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Fintan Lyons

Food and the Environmental Crisis: The Christian Approach

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What we eat or refrain from eating is today a significant issue for our health, whereas a generation or so ago concern for most people arose in relation to the regulations of the Lenten fast. Some will still recall the one full meal and two collations and the difficulty in deciding what these quantities amounted to. But of late, a whole new perspective has been added, expanding our concern beyond health issues and religiously motivated fasting to include the welfare of animals, the welfare of the planet and, ultimately, our survival as a species of planet dwellers.

There is growing recognition of the *interconnectedness* of all creation. Much research has been done on climate change caused by human activity and on the previously unquestioned practice of killing and eating animals. Many are now more aware than in the past that a malaise affects humanity in relation to its place in the world. Christians look to the Book of Genesis for an explanation of this malaise.

SCRIPTURAL GUIDANCE

The account of humankind's doings over the course of several chapters of the Book of Genesis represented an acknowledgement and explanation of the situation which actually existed at the time of the compilation of the text. It was an attempt to reach back into pre-history to a world where harmony was thought to have existed. The *first* account of creation in Genesis 1:28, where the Creator gave humankind its place in creation in relation to other creatures, is one which in all translations establishes humankind's supreme role. It states:

‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

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However, the next verse, 1:29 adds:

‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’

As scripture presents it, in the beginning, humans were meant to rely on the regenerating resources of plants and trees. That was the situation in the ideal conditions of the beginning. The end of that account has God resting on the seventh day, not from a feeling of need but from delight in all he had created - and there is no mention of humankind sharing this rest. The account of God resting is, in fact, peculiar to the author of the first account of creation and elsewhere in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, God’s creative activity is continuous. When the Jews persecuted Jesus for working a miracle on the Sabbath, he replied: ‘My father goes on working and so do I’ (Jn 5:17). Accordingly, the *second* account of creation (Gen 2:5-25) gives the detail of how God continues to deal with humankind: ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15). Humankind was not meant to live a life of indolence, but *work* would be a sharing in God’s creative activity. Later in Genesis, after the expulsion of sinful humanity from the garden, work was described as a frustrating and painful task. The earth would yield brambles and thistles and work involve toil and sweat (Gen 3:17-19).

The text of Genesis goes on to recount that as the generations succeeded one another, ‘the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth’ (Gen 6:5) and sent the great deluge to clear away the evil civilisation which had developed. Noah, who was a man who ‘walked with God’, was chosen to inaugurate a new epoch after he and the survivors emerged from the ark and he had offered burnt offerings from the clean animals and birds; their fragrance was pleasing to the Lord (Gen 8:21) and led to his making a covenant with Noah and succeeding generations.

The new epoch thus inaugurated presumed the existence of the disorder caused by sin and the continuing need for sacrifice. The compilers of the text in effect defended the legitimacy of the religious institution and its laws that regarding the religious rites, which from the time of the covenant with Moses included sacrifices of well-being (or peace) where the flesh of the animal was eaten, though without its blood, after parts had been made a burnt offering. This had been part of the covenant with Noah:

‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird

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of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Gen 9:1-3)

FROM FRUIT AND NUTS TO MEAT AND FISH

The dominant role of humankind was asserted and animals could be eaten, but, fundamentally, the way the narrative developed involved recognition that life as lived was still marked by a fallen state and consequent restrictions. Life was not a fulfilled one because humans yearned for a life they could not have, that which was signified by the picture of the original garden, by the diet of fruit and nuts and by God's rejoicing at the work of his hands in the Sabbath rest. The *ideal* for humanity would have been to enter into his Sabbath rest. The Psalmist spoke of how things actually turned out, of how God was wearied of humankind. 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways. Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."' (Ps 95:10-11)

The Old Testament established a culture in which the eating of meat had association with necessary sacrifice and would be based on what had become normal dietary practice. As a result, eating meat was not an ethical problem for the Judeo-Christian community when in time it emerged. They retained the meat (and fish) eating culture, and Peter's experience recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 10:13 established greater freedom for them with the elimination of the classification of clean and unclean.

ABSTENTION FROM MEAT

Despite acceptance by the Christian community, in monastic tradition and in ascetical circles generally there has been a settled conviction about the need to abstain from meat – a restriction imposed in due course on all Christians during Lent and on Fridays through the year. But such restrictions were frequently seen against a background of the need to do penance and of suspicion that the eating of meat inflamed the passions.

