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## The Implications of Solidarity for Food Ethics

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## **The Implications of Solidarity for Food Ethics**

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*This essay examines numerous ways in which commitments to solidarity have relevance in the area of food ethics. Among the topics explored are food insecurity and hunger, workers' rights, ecology, and the treatment of animals. Particular attention is paid to the impacts of the production and consumption of animal products. These issues are examined through the lens of the developing understanding of solidarity present in the tradition of Catholic social teaching (CST). The ethical framework provided by CST, it is suggested, could be further enhanced by insights drawn from the growing tradition of "Black veganism" and its holistic, intersectional understanding of solidarity and liberation.*

### **Introduction**

The concept of solidarity plays a central role in contemporary Catholic social teaching. CST understands solidarity as a virtue rooted in commitment to the well-being of all. "Solidarity," says Pope John Paul II, is "an authentic moral virtue, not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (John Paul II, 1987, no. 38). Going beyond empathy or sympathy, solidarity for John Paul implies a willingness to take action to address the underlying causes of injustice and suffering in our world.

Pope Francis, like Pope John Paul II, stresses the active nature of solidarity. Along with individual actions, Francis especially highlights the importance of grassroots social movements for social justice as central vehicles of solidarity:

Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing (Francis, 2020, no. 116).

Commitments to social justice, overcoming excessive economic inequalities, and meeting the basic needs of all have been at the heart of CST's understanding of solidarity. In recent years, the notion of solidarity has also begun to be extended to the relationship of humanity with other parts of creation. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis repeatedly stresses that humanity is fundamentally interconnected with other creatures and that profound ethical consequences flow from this reality. "Because all creatures are connected," Francis states, "each must be cherished with love and respect" (Francis, 2015, no. 42.) In a prayer at the end of *Laudato Si'* (no. 246), Francis asks God: "Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature...." The ethical

implications that Francis draws (or fails to draw) from these affirmations of interconnectedness with other creatures will be discussed later in this essay. First, however, let us explore the issues of world hunger and workers' rights and how our dietary choices and a commitment to solidarity may impact these crucial dimensions of the common good.

### **Solidarity and World Hunger**

One area of food ethics that is of deep concern to those committed to solidarity and to the common good is the reality of extensive global hunger and malnutrition. While the world currently produces more food than is needed to feed every person alive, nearly 800 million people experience chronic hunger, a number that has increased by over 100 million since 2019. When lesser forms of undernutrition are accounted for, it is estimated that approximately 42% of the world's population, 3.1 billion people, are currently unable to fully meet their basic nutritional needs (FAO, 2023, xvi).

Numerous factors contribute to the persistence of massive hunger in a world of plentiful food production, especially vast economic inequalities, war, and climate change. One additional newer factor that has received attention in recent years is the use of large quantities of grain, especially corn, for biofuel. This has contributed to higher food prices by decreasing the supply of grains that are available for human consumption. The World Bank, for example, estimates that "the grain required to fill the tank of a sports utility vehicle [one time] with ethanol...could feed one person for a year" (World Bank, 2008, 2).

Far more wasteful of grain than biofuel production, however, is the global livestock industry, which makes use of about 4 times as much grain as biofuels. (Economist 2022) The world's pigs alone, for example, consume more grain than any single country in the world (Economist 2022). The conversion of grains, beans, and other food products into meat is enormously inefficient. It is estimated, for example, that of the food calories fed to beef cattle, only 3% is returned as meat. For pigs the conversion ratio is about 10% and for poultry around 12% (Economist, 2022.) This results in a massive loss of the caloric and nutritional content of these foods. For example, with regard to protein, it is estimated that it takes an average of 6 lbs. of grain/bean protein fed to an animal to produce 1 lb. of animal protein. This involves a loss of protein available for human consumption of around 83% (Pimentel & Pimentel, 2003). Beef is estimated to have the lowest protein conversion efficiency, only 3.8%, resulting in a loss to human consumption of over 96% of the protein that is fed to cows (Ritchie, 2021). Many more people can be fed if grains, beans, and other food items are consumed directly by humans than if these foods are cycled through livestock. This wastefulness of modern meat production is the central (and often overlooked) factor that explains what happens to all the "extra" food that the world currently produces. Reflecting upon this reality, ethicist James Rachels (1977, 185) provocatively states:

What reason is there to waste this incredible amount of food? Why raise and eat animals, instead of eating a portion of the grain [and beans, etc.] ourselves and using the rest to relieve hunger?...The only reason for preferring to eat meat is our enjoyment of its taste; but this is hardly a sufficient reason for wasting food that is desperately needed by people who are starving. It is as if one were to say to a hungry child: "I have eight times the food I need, but I can't let you have any of it, because I am going to use it all to make myself something really tasty.

In response to arguments such as that of Rachels, it is often objected that one person deciding to eat less meat will not of itself lead directly to the hungry being fed. While there is truth to this statement, there are several important caveats. First, if one donates the money saved from reduced meat consumption to anti-hunger efforts (and numerous studies have shown that a plant-based diet is generally less expensive overall than a meat-centered diet, e.g. Oxford University, 2021), the reduced meat consumption of even one person could result in a reduction in hunger. Second, when many people make a choice to lessen meat consumption, the decreased demand for feed crops can contribute to lower prices for grains and other foods. This would enable some people to afford adequate food who otherwise could not. Also, less demand for meat could also reduce the pressure to take over land that is currently being used by small farmers to produce food in order to convert it into land for feed crops, enabling more people to be fed.

While reduced meat consumption by the world's wealthy won't by itself bring about the far-reaching structural changes truly needed to end hunger -- only broad-based social movements for political and economic democracy, such as those "popular movements" praised by Pope Francis, can do that -- significantly reduced meat consumption is clearly one essential component of what an effective response to hunger requires. As Walden Bello states, "the meat-eating habits of the wealthy around the world support a world food system that diverts food resources from the hungry. A diet higher in whole grains and legumes and lower in beef and other meat is not just healthier for ourselves but also contributes to changing the world system that feeds some people and leaves others hungry" (Bello, n.d.). A reduction in meat consumption, especially by the world's wealthy, can therefore be understood as one important implication of solidarity in the realm of food ethics.

### **Solidarity and Worker Exploitation**

A second area of food ethics in which solidarity has great relevance concerns worker exploitation. While exploitation in food production is clearly not limited to the production of animal products, it is experienced within this industry in profound ways. In so-called 'factory farms,' in which huge numbers of animals are raised in tightly confined spaces, workers generally experience both low rates of pay as well as conditions detrimental to worker health. Such harmful health conditions include, for example, exposure to high levels of toxic substances in the air of the factory farm buildings and their surroundings, including nitrous oxides, ammonia, particulate matter, endotoxins, and hydrogen sulphide (World Animal Protection, 2022, 36).

Similarly, working conditions in slaughterhouses/meatpacking plants are generally deeply hazardous for the workers. Among these conditions are extremely fast assembly lines that entail the use of highly dangerous, sharp tools and excessive levels of repetitive motion that cause painful injuries. Slaughterhouses have the highest injury rate and highest worker turnover rate of any industry in the United States. In addition to physical injuries, numerous studies have also documented a significantly higher than average rate of mental health problems among slaughterhouse workers, a consequence of their participation in the massive daily slaughter of animals. One assessment of the available evidence concludes:

[S]laughterhouse work has been linked to higher levels of aggression, violent dreams, anxiety, and hostility. Some researchers have categorized the psychological symptoms experienced by slaughterhouse employees as a form of trauma disorder, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or the more

seldom-discussed Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS). As a whole, slaughterhouse workers experience significantly higher levels of serious psychological distress (SPD) than the general population (Heanue, 2022; also see Nagesh, 2017).

Many slaughterhouse employees, it should be noted, are undocumented immigrants, who are unable to openly complain or organize on behalf of better working conditions or a living wage for fear of being fired or deported. The atrocious conditions in these plants have been well-documented in the Human Rights Watch reports *Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants* (2004) and *'When We're Dead and Buried, Our Bones Will Keep Hurting': Workers' Rights Under Threat in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants* (2019).

