

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND CONSUMERISM

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BEGINNINGS

Catholic social thought (CST) reflects on Scripture in order to discern how to respond to the signs of the times; thus, Jesus' life and his teachings have shaped the Church's concerns with the effects of materialism and the culture of consumerism. Christ lived his life with little possessions but with great love for people, especially those on the margins. The model he offers speaks to the crises we confront today. People consume goods, images from social media, and even experiences (checking off "bucket lists" of places visited and mountains climbed with little thought to the impact on the environment and local peoples are a new cultural trend). This modern form of consumerism often leaves "no room at the inn" for the welcome of God's children and for a respect for the sacredness of every human person and for Creation. Possibilities for epiphany are closed off because encounter and contemplation have less value than possession and productivity in contemporary culture. Pope Francis has been very vocal about a consumer culture that promotes hoarding possessions, images, and experiences but disregards human beings seen to be without economic value. Yet, his is not the first voice to challenge such values.

The Church's concern about growing materialism, a by-product of the Industrial Revolution, goes back to the late 19th century with the beginning of modern Catholic social thought. Pope Leo XIII, in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), declared that the twin plagues of life, excessive desire for wealth and thirst for pleasure, can make humans "miserable in the midst of abundance" (28). Human Flourishing, a central value of CST, can be undermined by constant attention to the pursuit of more and more things and experiences. Forty years later, Pope Pius XI, in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (On the Reconstruction of the Social Order), voiced concern that "unbridled and sordid greed" allowed people to be "swept away by their passion for property," so they turn away from the call of Christ and his people (131). Solidarity with others and the Common Good, two basic aspects of CST, are devalued when individuals put all their focus and energy into amassing possessions of all kinds solely for their own benefit.

After World War II, the production and consumption of material goods began a renewed and rapid post-war growth in the U.S., and then became a global phenomenon, at least for developed countries. “Progress” was repeatedly affirmed as an ultimate good in itself as more and more made-to-be-quickly-replaced goods flooded the market. The Church took note of this cultural trend and its effect on the human person and on the fabric of the human community over a half a century ago. In 1961, Pope John XXIII was concerned that “the progress of science, technology, and economics is pursued for its own sake, as though material well-being were the be-all and end-all of life” (*Mater et Magistra* [Mother and Teacher], 176). In 1965, the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed this point, proclaiming in *Gaudium et Spes*: “It is what a man is, rather than what he has, that counts,” rejecting the idea that human value is defined by productivity and by possession (35).

Pope Paul VI wrote in 1967 *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) that when material progress becomes the highest good, humans and nations become self-absorbed, working solely for reasons of self-interest rather than solidarity. “Neither individuals nor nations should regard the possession of more and more goods as the ultimate objective. Every kind of progress is a two-edged sword. It is necessary if man is to grow as a human being; yet it can also enslave him, if he comes to regard it as the supreme good and cannot look beyond it. When this happens, men harden their hearts, shut out others from their minds” (19). Pope Paul called the human community to recognize that all members of the global family must be able to develop and grow in mutually beneficial ways that support authentic human development—and he was mindful of the limitations of the earth’s resources. During Paul’s time, a growing recognition that 20% of the earth’s population using 80% of the earth’s resources was no longer just nor sustainable.

CONCERN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As secular culture continued to put more and more emphasis on possessions as an unquestionable good, CST continued to reflect on these issues through the writings of more recent popes and bishops, Pope John Paul II reflected deeply on the nature of the human person and the negative aspects of consumerism on human beings, and he recognized the necessity of equitable and sustainable use of the earth’s resources in his encyclicals *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern) in 1987 and *Centesimus Annus* (Hundredth Year) in 1991. John Paul II reemphasized “being over having,” authentic personhood over a consumer identity which contributed to misery for many:

“Unless all the considerable body of resources and potential at [people’s] disposal is guided by a moral understanding and by an orientation towards the true good of the human race, it easily turns against [these people] to oppress [them]. Side-by-side with the miseries of underdevelopment, ... we find ourselves up against a form of superdevelopment ... which consists of an excessive availability of every kind of material good ... [making] people slaves of ‘possession’ and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of things already owned with others still better” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 28).

Pope John Paul II recognized the link between consumerism and an unregulated capitalist system, and he criticized the excesses of both socialism and capitalism, declaring both economic systems could reduce humans totally “to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs” (Centesimus Annus, 19).

Thus, it is necessary, declared this pope, to create systems and lifestyles so “the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices” (Centesimus Annus, 36). He challenged people of faith to understand that CST’s Option for the Poor calls us to be aware of how our consumer choices can drain natural resources “that were meant for all” (Centesimus Annus, 61).

