



NJPN Comment

Single acts can make difference

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I was in a busy city-centre train station a few weeks ago. It was a cold, early morning, and I fancied a cup of coffee.

So entering one of the platform cafés I did what I always do and asked for a cup without the plastic lid. More often as not this request is refused, for reasons which I am told concern my own ‘health and safety, an explanation for which it is futile to argue against, thus resulting in me leaving without buying a drink.

On this occasion my request was agreed to without question, and while waiting for my drink to be prepared, I heard a voice behind me say “Good call!”. Turning around I saw a gentleman stranger, next in the queue. He and I then had a brief conversation before going our separate ways. As I left the counter I heard him asking for his own drink “without a plastic lid please”.

What is society to do about plastic waste? This question was asked of me last week in a professional capacity. I was being quizzed on a technological concept currently hot in America called ‘plastic into fuels’. After denouncing the notion as both energetically and environmentally unsound, the big question was asked “so if technology cannot save us, what else can be done?”

The answer, I said, is obvious: governments must legislate to ban single use plastics, and while doing so make it mandatory for retailers to receive back all that they disseminate.

Anyone who has attempted to give up plastic for Lent will know that legislators show no readiness to do this. Why? To quote Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga in his address to the United Nations Framing Convention on Climate Change in 2011: “We have for too long been silenced by economic power”.

But in an economy-driven world we consumers are far from silent. We can choose whether to buy or not, and by these actions we have power.

It may seem insignificant for one person to refuse a coffee cup lid, but I am reminded of the starfish thrower story: “it makes a difference to that one”.

And who knows, if by each of our actions we can recruit one other person to join us in saving the environment then we do indeed have capacity to bring about political change. That would be a “good call” indeed.

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