



Introduction

Our lives depend on the fruits of creation; these cannot be reduced to mere objects to be recklessly handled and used. -- Pope Francis' World Food Day Message, October 16, 2019

We invite you to reflect on your food choices, since food is a gift from Earth that not only sustains us, but links us with unknown sisters and brothers around the world.

We will explore:

- Industrial food production: turning food into a commodity
- Processed foods: their impact on the health and livelihoods of people around the world
- Palm oil: a substance we encounter daily, and maybe never heard of, but one that has serious negative impacts on many poor countries in the global south
- Reducing food waste at home
- Food waste II: food dating, composting

Turning Food into a Commodity

The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule. -- Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium #56, November 4, 2013.

Where does our food come from? We sometimes hear terms like *farm fresh* or *straight from farm to table* in food advertisements. However, the iconic family farm as it existed for decades in the U.S. has all but disappeared. Today, only 1.3 percent of the U.S. workforce is employed in farming and ranching, and the number of farms has decreased from about seven million in 1935 to about two million in 2019. Globally, about 26 percent of the world's population is engaged in agriculture.

Most food today is produced on large factory farms. This industrial agriculture has fundamentally changed our relationship to food and the natural world from which it comes.

Two examples:

- CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) can house more than a thousand animals in a relatively small area. These operations often feature cruel treatment of animals and over-use of antibiotics, which can contribute to the development of bacteria resistant to antibiotics. CAFOs also have serious environmental impacts, with massive volumes of animal waste that is often stored in open lagoons. During storms, these lagoons can overflow onto croplands where the runoff pollutes streams and rivers.
- Large factory farms where one crop (monoculture) is planted on thousands of acres also presents new challenges. To assure uniformity, seeds are genetically modified by altering their DNA or introducing genetic material from another species to produce desired characteristics such as resistance to a specific herbicide. Nevertheless, some weeds develop a resistance to a cancer-causing chemical called glyphosate, so that even greater concentrations have to be sprayed on crops. This poses a threat to human health and to other species like Monarch butterflies.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How has industrial farming upset our relationship with creation?
- Who is most harmed by the practices that now dominate food production?
- What can I do to become more aware of the hidden costs (at least from me) of the foods I consume?

ACTION: Visit a local farmers' market this week and talk with some of the farmers about how they grow their produce and raise their livestock, or read about their practices on their websites. Identify how you might adjust your food budget to purchase some of your food from smaller-scale operations that use practices that align with your values

Processed foods: impacting health and livelihoods around the world

*Other indicators of the present situation have to do with the depletion of natural resources. We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* #27*

Processed foods can contain high concentrations of sugar, salt and fat. Because they are cheap, tasty and have a long shelf-life, they often are the [only foods available in low-income neighborhoods](#) that depend on convenience stores, dollar stores and gas stations for groceries. This contributes to systemic poor nutrition, a symptom of institutional racism deeply embedded in our food system.

As markets in the industrialized world become saturated, food multinationals seek new markets for their products. Trade agreements have made it easier for companies to export food, and local populations find these foods attractive and associate them with an affluent Western lifestyle. Unfortunately, countries are beginning to see some of the adverse health impacts already evident in Western countries including increasing levels of obesity. In many ways this is just the latest chapter in the ongoing history of colonialism.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have I reflected on the role that processed foods play in my diet?
- How can I advocate for access to affordable, nutritious foods in my neighborhood, city?
- How can I challenge food manufacturers to produce healthier food?

ACTION: Develop a menu of meals for this week that avoids processed foods as much as possible, then consider how you can make such meal planning part of your ongoing routine.

Palm Oil and the Destruction of Ecosystems

Your lovely island of Madagascar is rich in plant and animal biodiversity, yet this treasure is especially threatened by excessive deforestation, from which some profit. The deterioration of that biodiversity compromises the future of the country and of the earth, our common home. -- Pope Francis, Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corp, Madagascar, September 7, 2019.

Have you had your palm oil yet today? This ubiquitous substance, estimated to be [an ingredient](#) in half the packaged foods on supermarket shelves, hides under [a long list of aliases](#) so it is easy to miss. However, palm oil links us with people thousands of miles away and its production is raising serious environmental concerns.

