

Land, Economy, and the Measure of Christ: The Catholic Agrarianism of Vincent McNabb, O.P.*

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Grant that whatever good things I have, I may share generously with those who have not and that whatever good things I do not have, I may request humbly from those who do . . .

Plant deep in me, Lord, all the virtues, that I might be devout in divine matters, discerning in human affairs, and burdensome to no one in fulfilling my own bodily needs.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, from *A Prayer to Acquire the Virtues*¹

[Land] produces every kind of real wealth, from the stone that built Salisbury Minster to the wool that makes the world's best homespuns and the wheat and grapes that may become the Sacrifice of a World Redeemed.

—Vincent McNabb, O.P., *The Church and the Land*²

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS'S prayer that God "plant deep in [him] . . . all the virtues" invokes the metaphor of agriculture, asking for God's care in nurturing him into a fruitful life. But his petitions to God for the generosity to share and the humility to request good things, along with the desire to meet need without burdening others, does not just invoke

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¹ Thomas Aquinas, *The Aquinas Prayer Book: The Prayers and Hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000), 53.

² Vincent McNabb, *The Church and the Land* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2002 [1925]), 152.

the metaphor of agriculture but implies the practice of agriculture itself—the gift of land and its fruits, the work of human hands—just as it envisions an economy within which the circulation of created goods to meet need is paramount.

More than six centuries later, Vincent McNabb, O.P., found these strands within the Thomistic inheritance particularly important for his contemporaries to hear. Addressing a world in the grip of an industrialism that he thought enslaved God's children, McNabb proposed a way to be devout in divine matters, discerning in human affairs, and burdensome to no one in fulfilling bodily need precisely by attending to the important relationship between God's planting the virtues in us and our planting in the soil—the mutual implication, as he saw it, between culture and agriculture, economy and land.

This essay focuses on McNabb's theological critique of what he called "the Factory System of Industrialization"³ and the alternative understanding of economy he sought to revitalize. Despite the relative neglect of McNabb's thought, it is worth examining for many reasons, perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this forum⁴ because he believed "responsible stewardship" of God's creation to be inseparable from economy, and economy, in turn, to be embedded within a wider created order, of which land was the epitome. He therefore regarded industrialism as destructive, not only of people, but of places. "The craze for the big farm," he wrote, "ends by impoverishing the farmer and the farm"⁵—not to mention those implicated in this process of impoverishment. McNabb, therefore, followed Pope Leo XIII in attempting to hold together Thomas's thought on both theology and economy, rejecting the assumption that the modern world made either obsolete. For McNabb, as for Pope Leo XIII, modern developments made recovery of Thomas's thinking on both theology and economy crucial.

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³ Ibid., 36.

⁴ A shorter version of this essay was originally presented at the conference "Renewing the Face of the Earth: The Church and the Order of Creation" at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, from 29 to 31 October 2009. The purpose of the conference was to "bring the wisdom of the Catholic intellectual tradition, especially that of St. Thomas Aquinas, to the articulation of an adequate vision of responsible stewardship."

⁵ Vincent McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 77.

Vincent McNabb was Irish by birth and a Dominican of the English province by vocation.⁶ He was born Joseph McNabb on 8 July 1868, in Portaferry, County Down, Ireland, near Belfast, the tenth of eleven children of Ann Shields and Captain James McNabb. When he was eleven, his father's work moved the family to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. In 1885, he entered the novitiate of the English Dominicans at Woodchester in Gloucestershire, England, and took the name Vincent. He was ordained a priest in 1891. After a three-year supplemental course of studies for the degree of lector in Sacred Theology at the Dominican Studentate, Louvain, Belgium, he returned in 1894 to England, where he served variously as a professor (at Woodchester and Hawkesyard in Staffordshire), a prior (at Woodchester, Holy Cross in Leicester, and Hawkesyard), and a parish priest (at St. Dominic's in London).⁷ He died at St. Dominic's on 17 June 1943.

While a young prior at Hawkesyard, he involved himself in agricultural work, devoting many hours each day to it. His chief biographer, Ferdinand Valentine, contends that this work profoundly influenced him, infusing new life and meaning into the asceticism he had embraced from an early age and the Thomism into which he had been trained as a Dominican.⁸ Even in his life in London, McNabb was determined to embody the economics of the homestead. His habit was made on a domestic loom from the wool of sheep reared on neighboring land, and his boots by a local craftsman. He wrote with a quill rather than a fountain pen. He refused mechanized forms of transportation like buses and trains, preferring to walk to and from his engagements, often ten to fifteen miles or more. Valentine explains McNabb's rationale: "If the machine were responsible for the dislocation of modern life and the disintegration of the home, he would do without it."⁹

⁶ For information about Vincent McNabb's life I draw principally upon Ferdinand Valentine, *Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.: The Portrait of a Great Dominican* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1955). See also Aidan Nichols, *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewrig, 1997).

⁷ He was a Professor of Philosophy at Woodchester (1894–97), Professor of Sacred Theology at the Studentate of the English Province at Hawkesyard Priory (1897–1900), Prior of Woodchester (1900–1906), parish priest at St. Dominic's in London (1907–8), Prior of Holy Cross in Leicester (1908–14), Prior of Hawkesyard (1914–17) and then Professor of Dogmatic Theology (1917–20), and finally a sub-prior and librarian at St. Dominic's Priory for the remainder of his life (1920–43).

⁸ Angela Cunningham traces his interest even earlier, to the time of his studies at Louvain and his impression with the intensive farming practices of the small-holders he met while living there. Angela Cunningham, "Prophecy and the Poor," *New Blackfriars* 64, no. 752 (1983): 57.

⁹ Valentine, *Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.*, 157.

McNabb is perhaps best known for association with Distributism and its main proponents, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and Eric Gill. He has been called “the most unabashedly radical,”¹⁰ the most “extreme,”¹¹ among the group. Following Pope Leo XIII’s statement in *Rerum novarum* (1891) that “the law therefore should favor ownership and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners,” Distributists argued for the proliferation of ownership of property.¹² “The basic solution,” McNabb contended, echoing Distributist principles, “lies along the lines of decentralization, diversification, small ownership, and cooperation and a large increase of subsistence homesteading.”¹³ Distributists therefore opposed *both* capitalism, in which productive property tends to become concentrated in the hands of few, *and* socialism, in which productive property is not held by individuals or families but by state or some other collective form. While deeply sympathetic to Distributism, McNabb, however, did not fully embrace the label, preferring to speak of himself as a priest and a theologian of the Church. His teaching sought to be faithful, first and foremost, to Scripture, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Pope Leo XIII. If, in the process, he found common ground with Distributism, so much the better.¹⁴

McNabb was also known for being a pivotal figure in the Catholic Land Movement (CLM), which sought to establish Catholic homesteads in the countryside—a movement that obviously resonated with Distributism.¹⁵ Formed in Glasgow, Scotland in 1929, the CLM sought to foster a Catholic agrarianism as an alternative to industrialism.¹⁶ At the heart of McNabb’s thought and that of the CLM was an exhortation to a new

¹⁰ William Fahey, “Introduction,” in *The Church and the Land* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2002 [1925]), 12.

