



The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice

Working for social and economic change tackling poverty and exclusion

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JUST.NOW

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Food for Thought

Food is: A Gift, A Right, A Daily Challenge, A Responsibility

A Gift from God we are all called to share: " God has given the earth and its fruits for the use and enjoyment of the universal human community," (Pope Leo XIII).

A Right - according to Catholic Social Teaching as well as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights

A Daily Challenge for the 841,000,000 people whom the UN describe as being "food insecure" (i.e., who do not have access, through production or purchase, to the food needed to sustain a fully human life). This number is approximately one-seventh of the world's population, even though the global food system continues to produce enough food every year to **feed everyone** on the planet.

A Responsibility for those of us who are faced with an enormous range of food choices instead of food shortages to make ethical decisions when shopping. Ethical decisions go beyond the material world to spiritual, moral, social and environmental values.

This edition of JustNow focuses on an 'Ethical Approach to Food Shopping' by Sr. Anna Byrne D.C.

An Ethical Approach to Food Shopping

Words associated with food abound and increase daily. 'Junk' food, 'fast' food, 'convenience' food tend to have negative connotations while 'organic' 'fair trade' or food labelled with 'omega 3' catch our attention and have positive associations.

However, it is important to look beyond advertising, labelling, brand-names and the plethora of products available in modern supermarkets. While value for money and nutritional requirements need to underpin food shopping, the choice needs to be informed by an ethical approach. Such a stance seeks to purchase products that not only do minimal damage to communities and natural environments, but also promote social and economic development. This reflection attempts to investigate a few complexities facing an ethical shopper

Is cost the only criterion used in choosing between local or imported products or do we look beyond the cost? On the one hand the imports may further development, on the other hand the local produce have fewer 'food miles' - a measure of the distance and means by which food is transported.

The UK currently imports 95% of its fruit and more than half of its vegetables on long haul flights. What about Ireland?



Jet Lagged

Do we query the flavour and vitamin C content of 'jet lagged' vegetables? Air freight is said to emit most carbon contributing significantly to global warming. Consuming local produce in season and limiting luxuries like pineapples and mangetout to really special occasions could go along way to slowing global warming and inevitable environmental degradation.

The latter is predicted to occur mainly in those areas e.g. Bangladesh where the really poor live!

Major firms e.g. Marks and Spencer's and Tesco's have responded to the current ethical revolution. They have jumped on the band wagon some might cynically suggest.

They employ corporate social responsibility managers whose task it is to promote their firms' role as corporate citizens.

An excellent initiative! Until recently ethically accredited products have only been available from specialist outlets e.g. Trócaire or Oxfam.

Now ethical product lines are finding their way onto supermarket shelves as big companies realise that ethical concerns are influencing the purchasing habits of an increasing number of shoppers.

For the retailers this is a 'win-win' situation, as they are able to capture a part of the growing ethical consumer market, while showing them selves to be supporters of products the integrity of which is beyond question. In this way they can promote themselves as good corporate citizens.



Now What Do I Choose?

Now consider the shopper who wishes to purchase coffee on the weekly food shop trudge. A cursory glance along the coffee shelf in a typical Tesco store reveals that a consumer can purchase Cafédirect Fairtrade, Kenco Sustainable Development, Americano Organic and Douwe Egbert's Good Origin. This dazzling array of coffees gives the concerned consumer the almost impossible task of differentiating between a multitude of schemes and accreditation marks.