Palm oil has emerged as an ideal fat because it is cheaper to produce than other fats and oils. Palm oil trees, which are native to West Africa but now grow throughout the tropical areas of the world, produce oil from both the fruit and the pit and yield multiple crops each year.

Large tracts of tropical forests are now being cleared and burned for palm oil plantations, which harms indigenous communities and ecosystems. Since these tropical forests rest on peat bogs, when this carbon-rich organic matter is burned, astronomical amounts carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere.

In addition to serving as a cheap fat for processed foods, palm oil is also a significant component in many toiletries, cosmetics and other personal care products. U.S policy is also implicated in the rise of palm oil production. Under pressure from agricultural

interests (mainly corn and soybean growers), Congress passed legislation in 2007 requiring fuel producers to mix in soy, palm and other kinds of vegetable oil with diesel fuel and to use ethanol from corn and sugar in gasoline.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What is my reaction to this information about palm oil?
- What can I do to become more conscious of the implications of my consumer choices?
- What can I do to impact U.S. policies that have such detrimental impacts on people around the world, particularly communities of color?

ACTION: Install an app on your phone or tablet so you can assess products with palm oil when you go shopping. [This](#) is for Apple products, and [this](#) for other devices. You also can refer to [this list of products](#) certified by the Rainforest Alliance as environmentally and socially sustainable as you consider purchases.

Reducing Food Waste at Home

It is a cruel, unjust and paradoxical reality that, today, there is food for everyone and yet not everyone has access to it, and that in some areas of the world food is wasted, discarded and consumed in excess, or destined for other purposes than nutrition.

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The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 1.3 billion tons (2,600,000,000,000 pounds) of food are lost or wasted every year. At the same time, almost two billion people are malnourished or go hungry. The food sector accounts for about 22 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, mainly because of the conversion of forests to farm land.

While we may think of food waste and loss just in terms of the food itself, large amounts of energy (for fertilizer production and transportation) and water are also wasted. Food loss and food waste are often used interchangeably but they do not mean the same thing. Food loss refers to food lost in the earlier stages of production including harvest, storage and transportation. Food waste, on the other hand, refers to foods that are edible but that are thrown out by supermarkets or consumers.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How can I be more conscious of the potential for waste when I purchase food?
- What can I do to encourage the places where I shop to be less wasteful in dealing with food?
- What policies might be contributing to food loss during production and distribution? What policies make it more difficult to reduce that food loss?

ACTION: While reducing food loss is a systemic issue, reducing food waste is up to each of us. Commit to adopting at least one of [15 steps for reducing food waste](#) suggested by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Food Labeling and Composting

We have learned that 1.3 billion tons of food are lost or wasted globally every year. In the U.S., the Department of Agriculture estimates that 30 percent of the country's food supply falls into those categories.

The question then becomes: where does all that food end up? In the U.S. the answer is disturbingly simple: discarded food is the single largest category of material placed in municipal landfills, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Not only is that sinful when people are going hungry in the U.S. and around the world, it's also contributing to climate change. Organic material in landfills lacks the oxygen to decompose naturally, and so releases the potent greenhouse gas methane. Food waste globally accounts for eight percent of greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Commonsense ways to reduce all this waste include:

- Not taking food labeling too seriously. Most foods in the U.S. are not required by the federal government to have labels indicating when they should be eaten. But manufacturers often add them to packaging to educate consumers. Too often, though, they just add confusion. Most "use by" and "best if used by" labels simply indicate when products will be at their freshest. These foods can usually be safely eaten past those dates, according to the US Department of Agriculture. You need to use your sense of sight and smell to determine if something is really spoiled and needs to be thrown away.
- Composting leftover food and inedible scraps, to break down food waste into rich material for your garden. A 17-minute segment from National Public Radio offers a [comprehensive guide to home composting](#), including options for apartment dwellers without access to a yard. If you don't want to bother with composting yourself, a growing number of municipalities are offering curbside compost pickup with the trash and recycling, while others have compost drop-off sites. You can also look into composting pickup services offered by private businesses.