¹¹ Cunningham, “Prophecy and the Poor,” 53.

¹² Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* §46.

¹³ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 148.

¹⁴ Bede Bailey, “Father Vincent McNabb, Dominican,” *The Chesterton Review* XXII, no. 1 & 2 (1996): 54.

¹⁵ On McNabb’s participation in the CLM, see Valentine, *Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.*, 142–49. Hugh Walters, “Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999: VI—*Pro Foco Non Foro*: The Thomist Inheritance and the Household Economy of Father Vincent McNabb,” *New Blackfriars* 80, no. 939 (1999). On the CLM more generally, see *Flee to the Fields: The Founding Papers of the Catholic Land Movement* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2003 [1934]).

¹⁶ CLM was characterized by a kind of monasticism, evidenced by these words McNabb wrote to his CLM brothers and sisters in ‘A Call to Contemplatives,’ one of the movement’s charter documents: “Be a *monastery* then—a MONK—a thing apart, aloof from the world; indeed, be a world apart, a self-sufficient, self-supporting kingdom.” McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 31.

exodus, not from the flesh pots of Egypt, but from the flesh pots of London, Birmingham, and Manchester. McNabb read the English slums of his own day in relationship to Israel's bondage in Egypt, the mass production of the factory in relation to the Pharaonic building projects, and the attempt to control the reproductive habits of the poor through birth control and eugenics legislation in relation to Pharaoh's attempt to control the reproduction of the children of Israel.¹⁷ The remedy, he thought, was nothing short of "revolution."¹⁸ The revolution, however, involved leaving Egypt, not assassinating Pharaoh.¹⁹

Like Israel's exodus from Egypt, the CLM's "first and principal motive" was the worship of God. "They will leave the ugliness of the town," he wrote, "not for the beauty of the land, but for the beauty of God's face; they will fly from the disease of the town, not for the health of the body, but for the health of the soul; they will cut the tangled complexity of town life, not for the simple life with nature, but for the quiet life with God."²⁰ This is an important feature of McNabb's thought that is often overlooked: while his critique implicated England as a whole, his solution appealed to theological sources and called for a distinctive Catholic witness.²¹ Moreover, he regarded exodus christologically:

[A]s a greater than Moses has, by His death on the Cross, led them out of a greater bondage than that of Egypt, the God whom they worship and would follow is He whose name was written on the Cross as JESUS OF NAZARETH.

Now Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made Flesh, did not come into our midst, to show flesh and blood an example but to be its redeemer . . .

The modern world needs redemption; and redemption means a return to Nazareth.²²

McNabb thought that only the *sequela Christi* and holding fast to the redemption Christ offered was strong enough to go out to the countryside, to live long upon it, and to resist the lure of the city. Christ not only gave us his "leadership" and "example," which made "a plain way still plainer," but, even more importantly, he gave us the redemption that made our "weak human will stronger."²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 76.

¹⁸ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ Vincent McNabb, *The Catholic Land Movement: Its Motives* (Catholic Truth Society, 1932). See also McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 32–33, 73–79.

²¹ Cunningham, "Prophecy and the Poor," 62.

²² McNabb, *The Catholic Land Movement: Its Motives*.

²³ Ibid.

Although McNabb urged an exodus from city to countryside, the purpose of the exodus was not to abandon cities to themselves. He simply thought that what was most necessary for social renewal in cities and the degrading and even enslaving conditions within them was the instantiation of a different kind of economy, a visible alternative to industrialism. As he put it, "No advance in social thought or social action is possible if we are seeking to prove to ourselves as a theory what we should be trying to realize as a fact."²⁴ Urban conditions were of such a nature that leaving them and instantiating an alternative to them was the only way to serve the city. This sentiment is perhaps most beautifully expressed in a collection of verbatim notes from a retreat he led:

We mustn't go out into the world as if the world were our enemy and we have to conquer it. It is like the poor wounded man on the road to Jericho; it is hungry, and we want to give it something to eat; thirsty, and we want to give it something to drink; homeless, and we want to open the door and give it a lodging and a home. It is not an enemy we want to overcome and subdue. We have some glorious thing, some Light, we want those outside to share; like the sunshine. We want it to be theirs as much as ours. And I think the first argument, and probably the most effective, is our life. But it is no use our speaking of our life if our life doesn't speak for itself.²⁵

What was at stake in exodus, therefore, was not so much separation as witness, the attempt to display to others the integration of what modern urban life was disintegrating.

As Angela Cunningham has argued, the wellspring of McNabb's critique of industrialism was his theology of the family.²⁶ The Holy Family of Nazareth was for him the model of true Christian social order. He considered industrialism to be antithetical not just to the good of the family but to the very existence of the family as such, especially poor families. Because wages and housing conditions were insufficient to support families, McNabb thought couples were increasingly pressured to practice artificial birth control. Moreover, McNabb and other Distributists regarded artificial birth control as part of a larger threat from eugenics legislation that sought to regulate the breeding of the "unfit." Birth control and eugenics legislation undermined the integrity of the family, which McNabb regarded as "the economic unit of the commonwealth."²⁷

²⁴ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 33, 30.

²⁵ Vincent McNabb, *God's Way of Mercy* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1937), 113.

²⁶ Cunningham, "Prophecy and the Poor."

²⁷ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 38–41.

