

The Morality of Food

*Fruit of the Earth
and the Work of
Human Hands*



By Simona Beretta

Eating is a moral act. Why can we make this statement? The first reason recognizes an elemental truth, which is self-evident for every person. Despite the fact that everyday life heavily relies upon virtual connections and virtual communication, eating is not a virtual action—we need to access real, tangible food. For basic survival, we must eat something real, with substance and nutrition. And, we feel more satisfaction when we eat something with a good taste, an inviting smell, and a beautiful look that pleases our senses. We get intense pleasure eating something that brings back memories we treasure: our childhood, a beautiful place we have visited, or friends with whom we have shared meals.

The human experience of eating is so much more than getting enough calories and chemical nutrients. The material and the non-material dimensions of eating are coessential, and deeply intertwined: this is what makes eating a human act. In all human actions, we pursue the fulfillment of our human desires—that includes material aspects but always goes beyond materiality.

At the very core of human desires, we find the desire of living a full, meaningful and happy life. This is what morality is about: morality is less the obedience to a set of principles or norms (moralism), than a way of being faithful to the full breadth of our own human desire: the desire for a life eternal. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The Work of Human Hands

There is a second reason why we need to remember that eating is a moral act. Real food comes from a real process, combining the gift of nature and the work of human hands. Food comes from the planting of seeds, fertility of soil and animals, harvest and slaughter, and, after all this, food preparation—a process that comes from tradition. Humans have material and non-material relationships with what will become their food, even before eating. Humans cook: this specific human activity, laden with traditions, shapes the relationships with those gifts of nature that will



be used for food in an interesting way. Thus, food preparation is a moral act, as eating is: it concerns our relationship with things and things as signs of ultimate meaning.

In the Liturgy of Eastertide, we are offered the powerful image of Jesus cooking after His Resurrection: He prepares roasted fish for His friends on the shore of the lake. In cooking for His friends, He shows us the real quality of simple relations: daily acts can express so much more than what meets the eye. In this experience, His friends are opened to know Him more deeply.

When we contemplate Jesus cooking, something is revealed about everyday life and its worth. Imagine being there: you see a charcoal fire prepared, with fish on it, and some bread. The Lord, whom you know very well and at the same time remains so mysterious, has prepared food for you, and you found He was already there, waiting for you. The roasted fish is more than a nice breakfast; it is a sign of love and dedication.

Cooking and preparing food takes time, and uses time in a particular way. Cooking requires care—carefully selecting and using ingredients for making good food and carefully controlling all aspects of the cooking process. With care, food becomes a source of help and strength for life, well beyond its material dimension. Cooking is a simple, elemental way of expressing our care for others. I lived in Wisconsin for one year, as an exchange student from Italy; my host family had a tradition: on one’s birthday, one could choose the menu. Something special, expressly made to meet one’s desire, is more than just food. It’s love made tangible.

Food is a Gift

Food is communal and also linked to the spiritual dimension of life. In times past, human beings have recognized this: food gifts were offered to others, to the dead, and to the divine. It is only recently that we have had trouble seeing this link between the material and the non-material dimensions of life and have lost the connection with the spiritual dimension of food and food preparation. Food has become a “thing” we buy with money, and we pay little attention to the fact that all food is ultimately a “gift” from nature. Abundance

of “things” makes us forget about their story: they are fruits of the earth and of the work of human hands.

Forgetting food is a gift has some negative consequences. Food waste has reached epic levels. According to the FAO Global Initiative on Food Loss and Waste Reduction, per capita waste by consumers is between 209-253 lbs. a year in Europe and North America, while consumers in sub-Saharan Africa and south and south-eastern Asia, each throw away only 13-24 lbs. a year.

Keeping Traditions

Human beings have always searched for ways of preparing food that prevented waste. In Europe, we have traditional recipes for using just about everything that the generosity of the earth has given. Obviously recipes for using leftovers; but also every part of an animal, plants and grains, even the icky parts! They can all be transformed into delicious and nourishing food. All is gift: all food is a gift. We receive everything—even life. We are human and made in the image of God, the Source of all gifts. In His image, we can also create new ways to make things out of His gifts.

When we face the moral issue of food, in its material and its symbolic, spiritual dimension, we are invited into an opportunity to go deeper into the real needs of humanity. Food is deeply connected to Catholic spirituality, and eating is a moral act. As part of this morality, we are called to care for the gifts of nature in the processing of food and to have care for the traditions of food preparation, especially in terms of food and resource waste. We are also called to recognize the dignity of work and the time and care it takes to prepare good food. I believe every person deserves access to safe and nutritious food, and likewise, access to the holistic processes of food preparation.

--Simona Beretta is professor of international economics in the School of Social Science at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. A consultant to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Beretta is also the convener of the Fetzer Institute Advisory Council for Social Sciences.