Reflecting upon these conditions and the ethical calls to solidarity and compassion, Daniel Mascarenhas, S.J. (2022) states: “If one wills the eating of meat, one also wills the killing of animals. The only thing worse than cruelty is delegated cruelty. By outsourcing the sordid business of animal torture and slaughter to poor farmworkers, we sin against God’s people by ignoring the good of these workers as well.”

### **Solidarity and Ecology**

In addition to negative impacts on world hunger and workers, high levels of animal product consumption also lead to a wide array of devastating environmental consequences that affect people, other creatures, and broader ecosystems. The negative ecological impacts of the livestock industry were the focus of a landmark report of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) entitled *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. “The livestock industry,” the UN report stated, “emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from the local to the global” (FAO, 2006, xx).

One aspect of the UN report that received the most publicity was its documentation of the astounding fact that the livestock industry is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than the direct emissions of all forms of transportation (cars, trucks, buses, trains, airplanes, etc.) combined (FAO, 2006, xxi). This massive contribution to greenhouse gas emissions takes numerous forms, including the vast amounts of energy used to produce all the crops that are fed to livestock, widespread deforestation for grazing cattle and for growing animal feed (which both releases huge quantities of carbon and reduces the capacity for carbon absorption), the heavy use of energy in factory farms, the energy used in freezing/refrigeration during storage and transport, and the highly potent greenhouse gases that are emitted by the animals themselves and from their decaying manure. Ruminants such as cows and sheep, for example, emit huge quantities of methane through exhaling/burping (primarily) as well as flatulence. Methane is also a by-product of the anaerobic decomposition of manure. Methane is 23 times as strong of a greenhouse gas as CO<sub>2</sub>. Nitrous oxide, an even stronger greenhouse gas with 296 times the global warming potential of CO<sub>2</sub>, is released in large quantities from the decomposition of manure and is also a by-product of the synthetic fertilizers typically used in growing animal feed.

Because methane cycles fairly quickly out of the atmosphere in comparison with other greenhouse gases and meat production is a main cause of methane, it has been argued that one of the quickest

ways to reduce human impacts on climate change would be through reduced meat consumption, especially reduced consumption of cows and sheep, which would result in smaller numbers of the animals being raised.

Studies of the average greenhouse gas emissions connected with various foods rate beef as having by far the most negative impact, responsible for over 30 times as many emissions per calorie of food produced as plant-based foods such as tofu or rice, over 70 times as many emissions as beans, and over 500 times as many emissions as nuts (Our World in Data, 2018). Other animal foods have somewhat lower emissions than beef, but all are still substantially higher than typical vegan foods. Dairy products, especially cheese, it should be noted, are among the animal products with high greenhouse gas emissions, one of the reasons that a vegan diet is more climate-friendly than a vegetarian diet that includes the use of dairy (Henriques & Gorvett, 2022). Overall, according to a recent study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, it is estimated that a vegan diet involves approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the emissions of a diet that is high in meat and dairy (Rabb, 2023).

Reflecting upon the impact of our dietary choices on climate change, James Hansen, the former head of NASA's climate science division and arguably the most prominent climate scientist in the United States, has stated: "If you eat further down on the food chain rather than animals..., you can actually make a bigger contribution [to greenhouse gas reduction] in that way than just about anything. So, that, in terms of individual action, is perhaps the best thing you can do" (Hansen, 2009).

In recent years there has been much attention given to so-called 'regenerative grazing,' with claims being made that such grazing can contribute to higher levels of carbon sequestration in the soil that could compensate for the methane emissions from the cows. Numerous studies have demonstrated, however, that even in the most optimistic scenarios such grazing can only offset about 20-60% of the emissions (Dunne, 2017) and that even the most low-impact beef is responsible for at least 6 times as many gas emissions as plant-based alternatives (Carrington, 2018). Regenerative grazing, the lead author of a recent University of Oxford report concludes, "is in no way a climate solution" (Dunne, 2017).