McNabb thought the family was the basis of economy, not only because work should take place in or near the home and involve the production of the goods needed by the home—economy in the classical sense of the term as household management (*oikonomia*/οἰκονομία)—but also because the home alone produced the goods constitutive to a flourishing commonwealth: good people. A flourishing family life was therefore “the acid test of any system calling itself civilization,”²⁸ and the answer to conditions that imperiled the possibility of a flourishing family life was not to conform the family to those conditions but to conform those conditions to the flourishing of the family.²⁹ As McNabb himself put it, “Any attempt at social legislation which is not based on the integrity of the family is not going to be a good thing, and once you realize that, you have the key, the clue, to the moving spirit of the Land Movement.”³⁰

McNabb therefore critiqued what he called “the Factory System of Industrialization”³¹ for its failure to distinguish true economy from what Aristotle called the art of making money (*chrematistics*/χρηματιστική). This failure amounted to a conflation of economy with avarice, which not only fundamentally misconstrued economy, but produced people who, if they sought to serve God at all, sought to serve God along with Mammon.³² Industrialism “displaced” and “misplaced” economy’s “center of gravity”³³ from countryside and land to city and factory. What was particularly pernicious to McNabb about these tendencies was the way they sought to disembed economy not only from the claims of families for what they need but from the role of land and the wider created order in meeting that need. Industrialism, in the words of *Rerum novarum*, surrendered workers, “isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of naked competition.”³⁴ But, for McNabb, such surrendering was possible only because work had become synonymous with earning wages. Industrialism attempted to extract workers from the bonds of family, community, and land, much in the same way that it extracted crops from soil, timber from forests, oil from wells, and coal from veins.

McNabb, therefore, did not understand economy in the modern sense of an interlocking system of markets that adjusts supply and demand

²⁸ Ibid., 141–42, 61–63.

²⁹ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 88–91, 114–17.

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 36.

³² Ibid., 32. See also Vincent McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2009 [1933]), 40–42.

³³ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 32.

³⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), §3. All magisterial documents cited are from the Vatican website, www.vatican.va.

through price mechanisms, or something along similar lines. He did not understand economics as a social science dedicated to the description and analysis of a separate sphere called “the economy.” Instead, McNabb envisioned economy in terms of household management and so understood it to be inseparable from the temporal and eternal flourishing of human beings. Economy therefore necessarily fell within the purview of the Church and her role as teacher: “The Church is not primarily interested in politics or economics, because neither politics nor economics are primary. Yet the Church is necessarily, and greatly interested in politics and economics because both politics and economics are moral.”³⁵ As we will see, McNabb regarded the gift of creation as a common gift, given to serve the needs of all, and he thought economy should defer to this purpose. Only in so deferring does economy find its proper place in relation to the mysterious economy of God’s salvation.



McNabb’s critique of industrialism presumes a Thomistic understanding of human creaturehood. It will be useful, therefore, to comment briefly on Thomas’s analysis of what it means to be a creature—first, in relation to God, and, second, in relation to the rest of the created order. Thomas’s understanding of the human creature is part of his larger discussion of God as the creator who alone creates and who does so not out of necessity but out of a plenitude of love that is diffusive, seeking nothing other than to share itself. All creation depends upon God for its very being. In Thomas’s words, “Creation in the creature is only a certain relation to the Creator, as to the principle of its being.”³⁶ In his study on Thomas’s economic teachings, Christopher Franks refers to this as our “ontological poverty before God,” our “created lowliness that empties us of all pretense to self-possession.”³⁷ Because of this ontological dependence, we cannot rightfully claim ultimate autonomy, for creatures do not possess their own being, much less hold themselves in being, but only have being in relation to the one who gives it, the one who is, to invoke St. Augustine, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Not only are we ontologically dependent upon God as creatures, but, as *embodied* creatures, we depend upon the rest of the created order to sustain us. Our bodies root us in a created order and occasion dependencies that

³⁵ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, xv.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I, q. 45, a. 3.

³⁷ Christopher A. Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas’s Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 3.

are constitutive to human life. Thomas tells us that the soul is the form of the body.³⁸ But this distinction between soul and body is not a separation. The nature of the soul requires it to be united to the body; it needs the body in order to accomplish those activities correlative to it: knowing, willing, and loving.³⁹ The body is, as Thomas writes, “a certain fullness of the soul (*plenitudo animae*).”⁴⁰ Because we are embodied, we need food, drink, clothing, shelter, and other such goods to sustain our bodies. Therefore, just as we can claim no autonomy before God, so also something analogous holds in our relation to the rest of creation. To be embodied is to be part of an order upon which we depend and to which we relate in bodily need. Wendell Berry suggests something similar when he observes that “no matter how urban our life, our bodies live by farming; we come from the earth and return to it, and so we live in agriculture as we live in flesh.”⁴¹

Of course, in company with Thomas, we must not lose sight of the fact that our ultimate flourishing as human creatures is not preservation of the body but union with God in beatitude.⁴² God is our highest good, our *summum bonum*. Because God is our highest good, we seek the goods of the body not for their own sake but for the sake of something else.⁴³ The goods of the body are not our end but support and sustenance on our journey toward our end. But that does not mean that they are unimportant for us as wayfarers. Indeed, they are partially constitutive of our flourishing in this life.⁴⁴ This is why Thomas argues against the Stoics, who held that the only human good is virtue, and that bodily goods are not goods at all. Because we are creatures in which soul and body are united, whatever preserves the life of the body, though not our final good, is still a good. For this reason, we should feel sorrow whenever those goods are lacking.⁴⁵

Our ontological dependence upon God, as well as our dependence as embodied creatures upon the wider created order, is crucial for understanding McNabb. As Franks writes, those of us habituated into prevailing

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1.

³⁹ *ST I*, q. 84, a. 4.

⁴⁰ Cited in Gilles Emery, *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), 219; emphasis mine. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1996), I.8.

⁴¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), 97.

⁴² Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 3, a. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I-II, a. 114, a. 10; II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 4, a. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 59, a. 3.

economic forms tend to imagine ourselves not as dependent but independent, as “proprietors”: “primordial owners” of ourselves and of “the goods we buy and the security they often represent.”⁴⁶ On this construal, the possession we have over ourselves mirrors the possession we have over our property. Both are marked by a kind of closure. But, as we will see, McNabb points out that such an understanding of the ownership of ourselves and our property not only fails to give God the worship due in justice, but also fails to give others their due in justice as well, because it obscures the way God gives land and the wider created order upon which we depend as common. It is to this that we now turn.



McNabb follows Thomas in holding that God creates land and the rest of the created order upon which humans depend as common, to meet the bodily needs of all. Thomas encapsulates this teaching as it was developed in patristic sources when he writes, “Now according to the order established by Divine Providence, [material goods] are ordained for the purpose of succoring needs by their means. Wherefore the division and appropriation of things which are based on human law do not preclude the fact that needs have to be remedied by means of these very things.”⁴⁷ Land and its fruits are gifts given by God, not only for the benefit of ourselves but for the benefit of all. The amassing of wealth for exclusive use violates God’s purpose for the created order. It rejects the claim of need to which all wealth is subject, and it therefore denies the moral community of which the amasser is a member.

