[ Animals & Religion ]

# COMPASSIONATE EATING *as* CARE *of* CREATION

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# LIVING TOWARD THE PEACABLE KINGDOM

HOW WE TREAT OUR FELLOW CREATURES is only one more way in which each of us, every day, writes our own epitaph—bearing into the world a message of light and life or just more darkness and death, adding to its joy or its despair.

—*Matthew Scully*[1]

## Discovering the Moral and Spiritual Significance of Eating

### An Awakening to Our Cosmic Connectedness

Stewardship of the animal kingdom is one of the primary responsibilities accorded to human beings in the Christian creation narrative. But the question of how best to respect and honor the creatures under our care is one that Christians too often neglect to ask. This omission is especially unfortunate given the compelling evidence of fallenness in the social and commercial practices that presently govern our relationships with animals. The most troubling of these practices is industrial animal agriculture or "factory farming"—an industry whose methods Pope Benedict XVI has described as the "degrading of living creatures to a commodity."

Within the small but steadily increasing circle of Christians who are aware of the methods and implications of industrial agriculture, there is growing consensus that the plight of farmed animals is an urgent moral concern. But for the great majority of us, the question of what goes on in factory farms and slaughterhouses may seem too distant from the concerns of everyday Christian living to merit serious attention. Given the gravity of the many human problems and environmental crises currently confronting us on all sides, an honest Christian can hardly be faulted for asking, "Don't we have more important things to worry about than what's on the dinner table and how it got there?"

This is certainly a reasonable query, or at least I hope it is since it's the first question that came to my mind when a good friend and fellow philosopher challenged me several years ago to examine the moral and spiritual implications of my eating habits. To say that I was skeptical at first is an understatement. Back then, frankly, the ethics of eating—if it registered at all—would have fallen somewhere between "zero" and "bad hair day" on my moral urgency meter. To be sure, I am as surprised as anyone that the past three years of research and teaching on this "off-the-radar" issue have significantly changed both my mind and my life, leaving

me convinced that this issue is among those that can instigate a holistic moral and spiritual transformation in those willing to engage it.

The moment of epiphany for me came as an awakening to the intimate but too often unacknowledged connections between the act of eating and just about everything else I claim to value as a person of faith. What I realized is that the links between what we choose to eat as individuals and the flourishing or languishing of God's creation as a whole are much more direct than we often believe. For though our daily food choices may at first appear far removed from the most pressing problems of our age, a closer look reveals that they have disturbing consequences not just for billions of animals, but for the food, commerce, and education systems of developing countries, the dignity of those employed in industrial farms and slaughterhouses, the integrity of our rural communities, the health of an increasingly obese and diseased human population, the accessibility of the health care systems that treat these ills, the sustainability of the earth's natural resources, and even the hastening of global climate change. The way we eat, it turns out, has profound implications for the whole of the created order.

As this evidence of the unintended consequences of factory farming continues to mount, it is becoming increasingly clear that, far from being a trivial matter of personal preference, eating is an activity that has deep

moral and spiritual significance. Surprising as it may sound, the simple question of what to eat can prompt us daily to answer God's call to care for creation—to bear witness to the marginalization of the poor, the exploitation of the oppressed, the suffering of the innocent, and the degradation of the natural world, and to participate in the reconciliation of these ills through intentional acts of love, justice, mercy, and good stewardship. Indeed, if it is the renewal rather than the degradation of creation that we profess to serve, we must address ourselves with more honesty, conviction, and imagination to the moral and spiritual significance of eating.

## A Call to Honesty, Conviction, and Imagination

I have spotlighted the qualities of honesty, conviction, and imagination here because the journey into recognizing eating as a morally and spiritually significant act presents us with a threefold challenge. We need honesty to meet the first challenge of facing up to some difficult facts about our daily choices that, in a less truthful mode, we might be tempted to rationalize away in order to preserve our personal comfort and convenience. But honesty alone is not enough, for simply facing the wider problems created by our daily food choices without resolving to be a part of their solutions is a recipe for "cognitive dissonance"—that underlying sense of anxiety and unrest that permeates our lives when we know that our actions are out of step with what we claim to believe. We need conviction, then, to meet the second challenge of acting on the beliefs that form within us when we take an honest look at the true costs of food. Of course, honesty and conviction without an inspiring strategy for moving forward can quickly lead to frustration and despair. There is nothing so disheartening as the feeling that our honest attempts to live what we believe aren't making any difference in the world at large. Thus, we need imagination to meet the third challenge of fixing our hopes on a broader vision that will ground and sustain our convictions even and especially when it seems that the world isn't listening.[2]

Our task in these pages is to articulate a strategy for meeting these three challenges with the honesty, conviction, and imagination they require. Specifically, we will seek to understand compassionate eating as a form of engaged Christian discipleship that responds to a wide array of practical, moral, and spiritual problems affecting all aspects of creation—

human, animal, and environmental. On this model, compassionate eating is a spiritual discipline that offers us a symbolically significant and practically effective way to live in faithful anticipation of the once and future "peaceable kingdom" described in Christian creation and redemption narratives.

Our strategy has three parts, each corresponding to one of the guiding themes of honesty, conviction, and imagination. Though honesty is first on the list, the truth of the matter is that most of us find it much easier to be honest with ourselves once our imaginations have been captured by a compelling vision that can help us see in advance some of the invigorating possibilities for moral and spiritual progress that might be generated by that sobering dose of honesty.

For this reason, we'll frontload the imaginative part and begin by envisioning the biblical ideal of the "peaceable kingdom" and thinking about what it would mean to understand God's call to care for creation as an invitation to live toward this vision on a daily basis. With the overarching vision in view, we'll turn to the theme of conviction in order to clarify what "compassionate eating" means for our purposes and to elucidate how it may serve as a spiritual discipline for practicing creation care. We'll conclude, finally, with an honest look at the true costs of our dependence on factory farming for creation as a whole, demonstrating in the process how living toward the peaceable kingdom through compassionate eating may help us to witness, conscientiously resist, and model faithful Christian responses to a surprising array of human, animal, and environmental ills that degrade the integrity of God's creation.

## Imagination: Envisioning the Peaceable Kingdom

### Good News for All of Creation

One of the perennial temptations that Christians have faced throughout the history of the church is that of living as if the good news of the Gospel of Jesus—God's promise to redeem and transform all of creation—is relevant only to human beings. This oversight is particularly troubling, given the clarity of the scriptural record both on God's original intentions for the created order and on God's promise to regenerate it from its currently fallen state. Whether we interpret the relevant passages literally or figuratively, our creation and redemption narratives make it abundantly clear that God's highest aspiration for creation is the institution of a cosmic

harmony in which human beings created in God's image promote the flourishing of the whole of God's world to God's eternal glory.

As the narrative goes, in fact, the first dignity God bestows upon human beings—our very first opportunity to exercise the love, power, and creativity of the divine image within us—is the charge to care for the natural world and the animal creatures with whom we share it. As the drama unfolds, however, human disobedience disrupts this harmony, leading to a downward spiral of selfishness and alienation that estranges us from God, from ourselves, and from the creatures entrusted to our care. Nevertheless, God resolves to redeem the created order by sending Jesus Christ, the "new Adam" who not only defeats human sin through his death and resurrection, but will one day return to usher in and reign over a "peaceable kingdom" in which the harmony of creation is so fully restored that the Scriptures describe it with images of children playing amidst venomous snakes, leopards and lambs lying down together, and lions eating straw.

An exhilarating vision, to be sure. Even so, if you're like me, your first inclination is to suspect that only the most politically correct of 21st century bleeding hearts could massage this cosmic tragicomedy into a call for creation care that holds up compassion for animals as a Christian virtue.[3] Perhaps, then, you'll be as surprised as I was to hear this call heralded so explicitly and so passionately in the following prayer by St. Basil of Caesarea, the fourth century church father whose influential teachings on church reform and social justice earned him the veneration of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions alike.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness
Thereof. Oh, God, enlarge within us the
Sense of fellowship with all living
Things, our brethren the animals to
Whom Thou gavest the earth as
Their home in common with us.
We remember with shame that
In the past we have exercised the
High dominion of man with ruthless
Cruelty so that the voice of the earth,
Which should have gone up to Thee in
Song, has been a groan of travail.
May we realize that they live not
For us alone but for themselves and
For Thee, and that they love the sweetness
Of life even as we, and serve Thee in their
Place better than we in ours.

