



CATHERINE DEVITT, Environmental Justice Officer at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (JCFJ), explores the environmental problems posed by our use of plastics.

A WORLD WITHOUT PLASTIC

A world without plastics may seem unimaginable. Combs, shopping bags, toothbrushes, bottles, toys, TVs, computer monitors – these are just some of the plastic items we use in our everyday lives. The large scale production of plastics, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the 1950s. Since then, we have produced 8.3 billion tonnes.

THE PROBLEM

While plastics may have built the modern world, our relationship with the material is nearing crisis point. Not only do plastics draw on diminishing fossil fuels, if you walk through our cities and towns and along our coastlines, you will quickly realise that plastic waste blights our urban and natural landscapes. Plastics leach chemicals that are harmful to marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and pose a direct threat to wildlife. Unlike other materials, none of the plastics that we commonly use are biodegradable, and while many plastics are recyclable, most often they accumulate in landfill, in the natural environment, or are incinerated. Of the total 8.3 billion tonnes produced, scientists estimate that only nine per cent has been recycled.¹

Plastic debris is found in all of the

major ocean basins, and with increasing contamination of freshwater and land, plastic waste has become ubiquitous and is now regarded as a key driver of environmental change. There is not only a cost to environmental health, the direct and indirect implications for human health are a growing concern. These health implications are not only related to contamination from plastic storage but also arise from the digestion of food items such as fish which may have ingested plastic debris in their natural habitats.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Some governments around the world are already attempting to reduce our dependency on plastics. Legislatures in the European Union, the United States and Canada have restricted or prohibited the use of certain plastic materials. The most notable of these materials is the microbead – plastic particles of less than five micrometres which are most frequently found in personal care products. These minuscule pieces of plastic contribute to water pollution, and present an environmental hazard for marine life. Here in Ireland, the introduction of a levy on the sale of plastic bags in 2002 led to a dramatic decrease in



the amount of plastic bags in circulation, and has proved to be one of Ireland's most successful environmental policies. Nevertheless, recycling rates in Ireland remain low.

As more and more plastic accumulates in the natural environment, the earth will continue to cry out. In the words of Pope Francis, we need to change course: *'Christians or not, as people of faith and goodwill, we should be united in showing mercy to the earth as our common home and cherishing the world in which we live as a place for sharing and communion'*.² While the safe disposal of plastic waste requires definitive action, perhaps the best solution is to imagine a world free of plastic. Perhaps the world of previous generations can offer some insight? Knowing what plastics are recyclable

can be confusing.³

- Generally, reducing our use of plastic in the first instance is the best place to start – buying produce with less packaging, buying in bulk, or choosing glass containers over plastic.
- The arrows symbol on plastic products does not mean that the product is recyclable. The number within the symbol (which ranges from one to seven) indicates whether or not it can be recycled. Most recycling facilities in Ireland accept plastics denoted by the numbers 1 (e.g., soft drinks bottles), 2 (e.g., shampoo bottles), 4 (e.g., plastic bags), and 5 (e.g., margarine and yoghurt containers). If uncertain, check with your local recycling centre or waste contractor. ♡

(Endnotes)

- 1 Source: <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/3/7/e1700782.full>
- 2 Source: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html
- 3 For more information on recycling plastic, see: <http://learn.eartheasy.com/2012/05/plastics-by-the-numbers/>