part of the European Union, also undertakes international obligations regarding food production and quality. However, although it is rich in natural resources, especially fertile land, and water, due to its heritage, at the beginning of its independence in the early 1990s, it did not put agriculture and small family farms at the center of development policy. Privatization and privileged allocation of state land directed the agrarian policy towards arming and big landowners'

food production, which led to the impoverishment and devastation of the Croatian villages. Slavonian bishops also warned about these detrimental effects in their Lenten letter in 2016.

Nevertheless, adopting the legislation of the European Union and accepting its guidelines on the development of agriculture has brought a certain shift in recent years. They adopted *the Food Act* and launched a pilot project of voluntary green public procurement of agricultural and food products. A step forward was also made by the adoption of *the Law on Agriculture*, which is harmonized with European guidelines, and they initiated the process of developing and adopting general quality requirements/standards for agricultural and food products intended for end consumers. They also adopted *the Act on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides*, supported the European Commission's initiative to limit the use of glyphosate and reduce the use of pesticides by 50% by 2030, and adopted *the Declaration on the GMO-free Alps-Adriatic-Danube Region*, which opened additional space for strengthening ecological production through organic farming in Croatia. We hope that this legislative framework and the new guidelines of agrarian policy will contribute to the strengthening of Croatian villages, the encouragement of small family farms, and the increase of food production, especially healthy, ecologically grown food, so that Croatia can restore its natural resources and produce enough food, not only for its own needs but enough for export to countries where there is not enough food.

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