



The FURROW

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The Circular Economy

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– our ‘green’ bin

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In his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis bemoans the lack of ‘a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them. A serious consideration of this issue would be one way of counteracting the throwaway culture which affects the entire planet, but it must be said that only limited progress has been made in this regard.’¹

The concept of a circular model of production or what is more commonly referred to as the ‘circular economy’, has been with us since at least the late eighties.² The linear model of production has worked on a take, consume and dispose basis with goods being produced from finite natural resources which all too often ended their life cycle in landfill. This model produces mountains of waste, as well as the release of dangerous pollutants and contaminants into the environment. The circular economy proposes instead that goods ought not end their life cycle in landfill but ought to be reused or recycled in such a way that they themselves become the raw material for the next generation of goods. So the life cycle of a given raw material becomes circular, a closed loop.

As a strand of Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis roots concern for the environment in the concept of the common good. This concept was explained by the Second Vatican Council as ‘the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 26). He uses the term ‘common home’ thirteen times in the encyclical, noting that this term ‘includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development and states that the climate is a common good, meant for all’ (art. 13)

1 *Laudato Si'*, art. 22

2 David W. Pearce and R. Kerry Turner (1989). *Economics of Natural Resources and the Environment*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

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The EU has also paid attention recently to the concept of the circular economy. At a conference held in 2015, Vice President Frans Timmermans said,

I passionately believe in the opportunities of the circular economy, for many reasons. But the main reason is this: everyone who looks at the structure of our economy, the structure of our society even, will see that the future is not in low-wage production, that the future is not in making things with finite components...you reduce the use of raw materials and don't deplete the earth's natural resources. I think this is the economic concept that by now has been embraced, by many enterprises across the world.³

It is interesting to note that the emphasis here is on the way in which a circular economy functions *qua* economy. This is made more explicit in the contribution of commissioner Vella, to the same conference,

In the waste sector alone, implementing existing legislation by 2020 will create over 400,000 new jobs and an increase in the annual turnover of the waste sector by over 4.2 billion euro. Implementing higher recycling targets would create another 200,000 additional jobs in Europe, a lot of these in the countries which are further away from meeting the targets. I am quite taken with the idea that good waste policy means we can have tomorrow's products and services at today's prices, in spite of price increases in raw materials.⁴

So good waste policy, of which the circular economy forms part, is viewed primarily in terms of its economic benefits as well as its positive environmental impact. Here the two analyses, of Pope and European Commission, go their separate ways. Both agree that a circular model of production is a good idea, but for very different reasons. The Pope emphasises benefits of a circular model of production as an expression of humanity's responsibilities in relation to its stewardship of Creation, the other views the model almost entirely in terms of its potential economic benefit. However, although the rationales behind proposing this circular model of the economy are distinct, they need not be mutually exclusive at the level of concrete action.

3 Opening speech, First Vice President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, 'Closing the Loop' Conference on the Circular Economy, Brussels, June 25th 2015.

4 Introductory remarks, Commissioner Karmenu Vella, 'Closing the Loop' Conference on the Circular Economy, Brussels, June 25th 2015.

REPAK

The organisation in Ireland, tasked with meeting the obligations of businesses in regard to this model for packaging waste is called Repak. Repak is the compliance scheme for Irish business, and it operates on a simple model. Businesses pay Repak on the basis of the packaging they place on the market, and Repak gives this money to waste operators in the form of subsidies to ensure that as much of their waste as possible is recycled. It also promotes, through its work with schools and via different media, reduction and reuse of waste materials. In its core work, Repak has been highly successful, meeting and exceeding targets set by Ireland and the EU.⁵

A simple, but important, example of how our own behaviour can influence the development of the circular model of production for good or ill was recently highlighted by the CEO of Repak. He spoke about the amount of contamination in the ‘green’ bin coming from households. This figure has increased recently, suggesting a more careless approach has developed on the part of Irish householders when sorting their waste.⁶ While problems of waste management can be viewed in economic terms, and as we have seen, they very often are, Pope Francis sees them primarily in ethical terms,

Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment ... There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions ... avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse ... or any number of other practices ... Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity.⁷

He goes on to say, ‘We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread.’⁸ If we wish to respond to the challenge of Francis and make our own contribution to the building of a circular model of production, we can do something both simple and effective – we can be careful about the materials we place in our ‘green’ bin, a decision with not only economic, but ethical implications.

5 https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/waste/stats/EPA_Progress%20towards%20EU%20targets_Jan17_web.pdf

6 Cf. Seamus Clancy, CEO Repak, <http://greenbusiness.ie/repak-asks-ireland-to-save-our-nation-from-contamination-this-repak-recycle-week/>, September 2016.

7 *Laudato Si'* art. 211

8 *Ibid.*, art. 212