## An Inkling of a New World Order

Some 17 centuries later, the lessons of St. Basil's prayer are as challenging and as urgent as ever. In particular, there are four insights here that can aid us in understanding the ideal of "living toward the peaceable kingdom." The first insight is that the entirety of creation belongs to God. While few Christians would contest this statement in principle, the ways in which we treat creation in practice suggest that either we don't really mean what we say or, perhaps more likely, our sense of what God's ownership of creation should mean for our daily lives has been dulled by our immersion in consumer culture—a culture that promotes the idea that anything we desire can be rightfully ours for a price. By focusing our attention completely on the short-term benefits that we enjoy through the use of creation as a "resource," consumer culture blinds us to the costs of our consumption for other human beings, animals, and the earth, seducing us into living as if creation were ours to dispense with as we please. But the world belongs to God. And the upshot of this insight for our purposes is that living toward the peaceable kingdom must begin with a renewed awareness of whose will it is the ultimate fulfillment of creation to serve—God's, not our own.

St. Basil is well aware, of course, that coming to terms with this insight will not be an easy task for fallen human beings. Presumably this is why he petitions God for help in the very next line, praying for a more expansive "sense of fellowship with all living things" through which we may reawaken to our humble station as creatures, indeed as kin to the animals with whom we share the earth as our God-given home. This second insight, that we too are creatures and that our fellow creatures enjoy a mandate to call the earth their home and to flourish here among us, fits hand in glove with the first insight. For the more we come to accept our standing as creatures among other creatures, the better we are able to see our well-being as linked to the well-being of the whole—one creation whose ultimate purpose is to serve the glory of God. The upshot of this second insight, then, is that living toward the peaceable kingdom transforms our conceptions of human flourishing in view of God's call to seek what is best for creation as a whole—a whole of which human beings are but one integral part.

Before anyone starts to worry that this second insight blurs the line between humans and animals or otherwise diminishes human beings in some way, let us turn our attention to the third insight, which is that God intended this all-species kinship to be facilitated through the "high dominion" of human beings created specially in God's image. Far from a demotion in rank, this call to seek what is best for the whole of creation elevates us to a station much higher than most of us have dared to imagine, much less sought to fulfill: It is a call to bring our own highest aspirations for the cosmos into line with God's, a call to exercise the love, power, and creativity of God's image within us toward the end of enabling the total flourishing of God's world. The upshot of this third insight, in summary, is that living toward the peaceable kingdom elevates humankind by realizing our unique potential to exemplify God's image through the loving and merciful treatment of all God's creatures.

Lest we forget, though, this once and future peaceable kingdom is for now just an ardent hope. Sadly, the fault of creation's languishing in the meanwhile falls squarely on us, its "groans of travail" a testimony to our selfishness and disobedience. And so St. Basil's prayer is, perhaps above all else, a prayer of repentance, a reminder—and here is our fourth insight—that God's call to high dominion is fundamentally incompatible with cruelty to animals, indifference to their suffering, and the conceit that they are here for us to do with as we please. These, we confess, are not acts

befitting our dominion but acts of tyranny, betrayals of God and our fellow creatures for which shame is our just yield. St. Basil well knows, nonetheless, that the end of genuine repentance is not shame but rebirth, and thus he closes the prayer with the hope that our approach to dominion may be transformed through a realization of the inherent dignity of animals, creatures whose lives are not ultimately measured by their usefulness to us, but by their value to God and to themselves. The upshot of this fourth insight, finally, is that living toward the peaceable kingdom challenges us to repent of our self-serving treatment of animals as mere objects so that we may become more mindful of their inherent dignity as beings created by God and deemed worthy in God's sight.

In view of these four insights, it should be clear that the ideal of living toward the peaceable kingdom is nothing less than an inkling of a new world order. It is an invitation to reconsider, in a dazzling new light, our relationships to God, ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our Earth. It is a call to imagine what creation might be like if we were to live today as though the kingdom of God has already arrived, grounding our present attitudes and actions toward all of God's creatures in the hope of honoring the dignity that will be theirs when God's redemptive work is complete.

Sounds good, right? To many of us, it probably sounds a little too good, as if perhaps living toward the peaceable kingdom is a feat best saved for saints and prophets—a challenge, in any case, that lies beyond the ability of ordinary human beings. As high-flown and otherworldly as this ideal may at first appear, however, a closer look reveals that it can serve as an inspiring source of moral and spiritual conviction for the journey here below.

## Conviction: Compassionate Eating as a Spiritual Discipline

### A Promising Point of Departure

Our guiding suggestion is that compassionate eating is a compelling way to turn these lofty aspirations for living toward the peaceable kingdom into concrete convictions that we can put into practice on a daily basis. In developing this suggestion, we should clarify, first, why the activity of eating is a particularly fruitful starting point for taking up God's call to care for creation. The main insight here is disarmingly simple. If the goal is to become increasingly mindful of the role we are called to play in the flourishing of creation as a whole, then it makes perfect sense to begin by paying closer attention to the daily activity that connects us perhaps more directly than any other to the whole of creation—eating!

The fact of the matter is that thinking through the ethics of eating forces us to ponder every link in the great chain of being. Indeed, practically every meal offers ample food for thought about the world around us and our place within it. A traditional breakfast of eggs and bacon raises the question of what life is like for the chickens and pigs who are used to produce the food. The drive-through "value meal" at lunchtime prompts our suspicion that some people somewhere are getting less than they deserve so that we can save a buck or two. The tomato salad at dinner gives us pause to consider the environmental costs of trucking produce thousands of miles so that we can eat "fresh" vegetables anytime of the year. And of course the midnight pizza with extra cheese raises the specter of an expanding waistline and the expanding health care costs that eventually come with it. In short, raising questions about the way we eat leads us quickly and directly to deeper questions about our relation to the whole—questions that aspiring stewards of creation need to start asking.

But if eating is an *enlightening* starting point as an activity that can illuminate our daily connectedness to the rest of creation, it is also an *empowering* starting point as an activity over which many of us have a significant degree of personal control. Relatively few of us can decide overnight to become full-time activists, ecologists, creation-friendly farmers, or even hybrid car owners (much less avowed nondrivers). By contrast, a great many of us already have it well within our means to change our eating habits or reallocate our food budgets in ways that, as we shall see below, can have transformative effects both in our own lives and in the world at large. Moreover, because eating is an inherently communal activity, the convictions of just a few members of any given community can spread like wildfire as friends and family, teachers and students, pastors and congregations begin to see that eating more intentionally is something they too can find morally and spiritually invigorating as well as delicious, nutritious, and cost-effective. Like the gospel that inspires it, this movement to honor creation through compassionate eating gains momentum as its transformative power in the lives of the few is witnessed by the many.

We have solid reasons, then, to think that careful consideration of our eating habits is a promising point of departure for our journey toward the peaceable kingdom. The next step is to discuss the question of what exactly "compassionate eating" is supposed to mean.

## Compassionate Eating: An Ecumenical Christian Vision

It will hardly come as a shock that different people answer this question in different ways. Some people think that eating more compassionately is a matter of reducing our collective meat consumption bit by bit while pushing simultaneously for reforms in the ways that animals are treated on industrial farms. Others argue that we should boycott factory-farmed products entirely and reallocate our resources to smaller farms that practice less intensive animal husbandry and more ecologically sustainable cropping methods. Others believe that raising animals in order to slaughter and eat them is wrong on any scale and argue, thus, that vegetarianism is an important part of the equation. Still others maintain that compassionate eating should be exclusively plant-based, since the production of eggs and dairy causes significant animal suffering and death as well. For ease of reference, we'll call these respective approaches "reformism," "agrarianism," "vegetarianism," and "veganism."

As you can well imagine, the many points of conflict among these various "isms" could easily keep us arguing until kingdom come over

which approach is the right one. And while arguing over these "isms" is ultimately an indispensable part of the process that can lead us to new insights and positive developments, timing is everything; these sorts of negotiations tend to go better when we have a clear sense of what we can all agree upon when the negotiating begins. Since the purpose of our efforts here is to provide an accessible point of entry for Christians to begin thinking through the challenges of compassionate eating in general, we'll leave the important but contentious battle of the "isms" for another day and focus instead on what reformism, agrarianism, vegetarianism, and veganism have in common.