Pope Benedict XVI echoed his predecessor when he spoke at World Youth Day in 2008, telling young adults “Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer,” and warning that the world’s natural resources are being squandered in the pursuit of “insatiable consumerism.” To fuel such rabid consumption, he pointed out, “there are ... scars which mark the surface of our earth: erosion, deforestation, the squandering of the world’s mineral and ocean resources;” Pope Benedict XVI also noted how these “scars” contribute to global warming, which has a disproportionate impact on people in poorer countries.¹

POPE FRANCIS ON CREATION AND CONSUMERISM

Pope Francis has developed a fuller critique of the link between consumerism and the unsustainable environmental degradation that is the result of a system that does not respect the earth nor the dignity of every human person. In *Laudato Si’* (On Care for our Common Home), Francis notes that the current system of production and consumption has promoted a “throwaway” culture that is no longer sustainable (16). People are conditioned by the advertising of corporations, supported by the media, so millions can keep buying and buying because what was new last year is out of fashion and must be discarded. The throwaway culture extends to people on the margins, who are seen to have no value as they are too poor to be regular consumers. Francis reminds us that Solidarity, Option for the Poor, Human Dignity, the Common Good, and Care for Creation—all central tenets of CST—are intertwined: “We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49). He voices concern about the “unjust habits” that those with privilege practice as they consume endlessly (93).

Pope Francis also stresses that the earth is a “shared inheritance” which is meant to benefit every member of the human family, not just privileged consumers (93). Francis reemphasized the CST long-held teaching that God created the earth and its resources for all members of the global human family, not excluding—or favoring—anyone, noting there is “always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose God gave them” (93). The parable Jesus told of Lazarus and the rich man clearly teaches that God did not mean for some people to have an excess and completely disregard those in need outside the gates.

“PURCHASING IS ALWAYS A MORAL—AND NOT SIMPLY ECONOMIC—ACT.”

POPE FRANCIS

Pope Francis also sees a threat to diverse cultures from global marketing efforts: “A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by today’s globalized economy, has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity” (144). He goes on to affirm the principle of Subsidiarity, calling us to respect the rights of all peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that “the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture” (144).

Sending massive quantities of cheap food and clothing to developing countries has decimated local farming (dairy farmers in Jamaica, for example, went out of business when cheap powdered milk from the U.S. flooded the market)² and has negatively impacted local textile industries in many areas of Africa.³ The pope reminds us that the “notion of the quality of life” should not “be imposed from without” (Laudato Si’, 144). Nestle’s advertising to poor mothers in developing countries to promote formula over breast milk is one example of this.⁴

The justice issues related to consumerism are all connected, Pope Francis has reminded us, and the central values of Catholic social thought call us to recognize these connections. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches: “Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise” (Luke 3:11). In a very complex world, the essential truth of our interconnectedness is simplified by the words of Christ: the gifts of Creation are to be shared with open hands and hearts, not anxiously consumed, not hoarded, not seen as “mine” but as “ours,” part of the joint possessions of a connected global family.

Endnotes

1 Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the Welcoming Celebration of World Youth Day, July 17, 2008, <http://bit.ly/2y0GQko>.

2 Jackson, Steven, “Trade Winds Diversifies into Dairy - New Milk Products, Cattle Farm to Be Rolled out,” News Outlet, The Gleaner, May 19, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2xZlxQ7>.

3 Goldberg, Eleanor, “These African Countries Don’t Want Your Used Clothing Anymore,” Huffington Post, September 19, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2y0haEk>.

4 Jackson, Steven, “Trade Winds Diversifies into Dairy - New Milk Products, Cattle Farm to Be Rolled out,” The Gleaner, May 19, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2xZqoD4>.

FAITH IN ACTION

- **Read** to understand how major brands skirt responsibility while vastly underpaying their workers: lat.ms/3IDPuZu
- **Learn** more about Catholic critique of consumerism: bit.ly/CEPAresource2
- **Celebrate** a recent win for Los Angeles garment workers: bit.ly/CEPAresource3

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Pope John Paul II reminded us we can easily become “slaves of possessions.” What are some example of this phenomena? Where do we see consumerism as a way of “being a person” in the world? What can people of faith and faith communities do to resist this kind of slavery and this concept of being human? How can we nurture an emphasis on a deeper sense of the human person, whose identity is a beloved child of God, called to grow in grace through solidarity with others?
2. Pope Francis reminds us that we must be very careful as consumers in our use of the earth’s resources. How are we responding to his message, as individuals, as communities, as non-governmental organizations as well as national governments and as a global community? What more needs to be done, and how can we support those who are working to conserve the world’s resources? What can we do on a personal level to respond to Pope Francis’s call?
3. Some huge shifts have arisen in our global economy as we’ve faced a pandemic: more people working from home, the need for higher wages for entry-level workers, the role of the government and choice, the unjust distribution of vaccines globally, health disparities by race and class in COVID-19 outcomes, and so many more. What positive possibilities do we have to reimagine the economic system recovering from COVID-19?

PRAYER

Bring us, O Lord, back to simple truths:

Our primary identity is being a child of a loving God,

We are meant to be good stewards of Creation,

We are called to share the necessities of a dignified life

With all our sisters and brothers in the global human family.

Be with us as we struggle to turn from being consumers

To being fully human and free, created in your image,

Supported by your goodness and your grace,

With open hands and open hearts,

Creating your kingdom where all are called to the table.

Amen.