



## You Are What You Eat

**Catherine Devitt**, of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, looks at the effect of diet on climate change, noting that so much of what we eat now is grown and produced in far-off places. Should we change our eating habits?

When we buy our groceries, or sit down to enjoy a meal, we may not consider how our food might be linked with social justice. In 2018, Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, made headlines when she suggested that Irish people take action on climate change by eating less meat. Her comments drew criticism from sections of the farming community. Agriculture has an important role in Ireland. A considerable proportion of our produce is exported to Asia and the Middle East. Yet, agriculture is the single largest contributor to Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for over thirty per cent of the total. Expansion in dairy herds has resulted in increased emissions from the sector, as well as negative impacts on biodiversity and river quality.

Globally the loss of land to agriculture is the main cause of wildlife extinction, and climate change affects the most vulnerable. So, is it time to give former president Robinson's suggestion some careful consideration?



Some commentators predict that fifty per cent more food will be needed by 2050. During the same period, however, greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture will have to reduce significantly, creating considerable challenges for policy makers, food producers and for the choices we make as consumers.

The environmental impact of our diets points to a global food system that is unsustainable. Billions of people are either underfed, undernourished or overweight. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, currently one-third of all food produced is either lost or wasted. Our



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global food supply is best described by abundance, not scarcity. Sustainable food production is also an issue of governance and democracy. A 2018 report from the human rights organisation Global Witness found that increasingly, killings of environmental activists are linked to destructive land use practices associated with food products we consume daily, including palm oil, coffee, bananas and soy.

Looking at apples in Ireland, we see that so much of what we eat is grown and produced in far-off places. According to Grow it Yourself Ireland, around ninety-five per cent of apples are imported and are more likely to

have been grown in places such as New Zealand, China and Brazil than Ireland. This flow of food around the world contributes to climate change.

The motto 'Think Globally, Act Locally' has long been a guiding tenet for a more sustainable approach to what we eat. I grew up on a small farm, where after-school time was spent weeding the vegetable plot. The farm's cows provided milk, and late summer evenings were spent podding peas and picking blackberries. I reflect fondly on this period, not only for the time spent in nature, but also for the localness of where my food came from and how it was dictated by the seasons. Of course, this is not necessarily a time that can be revisited on a mass scale, but there is something to be said for buying Irish produce and buying in season.

Eating less meat and dairy produce is certainly one way of becoming more environmentally friendly. We also need to renew our relationship with food, be more aware of where our food comes from and reduce food waste. In the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis inspires us with a good starting point. He invites us to return to the meaningful custom of giving thanks before and after meals: 'That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need' (227). ♡