However different these various approaches may be in their details, they all agree that our current dependence on factory farming represents a lapse in good stewardship that has resulted in serious moral and practical problems that call for significant and lasting changes in the way we eat. Transposed into our explicitly Christian context, the phrase "compassionate eating" may serve as a collective term for various intentional approaches to eating that seek to be mindful of the flourishing of the whole of creation (human, animal, and environment) when raising, purchasing, and consuming food. While this definition is admittedly general, it has the important advantage of allowing us to disagree about which of the various approaches to compassionate eating is preferable without losing sight of the fact that, as fellow Christians, we share a common vision. Whether reformist, agrarian, vegetarian, or vegan, our different dietary choices are motivated by the same goal—to live toward the peaceable kingdom every day by striving to eat with the flourishing of God's creation explicitly in mind.

It is no accident that I have chosen the word "striving" here to communicate what it means to live out these convictions on a daily basis. In a consumer culture where the foods that take the greatest toll on creation are often the cheapest, most convenient, most popular, and easiest to find, the temptation is strong to follow the crowd and turn a blind eye to the consequences. For compassionate eating to become a way of life, we must overcome the inertia of our old habits and forge new ones in their stead, and that takes serious discipline. To muster this discipline, we need a strategy that will focus our attention, day in and day out, on both the hidden costs of our present eating habits and the greater goods of making more conscientious choices.

## The Imitation of Christ as a Spiritual Disciplinary Strategy

If we looked to the aspirations of the Creator to help us envision the peaceable kingdom, it is fitting that we should turn to the life and teachings of the Redeemer to help us secure our strategy for living toward the peaceable kingdom here and now. For Christians aspiring to do God's will on Earth as it is done in heaven, there is no better teacher than the one whose life, death, resurrection, and promised return achieves the total fulfillment of God's plan to redeem our fallen world. In assessing the definitive importance of Jesus' example for our identity as people of faith, renowned Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff does not mince words: "To be a Christian is to be fundamentally committed to being a Christ-follower."[4] The task before us now is that of showing how this fundamental commitment to being a disciple of Jesus may serve to ground our strategy for compassionate eating. In short, we must explain how the practice of compassionate eating can be undertaken as an explicitly Christian spiritual discipline.

To get this strategy off the ground, we'll borrow a few more key insights from Wolterstorff. Since discerning our calling as disciples of Jesus requires a clear sense of what the master himself came to do, we'll start with Wolterstorff's illuminating description of Jesus as "the principal witness, the decisive agent, and the one who gave the most lucid evidence" of God's plan to renew the created order.

This first idea of being a witness to the gospel is already familiar to most Christians. To be a witness in this sense is to proclaim to the world that God's kingdom is coming and to call people to join in preparing the way for its arrival. But if Jesus is the principal witness to God's redemptive work, he is also the decisive agent of this renewal insofar as his *actions*—his life, death, and resurrection—are the definitive means by which God's redemptive plan is carried out. Jesus doesn't just *proclaim* the gospel; he *lives* it. Not only does he teach us that the last shall be first and that we should love our enemies, but he spends his ministry serving the least of these and he prays for his own executioners from the cross. This perfect accord between what Jesus *says* about God's plan and what he *does* to bring it about, finally, provides lucid evidence of the coming kingdom right here and now, allowing us a glimpse of what the world will be like when God's redemptive work is finished.

If our aim is thus to become authentic disciples of Jesus, our challenge is to follow in his footsteps by answering God's call to take up the redemptive work of being witnesses, agents, and evidences of the coming of God's kingdom. To sum up: As witnesses, we are called to proclaim that God is working to renew the world; as agents, we are called to do what we can to bring this renewal about; and as evidences, we are called to provide indications in the present of what the coming kingdom will be like.

For fallen human beings, of course, there is always a wide gulf separating who we are called to be as Christ-followers from who we actually are at any given time in our daily Christian walk. We are called to be sacrificial givers, for instance, but we rarely even manage to tithe. We are called to be Jesus to the outcasts in our midst, but we prefer to keep them out of sight and mind. We are called to do good to those who hate us, but we often seek their destruction. We are called to stand with the weak against the tyranny of the strong, but we extol the halls of power for our own selfish gain. The hard truth is that our bondage to sinful patterns of thought and action presents a significant obstacle on the path that leads from who we are as "Christians" to who we are called to be as Christ-followers. If we're sincere in our desire to make progress as disciples of Jesus, we'll have to acknowledge this gulf between who we are at the moment and who we are called to be and to take concrete steps, however imperfect and incomplete, to narrow the gap.

## Becoming Who We Are Called to Be: Practicing Spiritual Disciplines

This is where the practice of spiritual disciplines comes into the picture. For the purposes of this article, we can think of a spiritual discipline as a repetitive daily practice that is undertaken in a faithful, albeit fallen, attempt to narrow the gap between who we are at the moment and who we are called to be. To clarify this notion, it will help to consider the

parallel, but more familiar, case of physical discipline. Think, for example, of athletic training and imagine that your goal is to become the very best runner you can be. Would you sit back and expect excellence to fall into your lap? No! If you really wanted to excel, you'd discipline your will to the wisdom of an experienced coach who would prescribe a rigorous regime of training exercises to help you identify your weaknesses and develop the skills to overcome them. In short, you'd commit to practicing these exercises day in and day out in hopes of narrowing the gap between the mediocre athlete you are today and the champion you desire to become.

To quell any suspicions that a sports-related metaphor is somehow inappropriate to our spiritual lives, we should remember that St. Paul himself draws this very comparison time and again in describing the self-discipline necessary for striving toward the "prize" of spiritual maturity. Though Paul is adamant that eternal salvation is a gift of grace received by faith and never earned by mere works, he is equally insistent that grace is an empowering invitation to repentance and redemption in *this* world—a call to take an active role in the sanctification of our lives through the daily imitation of Christ. The spiritually mature Christian, thus, does not receive grace in vain—treating Jesus as glorified "fire insurance"—but takes up the call to strive for holiness through the practice of spiritual disciplines. With Christ as her model, the authentic disciple seeks to become an ever more compelling witness, agent, and evidence of the coming kingdom.

A closer look at the mechanics of practicing spiritual disciplines will clarify how this transformation happens. When the disciple's desire for transformation is sincere and her motives for seeking it are appropriately humble, the practice of a spiritual discipline serves two essential purposes simultaneously: It calls the disciple to *repentance* and it propels her toward *redemption*. The purpose of repentance is served by reminding the disciple of her fallenness—of the gulf, that is, that separates who she is at the moment from who she is called to be. If she were perfect, after all, there would be no need for the discipline, and so the very act of submitting to it indicates both an acknowledgment of sinfulness and a desire to do better—in a word, repentance.

At the same time, the discipline serves a redemptive purpose by propelling the disciple, through the practice itself, toward a more authentic realization of the Christ-following to which she is called. Though practicing the discipline may feel burdensome or uncomfortable at first, the repetition

of the practice over time serves to interrupt the sinful patterns of thought and practice that the disciple is seeking to overcome and to habituate the more faithful attitudes and actions that she is striving to achieve. As time passes, the committed disciple experiences a redemptive transformation as the old habits exercise less and less control over her and the new habits become the norm.

For contemporary Christians living in an age of materialism, the discipline of alms giving, or giving to those in need, is a particularly instructive example of this transformative interplay of repentance and redemption. Suppose you became convicted that the temptation to conspicuous consumption—your insatiable desire for the latest, greatest material possessions—was dampening your resolve to answer Christ's call to sacrificial giving. In a sincere effort to loosen your bondage to self-aggrandizing spending and to become more mindful of the needs of others, you decide to allocate $200 a month that you would otherwise spend on clothes, books, DVDs, and other things that rust and moths can devour and channel it instead into several service organizations, perhaps a soup kitchen in your neighborhood, an abused women's shelter in your city, and an international hunger relief organization.

For the first few months, the gesture feels forced. You resent having to make sacrifices and you suspect that you're doing it for the wrong reasons anyway: guilt, or self-righteousness, or naïveté. You're sorely tempted to give up. But you persist. And as the months go by, something unexpected happens. You read the newsletters from the organizations you're supporting, and you find yourself doing follow-up research on the Web. You never realized how many homeless people live in your city, or how devastating the problem of domestic violence really is, or how many people in the global south live on less than $1 a day. You never imagined, moreover, that the stories of these people could teach you so much or move you so deeply.