In addition to negative climate impacts, the livestock industry is responsible also for massive land use. Meat and dairy production overall are responsible for about 83% of global farmland use, while providing only about 18% of total food calories and 37% of protein. It is estimated that switching to plant-based diets could free up as much as  $\frac{3}{4}$  of current farmland to return to forest or other natural ecosystems, with many positive impacts on carbon sequestration, biodiversity, water supply, and more (Carrington, 2018).

Other ecological problems to which the livestock industry is one of the top contributors include deforestation, water usage, air and water pollution, land degradation, eutrophication, and acidification, among others. Discussing the overall environmental impact of livestock production, the WorldWatch Institute declares: "[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 - deforestation, erosion, fresh water scarcity, air and water pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, social injustice, the

destabilization of communities, and the spread of disease” (WorldWatch Institute, 2004, 12). According to WorldWatch president Christopher Flavin, “There is no question that the choice to become a vegetarian or lower meat consumption is one of the most positive lifestyle changes a person could make in terms of reducing one’s personal impact on the environment” (EarthTalk, 2008). Joseph Poore, lead author of a recent study published in the journal *Science* that compared the environmental impacts of various foods, concurs. “A vegan diet,” Poore says, “is probably the single best way to reduce your impact on planet Earth” (quoted in Carrington, 2018).

Given the many ecological crises that we are facing and the positive role that reduced meat/dairy consumption can play in mitigating these crises, solidarity again would seem to point to the importance of transitioning toward plant-based diets.

### **Solidarity and Animals**

So far in this essay we have primarily explored issues of solidarity and food ethics in relation to some of the negative impacts of the livestock industry on people, though our discussion of ecological issues began to expand the conversation. In this section I wish to explore more directly the impact of the livestock industry on animals themselves, and to explore the question of whether solidarity can and should be extended beyond our relations with other humans.

In the United States (and increasingly in other parts of the world as well) the vast majority of animals to be used for food are raised in ‘confined animal feeding operations’ (CAFOs), more commonly referred to as ‘factory farms.’ Conditions in these facilities generally cause much harm to both the physical and psychological health of the animals (as well as to the workers, as we saw above.). For example, egg-laying hens are regularly caged with 7-8 birds to a cage that is smaller than an opened sheet of newspaper. The birds are so crowded together that they are unable to even open their wings. Their feathers often are rubbed away on the sides of the cage. To keep the animals from killing each other in the stress of such intense confinement (chickens have natural inclinations to establish a “pecking order”), the tips of their beaks are routinely chopped off, without anesthesia. As the beaks contain sensitive nerves, this is a highly painful procedure for the birds. Due to lack of mobility the hens’ toes often grow around the wire in the bottom of the cages, and they have to be ripped out when taken for slaughter. There may be 100,000 or more hens in one facility, with the birds often stacked in cages three or four tiers high, the droppings of the animals from the higher cages falling on those below. The hens never go outdoors (or even out of their cage) and generally never experience natural light.

Because the chickens used for laying eggs are a different breed than the chickens that are raised for meat and do not gain weight as “efficiently,” the male chicks of egg-laying hens are considered to be without value and are typically killed at birth, either being thrown (fully conscious) into a high-speed grinder or simply thrown into garbage bags and allowed to die of suffocation or starvation. This gruesome reality is the fate of many millions of male chicks each year. Even most organic, free-range egg producers either kill male chicks at birth or, more commonly, buy their chicks from businesses that kill the males at birth. Speaking of the overall treatment of chickens, veterinary professor John Webster suggests that it likely represents “in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe systematic example of man’s inhumanity to another sentient animal.” (Singer & Mason, 2006, 24; for more detailed discussion the treatment of chickens in factory farms, see Singer & Mason, 2006, 21-41; Emhoff, 2010.).

