**Pope Francis and Saving the Planet One Meal at a Time**

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Pope Francis’ encyclical, Laudato Si, speaks not only on behalf of ardent environmental and social activists but also for the protectors of animal rights and opponents of the horrendous conditions farm animals face before being slaughtered to satiate the world’s taste for dead flesh. It is a clarion call not just to Catholics but to all citizens of the world to wake up to the destructive course humanity is embarking upon and the annihilation of the very infrastructure upon which human survival and the endurance of all other species depends. There is reason to feel optimistic that an international leader, responsible for the spiritual direction of 1.2 billion Catholics would take this stance against the powers who are determined to alter and destroy life as we know it.

By focusing on the many benefits of preserving our environment, ecology, farmlands, and communities and cultures, the Pope is pointing the way towards what should be done if he can make one further step; that is to adopt a fully vegetarian or vegan diet. Even if only 10% of Catholics were to follow this example and pursue a diet based upon organic and principally locally grown foods, there would be a substantial reduction in poverty, misery and improved health. Not only would souls be saved but so would lives. Going vegetarian honors the sacredness of other species and lessens the animal cruelty of factory farming. Stresses on the planet and environment will decline including unregulated corporate pollution of the environment, acidification of the oceans, and weakened health of our bodies.

There is no longer any substantial benefit for continuing a meat-based diet. According to a study from Harvard’s School of Public Health, red meat consumption shortens lifespan. Grilled and charred meat has long been known to increase nitrosamine toxicity that has been repeatedly associated with a variety of cancers. A study from the JAMA Internal Medicine reported that red and processed meats raise the risk of Type 2 Diabetes as much as 51 percent. UCLA discovered an association between meat consumption and Alzheimer’s and dementia. And for women, meat consumption increases the risk of breast cancer.

Particularly in the developed world, a meat-based diet has become the foundation of a pyramid upon which rests economic inequality, rural migration to urban centers and poverty, near insurmountable environmental destruction and climate change, and the collapse of the planet’s biodiversity. It was not without reason that Albert Einstein noted several decades ago, long before the measurable impact of greenhouse gas emissions, that a vegetarian diet will “increase chances for survival on earth,” and would have a profound “physical effect on the human temperament.” In Einstein’s estimation, this would lead not only to better human health but also benefit how humans treat each other, to be kinder, more compassionate and more caring towards those in the greatest need. The increase of industrial factory farms is therefore one of the greatest single obstacles blinding people from the full social and environmental consequences of continuing a carnivorous diet.

The evidence of factory farms’ immoral assault on the environment, other animal species and human health is grotesque. Over 450 million tons of waste is emitted from the animal-consumption industry. A very large adult cow can produce up to 65 pounds of solid excrement and 4 gallons of urine waste a day. Among the byproducts of livestock manure is nitrous oxide, which, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, accounts for 65% of its anthropogenic emissions. Due to an overabundance of livestock manure, nitrous oxide interferes with our cells’ ability to utilize oxygen and thereby has been associated with apoptosis, the death of brain cells, and in particular in the brain’s region associated with learning and memory. It also disrupts the body’s ability to absorb Vitamin B12, a critical nutrient for the myelin sheaths protecting neurons. Research has also associated excess NO2 exposure with slower production of bone marrow and heart attacks.

Nitrous oxide is also a leading cause behind the death of our rivers, lakes and tributaries flowing into the oceans. Throughout the US, untreated animal waste is destroying water resources and renewable aquifers fed by groundwater. Tens of millions of gallons of manure waste contaminated North Carolina’s New River in the mid 1990s leading to the death of over 10 million fish. Since NO2 depletes oxygen, runoffs contribute to algae blooms and dead zones that threaten sea life.

According to a World Watch report, factory farms and the vast swathes of forests that have been leveled for animal grazing may account for 51% of all human-related greenhouse gas emissions, far more than the fossil fuel industry. As of 2012, 65% of the world’s deforestation was for increasing livestock ranching and grazing. Thirty-one percent was for large industrial agriculture to displace more sustainable traditional farming methods.

On average a single cow will release 155-265 pounds of methane gas annually. Although methane has a shorter lifespan in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide, it has a greater capacity to trap radiation. According to the Environmental Defense Fund, methane is 84 times more potent than CO2, making it the most serious greenhouse emission. The increase of anthropogenic methane emissions, coupled with the thawing of frozen tundra releasing vast quantities of methane, is rapidly increasing global warming and having a non-reversible impact upon the climate. Today, factory farms account for approximately 37% of methane emissions and is likely greater than emissions from the oil and gas industries.

In short, factory farms are an ecological disaster. Grass fed cattle and free range chickens are neither a solution. To the contrary, the organic industry impacts global warming 20% more than standard industry chicken farms. And grass fed cattle has contributed to the destruction of millions of acres in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, and releases more methane than cattle fed common feedstock grains. For this reason, forsaking consumption of all meat products is the only solution.

Unfortunately factory farms are increasing. Between 2002 and 2012, large factory farms rose by 20 percent with 28.5 million separate units. Dairy cows rose 121 percent, broiler chickens by 80 percent and hog farms by 37 percent during the same period. According to Food and Water Watch, one fundamental reason for livestock increase is regulation failures that have led to over-production. In addition an economic synergy exists between the meat industry and the agrochemical industry with more genetically modified crops carpeting the US’s farmlands. Each industry serves the other’s interests in a hidden monopolistic scheme, and Monsanto leads the way in keeping the factory farm industry alive. Today the majority of Monsanto’s GMO soybean and corn is grown for animal feed and biofuels.