You steadily increase your giving, but soon you find that giving alone isn't enough, and you begin devoting your time and creative energy as well. If you're a teacher, you bring these issues into the classroom. If you're a mechanic, you fix cars for shelter residents. Whoever you are, you're looking for ways to use your unique gifts and talents to meet the needs of others. Almost as an afterthought, you begin to realize that your anxiety over the acquisition of possessions—a feeling that used to dominate your

life—now preoccupies you less and less. What began as a small gesture of repentance is now pushing you, slowly but surely, toward a fundamental change in perspective. You'll never be perfect, but the horizon of your desires is shifting, nonetheless, from the fallen world to the kingdom of God.

What this hypothetical narrative teaches us is that transformation through the practice of spiritual disciplines starts small, proceeds gradually, and moves from the inner redemption of the disciple to the outer redemption of the world around her. This lesson is confirmed in the parables that Jesus himself chooses to illustrate the character of kingdom living. Like the tiny mustard seed that becomes a tree in which birds may find shelter, or the yeast that turns flour into daily bread, the efforts of even a single Christian disciple to live toward the kingdom can have leavening effects that extend well beyond the spiritual flourishing of the disciple herself. So it is, I shall argue, with the spiritual discipline of compassionate eating.

## Compassionate Eating as a Christian Spiritual Discipline

In suggesting that compassionate eating can be put to work as a Christian spiritual discipline, my contention is that a daily commitment to

remembering and taking care to reduce the hidden costs of our food choices may serve to narrow the gap between who we are at the moment and who we are called to be. Practicing this discipline is an act of repentance because it reminds us, each time we sit down to eat, that every single one of us makes decisions every single day that contribute to the unnecessary suffering of God's human and nonhuman creatures and to the degradation of God's world. But compassionate eating is also an act of redemption because the daily activity of seeking out less cruel, more socially and ecologically responsible choices—even though it can never fully extricate us from the web of fallen institutions and practices in which we are always already entangled—nevertheless serves to propel us in the right direction: toward a more authentic witness to the work of renewal that God has promised to carry out, a more engaged agency in the sharing of this work, and a more compelling, if still woefully veiled, demonstration of what the world might be like when suffering, death, and degradation are no more.

In summary, compassionate eating is a commitment to living in hope that one day the peaceable kingdom will arrive, striving in the meanwhile to become the most faithful witnesses, agents, and evidences of its coming that we have it within our limited power to be. Limited though our power is, the seemingly insignificant practices of eating less meat, supporting less intensive farming methods, or adopting a greener diet have a way—like mustard seeds—of giving rise to greater things. In order fully to appreciate the transformative possibilities of these practices, however, we must steel our resolve and take a hard look at the true costs of our current eating habits for the integrity of the created order.

## Honesty: Facing the True Cost of Food

### The Bad News and the Good News

We'll start with the bad news: As the saying goes, the truth hurts. In this case, facing the truth means reconciling ourselves to the hard fact that, taken collectively, our daily food choices contribute massively to the degradation of God's creation on all levels: to the economic marginalization of the world's poorest people; the exploitation of the workforce within the industrial agricultural system; the deterioration of our personal health and our public health care; the exploitation, suffering, and death of billions of sentient animals per year; and the devastation of the

environment, from the polar ice caps, to the rain forests, to the land, air, and water of rural communities just up the interstate from our own backyards. The truth is that the way we eat is making a terrible mess of things, and it's not the sort of mess that stronger paper towels or half-hearted lip service can clean up. If our authentic desire is to live toward the peaceable kingdom, then genuine repentance must be our aim, and repentance is never easy. In the face of such widespread and deeply rooted systemic problems, the temptation is strong to retreat into shame or indifference, both of which have paralyzing effects on our moral and spiritual lives.

The good news is that the hard work we've put into envisioning the peaceable kingdom and developing a strategy for living toward it has prepared us well to face the true cost of food with the confidence, courage, and hope that come with realizing that repentance is the road to rebirth and redemption. With our eyes on the prize and our strategy for striving toward it, we can follow St. Paul in leaving our shame and indifference at the cross, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward

to what lies ahead, not because salvation depends on it or guilt requires it, but because Christ has empowered us with a calling. If a self-confessed murderer of Christians (Saul of Tarsus) can be transformed by this call into a disciple of kingdom living (St. Paul the Apostle), then so too can each of us.

When it comes to finding the motivation to undergo this transformation, another bit of good news is that evidence of the urgency of our calling to seek out better alternatives to industrial animal agriculture is emerging with increasing frequency from virtually all relevant corridors of information: theology and religious studies; philosophy; sociology; biology; economic development research; medical research; animal psychology, physiology, and neurology; environmental studies; journalism; and law.[5] The very act of becoming educated on these developments is a spiritual discipline in itself, and the increasing availability of information online is making it easier than ever to mobilize these excellent sources of motivation.[6] Even those of us whose economic or social circumstances make immediate lifestyle changes unduly burdensome can still take up the kingdom call by resolving, for instance, to educate ourselves at home, at school, or at the public library and to share what we've learned with others.

## A Call to Spirit-Guided Discernment and Humility

Though we can only hope to scratch the surface of this growing body of evidence here, our task is to summarize some of the most troubling implications of our current dependence on industrial animal agriculture, focusing, in turn, on its hidden costs for human beings, animals, and the environment. Our aim in so doing is to provide a preliminary case for the call to compassionate eating that may serve as a springboard to further research and discernment and perhaps even to the practice of this spiritual discipline on a daily basis. What we shall see in the process is that we have a surprising variety of compelling reasons, all thoroughly grounded in our call to care for creation, to seek out more responsible alternatives to the traditional American diet.

For the purposes of clarity and organization, we'll consider the human, animal, and environmental costs of industrial animal agriculture each in their turn. We must remember, however, that in reality these divisions are artificial and that all of these problems ultimately spring from the same root: human sin and disobedience. As creatures made in the image of God

and dignified with the high calling to care for God's creation, we are the ones to whom God has entrusted the well-being of the animal kingdom and the natural world, and so the degradation of these is ultimately evidence of our own decadence. While it is natural for each of us to find different aspects of this same basic problem more and less compelling (some of us are moved most deeply by the plight of the global poor, others by the suffering of animals or the degradation of the natural world), we would do best to cultivate a holistic sensitivity to all of the above, acknowledging that the flourishing of the whole is our ultimate aspiration as Christians called to be witnesses, agents, and evidences of the coming kingdom.

As we strive in what follows to cultivate this holistic sensitivity, the need for spirit-guided discernment is paramount. For though the Scriptures give us general guidelines as to what a life of authentic Christian discipleship should look like, they do not directly address the question of how we should respond to the specific forms of alienation, suffering, and decline that have arisen in the wake of industrial agriculture over the past 60 years. When we combine this fact with the knowledge that taking a stand on these issues will require sacrificing some of the conveniences to which we've grown accustomed—for instance, eating whatever we want whenever we want it or having access to unlimited quantities of inexpensive animal products—we may find ourselves tempted to exploit the Bible's lack of specific directives on these matters for our own selfish purposes.

In such moments of weakness, we must remember that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us and that, even in the absence of specific directives, we have been instructed to follow the Spirit where it leads and to know it by its fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As we contemplate the consequences of the way we eat, we must prayerfully consider whether these are the fruits of our daily choices. We must ask ourselves, directly and unflinchingly, whether our continued support of the current system is consistent with our calling to think and act upon whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. If, after honest discernment, the answer to this question is "no," then we must ready ourselves to take steps toward doing better.

As we consider the consequences of our daily choices, finally, we must take great care to remember that we are dealing here with the fallenness of

the agricultural system at large—a system in which we are all involved at some level. As such, when the temptation arises to assign blame, we must strenuously resist the urge to scapegoat people who work in the industry—be they agribusiness people or workers on industrial farms—as "the real culprits" who bear the brunt of the responsibility. Farmers, after all, are generally at the mercy of the brutally competitive agribusiness market, and the market is brutally competitive because it must answer to shareholders who demand high returns and consumers who demand low prices. If anything, the buck stops with those of us who have the power to demand positive changes or to patronize new and better markets. In short, we should humbly discern the planks in our own eyes before attending to specks in the eyes of others.