Factory farm conditions for pigs, cows raised for beef, dairy cows, chickens raised for meat, and other animals are also deeply problematic. For example, pigs, like chickens, are confined indoors in highly crowded conditions. Their natural desires -- to wallow in the mud, root in the ground for food, build nests, interact with their mothers when young -- all are frustrated. As a result various neurotic behaviors often occur, such as biting each other's tails (which the industry responds to by cutting their tails off) or chewing incessantly on metal bars. Unsited to the hard concrete or metal floors and bred for weight maximization, most pigs develop painful foot, joint or bone injuries. The majority of pigs are slaughtered at the age of about 5-6 months, only about 1/20 of what the normal lifespan of a pig could otherwise be. More than 90% of pigs in the U.S. are now raised in factory farm conditions (Singer and Mason, 2006, 42-55). It is important to stress the these living conditions described here for chickens and pigs are not aberrations or worst-case examples. They are, rather, the standard, accepted practices of the factory farm industry.

Does the notion of 'solidarity' have implications for our treatment of animals? Some would argue that it does not, either because they believe solidarity can only apply to relations among humans or because they deny more broadly the moral status of animals, viewing animals as existing primarily only to serve human purposes. Pope Francis would challenge such views. "Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly," Francis states, "we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" (2015, no. 69). "Everything is related," Francis says, "and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures..." (2015, no. 92). Envisioning solidarity as commitment to the common good, Francis seeks to expand our understanding of the common good to include non-human creatures.

### **Catholic Social Teaching and Food Ethics**

Comments of Pope Francis such as those cited above would seem to have important implications in the area of food ethics, although Francis has not himself yet fully explored these potential implications. In order to better contextualize Francis' contribution to these conversations, let's take a deeper look at what has been said in the broader tradition of CST concerning food ethics.

Overall, food ethics prior to Pope Francis has been an underdeveloped area within CST, rarely explicitly reflected upon aside from important admonitions to work to end world hunger and to support small farmers. With regard to the treatment of animals, relatively little has been said, though some of what has been said has potential far-reaching implications. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, expressed strong criticism of factory farm conditions in an interview in 2002, prior to becoming pope. In response to a question from a German journalist as to whether it was morally acceptable to use and eat animals, Cardinal Ratzinger replied:

That is a very serious question. At any rate, we can see that they are given into our care, that we cannot just do whatever we want with them. Animals, too, are God's creatures and even if they do not have the same direct relation to God that man has, they are creatures of his will, creatures we must respect as companions in creation ... Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity



seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible (Ratzinger, 2002, 78-79).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* likewise encourages appreciation for animals as God's creation and expresses concern about their mistreatment: "Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness....It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly" (Catholic Church, 1994, no. 2416).

And Pope Francis, as we have seen, has affirmed the inherent value of non-human animals, stating that "other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" (2015, no. 69). Francis has not, however, explored what the implications of this affirmation of the intrinsic value of other creatures may be for our dietary choices, nor have the other popes before him. Nor have the popes explored further what it means, in the words of the *Catechism*, "to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly." If one lives in a context in which access to a healthy plant-based diet is available, could not a strong case be made that choosing to eat animals instead is in fact causing animals "to suffer or die needlessly" and thus a violation of the *Catechism's* moral teaching?

Significantly, even while not yet having called for reducing or eliminating meat consumption based on concern for animals (even though this would seem to follow from the underlying principles that Francis articulates), Francis is the first pope to have explicitly called for reduced meat consumption for other reasons. The rationale that he provides is ecological. In a letter to young people of Europe, Francis states: "There is an urgent need to reduce the consumption not only of fossil fuels but also of so many superfluous things. In certain areas of the world, too, it would be appropriate to consume less meat. This too can help save the environment" (quoted in San Martin, 2022).

In a recent message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Francis condemns factory farming, which he terms "intensive animal farming," also on ecological grounds. In particular, he critiques factory farming's excessive use of and pollution of water. (Francis, 2023)

Overall, it seems clear that the principles of CST point toward the need for a strong rejection of factory farm practices, based on concerns for world hunger, the rights of workers, ecology, and the prohibition of causing unnecessary harm to animals. Can CST go further, however, and suggest not just the need to raise animals for food in ways that are less inhumane, less unjust, and less ecologically harmful, but rather to encourage a more principled transition away from meat-eating entirely to a plant-based diet in circumstances in which this is possible, grounding this at least in part on a stronger and deeper sense of solidarity with animals? As CST begins to reflect in greater depth upon these issues, I would suggest that much could be learned from dialogue with the tradition of 'Black veganism.'

