



Eating Our Words: Food, Faith, and Catholic Social Teaching¹

By Patrick Carter

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From the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey to the Last Supper, the imagery of food and meals abounds in Catholic faith, practices, and beliefs. The integration of food and faith, however, extends beyond Scripture and the metaphors in Catholic doctrine. It is common for families or individuals to say a prayer before meals and Catholics consume the Body of Christ at mass. We are called to welcome everyone to the table to break bread, we thank God for blessing us with enough to eat, and we believe that the bread and wine offered as gifts at mass are not just grain and grapes, but the transformed body of Jesus Christ.

Given all of these faith-centered elements of food, there remains little indication in New Testament Scripture, tradition, doctrine, or Catholic Social Teaching about *what* Catholics should eat. As a faithful Catholic who is spiritually and socially fulfilled by the process of preparing, cooking, and sharing food with family and friends, I see the lack of a Catholic food ethic as a deficiency of my faith. The social, economic, environmental, and human concerns dominating our faith's Catholic Social Teaching are also components of growing, buying, and consuming food. While Catholic Social Teaching provides ethical guidance in many areas, none explicitly describe or prescribe what a Catholic should eat. This article will explore possible applications of Catholic Social Teaching to growing and consuming food, particularly in the areas of environmental stewardship, the common good, and subsidiarity.

Environment in CST

The primary foundation for Catholic Social Teaching's perspectives on the environment is that God created the world; it is thus inherently good. In a recent social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI states, "The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole."² The earth is not to be approached as a resource, whether limitless or finite, but rather as a gift of which we are to be stewards, not owners.

The responsibilities of this task have rigorous ethical implications. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their document *Climate Change*, assert "True stewardship requires changes in human actions....We must not allow our desire to possess more material goods to overtake our

concern for the basic needs of people and the environment.”³ Stewardship, therefore, means understanding and practicing the idea that the earth is not ours to deplete or destroy, but rather a gift from God.

Common Good in CST

The common good, a nearly ubiquitous theme in Catholic Social encyclicals, means that all actions should seek the betterment of the whole created community. Practically, the concept of the common good can mean surrendering one’s gifts and possessions to the collective community after fulfilling individual basic needs.⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council, declares that “the best way to fulfill one’s obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one’s means and the needs of others.”⁵ Through this form of obligation comes the necessity to care for those in poverty, seek to alleviate their current struggles, and work to prevent poverty for all people. This obligation does not just mean donating money to the poor in one’s own community or nation. Rather, as is stated in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the preference for the poor “has to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense numbers of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and those without hope.”⁶ This universal call to serve the poor and to seek the end of poverty is not only a desirable ideal, but is a practical mandate for Catholics. Because each person is the likeness of God, we are called to treat all people as if they are the daughters and sons of God. As Jesus said, the final judgment will be determined by how one treats the poorest and hungriest people or, in other words, how we seek the common good.

Subsidiarity in CST

Subsidiarity means a preference for decision making, policy development, and practicing the common good at a local level. This principle seeks the creation of coherent communities through decisions that are discussed, implemented, and assessed within a small locality. Through this process, community members have a greater investment in the outcome of decisions because they are tailored to that particular area. This is not to say that broader, more general authorities are futile or unnecessary. Rather, there is simply a preference for decision making at a local level. Pius XI describes the principle of subsidiarity in *Quadragesimo Anno* by defining its antithesis as a “grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.”⁷ This means that if a more localized municipality, group, parish, state, or organization can adequately make and implement a decision, it should be able to do so without interference from a greater authority. The goal of subsidiarity, therefore, is to strengthen local communities and to create less generic and less burdened larger authorities.

Using the basic previews of these three major themes in Catholic Social Teaching – environmental stewardship, working for the common good, and preference for subsidiarity – I will now evaluate the present realities of food production and consumption.

Eating Sustainable Meat

The production of factory farmed meat has substantial impacts on local and global environments. A United Nations study on the environmental impact of food and agriculture states that, of all greenhouse gases created by humans, 18% come from the production of livestock – more than is generated by all global transportation.⁸ Not all livestock, however, equally pollute and contaminate the earth’s air, water, and soil. The majority of these negative environmental impacts come from beef production, which generates about thirteen times as much greenhouse gas per

pound of meat as the production of chicken.⁹ Additionally, cattle that are raised in “concentrated animal feeding operations” (“factory farms”), cause up to three times as much carbon dioxide as those produced in smaller operations.¹⁰ Factory-farmed animals are not only particularly degrading to the environment, but the production of meat on an industrial scale requires an enormity of resources. Of the world’s non-ice land mass, 26% is dedicated to the raising of livestock – most of which is primarily used to grow feed for factory-farmed animals. In typical industrial-scale beef production, seven pounds of grain are used to create one pound of edible meat. In 2008, about 800 million tons of grain were fed to cattle.¹¹ With a reduction in demand for beef, there would be much more land on which crops could be grown and used for feeding humans directly, without rerouting grain to feed animals.