McNabb attempts to think through the implications of God’s gift of land and its fruits to meet the needs of all. According to McNabb, even the fecundity of land itself bears a trace of the purpose for which it was created: “Daily fellowship with the land which God has made to give its gifts to all mankind, schools him in the divine art of giving. He gives seeds to the arable soil and the soil gives back the seed tenfold, a

⁴⁶ Franks, *He Became Poor*, 3.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 66, a. 7. See also William J. McDonald, “The Social Value of Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Social Philosophy” (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1939). George H. Speltz, “The Importance of Rural Life According to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Economic Philosophy” (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1945), 4. Among the principal texts regarding the common gift of creation are Clement of Alexandria, *Paidagogus*, 2.13; Basil the Great, *Homilia in illud Lucae*, ‘Destruam,’ 7; Ambrose of Milan, *Commentarium in Epistolam II ad Corinthios* 9.9. These texts, as well as many others, can be found in Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

hundredfold, when autumn comes.”⁴⁸ Reflecting on land can teach us something about God and the way God gives, as well as about the wider created order, in which, as William of Auxerre writes, “each creature is compelled to give itself; the sun is compelled to give itself to illuminate; similarly the earth is compelled to give whatever it can, and similarly the water.”⁴⁹ In the soil’s multiplication of seed we can discern a trace of the God who multiplies loaves and fish.

Because God gives land and its fruits to meet need as perfectly as possible, all should have access to them. These words, already quoted above from *Rerum novarum*, function like a refrain throughout McNabb’s writings: “The law, therefore, should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners.” McNabb closely follows Pope Leo XIII in arguing that God’s common gift of land and individual ownership are not mutually exclusive, because ownership is not absolute but social; it is intrinsically ordered to the needs of all.⁵⁰ According to McNabb, the right of property of which Pope Leo XIII speaks does not mean, therefore, “that some men shall have all property, but that all men shall have some property.”⁵¹ Or, as McNabb writes elsewhere, “The right to property does not mean that a man shall have a right to as much as he wishes, but that he shall have a right to as much as he needs.”⁵² The proper measure of our ownership of land or created goods is our needs, and the proper measure of our needs is not “Babylon, or Thebes, or Paris, or New York, or London” but “Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capharnaum, Calvary.”⁵³ We will return to this measure—the measure of Christ—below.

Because God creates land and the wider created order for all, it follows that whenever some people have goods in excess of their needs, the goods cannot properly be said to belong to them but are most properly said to belong to those who need them. As Thomas writes, “Whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor. Ambrose says . . . : ‘It is the hungry man’s bread that you withhold, the naked man’s cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor man’s ransom

⁴⁸ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 201–2.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, “The Theological Economics of Medieval Usury Theory,” in *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 106.

⁵⁰ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §§6–10.

⁵¹ Vincent McNabb, *Francis Thompson and Other Essays* (London: Aquin Press, 1935), 59.

⁵² McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 7.

⁵³ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 34.

and freedom.’”⁵⁴ For this reason McNabb, again drawing on the words of Pope Leo XIII, writes that property is most endangered not when “a challenge is given ‘to the small number of very rich men who have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than of slavery itself’; but when no attempt is made to give back to these teeming masses the things that are theirs.”⁵⁵ There is an openness to the claim of others’ needs upon land and property that is simply the realization within economy of the grammar of creation itself. Our use of land and property to meet the needs, not only of ourselves, but of others, is not to take what belongs to us in order to give it to others, but to give others what is their due. It is to use property properly; it is to see property’s social import—its openness to the claim of others’ needs—as intrinsic to what it is.

Attention to the theological horizon of God’s creation of land and its purpose in meeting needs is the basis of McNabb’s insistence that land, as the source of all wealth, makes economy possible. It is that within which economy is embedded and from which it receives its shape. As he continually reminds his readers, “The land and the land alone gives us the simplicities of Food, Clothing, Housing, Fuel.”⁵⁶ Or, as he writes elsewhere, “None of the necessities of life really come by factory production, but by the land.”⁵⁷ McNabb thinks those of his own time are particularly susceptible to the illusion that wealth comes not from land but from factories, and so he does not tire of reminding his readers that “no factory has the power to produce the necessities of life; at least, they can manipulate and modify material supplied to them.”⁵⁸

McNabb’s argument presupposes a distinction between what he calls “real wealth” and “token wealth,” or between what he elsewhere calls “first things” and “secondary” or “tertiary things.”⁵⁹ This is McNabb’s restatement of the distinction found in Aristotle and Thomas between natural wealth and artificial wealth. Thomas defines natural wealth as consisting in created goods like food, drink, clothing, materials for dwelling, and so on. He calls this wealth natural because its purpose is to meet bodily needs directly. For Thomas, such wealth serves as a support

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 66, a. 7.

⁵⁵ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 115. For a good discussion of McNabb’s view of property, see Walters, “Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999.”

⁵⁶ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 35–37. McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 10–16. McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 47–57.

for our bodies as we pursue our true last end, God. Artificial wealth, in contrast, Thomas defines as “invented by art, for the convenience of exchange, and as a measure of things [sellable].”⁶⁰ He calls it artificial because, although its purpose is also to meet need, it does so indirectly rather than directly. Thomas’s main example of such wealth is money, which he contends is sought for the sake of the natural wealth by which we attend to the needs of our bodies directly.

This distinction between real wealth and token wealth intimately relates to another distinction—also found in Thomas and in Aristotle—between use-value and exchange-value. Aristotle concisely explains it in the *Politics* in the following way:

Of everything which we possess there are two uses: both belong to the thing as such, but not in the same manner, for one is the proper, and the other the improper use of it. For example, a shoe is used for wear, and is used for exchange; both are uses of the shoe. He who gives a shoe in exchange for money . . . does indeed use the shoe as a shoe, but this is not its proper use, for a shoe is not made to be an object of barter. The same may be said of all possessions, for the art of exchange extends to all of them.⁶¹

In this passage, Aristotle observes that human beings make certain goods to serve specific needs and purposes. Just as shoes are made to wear, so food is grown to be eaten, water collected to drink, clothing made to put on, dwellings built for people to inhabit, and so on. These needs or purposes are what Aristotle calls the use-values of goods. The use-value is exhaustive of the use of a good, but simply that goods serve human needs, and purposes derive from properties that fit them to particular uses.