### **Black Veganism and Holistic Liberation**

Black veganism is a growing movement that builds upon a history of Black connections with vegetarian/vegan diets, including within Black religious traditions (Mercer, 2021). In the United States, contrary to common stereotypes concerning the demographics of veganism, Blacks identify as vegetarian/vegan at a rate nearly three times as high as whites (BBC News, 2020). It is important

to understand that Black veganism, as explained by its proponents, is not simply generic veganism embraced by Black people. Instead, it represents a particular, holistic, intersectional understanding of the reasons for embracing a plant-based diet. Aph Ko, creator of the website Black Vegans Rock, explains it this way: “Black veganism is not just about Black people eating kale or whatever, it’s talking about the world, talking about oppression in a totally different way, and re-envisioning a more liberatory world.” (Surprisingly Black History of Veganism, n.d.)

In its commitment to liberation, Black veganism shares many fundamental principles in common with CST, including commitments to social justice, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, ecological sustainability, and nonviolent social action. It also shares many features in common with the broader vegan movement, such as concern for animals, ecology, human health, and world hunger. At the same time, Black veganism contains several distinctive features from which both CST and the broader vegan movement could learn (Sniegocki, 2023).

Most fundamentally, Black veganism stresses that the various forms of injustice that characterize our world are profoundly interrelated and share common roots. This includes a recognition of deep connections between the mistreatment of animals and the mistreatment of people. One way that this manifests in through racism. As Aph Ko states, “many of us have come to the conclusion that our experiences of racial oppression are deeply entangled with animal oppression on a fundamental level (Ko, n.d., 19).

Numerous Black vegans cite the influence of books such as Marjorie Spiegel’s *The Dreaded Comparison* (1988), which highlights similarities between the treatment of animals and the treatment of slaves, and Charles Patterson’s *Eternal Treblinka* (2002), which highlights parallels to the Holocaust. The latter book takes its title from Jewish author and vegetarian Isaac Bashevis Singer’s famous quote: “In relation to them [i.e. animals], all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka.”<sup>1</sup> Those making these comparisons stress that they are not claiming that the mistreatment of a cow or pig or chicken is morally equivalent to the mistreatment of a human being, but rather they are seeking to highlight that these realities nonetheless share similar roots and features.

A common way that racism has often been justified has been to describe Black people as less-than-human, as ‘animals,’ with wealthy, white, heterosexual males understood as the standard of the truly human. One response to such a hierarchical anthropology could simply be to try to assert one’s own full humanity, without challenging the mistreatment of non-human animals. But in the view of many Black vegans this would leave the root of the problem (i.e. oppressive mentalities based in hierarchical dualisms) insufficiently challenged. Black veganism understands itself as an attempt to fundamentally subvert and resist oppressive, hierarchical anthropologies entirely. Black theologian Christopher Carter states:

In this way, I suggest that when people of color make the argument that we “are human, too,” we are not critiquing the system of white supremacy; rather, we are making a claim that we should be included among the humans who are allowed to exploit other creatures—this is an argument for equality with the oppressor rather than the dismantling of the reasoning that morally justifies the oppression. This

realization ultimately led me to reach a conclusion I never expected: veganism, specifically Black veganism (Carter, 2022).

Other Black vegans similarly highlight the links between animal and human oppression:

- “The key is to unlearn the conditioning that teaches us that any form of oppression is okay” (McJetters, 2014, 130).
- “In order to achieve black liberation, we need different tools from the ‘master’s’. ... We would maximize our own freedoms by fighting for all creatures – human and nonhuman” (Moore, 2019, 59-60).
- “Full liberation from capitalism, imperialism, and other oppressive structures cannot occur if so-called liberators are caging, killing, or otherwise exploiting sentient beings” (Brueck, Rodriguez, & White, 2019, 31-32).