Those who abstained were not concerned with what some today would call 'animal rights' – a rather infelicitous term, as 'rights' is a concept that correlates with 'duties' and is not really appropriate in relation to animals. As it developed, Christian tradition did not extend the idea of 'right' to animals. In religious terms, the issue is not a potential community of rights but the *relationship* between humans and the rest of creation and this has begun to

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be studied anew in light of environmental issues, and also from a new interest in the nature of the human person. This involves re-visiting previously unquestioned theological positions derived from scripture and centuries of theological development. While the tradition of meat-eating is well established in Christianity, it must be open to *review* in light of the environmental and animal welfare issues. Some kind of restriction is needed to express a new vision of humankind's relationship with other creatures.

A GROWING INTEREST IN DIETS INVOLVING FASTING

The era of industrial development imposed such demands on the workers serving its progress that the need to maintain physical energy at maximum level made a fasting regime an illogical and even impossible way of life. In the post-industrial age of the knowledge and digital economies, work of a less obviously physical but sedentary kind has been found to be equally tiring; instead of exhausting physical effort, the minimal effort associated with work deprives the worker of the exercise the body needs and in so doing affects brain function negatively also. Rather than reducing the food consumed, the tendency in this situation is to use stimulants, such as coffee or even opioids, in order to improve the sense of well-being, and this affects the normal psychological balance of the appetite for food, leading to the excesses of over-eating in some cases and food deprivation in others. The high rate of obesity in Western society does bear witness to lack of discipline on the part of people without religious motivation for fasting, but it is also due to cultural factors which entrap people in unhealthy lifestyles.

There is a contemporary dieting regime which requires significant periods of fasting and is one of the more popular but demanding types of dieting at present. Intermittent fasting consists of having regularly scheduled periods of time when a normal pattern of eating is maintained, alternating with periods of restricted eating or total fast. It amounts to skipping meals for a day or so on a regular basis or taking only light snacks. Intermittent dieting is in fact similar to the fasting regime of monasticism in its early phase. At the beginning of the monastic life of one of the Egyptian monks, Pachomius (292-348), his mentor Palamon introduced him to the practice of eating each day in summer, but only every other day in winter.¹ When Pachomius founded his own community, he did not try to impose such a regime on his followers, recognising that different individuals had different needs. Similarly, today the

1 *The First Greek Life of Pachomius*, Armand Veilleux trans., CS 45 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980) 301

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one who engages in intermittent fasting will find it difficult to do so in a family or even workplace environment, so it can result in a certain amount of isolation which would be counterproductive to the overall objective of promoting one's health.

MOTIVATION

This is all at the level of practice, but the issue of *motivation* is the fundamental one. In the Christian tradition or at least in that part of it where asceticism was not extreme and damaging to health, the motivation for fasting was part of an overall religious motivation to maintain control over all inordinate desires. As a monastic writer put it:

‘The appetite for nourishment is only one of the desires emanating from the human heart. ... Its incessant compelling urgency sets it aside from other desires. Some, like sexuality, are not less natural, but none of them is as immediately essential. From this results its key position and its value as a test for the whole moral effort.’²

The result of putting fasting in this spiritual context is that it helps to avoid the backsliding and ultimate dishonesty that have often been evident in the history of *outward* conformity to the fasts imposed by church authorities. In medieval and later times, the Lenten regulations which forbade the use of certain foods caused little hardship when ingenious methods were found to present others such as fish in many tasty forms – enough to satisfy a glutton quite often. Undertaking fasting for less than spiritual reasons - physical health or even a desire to improve one's self-esteem resulting from a more attractive appearance - is not likely to achieve lasting success, because to do so does not respond to the real need of the human person. There are many possible motivations which ultimately have to do with obsession with the self rather than a desire to live a life in conformity with God's law as revealed in Christ's teaching and example. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (1993), Pope Francis spoke of the spiritual worldliness which can lurk behind ‘an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realisation’ (no. 95).

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON FASTING

While restraint in eating for health reasons and in dietary programmes is on the rise, fasting from food and abstinence

2 Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of St Benedict*, J.B. Hasbrouck trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 241-2

from meat for religious motives have declined greatly in Western Christianity, while holding up reasonably well in the Orthodox world.

The Second Vatican Council in the twentieth-century had brought radical changes. The documents of the Council put less emphasis on the institutional nature of the church and its prescriptive rules and more on its spiritual dimensions as the Mystical Body of Christ. The spiritual aspects of life were intended, however, to be manifested in external practices, including penance. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* – in the only reference to Christian fasting in the Council’s documents – stated:

‘During Lent, penance should not be only internal and individual, but also external and social. The practice of penance should be fostered in ways that are possible in our own times and in different regions, and according to the circumstances of the faithful. ... Nevertheless, let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind’(no. 110).