The only incentive behind the factory farm industry is profit, even at the cost of environmental catastrophe. Between 1995 and 2012, American taxpayers subsidized large factory farms to the tune of $292 billion and only 10% of farms received 75% of the subsidies. Sixty-two percent did not receive any subsidies and these are the smaller family farm operations who rely on sustainable agriculture. Why would livestock firms be subsidized? Because of the massive amounts of grains consumed from Big Agriculture. Moreover, large livestock operations receive tax dollars to cover crop insurance. As of 2012, this amounted to $15.8 billion. And over $1.2 billion has been spent on lobbying federal legislators to keep this ponzi scheme alive. There is simply too much revenue at stake for the oligarchs to retreat on moral grounds. Legislative reform is also unlikely to make a crucial dent to lessen factory farms’ impact upon the environment. There is simply too much livestock and too many people willing to devour it.

In 2014, the World Bank released a report that calculated global poverty had declined in half during the past 20 years. This ushered a false hope that a global war on poverty was being won. However, the fallacy was that the report relied upon a baseline figure of $1.25 for its calculation. A subsequent report by the Asian Development Bank suggested that the way poverty is measured today is completely obsolete. Given the rise in cost of living and essential resources to survive, the baseline figure must be increased to a minimum of $1.50 and more realistically to $1.75. When calculated realistically, global poverty skyrockets and proves the war on poverty has been a dismal failure.

The meat and big agrichemical industries pushing genetically modified crops are largely to blame, particularly in rural undeveloped regions. Today, about 70% of the world’s poor live in rural areas where farming is the primary source of income. Rural farmers account for 60% of the world’s population. In a highly industrialized country like the US, with huge monopolistic farms, only about 2% of Americans are farmers. Factory farms, whether for the raising of livestock or animal feed on huge petrochemical farms continues to threaten communities and drive more people into poverty. Land that can be better used to feed the developing world is increasingly being usurped by western corporations to keep the animal death machine running.

Small generational farmers are forced off their lands and destined to a life of unemployment and impoverishment. The Pew Commission has stated that factor farms destroy the “social fabric” of communities and local economies. The private food and animal industries are resource parasites that waste vast amounts of natural resources, particularly water, to keep large industrial farms operative. In turn, water sources are contaminated with toxic pesticides and fertilizers, which increases manure waste, environmental and human health risks, and contributes to irreplaceable soil depletion. The rape of the land not only drives people into poverty but makes the land unlivable for future generations because it can only sustain itself by adding more and more toxins and pillaging more and more resources. The Pope acknowledges this crisis in this encyclical because for the indigenous farmer “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest here, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.”

The fundamental cause behind the numerous crises humanity faces is being technologically driven: the release of increasingly more toxic pesticides and herbicides, chemical fertilizers, unsafe genetically modified crops and trees, drugs, antibiotics and synthetic growth hormones to speed up animals’ natural metabolism to reach maturity, etc. Factor farms rely more on technology than labor. Pope Francis acknowledges this threat when “a concentration of productive land in the hands of the few” forces “small producers” from being forced off their fields and “end up in miserable urban settlements.” For this reason local communities are decimated and residents are forced into exile as migrants. In poorer developing countries where factory farms are thriving, money leaves the region to fill the coffers of large multinational corporations rather than being recirculated within rural farming communities.

With the future of sustainable living becoming ever more fragile, there is a moral imperative for institutions, academies, businesses and individuals to divest their financial interests in the livestock industry. Yet this will not guarantee a reduction in meat production unless a global-wide initiative to encourage people to adopt vegetarian and vegan lifestyles is launched to weaken the supply and demand and force private industry to scale back. For this reason, a meat-based diet supports the worst of the capitalist edifice financing factory farming and a global elite who are determined to keep it thriving in order to benefit from environmental degradation and human suffering.

As long as there is natural land available to be ravished by private corporations to keep the death machine spewing forth meat for consumption, more and more rural families, women and children, and entire cultures, will be reduced to poverty. The equation that unites a meat diet, global warming, corporate profits and rising poverty is clear. For this reason the food industry is determined to use whatever devious and fraudulent means at its disposal to hold its own. This includes the publication of duplicitous science, which is now endemic to multinational corporations in the pharmaceutical, chemical-based agriculture, food and animal industries. Unfortunately western countries, and in particular the US, refuse to ask themselves urgent moral questions. When a nation deliberates on what is right, what is the correct and humane thing to do, it inevitably frames its answers in the context of what is best for that nation to leverage an advantage over others. It is not about preserving the planet’s environment or improving people’s health. It is not about the “Earth as home,” as Pope Francis states.

What is particularly insidious and criminal are the economic elite who benefit financially from this holocaust of land and sea life. Pope Francis not only warns about the immorality that fuels free-market capitalism but also targets the agro-industrial complex and the oil and gas industries as the greatest threats to life on the planet. He is aligned with the food activists who oppose companies like Monsanto and DuPont who wish to dominate global food security and alter the very fabric of plant and animal life for greed and profit.

Unlike his predecessors, Pope Francis has adopted a humble and simple lifestyle that prefers less over more. His meals consist primarily of vegetables, salads, fruits, a glass of wine, and the occasional skinned and baked chicken. With the release of the encyclical, and the Pope’s inevitable soul-searching and pondering of the state of our planet’s condition, we may hope that the Pope will embrace a full vegetarian or vegan lifestyle to serve as an exemplar for all Catholics and his non-Catholic admirers.

Pope Frances has the capacity to do more than any other person today to change the course of modern history and rally people against the depraved multinational corporate and financial engine that has no intention in preserving life.