

Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness
**The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore
the relationships between food and social justice**

"There are starving children in Africa" never convinced any child to eat a plate full of Brussels sprouts. The wise children want to eat them anyway, and the "smart" children argue that even if they eat those Brussels sprouts, those same children in Africa will still be starving. Fair point. However, the connection between our eating habits and the lives of the poor all over the world is not as tenuous as we might think.

The people cannot depend on the rains being as they were in the past. Some of the past months are the hottest that I can remember. The fishermen on Lake Victoria are experiencing a general downturn in their traditional catch of fish, and typhoid is very much in evident because of the lessening quality of the water.

That was the response of Fr. Jim Eble, MM, in Tanzania, to a survey sent in 2015 to Maryknollers around the world on the impacts of climate change. Other Maryknollers cited similar threats to lives and livelihoods: unpredictable weather patterns, diminished access to clean water and food, poor air quality, rising sea levels, migration and upheaval are forcing ever greater hardships upon those who are least responsible for them and least equipped to cope.

What does all this have to do with our dinner plates? Plenty. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), agriculture, forestry and other land use (AFOLU) accounts for 24% of all man-made greenhouse gas emissions. Only one sector, electricity and heat production generates a greater share of the total (25%). Transport only accounts for 14%. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), says that of the AFOLU emissions, most come from livestock: 40% come from enteric fermentation outputs (in cruder, but more understandable terms, that's the burps and farts of ruminant animals like cows), 16% come from manure left on pastures, and 7% come from the processes required to store and manage manure. An additional 13% come from synthetic fertilizers, which make it possible to grow the vast amount of feed crops demanded by industrial livestock operations.

Most people don't think about livestock when they think about global warming. They tend to think about carbon dioxide emissions from cars, planes, and coal-fired power plants and they are right to do so, since carbon dioxide is still the most widely emitted greenhouse gas. However, other greenhouse gasses are more potent, in terms of their global warming potential. Methane, emitted from enteric fermentation and manure, is 28 times more potent than carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide (yes, laughing gas), emitted from manure, and as a result of the use (and overuse) of synthetic fertilizers on crops is 265 times more potent.

Livestock have always gifted us with their digestive byproducts, and we have been growing crops for millennia. However, in recent decades, we have been demanding, per capita, more animal products. Based on Department of Agriculture (USDA) and census data, Americans consumed, per capita, 198.97 lbs of meat and poultry in 1960. That amount was up to 277.41 lbs in 2004. It subsequently declined with the economy but it still remains relatively high: it is expected to be about 248.71 lbs in 2016. That's 10.9oz per day. The USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services recommend that teen boys and active men (the group with the highest recommended amounts for this category) eat a total of 7oz per day of meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts combined. Americans tend to be trendsetters, and some other countries have followed suit. Nonetheless, in 2014,

according to data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the FAO, Americans, per capita, consumed 2.65 times more meat and poultry products than the world average. Only Australians out-consumed us, and only just barely.

Increasing demand equals increasing strain on the environment. More livestock mean more enteric fermentation and manure, and therefore more methane and nitrous oxide emissions. More industrial livestock also mean more industrial feed crops, which mean more synthetic fertilizers, and more nitrous oxide emissions. This is because livestock require a lot more food than they provide in return to us. Based on research published in 2013 in *Environmental Research Letters*, it takes 33 feed-crop calories to provide one calorie of beef meat, and 20 grams of feed-crop protein to provide one gram of beef protein. Under current market conditions, many crop farmers feel they cannot compete without using synthetic fertilizers, and they can even feel incentivized to use more than necessary, as a sort of crop insurance.

The good news is you might already be on the path to ecological salvation. If you abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, without "making up for it" on other days or in other ways, you're setting an example for your neighbors of how to make personal choices that reflect a care for our common home. You may choose to go further. It is worth noting that in their 1966 Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence, U.S. bishops provided the following guidance:

Among the works of voluntary self-denial and personal penance which we especially commend to our people for the future observance of Friday, even though we hereby terminate the traditional law of abstinence binding under pain of sin, as the sole prescribed means of observing Friday, we give first place to abstinence from flesh meat. We do so in the hope that the Catholic community will ordinarily continue to abstain from meat by free choice as formerly we did in obedience to Church law.

Fifty years later, we find ourselves living under circumstances that deepen our appreciation for the wisdom of this guidance. In a study published in 2014 in the journal *Climactic Change*, environmental scientists concluded that only by including reduced meat and dairy consumption in our efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions will we have a good chance at staying within the internationally-agreed global warming limit of two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, beyond which scientists warn we all face grave consequences—consequences many of our poorer brothers and sisters already feel. Whether you abstain from meat on Fridays or choose to cut back on animal products in general, you are making a sacrifice that makes a real difference. According to *A Meat Eater's Guide to Climate Change + Health*, over the course of one year, cutting out one burger a week is like taking a car off the road for 320 miles, and a four-person family skipping steak once a week is like taking a car off the road for nearly three months. You may also consider the “baby step” of shifting away from beef and lamb and toward less emissions-intensive options like pork, turkey, chicken, and eggs.

If all this talk of animal products just makes you crave a big, cheesy, meat lovers' pizza, you're not alone. Most of us grew up in a culture that convinces us a meal is not a meal without meat, and the more the better. Some of us, erroneously, even think it is impossible to get enough protein and other essential nutrients without animal products. Perhaps we would do well to remember that animal products take a lot of resources to produce and thus, they are special. When the Prodigal Father celebrates the return of his son by slaughtering the fattened calf, it *means* something. As Catholics, we have an opportunity to apply our ancient tradition of prayerful abstinence in the face of a contemporary crisis, and show the world the utility and beauty of the Gospel message.