The logic of exchange, in contrast, seeks a measure for what is incommensurate. Money often serves as this measure. But systems of bartering also involve such measures, for instance, when a certain quantity of one kind of good is deemed to be worth a certain quantity of another kind of good. Aristotle calls exchange an “improper use” of goods, which is not to say that exchange should not take place, but simply to say that it is subordinate to the needs and purposes the goods are meant to serve. Exchange-value is a convention established, not in order to make wealth easier to accumulate, but to facilitate the needs or purposes these goods serve in their use. Thomas and McNabb follow Aristotle in understanding usury—

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 1.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. I, ch. 9 (1257a); translation from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1994.

making money by lending money—as unjust. It is unjust due to what they all understand money to be. Lending money is not like lending land but more like lending bread. Whereas the use of land does not consist in its consumption, the use of bread, just like the use of money, does. Therefore, to charge money for lending money is tantamount to, as Thomas writes, “selling the same thing twice” or “selling what does not exist.”⁶²



The Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition within which McNabb works privileges a certain dependence upon the sufficiency of the locale to meet the needs of inhabitants. McNabb fully endorses Thomas’s position in *De regno* that “a city whose neighbourhood gives the necessities of life in plenty possesses a sufficiency more fully than another city which depends on its trade with others.”⁶³ The kind of sufficiency in view here is not a denial of ontological dependence on God or bodily dependence on land to meet human needs. Nor is the point the exclusion of trade altogether.⁶⁴ What is at stake is something more like what McNabb calls the “economic center of gravity”: the *telos* of economy, the role of trade within it, and the kinds of dependencies economy should engender.

Dependence on the sufficiency of the locale also relates to this tradition’s ambivalence with regard to trade. Thomas thinks a certain “debasement” characterizes trade because of its potential misuse of created goods, for trade, in itself, “does not imply a virtuous or necessary end.”⁶⁵ Trade might facilitate the proper use created goods, for instance, the “upkeep” of households, “assistance” to the needy, or similar efforts to provide for the “necessaries of life.”⁶⁶ But trade might also pursue not the “necessities of life” but “profit,” and this latter kind of trade, according to Thomas, simply “satisfies the greed for gain.”⁶⁷ McNabb follows Thomas’s judgment that trade, when ordered exclusively to profit can be profoundly destructive because it “knows no limit and tends to infinity.”⁶⁸ McNabb quotes

⁶² Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 78, a. 1. See also O’Donovan, “The Theological Economics of Medieval Usury Theory,” 97–120.

⁶³ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *ST* II–II, q. 77, a. 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* McNabb thinks that a system that prizes token wealth is a system that excites an “unsatisfied indefinite desire” for more and more token wealth, the uncertain future value of which will only increase our “almost irresistible desire not to measure [our] wants by [our] needs.” In a system that prizes real wealth, on the other hand, there are certain limits placed upon our desire. As McNabb puts it, “In a system mainly of things, the average person may be trusted to limit

Thomas on the consequences of such trade: “The result is that everything in the city will become venal; good faith will be destroyed and the way opened to all kinds of trickery; each one will work only for his own profit, despising the public good; the cultivation of virtue will fail since honour, virtue’s reward, will be bestowed upon the rich.”⁶⁹ It is therefore important to prevent polity from being “totally exposed to trade (*totaliter negotiationi exposita*)”—such total exposure degrades not only the bonds constitutive of social flourishing, but, as we will see, land and the wider creation as well.⁷⁰



As we have already begun to examine, McNabb thinks that industrialism and the assumptions that undergird it display a disordered understanding of economy. This is especially clear when he addresses the arguments of economists who contend that a wage system cannot be based on living wage, which McNabb regards as an attempt to construe economics as a science not subject to the Church’s moral and theological teaching. In response, he follows *Rerum novarum* in arguing that the measure of the wage is the worker rather than the work, and so the standard of commutative justice between a wage-giver and a wage-getter is a living wage. Moreover, if the worker has a family, a living wage is a wage sufficient to support the family.⁷¹ McNabb therefore observes, quite sardonically, that if the wage system cannot be based on a standard of living, as the economists argue, it must be based on a “standard of dying.”⁷² Instead of a living wage, employers offer a “killing wage.”⁷³

According to McNabb, the argument that a wage system cannot be based on living wages simply reveals a misapprehension of economy. It reveals problems intrinsic to the wage system itself, along with the urgent need for an alternative to it. McNabb envisions this alternative in the words from *Rerum novarum* that we quoted above about law and policy

wants by needs. But in a system mainly of tokens, the average person cannot be trusted to limit wants by needs” (*Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 15–16).

⁶⁹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 55. I am drawing on the translation, Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship: To the King of Cyprus*, ed. I. Th. Eschmann, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949). The Latin text can be accessed at: www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html.

⁷⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre argues along similar lines in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, The Paul Carus Lecture Series (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999), 145.

⁷¹ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 69–78.

⁷² McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 87.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87.

favoring ownership among as many as possible. This he calls an ownership system, as opposed to a wage system. An ownership system, he contends, does not mean the exclusion of wages but the exclusion of their dominance within the system, just as it does not mean the exclusion of industry but the exclusion of its dominance over and against agriculture.⁷⁴ What passes for economics fails to be truly economic because it misconstrues what wealth is, where it comes from, and what it is for.

An important feature of McNabb's critique of the wage system is the way he constantly attends to language and the changes that occur when, as he puts it, "a nation changes the words it uses."⁷⁵ His discussion of these matters illumines what he regards as pernicious abstractions associated with industrialism. For instance, he writes that if thirty years earlier England had been beset by what it now calls "unemployment," it would have discussed the matter not as a problem of "unemployment" but as a problem of "work" or a problem of the insufficiency of goods.⁷⁶ At issue here are the manifold assumptions latent in the notion of "unemployment" that are not present in the word "work." "The word 'work,'" he writes, "implies a relation merely to a thing," while "the word 'unemployment' implies this work-relation to a thing, but adds a new relation to a person or employer."⁷⁷ These linguistic shifts, McNabb thinks, shape the way we see a problem, and, consequently, the way we respond to it. In these shifts we see the way words themselves assume "the necessity of the very disease which the poor are trying to cure."⁷⁸ Instead of seeing the problem as an insufficiency of goods whose alleviation resides in the fostering of widespread land ownership and the production of real wealth through work, to speak of "unemployment" construes employment and wages as the only remedy and the employer as the only benefactor.⁷⁹

But, for McNabb, it is precisely this assumption—an assumption that resides in the words themselves—that those who "hunger and thirst after that virtue of justice which gives everyone his due" should challenge.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Ibid., 86–90. McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 69–78.

⁷⁵ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 59. See also Cf. McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 17–20.

