

Factory-farmed meat has been sacrificed to idols

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(RNS) Joking with vegetarians about how good meat tastes is old hat. We vegetarians have heard them all:

* “Animals have rights. The right to get in my belly.”

* Question: “How many vegetarians does it take to eat a bacon-cheeseburger?”
Answer: “One, as long as no one’s looking.”

But here’s the latest:

“I’ve always thought the reason people are vegetarians is simply because they haven’t met the right pork loin yet.”

It comes from Angelo Stagnaro, a Secular Franciscan, in an article he wrote for the National Catholic Register. He would go on to say that his grandmother made a pork loin so delicious “it would drive a vegan animal rights activist to strangle a pig with his bare hands in the oft chance (she) would cook it for him.”

His joking about horrific cruelty to animals aside, it is interesting that Stagnaro uses the image of strangling a pig here, especially since he knows that in the biblical Book of Acts, Chapter 15, the Council of Jerusalem taught that Christians are to keep four prohibitions of the Jewish law — one of which is refraining from eating animals that had been strangled.

Another prohibition Stagnaro mentions is refraining from eating animals that have been sacrificed to idols.

Today we hear this passage and simply say, “Well, nobody worships Jupiter anymore,” and move on. But it turns out that most of us are eating meat which has been sacrificed to idols: the twin false gods of profit and consumerism.

The cruel suffering and death inflicted on 50 billion animals in factory farms every year is necessary to drive the prices down low enough so that (1) we can get our tasty meat at the kind of price which allows us to eat it regularly, and (2) corporations can make a huge profit.

Evidence of the abject cruelty to which animals are subjected in factory farms is available to anyone with an Internet connection, but some may be unaware of just how much biotechnology has taken over the industry. In their quest to maximize “protein units per square foot,” factory farms now breed turkeys with breasts so large that it is physically impossible for them to mate. (The unfortunate workers who procure the semen from male turkeys for artificial insemination of the females were featured on the Dirty Jobs show.)

In addition, factory farms have managed to genetically alter chickens so that they never feel full, prompting them to eat as much as they can as quickly as they can. With today’s technology, maximizing protein units per square foot not only requires packing chickens into ridiculously tight quarters, but also refusing them even the modest relief of a full stomach.

But why are factory farms treating animals this way? It isn’t because they enjoy being cruel to animals. No, the blame lies with us. We consumers demand that they behave this way when we buy our meat purely for price, not caring at all for what was necessary for that meat to get on our plate. Like Stagnaro, we simply want meat that tastes good and that we can afford to have on a regular basis. We have power, and the animals don’t. Sucks to be them.

Christians, of course, are called to a higher moral standard. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for instance, uses the language of justice in teaching that we “owe animals kindness.” It also teaches against causing animals to suffer or die needlessly.

While we might like its taste, very few of us need to eat meat. Even fewer need to eat it at the prices offered by factory farms.

This teaching is on strong biblical ground. God creates the animals for “good” in Genesis, without reference to human beings, and brings them to Adam — not to eat — but because “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18).

Eden is a nonviolent kingdom in which all animals (human and nonhuman) live in vegetarian peace. With sin came death and violence, of course, but the Kingdom of God prophesied by Isaiah — and to which we are to bear witness — is one where lions lie down with lambs and babies play with snakes.

No wonder Pope Francis teaches in his latest encyclical, “Laudato Si,” that the Virgin Mary “grieves for the sufferings” of “the creatures of this world laid waste by human power.”

Given the interconnectedness of evil practices, we should not be surprised that factory farms are terrible in ways that go beyond how they treat nonhuman animals. They exploit workers, create drug-resistant “superbugs” and are among the most serious contributors to climate change. They’ve also driven small, local farms out of business, putting the power of how our meat gets to our plate in the hands of a tiny few corporations — corporations legally obligated to maximize profits.

Ah yes, profit — the golden idol to which Americans are disproportionately quick to pay homage. Along with consumerism, these are the twin false gods to which 50 billion nonhuman animals are sacrificed in factory farms every year.

It doesn’t matter how good their flesh tastes. Christians have a moral duty to refuse to eat factory-farmed animals. They have been sacrificed to idols.