

## Planet needs us to curb obsessive, throwaway culture



If more celebrities followed Pope Francis's example, frugality could be cool as well as virtuous. Extreme consumption and waste is a moral issue and is driving the acceleration in weather and climate shifts, writes **Margaret Hickey**

[Daffodils blooming in January is an indication of how our climate is changing and how the temperature of our planet is rising.](#) Picture Denis Boyle

CLIMATE change has made its most emphatic case in our back gardens this January. By the third week of the month, while some of us were still packing away the Christmas decorations, daffodils were flouncing around in all their frilly glory in sheltered spots. What next one may ask? Sweet pea in time for St Patrick's Day? Strawberries by Easter?

Climate change is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the argument, now accepted by most scientists across the world, that our 21st-century patterns of production and consumption are a significant cause, perhaps the most significant cause, of our current weather and climate volatility.

In his encyclical on the environment, *Laudate si*, Pope Francis accepts this consensus view though he does not dismiss other factors such as "...variations in the Earth's orbit and axis and in solar activity". Certainly, there is ample evidence that weather and climate were changing and changing dramatically long before the arrival of the industrial age.

So there is the somewhat unresolved issue as to how much of the current change is human induced and how much the result of forces beyond our control. The dominant view amongst the experts is that humankind, not the cosmos is driving the acceleration in weather and climate shifts.

Previous shifts have taken place at the proverbial glacial speed. To exacerbate the problem, recent human developments and settlements in low coastal areas mean that even relatively small changes could wipe out many of the world's megacities.

Whatever about changes in climate, environmental degradation is almost totally our responsibility and almost totally within our power to resolve. In *Laudate si*, Pope Francis focusses mainly on this aspect of the planet's problems and the ethical questions raised. The solutions he advances are not quite the same as those of the secular climate ideologues.

Francis sees extreme consumption and waste as a moral as well as environmental issue. He sees humanity turning its beautiful home into a giant skip, holding "an immense pile of filth, toxic, non-biodegradable and radioactive".

Unlike climate change bellringers, he does not see a solution primarily in terms of alternative, cleaner methods of energy but in curbing the "obsessive" consumption of our "throwaway culture". For Francis, "less is more".

This, however, is not a convenient solution for global trade. But can we continue the exponential development and expansion of markets at home and the economic recolonisation of the developing world and curb carbon emissions at the same time? Targets for greater energy efficiencies and the development of alternative clean energy only go so far.

There is a carbon footprint to every alternative just as there is a carbon footprint to recycling. Personal experience can be instructive. A few months ago, I took my granddaughter, whom I was minding, for a stroll because the weather had improved.

I mean the incessant rain had eased to a drizzle. On arriving home we were wet enough so I put her green fleece on a radiator to dry. Soon, dark smoke and an acrid stench flowed through the house. Invariably, when an unfortunate event like this happens the kitchen is the incident scene so I missed a few valuable seconds scanning wholly innocent pots on the hob. The source was tracked to what looked like spilt dark blue paint over the radiator. Incredulity might have lost a few more seconds except that a rapidly diminishing island of green fleece was visible above the ooze. My three-year-old grand daughter is old enough to know that things can happen to fleecy jumpers like getting torn or dirty or being left behind in cafes but this metamorphosis was of another order.

She was completely spooked and wailed while I got to work, putting home before planet, as I opened the window to release a surge of toxicity into the ecosystem.

What is the point in making things like fleece garments with solar or wind energy if you still use the toxic material of oil by-products?

If they are dumped they pollute. If they are re-cycled they pollute even more. I would imagine that if the green fleece had found its way via re-cycling to a factory in Shandong it might be down-cycled to a dark blue plastic bowl that might be used to feed a baby in Colorado.

On the other hand, it might be up-cycled as a smart and pricey cover for a smart and pricey ipad and end up back in Cork again. What is the real net toll to the planet of this manic, manufacturing merry-go-round? Cui bono? Not the tired, toilers who turn plastic into fabric and fabric back into plastic again to feed our shopping fetish. If we could make do and pay them the same for less, we would be spiritually better off and they would have the kind of work/life balance that we consider a right here in the developed world.

Cui bono? High above the unseasonal daffodils, under a flight path towards the country's third-biggest airport, planes come and go.

Nobody says anything much about the carbon emissions that surge from their tails as they streak high above us. Obviously, they can't switch to wind energy but maybe we could reduce their number by shopping and sourcing local? It was reported that a retinue of some 40,000 accompanied the world leaders who attended the November Climate Summit in Paris. That is a lot of aeroplanes. It is a lot of everything but mostly a lot of taxpayers' money. So it isn't just the climate we need to keep a weather eye on.

Cui bono? Well, our own Bono got kudos for his contribution on climate change in Davos. Some celebrities like Al Gore have become very rich for pursuing a green agenda. Maybe the Pope had some of them in his sights when he spoke of "rock stars calling for a green consciousness from a stage blazing with illuminations".

Pope Francis cannot be accused of not leading the way by example. With scuffed black shoes and a second-hand car he models the frugality he extols. If more celebrities followed his example, frugality could be cool as well as virtuous. And that might help keep the planet cool too.