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Thinking about eating ethically

Bill Tammeus | Jun. 4, 2010 A small c catholic

An old joke about us Presbyterians says that if we had been in charge of organizing the Last Supper it inevitably would have been called the Last Potluck Supper.

Catholics, in my experience, match Protestants? love of eating meals together. But the reality is that neither group in the U.S. does very well when it comes to thinking about eating ethically.

Patrick Carter, a Catholic who just graduated this spring from Creighton University in Omaha [1], hopes to change that. He has just completed an independent research project [2] there in which he sought to apply Catholic social teaching to producing and, especially, consuming food.

?We should first change ourselves,? Carter told me. ?Buy local food, eat out less, eat less meat and don?t over eat. We, as Christians, have a responsibility to care for God?s creations ? humans, animals, earth and water ? and the way we currently grow and eat food is not reflective of this call.

?We can have a sustainable existence by first changing ourselves by buying locally grown and ethically harvested food that has a minimized impact on the environment.?

In other words, apply even to the dinner table the values drawn from Catholic social teaching. It?s hard to imagine a place more suitable for teaching such values.

As Carter says, ?There is a tremendous amount of fellowship that exists at gatherings centered on food, faith and community. However, if the food would more closely reflect our Christian values to love the poor and care for God?s creation, then the eaters could be in solidarity with the growers, the land, the farmers, the livestock, the harvesters and the hungry of the world in addition to the others in the room.?

I asked him if he thought there were Eucharistic implications for what he?s advocating, and, sure enough, he said yes:

?Imagine,? he said, ?what a powerful statement of faith it would be if Christian communities purchased bread that was composed of ethically harvested and sustainably grown wheat. In our consumption of Christ we would accurately reflect our Christian faith to have a preferential option for the poor and to care for creation.?

I?m regularly appalled by ways in which Americans view and treat food. Perhaps this comes from my childhood. My parents not only told me to clean my plate because children are starving in India but they actually moved our family to India for two years ? not exactly to prove they were right but so my father could be part of a University of Illinois agriculture team that could help make India food self-sufficient.

So when I go to watch the Kansas City Royals play and, between innings, see the team mascot firing hot dogs at fans out of a giant air rifle, I often turn to the person next to me and sigh, ?Only in America.?

And when I see the enormous food portions that restaurants regularly dish out, the plague of obesity in our country doesn?t shock me.

Carter thinks applying Catholic social teaching to food consumption would help with this problem, too:

> ?Diets composed of excessive meat, fat, sugar and calories ? along with a lack of fruits and vegetables ? have led,? he said, ?to a nation that has expanding waistlines and an increasing number of heart attacks, strokes and cancers.? Beyond that, he said, over-consumption and the manner in which we grow the food have ?harmful effects across the globe. For example, Americans? desire for beef results in huge areas of forest being cut down in Brazil in order to make space to grow cattle.?

Carter is not the first person to think about the connection between food and ethical values, of course. He said, for instance, that he was influenced by some work in this field by John Sniegocki of Xavier University [3].

I just hope he?s not the last such person but is, rather, an early voice for important changes Americans should make.

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