⁷⁶ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 60.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Cunningham, "Prophecy and the Poor," 58.

⁷⁹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 60.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 60. As Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, a "picture" can hold us "captive": "And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), §115, emphasis in original.

The unemployed are not really unemployed; they are employed, just not employed on land in the production of what they need to live. Instead of producing real wealth on land, they scavenge the cities for employment and wages in order to purchase what they need.⁸¹ While there is an abundance of people but a scarcity of employment in the cities, there is an abundance of land but a scarcity of people to farm it in the countryside. McNabb therefore tirelessly insists to his contemporaries that the problem of the inhuman living and working conditions in the slums and factories—"the state of things under which the poor rot"⁸²—cannot be understood apart from the vast tracts of untilled land in the English countryside and the unsettling England had experienced over the course of the previous centuries.⁸³ As he puts it, "The epidemic of unemployment, now so recurrent in this country, is as certainly connected with the land as hay is connected with grass. . . . The question of unemployment is the question of land."⁸⁴

⁸¹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 89. See also 150–52.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸³ Not only is what is happening in the slums of England related to what is happening in the countryside of England, but I would suggest that these developments are, in turn, crucially related to developments beyond England and what her colonial ambitions entailed for the uses of people and land elsewhere. Though written by a Frenchman, Bernardin de Saint Pierre's observation in 1773 seems apposite: "I do not know if coffee and sugar are essential to the happiness of Europe, but I know well that these two products have accounted for the unhappiness of two great regions of the world: America has been depopulated so as to have land on which to plant them; Africa has been depopulated so as to have the people to cultivate them." Cited as the epigraph to Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985). Doing justice to this topic would take me well beyond the scope of this essay and its purpose in presenting McNabb's thought. Though McNabb, at least to my knowledge, does not explicitly discuss the slave-plantation agriculture of some of England's colonial holdings, the implications of his critique would seem to embrace both metropole and colony. With regard to such agriculture, in addition to Mintz's study, see also James Duncan, *In the Shadows of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth-Century Ceylon* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); James Horn, "Tobacco Colonies: The Shaping of English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake," in *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Canny and Elaine Low, *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); also in the same volume, Hilary McD. Beckles, "The 'Hub of Empire': The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century"; Jacob M. Price, "The Imperial Economy, 1700–1776," in *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P. J. Marshall and Elaine Low, *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and in that same volume, Richard B. Sheridan, "The Formation of Caribbean Plantation Society, 1689–1748."

⁸⁴ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 104. See also 149–51.



We have already examined McNabb's concern that industrialism imperils family and polity. But he also thinks industrialism damages land and the wider created order as well.⁸⁵ While McNabb tirelessly urges his urban contemporaries to flee to the fields, he is extremely critical of the way the farmers who have remained in the fields have increasingly begun to farm through the application of industrial methods—what McNabb calls “business methods,” “efficiency methods,” “the science of making [fields] yield their heaviest crop.”⁸⁶ In applying such methods, farmers attempt to make land into an “agricultural factory.”⁸⁷ When McNabb writes, for instance, of the reaping machines “wounding” land,⁸⁸ he evokes John Clare (1793–1864), the Northamptonshire peasant poet, whose poems, in confronting enclosure, speak of “the rage of blundering plough”⁸⁹ and the tools of gains “greedy hand/And more then greedy mind.”⁹⁰ This kind of agriculture wounds land because it uses land as if it were a machine or a factory in its efforts to organize agriculture on the model of industry, mass producing commodities to be sold on the market. But this is a category mistake, because, as we have seen, land is simply not the same kind of thing as a machine or factory, even if it is used as such. As McNabb writes, “The cause of the disease [is that] the land has not been treated as land; land has been industrialized. Land, which is the indestructible primary of economic wealth, has been treated as if it was an economic secondary or tertiary, like a shop or a factory.”⁹¹ The application of industrial methods to land fails to acknowledge land's giftedness and so obscures the relation between land

⁸⁵ “The main generalization” about the present state of things, he writes, “is that we are living on Capital.” Industrialism is a kind of “drunkenness,” consuming in excess of what the body can tolerate. “In a hundred spheres of necessary human toil,” he writes, “we are consuming not merely more than we produce, but even more than we and our ancestors produced.” Industrialism uses soil, forests, oil, and coal as if they were “inexhaustible capital,” and in doing so, exhausts them. While defenders of industrialism point to its “cheapening” of many commodities, McNabb asks about the true cost of these commodities, whether their cheapening is merely a ruse—a “prodigal prosperity” bought “by a subtle living on Capital”—whether its “successes” are simply “a successful theft from tomorrow.” McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 21–24.

⁸⁶ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 123. See also McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 111–41.

⁸⁷ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 158.

⁸⁸ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 129.

⁸⁹ “The Mores,” in John Clare, *John Clare: Major Works*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁹⁰ “Lament of Swordy Well,” in *ibid.*

⁹¹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 157.

and altar, the relation between, in the words of the other epigraph to this essay, land's production of "every kind of real wealth" and the "wheat and grapes that may become the Sacrifice of a World Redeemed."⁹² Such agriculture displays a fundamental misconstrual of what land is, what it is for, and how these should guide its farming and its use.

The industrialization of agriculture is therefore not a minor problem but "the worst of all economic diseases."⁹³ The ellision of the distinction between "wealth-making" and "mere wealth-getting," and, along with it, the organization of agriculture for mass production on the model of industry, is the basis of industrialized agriculture.⁹⁴ Such agriculture, McNabb thinks, simply underwrites the unsettling of the English countryside and the creation of landless wage laborers flooding the cities. It entails an organization not for the needs of the home but for the market and so decouples the locale of production from the locale of consumption.⁹⁵ Because of this decoupling and the associated specialization of production, McNabb argues, such agriculture tends toward monoculture, and with it, drudgery and loneliness.⁹⁶ Instead of farming families directly engaged in the production of what they need to live, those who organize agriculture industrially rely upon the mediation of money and markets. They produce, not what they need to live, but in order to make the money that they then use to purchase what they need to live, which leads to what McNabb regards as patent absurdities, like potato farmers destroying a bumper crop when the market cannot purchase it,⁹⁷ or cotton farmers rioting in demand for food for themselves and their families.⁹⁸

What makes this mode of agricultural organization such a problem is its misconstrual of economy, the way it severs the bond between land as the source of wealth and its direct relation to the need it was intended to serve. McNabb observes that we become "so fascinated by the machinery," that

⁹² There is a close relationship between the way Eric Gill thought about "making fitting furniture for a civilization directed heavenwards" and the way McNabb thought about agriculture. Gill's words are cited in Walters, "Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999," 231.