## Factory Farming Fallout: Hidden Costs to Human Beings

Altruism is a wonderful thing, and before this exercise in honesty is over, we'll have ample opportunity to think from that perspective. But self-

interest can be useful too, especially when it comes to finding the motivation to engage new ideas like compassionate eating; if we can see from the outset that this discipline promises some immediate and concrete benefits *for us*, it certainly can't hurt the odds of our sticking around to find out who else stands to benefit. As we consider the human fallout of our dependence on industrial animal agriculture, then, we'll start with the problems that hit closest to home and widen the scope as we move along.

If Emerson was right that "the first wealth is health," then our dependence on factory farming is costing us a fortune, both individually and collectively. As intensive livestock operations have displaced family farms and flooded the market with inexpensive animal products, our collective consumption of these foods has skyrocketed. Today, Americans consume almost 73 more pounds of meat per person per year than we did 40 years ago,[7] and the consensus of the medical community is that our meatier diets are not serving us well. A full two-thirds of us are now overweight and our children are becoming obese in record numbers; the heavier we get, the more vulnerable we become to debilitating and life-threatening illnesses.[8] In fact, four of the top nine leading causes of death among Americans (heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes)[9] are "diseases of affluence" that have been linked to the overconsumption of animal products.[10]

Of course, personal health crises lead to public health crises, and this is proving true in the United States, where the high cost of medication and surgical procedures to treat preventable illnesses is putting ever greater strain on an already overstretched system. A controversial study published in 1995 in the peer-reviewed journal *Preventive Medicine* estimated the medical costs associated with U.S. meat consumption to be in the range of $28.6 billion to $61.4 billion a year; according to its authors, "The combined medical costs attributable to smoking and meat consumption exceed the predicted costs of providing health coverage for all currently uninsured Americans."[11]

To make matters worse, the public health problems associated with factory-farmed animal products go well beyond the risks and financial burdens related to personal overconsumption. Indeed, the very methods by which animals are raised pose significant public health risks that threaten the entire population, no matter who's doing the overeating. To see why, let's look at how the system works. To feed the 56 billion land

animals slaughtered annually for food requires a lot of grain; recent estimates put the figure at around 670 million tons.[12] To grow this much grain requires a lot of pesticide, some 22 billion pounds of it, in fact, just to feed the animals farmed in the United States alone.[13] To feed this many animals this much grain requires intensive confinement of the animals so that they can be machine fed and watered. Intensive confinement, however, leads to high risk of epidemic disease among confined populations, thus requiring that feed be mixed with high dosages of antibiotic, antifungal, and antiparasitic drugs (more than 50 percent of the world's available supply of antimicrobials) to combat the risk of crippling losses due to widespread disease.

When tens of billions of animals eat hundreds of millions of tons of pesticide-laden, antibiotic-laced grain, they produce trillions of pounds of pesticide-laden, antibiotic-laced manure (an estimated 3.3 trillion pounds per year in the United States alone).[14] And when this manure inevitably finds its way back onto our arable land as fertilizer and into our waterways as runoff, it deposits toxic chemicals, heavy metals, antibiotics, and harmful bacteria right back into our food system, causing foodborne and waterborne illness and increased risk for any number of diseases.[15] All of this, and we haven't even mentioned the potentially epidemic and pandemic diseases for which intensive animal farms are the breeding ground: mad cow disease and, more terrifying still, avian influenza or "bird flu"—the virus that has health and government officials stockpiling scarce antiviral medication and Fortune 500 companies discerning how to stay operational with 40 percent of their workforce incapacitated or dead.[16]

These health risks alone provide reason enough to make radical dietary changes. Regrettably, though, health risks are just the beginning for the more than one billion people in the world who live in rural communities or depend on agriculture to earn their daily bread. It is common knowledge that the industrialization of agriculture has had devastating effects on rural America, degrading the land, polluting the water, putrifying the air, driving down property values, and bringing traditional family farming to the brink of extinction. As small family farms have vanished into large industrial conglomerates, moreover, the local goods and services providers that used to populate our small towns have disappeared along with them, paving the way for warehouse superstores to fill the vacuum.[17]

Proponents of industrial agriculture sometimes cite the creation of much-needed jobs to counter these sorts of criticisms. But as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has noted in a recent position paper criticizing the current system, these jobs tend to be low-paying and generally undesirable: "Agricultural labor involves some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with workers exposed to harsh working conditions, pesticides and other chemicals, and long hours of labor-intensive work."[18] Furthermore, the people willing to take these jobs are often easy targets for exploitation, as many of them are undocumented immigrants who are unaware of their rights or too afraid of deportation to stand up for them.

Among the most exploited workers in the industrial agricultural complex are those who toil in the slaughterhouses and packing plants of the meat and poultry industries.[19] Since profit margins on the meat processed are often just pennies per pound, a company's ability to compete depends on producing the highest possible volume in the shortest possible time.[20] When you add these high production speeds to an inherently perilous job that involves "close-quarters cutting, heavy lifting, sullied work conditions, and long hours," you get the most dangerous job in America according to federal injury statistics.[21] And what do these workers get for their trouble? According to a comprehensive report issued in 2004 by Human Rights Watch:

> Employers put workers at predictable risk of serious physical injury even though the means to avoid such injury are known and feasible. They frustrate workers' efforts to obtain compensation for workplace injuries when they occur. They crush workers' self-organizing efforts and rights of association. They exploit the perceived vulnerability of a predominantly immigrant labor force in many of their work sites. These are not occasional lapses. … These are systematic human rights violations embedded in meat and poultry industry employment.[22]

To add insult to injury, one of the principal reasons that the world's poor end up working these and other high-risk, low-paying jobs within our

borders is that global trade practices championed by the United States and other agricultural superpowers have rendered economically infeasible the smaller-scale farming practices that these people have traditionally relied upon in their home countries. As the government-subsidized grains of industrialized nations flood the world market, smaller farmers in developing countries are unable to compete.[23]

Closely tied to the economic marginalization of the world's poor, finally, are the problems of food security and global hunger. Once again, current trends in industrial animal agriculture do not bode well for the world's poorest people. As we noted above, industrial livestock production requires enormous quantities of land, grain, water, antibiotics, and fossil fuels. As a means of feeding the world, this system is neither efficient nor sustainable. According to Cornell ecologists David Pimentel and Marcia Pimentel, American livestock are fed 6 kilograms (13.2 pounds) of plant protein for every kilogram (2.2 pounds) of animal protein produced. As for the rates of fossil fuel energy input to protein output, animal production boasts an average of 28:1 compared to the grain production average of just over 3:1. When it comes to water use, plant foods are more efficient yet again, with beef requiring 100,000 liters (26,400 gallons) of water per kilogram; chicken, 3,500 (924 gallons); soybeans, 2,000 (528 gallons); rice, 1,912 (505 gallons); wheat, 900 (238 gallons); and potatoes, just 500 liters (132 gallons) per kilogram.[24]

Since these figures were published a decade ago, the news has only gotten worse. According to a 2001 World Bank report, "Global meat demand is projected to grow from 209 million tons in 1997 to 327 million tons in 2020" and "the developing world is projected to be the most important supplier to this growing market."[25] "Under any scenario," the report continues, "the increase in demand will put strong pressure on global natural resources," threatening as well to "crowd out the poor" and "endanger global food security and food safety."[26] In more concrete terms, the rural poor are at risk of losing their agricultural stakes to the encroachment and environmental fallout of larger operations; the urban poor are at risk of going hungry due to projected increases in grain prices; and the middle classes—those who can afford to consume the influx of animal products—are at risk of suffering "diet-related chronic disease patterns similar to those in the industrial world."[27]

In a culture where steak is the emblem of power and affluence and Mom's fried chicken is the calling card of comfort and community, it is easy to forget that one person's feast can be another person's famine.[28] Nevertheless, the fact is that our current eating habits drive a system that marginalizes the poor and uses unsustainable amounts of scarce global

resources to produce animal products that are consumed largely by comparatively affluent urban populations. When we figure in the risks that this system poses to public health and consider the personal health benefits of adopting a greener diet,[29] it appears that we have a compelling combination of both altruistic and self-interested reasons to practice compassionate eating.