Another important consideration of both the global poor and meat production is the ethical state of employment related to this sector.¹² Worldwide, about 1.3 billion people are directly or indirectly employed by the meat producing industry. Of these people, nearly one billion are considered poor and receive their “livelihoods” from this employment.¹³ Employees of factory farms encounter intense levels of toxic chemicals in the air, water, and soil on the farms.¹⁴ Additionally, because of the speed and volume of large-scale meat processing facilities, workers are subjected to dangers associated with contaminated blood, heavy animal parts, and sharp cutting devices. According to Human Rights Watch, an international fact-finding coalition, meat processing plant workers have the most dangerous job in the United States. Consequently, it is the occupation with the greatest turnover rate.¹⁵ Additionally, despite working in the food production sector, many meatpacking workers frequently struggle with getting enough nutritious food for their families.¹⁶

Given Catholicism’s rich tradition of caring for all of God’s creation, especially the poor and the environment, it seems difficult to reconcile the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and the practice of eating factory-farmed meat. Eliminating meat that is raised on factory farms, fed a diet of heavily-fertilized feed, and then transported long distances fulfill Catholicism’s call to care for the environment. In addition to reducing the pollution of water, air, and soil with pesticides, fertilizers, fossil fuel emissions, and animal waste, Catholics can also contribute to the common good by respecting the dignity of meat-industry workers. With this said, John Sniegocki accurately suggests, “those who are conscientiously seeking to reduce their consumption of factory farm products (even while not eliminating them entirely) are...to be commended and encouraged, rather than chastised for falling short of a moral ideal.”¹⁷ Transitioning to eating less meat in order to answer Catholicism’s call to care for the poor, work for the common good, and promote subsidiarity may be challenging, but it is a necessary response.

Eating Locally

Promoting and supporting local agriculture is a logical application of the principle of subsidiarity. Decisions made about farming, raising animals, water use, and pesticide application affect local communities, not just the gross domestic products of national governments. Additionally, creating local food economies and buying locally grown food reduces devastating environmental impacts. On average, every American meal travels a total of 1,500 miles from farms and factories to the dining-room table.¹⁸ It is not implausible for a person to consume a meal composed of salad greens grown in California, pears produced in China, and beef raised in Brazil. Annually, about 20% of a country’s total fuel is used in the movement of food.¹⁹ Since the fossil fuels used to transport food create global pollution, consumption of non-local food directly contributes to environmental degradation and climate change. Because of the source and size of many Americans’ meals, the average American family “consumes” about 900 gallons of gasoline per year in order to fuel their food’s transportation. This is about 85% of the amount of gasoline that the same family would

consume with their cars on an annual basis.²⁰ The environmental costs of non-local goods can be calculated in the amount of pesticides, preserving chemicals, and fossil fuels expended to transport these goods to the grocery store and to the table.

There is, however, an alternative to this environmentally destructive food system. According to a recent study in Sweden, local food may incur as much as ten times less environmental damage as purchasing food that was grown across the country or across the world.²¹ While purchasing local food will involve seasonal variations in diets and may involve canning, freezing, or preserving the food, it is clear that the environmental, economic, and ethical implications of not buying locally are contradictory to Catholic Social Teaching. Eating local food supports regional food economies and community producers while minimizing environmental impacts of food production – allowing Catholics to fulfill the call to care for God’s creation and support the practice of subsidiarity.

Eating to Eliminate Global Hunger

Feeding hungry people is one of the ways in which Jesus calls us to serve the poorest persons of the world. This not only means temporarily alleviating hunger, but completely eliminating it where possible. A reiteration of Jesus’ call is bluntly stated in *Gaudium et Spes*: “Feed the people dying of hunger, because if you do not feed them you are killing them.”²² Because this giving should be done according to a person’s “ability to share and dispose of their goods to help others,”²³ every person with enough food is called to ensure food stability for those who will die without it. In fact, the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching says that one does not have the right to inhibit another from receiving food (or any other necessary material good) because “the world is made to furnish each individual with the means of livelihood and the instruments for growth and progress, all people have therefore the right to find in the world what is necessary for them.”²⁴ This belief in the universal purpose of all created things is reflective of the idea that God created the world for every person and did not allot certain goods, lands, or food to people simply because they were wealthy.