⁹³ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 150.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157–59.

⁹⁶ As McNabb writes, "The great lesson of the . . . machineless harvest-field was a social lesson." It is crucial to see that McNabb's conception of sociality includes not only the presence of people but the presence of hens, ducks, dogs, rabbits, larks, hares, and so on. McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 127–29.

⁹⁷ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 160.

⁹⁸ McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*.

we lose sight of “the beginning and ends of things.”⁹⁹ God’s gift of land for the purposes of “wealth-making” rather than “mere wealth-getting,” therefore, has profound implications for farming and for other uses of land.⁹⁹ If the purpose of land is to minister to need, then it is most fitting that farming families use land primarily in order to produce what they need to live and then give away or sell what they have in surfeit. As we will recall from our discussion above, this is to use property properly. Severing this bond only encourages the misconstrual of agriculture as a practice of wealth-getting rather than wealth-making, which, according to McNabb, is something akin to the subversion of economy itself, the attempt to re-shape land and the wider created order in accordance with a logic that is extrinsic and antithetical to it.



In his study on Thomas’s economic teachings, Christopher Franks attends to a significant feature of Thomas’s agreements with Aristotle that I have been emphasizing throughout this essay: Thomas follows Aristotle in locating economy within a wider created order that precedes it and shapes it. This feature of Aristotelian economy is as crucial for understanding McNabb as it is dissonant with widespread assumptions that governed much economic thinking in McNabb’s day, as well as in our own. As Franks puts it: “Aristotle and Aquinas both reject economic practices that threaten to promote an unconditioned claim to security from nature’s goods . . . Aquinas defends a lowliness and receptivity that echoes Aristotle’s concern to foster a deferent acknowledgement of dependence.”¹⁰⁰

Despite these convergences, we have also seen some of the ways Thomas and McNabb diverge from Aristotle, particularly with regard to what I have called the ontological dependence of creation on God—or what Franks calls our “ontological poverty,” our “created lowliness.” As Franks reads Thomas, Christ’s cross displays “the true character of the humility and receptive trust our created lowliness demands . . . there is a kind of correspondence between our created lowliness and the lowliness of the cross.”¹⁰¹ As Franks goes on to argue, Thomas’s economic teachings, like his whole account of Christian life, find their perfection in Christ. Christian life, according to Thomas, “is always summoned deeper, so that its center of gravity is its goal, the charity revealed on the cross.”¹⁰² As we have seen, McNabb follows Thomas in locating the

⁹⁹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ Franks, *He Became Poor*, 4, 35–66.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 23.

center of gravity and goal of economic life—indeed, of all life—in Christ. Or, to use a favorite metaphor of McNabb's, Christian life is like the craft of the builder. Just as the builder needs the level, the plummet, and the square in order "to true the work of his hand ten thousand times in the working," Christian life must be continually "trued" by the measure of Christ. "Nazareth," he writes, "is the place where all the Sovereign Measures are verified and kept."¹⁰³

Jesus is from Nazareth, and so McNabb regards the particularity of Nazareth and its surrounding geography as significant. This land uniquely bears witness to the mystery of redemption, because it is the land in which Jesus Christ lived, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. "Every stone" of Nazareth, McNabb tells us, "was hallowed by thirty years of God's redemptive love."¹⁰⁴ As Robert Louis Wilken writes with regard to early Church reflection upon this land, but with words that are equally applicable to McNabb, "Christ's sojourn on earth, it seems, had sanctified not only the specific places where he lived and died, but the very soil of the land itself."¹⁰⁵

Christ's life hallows not only the land of Nazareth but its economy as well. McNabb sees Nazareth as a place constituted by true economy: families "gathered together in aid and defence of life," "the self-sufficing group of land-workers and hand-workers."¹⁰⁶ According to McNabb, it is therefore fitting that God would choose Nazareth for the Son's earthly abode, and McNabb continually underscores the role of Nazareth's economy within God's. God realized that in "a Nazareth alone could be the beginning of redemption," and that in "Nazareth alone" is given "the divine pattern to souls who covet to do the Redeemer's work in the Redeemer's way, amidst a strayed, lost people."¹⁰⁷

According to McNabb, constitutive of Christ's work and way is voluntary poverty—a poverty that culminates in the *caritas* of the cross.¹⁰⁸ McNabb regards Christ's poverty, not as an end in itself, but as an instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel, a "fundamental condition of all

¹⁰³ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 101–2.

¹⁰⁴ McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 4–5.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 125.

¹⁰⁶ McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 5. As Cunningham writes, "Nazareth stood for the small scale—a small, peasant community, living according to the primary things of life, both divine and human." Cunningham, "Prophecy and the Poor," 57.

¹⁰⁷ McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 146. McNabb reiterates Thomas's arguments from *ST III*, q. 40, a. 3 about the fittingness that Christ lived a life of poverty. See also McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 5.

ultimate remedy and redemption.”¹⁰⁹ As McNabb writes, “In His Crib, and still more on His Cross, Jesus gave us the example not so much of a poor man contented with his poverty, as of a rich man discontented with his riches.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, Christ’s poverty contains this crucial implication: “Consume as little as you need and produce as much as you can.”¹¹¹ Or, as McNabb explicates it elsewhere, “If our hands provide more than is necessary for ourselves, we must give to those who need it. These are not my ideas—they are the ideas of Christ.”¹¹²

McNabb insists that the way of Christ’s poverty is the way of all Christians. “Both those who do and those who do not make vows of poverty,” he writes, “are bound to the poverty of work and thrift which means they must measure their wants by the needs of their state in life.”¹¹³ All Christians must be engaged in the craft of limiting wants by needs, conforming work and life to the pattern of the stable and of the cross. The rule of the follower of Christ is: “What is superfluous to your poor estate *distribute*.”¹¹⁴ Christians are therefore called to be the antithesis of those who “consume, and control in order to consume, as much as they can whilst producing as little as they need.”¹¹⁵ Doing with as little as possible to lavish upon others as much as possible is “God’s simple apparatus for the enrichment of the world.”¹¹⁶ It enriches because it orients us toward the *telos* of economy, locating us in relation to the economy of God’s salvation in Christ.

As we have seen, McNabb follows Thomas and Pope Leo XIII in arguing that what we have in surfeit is due by natural law to our neighbors in need. But, as we have also seen, it does not follow from this that the claim of the natural law shines with luminous clarity to his contemporaries. The light of Christ therefore helps illumine the requirements of justice. We learn to measure what we possess by what we need such that our surfeit overflows onto others in justice. And we learn to measure what we need by the measure of Christ, devoting ourselves and our goods to the one

¹⁰⁹ McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 16.