## Factory Farming Fallout: Hidden Costs to Animals

Given that Christians have been largely inattentive to the fallout of factory farming for members of our own species (including ourselves), it is not surprising that creatures of other species are not faring well under our watch. Though the myth of "Old McDonald's Farm" may still hold sway in the minds of many, it is beyond reasonable doubt that animals suffer greatly in the intensive farming operations and slaughterhouses of contemporary industrial agribusiness. As we take a closer look at exactly how they suffer, it is important to realize that the farming methods discussed here are standard industry practices that are widely documented in scholarly and journalistic writing, video footage taken by farm employees and undercover investigators, countless eyewitness interviews, and even the trade publications of the industry itself.[30] Though some individual facilities are undoubtedly better or worse than others in some respects, there is no denying that the problems under discussion are systemic and widespread.

How, then, are the billions of animals raised and slaughtered annually in industrial agriculture generally treated? Before their lives even begin, bioengineering often stacks the deck against them by putting optimum market value ahead of their bodily integrity. Because a higher ratio of meat to bone than occurs in nature is economically advantageous, animals are engineered to have more body mass than their skeletal structures and organ systems can feasibly support, leaving them vulnerable to increased risk of broken bones, chronic respiratory difficulty, and organ failure. Once born, these animals are debeaked, tail-docked, dehorned, branded, and castrated without anesthetic. They live predominantly indoors in crowded conditions that deny them the ability to exercise their most basic instincts, including maintaining hygiene, caring for their young, establishing natural social orders, or even having full range of movement, much less the freedom to graze or forage for food in a natural setting. To optimize weight

gain, they are given heavily supplemented grain feed that their bodies are not equipped to digest, often resulting in perpetual discomfort and unnatural obesity for the duration of their lives.

For transport to slaughter, they are packed into trucks where overcrowding and exposure to extreme weather conditions usually claim some of them en route. Upon arrival at the slaughterhouse, the animals too sick to move of their own volition are deposited onto "downer piles" where they may remain for hours or even days before they die. Those fit for slaughter are then routed to the killing floor, where, depending on their species, they may be shackled upside down by the legs or channeled into metal "knocking chutes" that restrict their ability to resist their captors. There, surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of their fellow creatures dying, they are killed, perhaps by "captive bolt" to the brainstem, perhaps by a blade to the throat. Due to the speed at which these processes are carried out and the varying levels of skill among the workers, it is not uncommon for animals to survive their attempted slaughter, only to meet their fate farther down the processing line. Fully conscious chickens, for example, may be scalded to death in defeathering tanks, while cows and pigs may be dismembered alive.

Given these disturbing facts about the treatment of animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses, it is curious that proponents of industrial agribusiness have offered very little by way of moral justification for these practices, electing instead to focus on the "consumer freedom" made possible by their production of ever greater amounts of food at ever lower cost to the consumer. "Consumer freedom," however, is a double-edged sword, for as consumers become more educated about the methods of industrial agribusiness and begin to perceive the unjustified moral costs of "low prices" at the checkout counter, they just might decide to exercise their freedom by choosing products that better reflect their moral values.

While we Christians haven't been particularly well attuned to these hidden moral costs in the past, the time has come to be wary as serpents. By any defensible moral standard of welfare, a great many of the billions of animals raised and slaughtered for food every year by the industrial agricultural complex are enduring lives unbefitting creatures of God. If we ignore these animals' suffering, we do so at the peril of turning our backs on the scriptural record of God's original intentions for creation and God's plan for redeeming it. As Christian theologian Andrew Linzey has observed, the redemptive power of Christ's gospel is for every creature. "To stand for Jesus," Linzey argues, "is to stand for a ministry of reconciliation to the whole of creation … to stand for active compassion for the weak [against exploitation by the powerful], to stand for animals as God's creatures, against all purely humanistic accounts of animals as things, commodities, resources, here for us."[31]

In failing to be moved by the suffering of animals in the industrial system, moreover, we must also deny the validity of both our own experience and contemporary scientific accounts of the kinds of beings these animals are. Just like the cats and dogs we cherish as our companions, the chickens, turkeys, pigs, cattle, sheep, laying hens, and dairy cows we use for food are unique individuals—sentient beings who are fully capable of feeling pain and experiencing psychological trauma. The structure of their bodies is significantly similar to our own, their nervous systems transmit pain in the same ways, and they manifest similar types of behavior when in pain or under stress. They form lasting bonds with members of their own species, and they experience significant trauma when these bonds are broken. Like us, they seek pleasure and fulfillment, avoid pain and discomfort, and fight for their lives when faced with the threat of imminent death.[32]

None of this is to say, I should point out, that their suffering is on a moral or psychological par with human suffering. But please notice that it doesn't need to be on a par with human suffering in order to count as something bad, even as something horrendously evil—something that God-appointed stewards of creation should take great care to avoid inflicting or supporting without strong moral or theological reasons for doing so. Though we could argue indefinitely over what constitutes a good reason to inflict this kind of suffering on animals, I hope that many of us can agree that the overproduction of inexpensive comfort food for comparatively affluent people at the expense of poorer people and our collective health is not a particularly attractive candidate.

## Factory Farming Fallout: Hidden Costs to the Environment

As if the indignities suffered by human beings and animals weren't enough, our current dependence on industrial animal agriculture is having devastating consequences for the natural world as well. Unless you've been in hiding for the past decade, you probably already know that the environment is in crisis on just about every imaginable front. Global warming, deforestation, air and water pollution, and critical shortages of natural resources such as oil and fresh water have been the main headline grabbers. But behind the headlines, there is equally disturbing consensus in scientific journals and reports issued by environmental agencies worldwide that our oceans are at risk, our arable land is degrading, our topsoil is eroding, and the intricate balance of species diversity that sustains life on Earth is being compromised. In the air, on land, and at sea, Planet Earth is in grave peril, and the best available evidence suggests that human consumption and wastefulness are largely to blame.

Until recently, the admonition to live differently on behalf of the environment has issued primarily from the progressive margins. But as consensus on the severity of the crisis has solidified over the past decade, an increasing number of more mainstream voices have joined the chorus, including, to its credit, the Church. Indeed, the call to repent of our profligate ways and take up the mandate to care for God's creation is now ringing out from all corners of the ecclesiastical map.

In an act of solidarity between West and East, Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I issued a *Common Declaration on Environmental*

*Ethics*, enjoining their respective churches to "undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production."[33] Leadership and lay movements in the Episcopal Church[34] have put creation care front and center on the social agenda of mainline Protestantism, and surprisingly, one of the boldest calls to action has come from a movement that in the past has been among the more reluctant to embrace the cause of ecology—American evangelicalism. Boasting nearly 500 signatures from prominent evangelicals at the highest ranks of leadership in their fields, the *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* calls upon "all Christians to work for godly, just, and sustainable economies," a challenge that demands "careful consideration of how our corporate and individual actions respect and comply with God's ordinances for creation." As followers of Jesus, the declaration urges, we are called to "resist the allure of wastefulness and over consumption by making personal lifestyle choices that express humility, forbearance, self restraint, and frugality."[35]

For better or for worse, these declarations leave it to the reader to discern which lifestyle changes to adopt. But if the leading goal is to repent of "unsustainable patterns of consumption" by making choices that "respect and comply with God's ordinances for creation," there are few daily choices that can propel us toward this goal more effectively than compassionate eating. By eating less meat, supporting more sustainable organic alternatives, or going vegetarian or vegan, we can take significant steps toward repenting of one of the most unsustainable patterns of consumption the world has ever seen: our dependence on industrial animal agriculture. According to the Worldwatch Institute, a nonprofit environmental organization in Washington, D.C.:

> [A]s environmental science has advanced, it has become apparent that the human appetite for animal flesh is a driving force behind virtually every major category of environmental damage now threatening the human future—de-forestation, erosion, fresh water scarcity, air and water pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, social injustice, the destabilization of communities, and the spread of disease. [36]

This dire assessment of the environmental impact of animal agriculture is thoroughly corroborated by a recent report issued by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Ominously titled *Livestock's Long Shadow* (2006), this 408-page report offers detailed assessments of the "very substantial contribution of animal agriculture to climate change and air pollution; to land, soil, and water degradation; and to the reduction of biodiversity."[37] Of the many troubling findings reported here, perhaps the most surprising is that animal agriculture is responsible for "about 18 percent of the global warming effect—an even larger contribution than the transportation sector worldwide."[38] A new study by Japanese scientists puts this staggering statistic into more concrete terms: Producing one pound of beef generates the global warming equivalent of 36 pounds of carbon dioxide (the amount emitted by a 70-mile drive in an average European car) and "burns enough energy to light a 100-watt bulb for nearly 20 days."[39]

