

## ***Fish on Fridays?***

To believe some of the media reports following the plenary meeting of the Bishops of England & Wales earlier this year, you might think that eating fish on Fridays was a mark of Catholic identity. To mark the first anniversary of Pope Benedict's visit, Catholics in England & Wales are being asked to abstain from eating meat, or some other form of food if meat is not part of the normal diet, on Fridays from 16 September. The Bishops emphasise the importance of a common act of witness which is visible, externally and socially, and linked to prayer and further self-sacrifice. Responsibility for defining the nature of Friday penance was delegated to them in 1966 and clarified in 1985 following the introduction of the new code of Canon Law. They suggest that the practice has diminished over this period, although for some, in keeping with the Ash Wednesday reading from Matthew 6, perhaps just not visible, externally and socially. The popular misconception remains that abstaining from meat means eating fish instead. The new guidance suggests a common act of witness presents an opportunity to explain its significance to interested parties. Any such explanation could include a correction of the misconception and a reminder that, with many fish stocks and fishing communities under threat, it makes sense to be selective about the fish we eat at any time.

Bearing in mind Pope Benedict's statement on bequeathing creation not depleted of its resources to future generations so reiterating the words of his immediate predecessors (*Caritas in Veritate*: 50) , it is worth considering how we can contribute to maintaining a marine environment in which fish can thrive and continue to be a valuable albeit limited food for humanity. Back in 2008, Archbishop Agostino Marchetto addressing an Apostleship of the Sea International Fishing Committee meeting spoke of the depletion of fish stocks and concerns for the spiritual and material welfare of fishing communities. More recently, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has promoted unfamiliar species such as dabs, flounder, gurnard, black bream, coley and pouting, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Natural Environment and Fisheries Richard Benyon has recognised the need to address the scandal of discards and EU Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Maria Damanaki has launched ambitious proposals for major reform of the discredited Common Fisheries Policy.

Archbishop Marchetto reported that more than 1 billion people rely on fish as their main or even only source of protein, an estimated 41 million people are engaged in capture fishing and aquaculture production worldwide and 95% of fish workers live in developing countries, many of them amongst the poorest people and earning less than \$1 per day. Small scale fishers often face competition from subsidised commercial fishing vessels from Japan, EU, US, Canada, Russia, Korea and Taiwan, causing depletion of native fish stocks and threatening precarious livelihoods. Illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing continues to threaten the long-term sustainable management of fisheries particularly in African waters, see [www.nepad.org](http://www.nepad.org)

Globally, the demand for fish is increasing yet the volume of catch from the ocean has plateaued at around 80 million tonnes annually according to the 2010 FAO report *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture*. A further 20 million tonnes came from marine aquaculture, 10 million tonnes from inland waters and 35 million tonnes from inland aquaculture. Increasing demand for fish is met from aquaculture, with which there can be environmental concerns. Waste from farmed salmon may pollute sea water and the genetic quality of wild salmon may be diminished by inter-breeding with escaped stock. Warm water prawns are farmed in countries across SE Asia and Latin America, leading to destruction of mangroves and contamination of the marine environment, water supply and agricultural land. The environmental impact of aquaculture can be minimised by using lower stocking densities and avoiding fishmeal and fish-oil derived directly from wild capture as feed.

Trawls which scrape the seabed, as vividly described by Alistair McIntosh in *Soil and Soul*, can cause severe damage to essential seabed communities. Worms, clams, prawns, sea urchins and corals are some such species which play a vital role in the marine ecosystem by capturing food from the water and then processing it into a sediment which through microbial action promotes primary production by phytoplankton which forms the base of the food chain. Seine netting, a technique used for over a century, is considered to be a less damaging method of catching fish from the seabed. The development of appropriate technologies has the potential to improve the selectivity of catch and reduce the impact on other marine wildlife. The FAO report highlights the need for more research to address pollution caused by abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear in which species can be entrapped.

Consumption of cod has no doubt been part of the fish on Friday tradition. Once available in abundance from the North Sea, our appetite for cod is met now from more distant waters. Back in the 1930s, around 300,000 tonnes of cod were landed at UK ports annually; in recent years landings have reduced to around 10% of this value. The biomass of cod in the North Sea fell from over 250,000 tonnes in 1970 to below 50,000 tonnes a decade ago, since when stocks have begun to recover towards what is considered to be a minimum sustainable level of 70,000 tonnes. Imports have amounted to over 100,000 tonnes each year over the last decade. In 2009, the UK imported more cod from China than from Norway, with Iceland supplying almost one third of imported cod. These statistics are drawn from comprehensive data published by the Marine Management Organisation and included to only give an impression of recent trends.

The Marine Conservation Society has developed an on-line guide to sustainable seafood, [www.fishonline.org](http://www.fishonline.org) , which can be used to identify fish from sustainable sources caught using methods causing the least damage to other species and the marine environment. Marine Stewardship Council certification and improved labelling by retailers is aimed at enabling informed choices to be made, but the certification process is not foolproof as demonstrated by a successful challenge by the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition to certification of the Ross Sea Toothfish fishery.

Fish remains a valuable component of the diet, particularly for the 1 billion people mentioned by Archbishop Marchetto. In the UK, we might best be guided by the Marine Conservation Society "green list" of Atlantic organic farmed salmon, coley or saithe, herring, mackerel and skipjack tuna. No one doubts the nutritional value of fish, but eating such a precious resource hardly seems to be a penitential act.

Food Ethics Council magazine Spring 2009, Issue 1 entitled Fish: *All washed up?* is worth reading. It is available on-line at [http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/system/files/FoodEthics4\(1\)web.pdf](http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/system/files/FoodEthics4(1)web.pdf) I have drawn on several other sources but this is probably the most enlightening.

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