

The Price of Meat

Impact of Meat on Humans and the Global Environment



In his encyclical, *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis reminds us that 'our sister (planet earth) now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will' (No 2). In the next paragraph he tells us that he would 'like to enter into dialogue with all the people of our common home' to determine what needs to be done. The pope is aware that this will call for serious sacrifices which amount to changing our modes of production and consumption and opting for an ecological conversion. (No. 5).

One of the most difficult conversations which must take place is about the amount of meat which many of us eat each day. In November 2015, the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned us that eating too much meat can cause cancers, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Our human body is not designed for a heavy meat diet. Our hands are flat which facilitates pulling fruit and nuts from trees. Our teeth are designed to grind plant material. Our intestines are 12 times longer than our trunks in order that they can absorb nutrients slowly. Finally, our stomachs and liver have a low concentrate and tolerance for acids which are needed to digest animal protein. Contrast that with

a tiger – a true carnivore. Their intestine is only three times longer than their trunk. Their stomach and liver have high concentrates of uric acid to help them break down animal protein. So, even if we do not become vegetarians, meat should only be a small portion of our diet.

We might think that this generation is merely following the tradition of our ancestors when it comes to eating meat. In reality the global meat industry has grown dramatically in recent decades. Between 1963 and 2014 meat production globally has grown from 78 million tons to 300 million tons. This amounts to a fourfold increase.¹ With growing prosperity in Asia meat-eating has increased in China and India. Experts believe that with population increase and a growing appetite for meat, production will increase by 75 percent by 2050.

According to Damien Carrington in *The Guardian*, to reach a healthy level of meat consumption, citizens of the United States would have to cut their meat consumption by two-thirds, while in Britain and Ireland we should be eating half as much meat as we do.²

Our current effort to produce meat takes a huge toll on our environment. A total of 40 percent of the world's land surface is used to feed the world's population which now stands at 7.2 billion. Much of this land is grazed by cattle, pigs and chickens. One third of the world's fresh water is used in food

production. The 75 percent increase which is expected to take place by 2050 would be disastrous, making it impossible to keep the increase in the average global temperature to 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels.

Fifteen percent of greenhouse gases are attributed to the meat industry globally, because ruminants produce methane, which is 20 times more heat retentive than carbon dioxide. This is more than all the cars, trains, planes and ships combined.³ On the other hand if the world's population cut back to healthy levels of meat consumption of about 70g a day, this would reduce carbon emissions by an amount equivalent the US output which is the second largest polluter on earth.⁴

We are expected to reduce greenhouse gases in response to the agreement made at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris in December 2015. I have pointed out, on numerous occasions, the contradiction in the commitment made by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny in Paris to be actively involved in reducing greenhouse gases while at the same time planning to increase our bovine herd by 300,000.

An analysis from Glasgow University and the thinktank Chatham House found that in 12 countries measures to change peoples' behaviour can be acceptable to the public if they are seen to promote the common good. Of course, if there was a concerted effort to begin to tax our use of meat, the farming lobby and large multinational agribusiness corporations would be up in arms. The average subsidy on livestock in 13 OECD countries in 2013, was \$53 billion or \$190 per cow.⁵ There would need to be a huge education campaign to support initiatives such as cutting subsidies to livestock farmers. Farmers would have to be given support to diversify their food production. The reality is that a reduction in meat eating would be a win-win for both human health and the environment.

NOTES

¹ Conor Purcell, 'Meat production Big Environmental beef,' *The Irish Times*, January 21st 2016, page 12.

² Damien Carrington, 'Tax on meat not too hard to swallow, study suggests,' *The Guardian*, November 2nd 2015, page 11.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*.