Christopher Carter, author of the excellent book *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice*, emphasizes that Black veganism is not only for Blacks. Rather, it is an approach to veganism that recognizes the interconnected nature of injustices and that seeks to challenge oppression in all of its forms. This worldview, he suggests, can be embraced by persons of any race:

Black culture and the experiences of Black people are the starting point for my construction of Black veganism. However, the “Blackness” of Black veganism should be understood as an orienting disposition, meaning one does not have to be Black to practice Black veganism. Instead, the “Blackness” of Black veganism signifies a commitment to an anti-oppressive way of being in the world that signifies our commitment to being in solidarity with the exploited and dispossessed...(Carter, 2022).

As a Christian, Carter also relates Black veganism to his understanding of Jesus: “Black veganism seeks to opt out of structures that normalize violence and suffering and live into ways of being in the world consistent with Jesus’s spiritual path of radical compassion and his way of nonviolent social transformation (Carter, 2021, 14).

### **How CST Could Be Enhanced Through Dialogue with the Tradition of Black Veganism**

At the core of Black veganism is an emphasis on interconnectedness, understanding that all forms of oppression and abuse share common roots and that all forms of oppression and abuse need to be challenged and resisted, including mistreatment of animals. Given that a plant-based diet has been demonstrated in various ways to be healthier than a diet including animal products, in addition to having profound benefits for ecology and world hunger, reducing the suffering of animals, and fostering a spirituality of compassion, Black vegans argue that such a diet should be adopted whenever the option is available.

Pope Francis too has stressed interconnectedness repeatedly, especially in his encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Francis even explicitly highlights connections between violence against animals and violence against humans:

[W]hen our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people....Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures...(Francis, 2015, no. 92).

If this teaching is to be taken seriously (i.e. that mistreatment of animals and the causing of any unnecessary animal suffering is inextricably connected with the mistreatment of people), would it not seem to imply a call to a plant-based diet in any circumstances in which that choice is possible, as Black vegans suggest? These implications Pope Francis and the broader tradition of CST have not yet truly explored. A dialogue with Black veganism could deepen these dimensions of CST.

Another important contribution of Black veganism is the ways in which it incorporates awareness of justice issues into each of its analyses. For example, in reflecting upon the ecological impacts of the livestock industry, it is aware that the negative ecological impacts are experienced most profoundly by the poor and people of color throughout the world. In examining treatment of workers, it is aware again that it is largely the poor and people of color who work in factory farms and slaughterhouses. The same is true of course of those most likely to be experiencing hunger. With regard to the health benefits of a plant-based diet, Black vegans understand the embrace of such a diet to be an act of resistance and liberation, a challenge to the many ways that the structures of society (through slavery, systemic racism, etc.) have historically served to undermine the health of Black people (Roseman, 2017).

In advocating for a plant-based diet, Black vegans are also deeply aware of the problems of 'food deserts' and other obstacles to healthy eating. While seeing plant-based eating as the dietary option most conducive to the common good, they are not critical of those whose life circumstances (especially those struggling simply to survive) do not currently make this possible. They stress the need for deep structural changes to make a healthy plant-based diet more accessible to all, both within richer countries such as the United States and globally.

While CST is sensitive to some of these justice-related issues (e.g. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* stresses the intimate connections between concern for the poor and concern for the earth), CST is not always sufficiently sensitive to the specific dynamics of structural racism within these realities. Dialogue with Black veganism could deepen this awareness. Dialogue with Black veganism could also be of great value to the broader vegan movement, which at times lacks the holistic, intersectional, justice-centered worldview that Black veganism so powerfully articulates.

### **Black Veganism, CST, Solidarity, and the Future**

Overall, the ethical framework provided by Catholic social teaching contains many crucial principles that can guide an approach to food ethics. Among these are a commitment to solidarity with the poor and marginalized, an affirmation that the goods of the earth are intended by God for all, a strong defense of the rights of workers, a call to ecological conversion, and a call to avoid 'needless' harm to animals. Dialogue with Black veganism could enable CST to reflect more

deeply upon the implications of these principles, how to live them out more fully, and how to more effectively pursue holistic, integral liberation for humans and all creatures in the context of our suffering world.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This quote is spoken by a character in Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "The Letter Writer," which can be found in Singer, 2004. Singer himself was a deeply committed vegetarian.

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