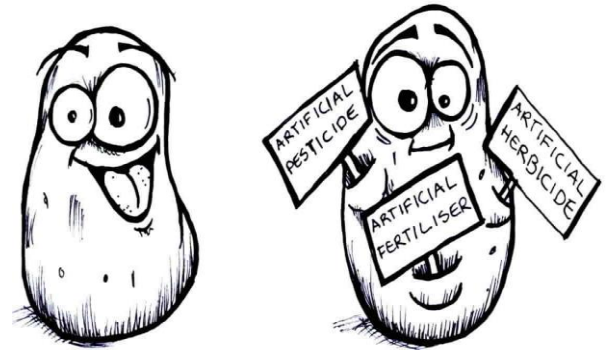
An Ethical Approach to Food Shopping

Lydl recently added to the confusion by putting the word 'Fairglobe' on their fair trade range but did not explain what they intended this term to mean to the customers! The ethical credentials of some product lines are little more than corporate 'greenwash'. The product marketing contains an ethical spin which may overstate the benefits experienced on the ground by the growers.

A crucial step beyond this diverse style of labelling then is needed with the promotion and introduction of a new 'Good for Development' label. This label could generate additional sales for exporters who can demonstrate unambiguously that they bring development as well as environmental benefits to the country of production.

Some shoppers today dither over the best potato to choose for the dinner. In this International year of the '*solanum tuberosum*' (common spud) our staple food deserves a mention.

Our parents would not have considered the choice of our beloved potato a moral issue. Choices in such matters were not available, environmental justice was not in vogue. We however, can choose to eat the 'jet lagged' variety from Cyprus and contribute to global warming or the Irish variety with the hidden additives in their 'pockets.'! Note each of these smiling tubers have equal nutritional value.



It is the extra unknown quantity however, in the 'pocket' that causes concern for health and of course for the soil in which they are grown. It is the 'jet-lagged' variety and those with 'full pockets' that can cause an ethical dilemma. Or yet again in the supermarket we can choose rice, pasta or couscous alternative carbohydrate options to the potato. If so, we miss an opportunity to be ethical consumers.

On launching 2008 as the Year of the Potato Hans Wieland said: "In a world increasingly concerned with carbon footprints and the effects of global warming it is important to rediscover the potato, which can produce nutritious food on less land than any other major crop. So let's get back to our roots and grow them or buy them locally."



Meat is another valued part of the Irish diet. Some nutritionalists claim that meat and dairy products from grass fed animals are high in 'omega 3' fatty acids of the cholesterol reducing kind. Ethical shoppers then have another reason for buying local produce where possible and a cause to lobby in its absence.

What We Can Do!

1. Discuss this article with others.
2. Before buying check source of food product.
3. When possible buy locally produced food.
4. Support local farmers' market.

Reflection and Prayer

Prayer

Jesus ...had compassion for them ... Jesus said to [the disciples], "They need not go away; give them something to eat," They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled.

Matthew 14:14, 16-21

The Paradox of Our Age

We have bigger houses
but smaller families;
more conveniences, but less time.
We have more degrees, but less sense;
more knowledge, but less judgement;
more medicines but less healthiness.
We've been all the way
to the Moon and back,
but we have trouble crossing
the street to meet the new neighbours.
We have built more computers
to hold more information,
to produce more copies than ever,
but we have less communication.
We have become long on quantity,
but short on quality.
These are the times of fast foods
but slow digestion;
tall man but short character;
steep profits but shallow relationships.
It is a time when there is much in the
window but nothing in the room.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

Lord God, Show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray for the small farmers who struggle to make a living despite the difficulties of limited resources and competition with corporate farms.

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray that we may be better stewards of the land you have given us and for in-tuned-ness to our moral responsibility to the common good.

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray for those who determine prices and use of natural resources: for fairer prices, and a healthier environment.

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray for consumers, faced with the challenges of conscientious buying which can make better or worsen this food security crisis.

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray for the people of those countries in which the highest percentage of people are undernourished. In Somalia, Burundi, Congo, Ethiopia, Angola, Haiti, Nicaragua, Colombia, Guatemala, North Korea, Cambodia, and the Philippines

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.

We pray for the leaders of developed countries who have great power in the creation of policies of International Financial Institutions that can so greatly influence the distribution of food in our world.

Lord God, show us how to redistribute the food you have given your human family.