The ill-distribution of food in the modern world not only affects individuals, but inhibits the flourishing of families, villages, and complete economies. On the topic of hunger, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, says that food is a universal human right that cannot be negated under any circumstance.²⁵ Benedict declares that hunger continually reaps “enormous numbers of victims among those who, like Lazarus, are not permitted to take their place at the rich man’s table.”²⁶ Citing the outcast Lazarus reminds Catholics that the call to feed the hungry is not a secular duty but a mandated moral obligation of our faith.

According to the United Nations, “the world produces enough food to feed everyone.”²⁷ This food, however, is concentrated on the tables of wealthy persons and is missing from the stomachs of those who need it the most. According to a 2006 UN report of global livestock production, about one billion of the world’s people are chronically hungry at any given time, which means that one in seven people around the world consistently does not have enough food.²⁸ This statistic even excludes those people who are able to find food to occasionally fill their stomachs, but are not able to access nutritionally substantive food.²⁹ Empty stomachs and hunger pangs are experiences thought to be a “developing-world problem,” not one that is pervasive in America. In the fall of 2009, however, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released an alarming report about hunger rates in the United States. About 50 million people, including 25% of all American children, “struggled” to get food sometime during 2008.³⁰

Catholic Social Teaching suggests developing the common good by living simply. Simplicity means reducing consumption and, consequently, being more present to others, life, the state of society,

and oneself. Buying and consuming less, however, is not enough if we are to be truly present to the realities of the global poor. Arthur Simon, the founder of Bread for the World, says that “living simply may enable people who are barely surviving to live,” but, he continues, “cutting back isn’t going to feed anyone unless you contribute the amount saved” directly to those in need or to a charity.³¹ In order to fulfill Catholic Social Teaching’s obligations of simplicity, caring for the poor, and working for the common good, we have two obligations: live simpler lives by consuming less and donate food, time, and money to organizations that feed the hungry. Eating fewer expensive, luxurious, and unnecessary foods will save money which can be used to feed those who have little or nothing to eat. As Pope Benedict recently said at the World Food Summit, “opulence and waste are no longer acceptable when the tragedy of hunger is assuming ever greater proportions.”³² Catholic Social Teaching’s proclamation of the common good should compel us not to waste money or food when this excess can and should be diverted to feed hungry persons around the world. In the United States, almost 5 million households visited food shelves in 2008.³³ Far fewer, but still a substantial number, were the approximately 600,000 families who relied on food from soup kitchens.³⁴ Through donations, these families are not only able to eat, but their inherent human dignity is fostered and their well-being is cherished.

Conclusion

As Pope Benedict XVI said in his most recent encyclical, “every economic decision has a moral consequence.”³⁵ Purchasing and growing food involve economic transactions; therefore, they are moral statements. Choosing to eat factory-farmed meat, distantly-grown produce, or unethically-processed food is in opposition to Catholic Social Teaching’s tenets of prioritizing the common good, environmental stewardship, and subsidiary development. Reducing purchases of unnecessary and excessive amounts of food provides Catholics the opportunity to live simply *and* to build the common good by donating the money saved to feed the poorest members of the human community. It is our Catholic moral obligation to change how much and what we eat. Otherwise, our actions will not only neglect to reflect our beliefs, but our food choices will be in opposition to the fundamentals of our faith.

As Pedro Arrupe, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, said in his address to the Eucharistic Congress in 1976, “If there is hunger anywhere on the planet, the Eucharist is incomplete everywhere on the planet.”³⁶ By not eating factory farmed meat and by supporting ethically and locally grown food, Catholics can care for the poor, the environment, and subsidiary communities while also completing the Eucharist and contributing to the construction of the Kingdom of God.

¹ The research for this article was initially conducted for the author’s Honor’s Program Senior Research project at Creighton University during the 2009-2010 school year and its ideas were developed through educational service trips to Shadowbrook Farm in Lincoln, NE and to The White Violet Center for Eco-Justice at St. Mary-of-The-Woods, Indiana.

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