The Council reference to ‘wherever possible’ indicated that more discretion was now left to the individual Catholic – as well as to national Bishops’ Conferences – with regard to fasting and abstinence. The decision of many Conferences to remove the obligation to abstain from meat on Fridays was a reaction to this situation in the form of a move away from external observances towards a more *internal* penitential practice. What appears to have been missed, however, is the symbolic importance for religious identity of a ritual such as abstention from meat. It was re-introduced by the Bishops of England and Wales in 2012.

Associating fasting with the liturgy, as the Council did, in the sense of a preparatory *fast* leading up to a *feast*, the fast in the absence of the Bridegroom (Mt 9:15), has always been the fundamental rationale underlying Christian fasting. This is something distinct from the asceticism that has been seen as necessary in the Christian life from the beginning of the Christian era. In the early centuries the nature of fasting did not have the exactness associated with later centuries – with the Lenten Regulations read out in church a generation ago. For example in the sixth-century, St Benedict in his *Rule* only required moderation in all things, and that in Lent the monk should deny himself ‘some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting.’ He should ‘look forward to Easter with joy and spiritual longing’.

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GLUTTONY

Today fasting has become a *discretionary* discipline and individuals need to be sensitive to the ascetical requirements of Christian living. The temptation to gluttony is a real one. Gluttony is often described as one of the seven deadly sins, though more accurately in the Christian tradition it is described as one of the *capital* sins, because, according to Pope Gregory the Great, it propagates other sins, such as ‘scurrility and dullness of mind’.³ Gluttony is an abuse of the natural and legitimate passion for food or drink but can, if limited in its extent, be simply a case of eating more than is necessary or desirable for health. Because a glutinous act is connected with the need for nourishment, it may not be a serious perversion, and only to be considered a serious sin if it turns a person away from God and his commandments.⁴

Quantity, more or less, is not ultimately the issue affecting a person’s tendency to gluttony; the issue is a self-centred obsession with food. People can address this problem motivated by the desire to overcome self-centredness and become truly Christian, in a life centred on Christ and lived in accordance with his commandments. In the desire for conversion, *penance* in the form of fasting may then be undertaken for a variety of particular reasons, such as in memory of the passion and death of the Lord, as a sharing in Christ’s suffering, or as a form of reparation for sin.

Fasting undertaken as an individual ascetical exercise has a significant role in the Christian life, but fasting undertaken out of regard for the liturgical seasons, giving it a communal dimension is in fact the more fundamental option. The Christian identity is relational; Christians are members of the Body of Christ, connected to Christ and to each other. In the context of the food debate, especially in its global context, this idea of connectedness is fundamental and figures prominently in the Encyclical, *Laudato si’*.

LAUDATO SI’

In the Encyclical, Pope Francis addressed the issue of the global ecological crisis, exemplified by global warming, and the thinking needed to counteract degradation of the environment. His approach continued that of recent popes, who have applied Catholic Social Teaching to this issue. After an analysis of the economic and social problems which have given rise to potential disaster for

3 Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job* 39.25

4 Denis Okholm, ‘Gluttony: Thought for Food’, *American Benedictine Review* 49.1, March 1998, 38-9

people and planet, he developed a theme based on the three terms, *interconnected*, *interrelated* and *interdependent*.⁵ His concern was to provide principles for ‘Ecological Education and Spirituality’ (Chapter Six), using those concepts theologically. His teaching was well summed up in one paragraph:

‘The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from oneself to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.’ (no. 240)

When Christians become aware of the challenge of the interconnected, interrelated and interdependent nature of life, the question arises about what they can do about it. Humans’ food culture cannot be blamed completely for the looming crisis, but the fundamental action of eating is the basic preparation for human activity. In the end is it all about one’s individual carbon footprint? Christians can of course, like non-believers, make serious adjustments to their lifestyle, but it does seem that the Christian community can play a part even *more* radical than just taking to heart the teaching of *Laudato Si’*, with its many insights and recommendations for environmentally sensitive Christian living.

Fasting is not the identifying mark of Christian identity. Feasting is, supremely so in the Eucharistic feast that, according to early tradition, nourishes even the body with immortal life. In the shared meal of the Eucharist, the church experiences anticipation in the eternal banquet. Nourished by it, it has the resources needed to bring about transformation of humanity into true fulfilment rather than disaster. There is need for the church as community to become more aware of its identity as a harbinger of the end-time, as a body which is not simply limited to a role of witnessing to kingdom values in its teaching or in lobbying the state. While still in the world the church can, by its feasts and the fasts before its feasts, bring to today’s crisis the enlightenment, the motivation and the energy needed to avert environmental disaster.

5 See Dermot Lane, ‘Anthropological and Theological Reflections on *Laudato Si’* in Seán McDonagh ed., *Laudato Si’*. *An Irish Response* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2017) 31-54