The environmental case for compassionate eating gets even stronger in light of recent studies that show plant-based diets have a significant quantifiable advantage over their meat-based counterparts from the standpoint of sustainability. In 2003, Cornell University ecologists David

Pimentel and Marcia Pimentel compared the ecological impact of meat- and plant-based diets of equal caloric content and found that "the meat based diet requires more energy, land, and water resources than the lactoovovegetarian diet [a plant-based diet supplemented with dairy and eggs]."[40]

Building on the Pimentels' findings, University of Chicago geophysicists Gidon Eshel and Pamela Martin examined the greenhouse gas emissions from meat- and plant-based diets of equal caloric content and found that the meat-based diet causes emissions of 3,267 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent more than its plant-based counterpart. "Far from trivial," they conclude, "nationally this difference amounts to over 6% of the total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions."[41] For those of us who aren't geophysicists, it may be easier to grasp the point this way: In terms of global warming, the difference between consuming a typical American diet and consuming a plant-based diet is greater than the difference between driving a typical sedan and driving a hybrid.[42] The upshot is that, all things being equal, the fewer animal products we consume, the smaller the ecological impact of our diets.

Global warming, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg. Other sobering effects of animal agriculture addressed in the United Nations FAO report include the rapid deforestation of some of the earth's "most vulnerable and valuable eco-systems," the increasing occupation by livestock of "a vast area that was once habitat for wildlife," the depletion of land and soil quality due to both overgrazing and the monocropping of feed grains, and an "unprecedented crisis" in marine ecosystems due to animal waste runoff and overfishing for animal feed.[43] We could rehearse alarming statistics indefinitely on these and many other indignities, but the bottom line is clear: Our daily food choices are driving a system that is destroying creation, and time and again, it is industrial livestock production that is cited as having the most detrimental impact. The best available evidence suggests that those of us who wish to make a serious commitment to creation care must be prepared to change the way we eat.

The good news is that our compassionate eating strategy pushes us in the direction of several trends cited by the FAO report as "reasons for optimism" that consumers in developed and developing countries are ready to take action for positive change: "the trend toward healthier diets," "the development of markets for organic products," and "the tendency toward vegetarianism."[44] As we have argued all along, hope for the future

lies in eating less meat, supporting smaller, more sustainable organic farms, or going vegetarian or vegan.

## Onward Toward the Peaceable Kingdom: Wisdom for the Journey

### Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation: Advantages and Advice

The road has been long, but we have achieved some significant progress. We have envisioned the peaceable kingdom, developed a strategy for compassionate eating that can aid us in living toward it, and confronted a wide array of problems that this discipline may help us to address as Christians called to be witnesses, agents, and evidences of the coming of God's kingdom. Our final task is to highlight some of the unique advantages of this approach and offer some concluding advice on how to put these advantages to work as we take up the call to creation care through compassionate eating.

The first advantage of our approach is that it provides an *accessible, distinctively Christian framework* for coming to appreciate the moral and spiritual significance of some urgent contemporary issues that many

Christians may otherwise find alienating or off-putting. Many Christians, for instance, are suspicious that "animal compassion" demotes human interests or that "environmentalism" worships nature. Within this framework, however, such Christians can see the merits of deep concern for animals and the environment as perfectly consistent with our fundamental commitment to a theocentric universe in which human beings have been dignified with a special calling. Once attuned to this consistency, we can engage the causes of animal compassion and environmentalism not as "outside threats" but as productive challenges that can provoke our discovery of invigorating new possibilities for discipleship within our own tradition.

A second advantage of our approach is that it is *ecumenical*—it is inclusive of the interests of a wide variety of people, including different types of Christians, people of other faith traditions, and even some nonreligious people. Christians of a conservative stripe can appreciate our strategy's emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of personal responsibility to the moral and spiritual life. Christians of a more progressive stripe may resonate with its emphasis on social justice, its sensitivity to the importance of engaging culture and questioning the status quo, and its call to make the imitation of Jesus a more salient feature of Christianity's contemporary witness. People of other faith traditions may find something useful in our strategy's emphasis on the practice of spiritual disciplines, an approach to seeking authenticity that has been employed for millennia by pilgrims from virtually every spiritual heritage. Finally, nonreligious people with a passion for the human, animal, and environmental concerns addressed here can perhaps see in our strategy an opportunity to make allies of people they once viewed as adversaries.

A third advantage of our approach is its *holism*. Rather than emphasizing the interests of just one aspect of the created order at the expense of others, the focus of our strategy is squarely on the flourishing of the whole. By highlighting the intimate connections among the different interests represented in creation and by recognizing that the degradation of any one of them has repercussions for the well-being of the others, we end up in a better position both to discern what moral and spiritual flourishing means for us and to negotiate conflicts of interest with the principles of compassion, justice, and sustainability in mind.

The fourth and most significant advantage of our approach is that the discipline of compassionate eating has its moral and spiritual sights set on *liberation and transformation rather than legalism and conformation*. Compassionate eating, as we have described it, begins not with a code of laws to which we are obliged to conform but with the vision of an ideal toward which we are called to strive. Instead of saying, "This activity is bad; don't do it," our approach says, "Practicing this discipline is liberating; take up the call and experience transformation!" The transformation we have in mind here, recall, is not a once-and-for-all arrival at a perfected state but rather a disciplined process of ongoing striving that proceeds in full view of our fallen limitations, challenging us, nonetheless, to shoot ever higher as progress is achieved.

Setting realistic goals is thus a very important part of taking up the call to compassionate eating, especially at the beginning of the journey. When we start with goals that are too ambitious, we usually end up spending most of our time either in fear that we will fail or in shame that we have failed (or both). This cycle of fear and shame leads more often to the abandonment of our moral and spiritual goals than to their fulfillment. An excellent way to break this cycle is to set modest but still significant goals that are possible to achieve without extraordinary hardship: "This week I'll do research and find some good recipes; next week I'll visit the farmers market; the week after, I'll cook two meatless dinners." Once we see that we can actually make headway, the momentum of that success may propel us toward more rigorous strivings that would have seemed unduly burdensome at the beginning but that now seem entirely manageable in light of past successes. This liberating journey toward spiritual maturity vividly captures what St. Paul describes as our "freedom in Christ"; though we are not called to take on more than we can bear, finding the courage to answer the call often leads to the invigorating discovery—once the transformation is under way—that, by the grace of God, we can bear a great deal more than we ever thought possible.

## Benediction: Summoning the Courage to Answer God's Call

The goal of compassionate eating, in summary, is not some this-worldly utopia, nor is our disposition toward those who disagree with us one of separatist judgment. Our two-fold aim, rather, is this: (1) to live as faithfully as we can toward the peaceable kingdom in which the harmony among

human beings, animals, and the natural world will be restored; and (2) to commit ourselves in the meanwhile to bringing pressure to bear on the institutions of the fallen world (of which we remain a part) in the hopes of raising the world's consciousness and advancing whatever improvements are possible under the specific fallen conditions in which we find ourselves. Promoting a one-size-fits-all legalism is a surefire way to achieve irrelevance. If this witness really matters to us, if we really believe in its transformative power, we must adapt it to the particular communities we serve, grounding our words and deeds in intimate knowledge of and respect for the cultural and socioeconomic circumstances of the people with whom we live and work.

At the end of the day, it is the faithfulness of our discipleship rather than its impact on the world that matters most. Being a witness, after all, sometimes means being a martyr, and there will surely be times when the different choices we feel called to make will be met with indifference, cynicism, or even contempt by the world at large, indeed perhaps even by our own friends or family. We must persevere, holding out hope that the many individual and social goods of compassionate eating—dare I say fruits of the spirit—will flourish: heightened appreciation of the complex relationships between parts of creation and the whole; solidarity with the poor and disenfranchised; increased compassion for all sentient life; more deliberate stewardship of personal resources; increased personal health; the opening of new markets for less cruel, more sustainable alternatives; the forging of a bond of trust and accountability with the people who grow our food; increased patience in waiting for (and increased delight in savoring) natural foods that defy the immediate (but often shallow) gratification of the grocery store; increased imagination and creativity (gleaned through the process of learning to put compassion before convenience in a world that doesn't always make it easy to do so); the experience of tighter-knit community with newfound, like-minded friends (since collective cooking and eating substantially defray costs).