¹¹⁰ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 147.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147. See also McNabb, *Nazareth or Social Chaos*, 56. McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 7–11. Along these lines, Valentine (*Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.*) quotes from the Rule of St. Augustine and its importance for McNabb: “It is better to need little than to have much,” 171.

¹¹² Quoted in Walters, “Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999,” 228.

¹¹³ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 164. See also 162–68.

¹¹⁴ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 34. McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, 9, 18.

¹¹⁵ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 147.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

who became poor so that we might follow his poverty-path to the attainment of true riches (2 Cor 8:9)—a path that calls for the dispossession not only of our possessions but our lives (Mt 10:39, 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25). Here we see that the exodus McNabb urged is not solely or even primarily an exodus from the slums but above all an exodus from the enclosure of self and property. While Christ's participation in the Nazareth economy affirms it, it does not leave it unaltered. Christ's light illumines justice only as it points beyond it toward a life of cross-bearing. The overflowing of our surfeit is therefore a kind of training in charity: we learn to give to others what is theirs, so we can learn to offer them what is our own in the laying down of our lives (Jn 15:13).



When presented with the news that he had cancer and that his death was imminent, McNabb said, "I don't see why I should make a tragedy of this; it's what I have been preparing for all my life."¹¹⁷ It is a comment that bears witness to a life devoted to the path of Christ, a life that attempted to relate itself and all things to the mysterious economy of God.

Since McNabb's death in 1943, the economic forms he opposed have only grown stronger, and the possibility of an alternative, not only dimmer, but, for many, scarcely imaginable. Jonathan Tran expresses this well: "[A]sk any reputable economist for coherent alternatives to global capitalism and you will be met with a quizzical look. The pressing issues in relation to globalization within contemporary economics are entirely directed toward trends within globalization; imaging an alternative now seems passé if not irresponsible."¹¹⁸

But even before his death, McNabb sensed defeat. "I seem to realize when perhaps it is too late that Industrialism has won," he wrote.¹¹⁹ He dedicated one of his final books, *Old Principles and the New Order*, to "the men and women of the English Catholic Land Movement who, bravely and alone, left England's cities for England's soil and whose seeming failures like winter sowings may yet be blessed by God unto autumn reappings."¹²⁰ While McNabb's words admit a sense of failure, they offer that failure to God in the hope that it might, with God's blessing, still yet yield fruit.

In our own time, the Church's magisterium has responded to the so-called "environmental crisis" as symptomatic of a more profound moral

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Matthew Hoehn, *Catholic Authors: Contemporary Biographical Sketches* (Newark, NJ: St. Mary Abbey, 1948), 479.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2011), 48.

¹¹⁹ Valentine, *Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.*, 214.

¹²⁰ McNabb, *Old Principles and the New Order*, v.

crisis—a crisis that has roots in humanity’s life with God but ramifications beyond human existence, to the entire creation.¹²¹ The pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, in particular, have emphasized the significance of agriculture within this moral-ecological crisis. We see this emphasis, for instance, in their yearly addresses since 1981 to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) on the occasion of World Food Day, which resonate with many of the issues with which we have grappled in this essay: God’s purpose for the common gift of the created order in meeting the needs of all; the unique importance of God’s gift of land and its fruits; the neglect within prevailing models of development of the role of agriculture in meeting need; the critique of economic structures and even agricultural practice itself as too often oriented solely to profit; the need for lifestyles characterized by temperance; and so on. In his inaugural address, Pope John Paul II quotes from his encyclical *Laborem exercens* regarding the need for “radical and urgent changes” in order to restore “to agriculture—and to rural people—their just value as the basis for a healthy economy.”¹²² And in his 2006 address, Pope Benedict XVI echoed these sentiments: “The rural family needs to regain its rightful place at the heart of the social order.”¹²³ Perhaps this is some of the fruit for which McNabb hoped?

In retrospect, defeat seemed secured for McNabb’s single-minded insistence that the only way to redeem the urbanism that had so stamped the world by the time he wrote was to flee it—his “Luddite agrarianism,”¹²⁴ his visions of “agrarian utopia.”¹²⁵ The mistake was, in Joseph Kelly’s words, the notion that “God and salvation needed to be sought in a comprehensive rejection of, and exodus from, the wage slavery of urbanism.”¹²⁶ Kelly details that, as a consequence of McNabb’s intransi-

¹²¹ See, for instance, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), §§461–65. See also Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict Speaks out for Creation and Justice* (Naples, FL: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

¹²² Pope John Paul II, *Mensaje Del Santo Padre Juan Pablo Con Motivo De La Primera Jornada Mundial De La Alimentación* (14 Octubre 1981). Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), §21.

¹²³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Director of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) for the Celebration of World Food Day* (16 October 2006).

¹²⁴ Walters, “Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999,” 232.

¹²⁵ Joseph Kelly, “Vincent McNabb, Agrarian Utopia and the Theology of Work: An Exploration of the Theology of the Catholic Land Association in Relation to the Social Encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Laborem Exercens*,” *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1003 (2009): 286–303.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

gence on this point, McNabb and the CLM over time grew isolated from a Church committed to living and working within an increasingly urban world rather than moving whole families, or even single men for that matter, to the countryside.¹²⁷

The exodus McNabb urged, however problematic its assumption that Catholic life could flourish exclusively within the countryside, was a response to real damage inflicted on people and land. As we have seen, the heart of McNabb's critique of industrialism was not urbanism per se but rather its displacement and misplacement of economy's center of gravity—its misconstrual of economy's *telos*. The problem was not that money could and did serve as a means and a measure of some things, but that it was becoming the means and the measure of all things. The problem was not that wage relations existed, but that they had become synonymous with economy itself. The problem was not the existence of markets, but total reliance upon markets ordered to profit alone rather than to the claim of need and the uses of land entailed by that claim. Marked by a sense of the contingency of the industrialism he opposed, McNabb's exodus was an effort to heed Pope Leo XII's call that "some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class"¹²⁸ with the same urgency with which the call was made. In our evaluation of McNabb, McNabb himself would have us remember that "[i]t has never been part of the Church's redemptive work to denounce the wrongs of any popular movement without denouncing the other injustices which germinate these wrongs."¹²⁹

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¹²⁷ Ibid., 294–95.

¹²⁸ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §3.

¹²⁹ McNabb, *The Church and the Land*, 81.