Whether or not we succeed in changing the world on a grand scale, the personal and communal rewards of compassionate eating are many, and rejoicing in the bounty of this discipleship is an essential part of what ancient Christians called "living *in* Christ." As we sow these fertile seeds of mercy, compassion, justice, and good stewardship, miniscule though they may be, we are well within our rights to hope for an abundant harvest. We

are covenanted, after all, to a God who has poured out torrents of living water from many vessels as broken as we ourselves, a God who can multiply the effects of even a single act of discipleship well beyond our wildest imaginations. Whatever it is that steels your resolve, be it the modest promise of a more peaceable table or the grandest hope of a world transformed, now is an excellent time to act: for ourselves, for our neighbors, for the least of these among us, for the animals, for the Earth, in the name of God Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth, for the sake of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, and in the Spirit of all that is excellent and worthy of praise, may we find our courage.

## Notes

1 Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002 (Scully 2002).

2 My emphasis on the importance of honesty and moral imagination here is inspired by Brianne Donaldson's masters thesis, *Here Below: Extending Honesty and Moral Imagination to All Creatures*, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2007.

3 For a more in-depth theological grounding of the importance of Christian compassion for animals, see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994; Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998 (Linzey 1998); Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2001; Robert Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge Our Moral Universe*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003 (Wennberg 2003); and *Good News for Animals: Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being*, Pinches & McDaniel, eds., Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993.

4 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984, 71. All subsequent citations of Wolterstorff are drawn from page 73 of this volume.

5 For a single resource that situates each of these areas of inquiry into a broadly religious context, see *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, & Ethics*, Paul Waldau & Kimberley Patton, eds., New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

6 The following websites are particularly good places to start, since they highlight the interrelated character of problems caused to human beings, animals, and the environment alike: Compassion in World Farming (*www.ciwf.org.uk*), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (*www.fao.org*), The Humane Society of the United States (*www.humanesociety.org*), World Society for the Protection of Animals (*www.wspa-international.org*), and Worldwatch Institute (*www.worldwatch.org*).

7 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Database, *http://faostat.fao.org*.

8 T. C. Campbell and T. M. Campbell, *The China Study*, Dallas: Benbella, 2004, 3 (Campbell and Campbell 2004).

9 R. N. Anderson, "Deaths: Leading Causes for 2000," *National Vital Statistics Report* 50(16), Hyattsville, Md.: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002.

10 For a comprehensive review of the adverse effects of dietary animal fat intake on cardiovascular diseases, see W. C. Willet, *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. For a review of relevant literature on the links between the consumption of animal protein and increased risk for heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes, see Campbell and Campbell 2004.

11 N. D. Barnard, A. Nicholson, & J. L. Howard, "The Medical Costs Attributable to Meat Consumption," *Preventive Medicine* 24(6), 1995, 646–655. Because the authors are associated with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (a nonprofit medical organization that promotes vegetarianism), their results were met with some skepticism by the medical establishment. As Cornell University nutritional biologist T. Colin Campbell has pointed out, however, this response is fully expected, given that the medical establishment has a vested interest (both financially and for the good of its own reputation) in keeping these figures under wraps. See Campbell and Campbell 2004, 321–341.

12 *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*, Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006, 38 (FAO 2006).

13 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Database, *http://faostat.fao.org*.

14 Michael F. Jacobson, *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet: How a More Plant-Based Diet Could Save Your Health and the Environment*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2006 (see "Eating Green: By the Numbers" just before the Table of Contents).

15 FAO 2006, 273.

16 For a comprehensive overview of the literature on the agricultural origins of these diseases and the increased risks that intensive confinement operations pose to public health, see Michael Greger, M.D., *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching*, New York: Lantern Books, 2006.

17 For a Christian perspective on the toll that industrial agriculture takes on rural communities, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (*www.ncrlc.com*) is an excellent resource.

18 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Catholic Agenda for Action: Pursuing a More Just Agricultural System* (*www.ncrlc.com/Agenda-Action.html*).

19 Their stories are beginning to reach the general public thanks in large part to the journalism of Eric Schlosser, author of "The Chain Never Stops" (*Mother Jones*, July/August 2001; available online at *www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2001/07/meatpacking.html*) and of *The New York Times* bestseller *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001, 149–190) (Schlosser 2002).

20 Human Rights Watch, *Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004, 31 (Human Rights Watch 2004) (*www.hrw.org/reports/2005/usa0105*).

21 Human Rights Watch 2004, 24–55.

22 Human Rights Watch 2004, 11–12.

23 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Catholic Agenda for Action: Pursuing a More Just Agricultural System*. For a fascinating and accessible media presentation of these and related problems, see the award-winning documentary film *The Global Banquet: Politics of Food* (*www.olddogdocumentaries.com/vid_gb.html*).

24 *Food, Energy and Society*, D. Pimentel & M. Pimentel, eds., Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 1996. The three essays authored by Pimentel and Pimentel are especially helpful, dealing with energy use in, respectively, livestock production (77–84), grain and legume production (107–130), and fruit, vegetable and forage production (131–147).

25 *Livestock Revolution: Implications for Rural Poverty, the Environment, and Global Food Security*, World Bank Report 23241, November 2001, xi (World Bank 2001).

26 World Bank 2001, xii.

27 World Bank 2001, xii.

28 For more information on the effects of industrial animal agriculture on the global poor, see Compassion in World Farming, *The Global Benefits of Eating Less Meat* (*www.ciwf.org.uk/publications/sustainability.html*), and World Society for the Protection of Animals, *Industrial Animal Agriculture: Part of the Poverty Problem* (*www.wspafarmwelfare.org/wspa_resources.html*).

29 Cornell University nutritional biologist T. Colin Campbell has conducted significant and repeatable research that suggests that a plant-based diet not only greatly reduces risk for many "diseases of affluence" but can mitigate and even reverse them when they've already taken hold. For an overview of the medical and nutritional literature on the health benefits of a whole foods plant-based diet, see Campbell and Campbell 2004.

30 Reliable sources on the methods of industrial animal agriculture and its effects on farmed animals are too numerous to list here, but the following sources are particularly helpful: Scully 2002; Gail Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, Amherst, Mass.: Prometheus Books, 1997; *Tom Regan, Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004 (Regan 2004); Schlosser 2002. The controversial philosopher Peter Singer, though no booster of Christianity, has done us a service in compiling an account of the practices of industrial farming that is drawn largely from the trade publications of the industry itself; see Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 95-157.

For those who need to see in order to believe, there are a number of award-winning documentary films to choose from, including *Peaceable Kingdom*, *Our Daily Bread*, and *Earthlings*, the latter of which is available online (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhxKnys7Ryw*). Due to the graphic nature of this content, viewer discretion is advised.

31 Linzey 1998.

32 Regan 2004, 53–61; Wennberg 2003, 84–118.

33 *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics of John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I*, June 10, 2002 (*www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration_en.html*).

34 For information on the creation care initiatives in the Episcopal Church, visit the Episcopal Ecological Network at *www.eenonline.org*.

35 Evangelical Environmental Network, *An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation*. The full text of the document and a link to a partial list of signatories may be viewed online at *www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php*.

36 The Editors (Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C.), "Meat: Now It's Not Personal," *World Watch Magazin*e, 17(4), July/August 2004, 12.

37 FAO 2006, iii. The full report is available as a free download at *www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm*.

38 FAO 2006, 272.

39 A. Ogino, H. Orito, & K. Shimada, "Evaluating Environmental Impacts of the Japanese Cow-Calf System by the Life Cycle Assessment Method," *Animal Science Journal*, 78(4), 2007, 424–432.

40 D. Pimentel & M. Pimentel, "Sustainability of Meat-Based and Plant-Based Diets and the Environment," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 78(3), 2003, 660S–663S.

41 G. Eshel & P. Martin, "Diet, Energy, and Global Warming," *Earth Interactions*, 10(9), 2006, 1–17 (Eshel and Martin 2006).

42 Eshel and Martin 2006, 12.

43 FAO 2006, 181, 272–273. For an accessible and engaging introduction to the environmental crises associated with overfishing, see Julia Whitty, "The Fate of the Ocean," *Mother Jones*, March/April 2006, 32–48 (*www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2006/03/the_fate_of_the_ocean.html*).

44 FAO 2006, 276.

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