



Taking Personal Action

The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective:

The Challenge of Consumption by Msgr. Charles Murphy

Christianity is not about feeding yourself. Christianity begins with what people do with the leftovers. So spoke Professor Megan McKenna, whose field is social ethics, alluding to the biblical miracle of the sharing of the loaves and the admonition that the leftover fragments be gathered (see Mt 14:20).

Faces fell. A certain religious complacency was pierced, giving way to a degree of consciousness-raising. It is startling to be told, in a culture as wasteful as ours, that Christianity *begins* with what we do with our leftovers. Just visit a typical school lunch program and see the mounds of garbage. “Waste not, want not” means little to children brought up to believe that if something does not meet your taste or adhere to the current fashion, toss it.

A familiar statistic in this context begins to ring true: The industrialized countries, with only one fifth of the world’s population, consume two thirds of the world’s resources and generate 75 percent of all the pollution and waste products. The disparities between human beings who live in squalor and those who have everything money can buy are glaring in a world brought closer together through

amazing advances in communication. This great disparity denies social justice, leads to ecological tragedy, and most of all creates a misperception of what the good life really is, which ultimately makes excessive consumption a religious question.

What and how much we consume manifest our conception of who we are and why we exist. The spiritual and cultural impoverishment that are the natural byproducts of consumerism are evident everywhere. Money talks, but, as they say, “it has such a squeaky voice and has so little to say.” How can our Catholic faith help us to find a more satisfying life for ourselves and at the same time make us more socially responsible in achieving it? I suggest three ways: the cultivation of the natural virtue of temperance; the gospel admonitions about the dangers of overconsumption and the fundamental requirement of love of neighbor; and, finally, the recent social teachings of the Church based upon the order of nature and the higher demands of gospel living. I will also provide some indications of what the good life might be like for us all.

TEMPERANCE AS A VIRTUE OF LIVING

More and more ethical theorists give credence to the role virtues play in building character. Virtues are being seen and appreciated anew because their cultivation can provide the inner strength needed to live happily and successfully. Without these well-established habits we are at the mercy of external stimuli, and we become victims of our own disordered needs and passions. To be creative and contributing members of society, we need a structure that allows us to use our gifts

Charles Murphy, “The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem of Consumption,” in *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995; article updated 2006).



in a sustained way; the virtues provide such a structure. They are a wisdom for living that was recognized as far back as the ancient Greeks and beyond. The virtues are honored in the Scriptures as part of a household code of living on earth and were incorporated by the Church fathers in their syntheses of Christian life.

Among our four “cardinal,” or “hinge,” virtues that humans find essential is the virtue of temperance; with prudence, justice, and fortitude, temperance is regarded as one of the hinges on which hangs the gate to a happy life.

In his classic study of the cardinal virtues, Josef Pieper was quick to point out that the rich meaning of temperance is not captured by the concept of moderation. Moderation is only a small part of temperance—the negative part. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, temperance gives order and balance to our life. It arises from a serenity of spirit within oneself. The reasonable norm allows us to walk gently upon the earth. Temperance teaches us to cherish and enjoy the good things of life while respecting natural limits. Temperance in fact does not diminish but actually heightens the pleasure we take in living by freeing us from a joyless compulsiveness and dependence. Temperance therefore means a lot more than the so-called “temperance movement” regarding the consumption of alcohol!

E. F. Schumacher, in his most influential book *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, contrasted the consumerist way of life, which multiplies human wants, with the simple life, whose aim is to achieve maximum well-being with the minimum use of the earth’s resources. The “logic of production” that demands more and more growth in consumption is a formula for disaster, he argued. “Out of the whole Christian tradition,” Schumacher concluded, “there is perhaps no body of teaching which is more relevant and appropriate to the modern predicament than the marvelously

subtle and realistic doctrines of the Four Cardinal Virtues” and in particular temperance, which means knowing when “enough is enough.”

THE GOSPEL AND WEALTH

When Pope John Paul II paid his first visit to the United States in October 1979, he delivered one of his most memorable homilies on the subject of consumption. Speaking to a congregation gathered in New York City at Yankee Stadium, the Holy Father said:

Christians will want to be in the vanguard in favoring ways of life that decisively break with the frenzy of consumerism, exhausting the joyless. It is not a question of slowing down progress, for there is no human progress when everything conspires to give full reign to the instincts of self-interest, sex, and power. We must find a simple way of living.

For it is not right that the standard of living of the rich countries would seek to maintain itself by draining off a great part of the reserves of energy and raw materials that are meant to serve the whole of humanity. For readiness to create a greater and more equitable solidarity between people is the first condition of peace. Catholics of the United States, and all you citizens of the United States, you have such a tradition of spiritual generosity, industry, simplicity, and sacrifice that you cannot fail to heed this call today for a new enthusiasm and a fresh determination. It is in the joyful simplicity of a life inspired by the Gospel and the Gospel’s spirit of fraternal sharing that you will find the best remedy for sour criticism, paralyzing doubt, and the temptation to make money the principal means and indeed the very measure of human advancement.



As the basis of his teaching, the Holy Father drew upon the parable in St. Luke's Gospel regarding Lazarus and the rich man. The Lukan Gospel is particularly harsh regarding the hazards of wealth. The parable may be read as another illustration of the biblical saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the needle's eye than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom (Lk 18:25). What is noticeable in the parable is that the rich

man is condemned because he is rich. Enclosed in his world of wealth and the self-sufficiency that wealth brings, he simply failed to notice Lazarus begging at his gate, much less help him. Even the natural world, symbolized by the dogs licking Lazarus' sores, displayed more sympathy. The rich man's incurable spiritual condition continues into eternity and becomes permanent. The parable takes on a contemporary meaning when Abraham rejects the suggestion that Lazarus return from the dead to warn the rich man's brothers of the fate that awaits them should they not repent. The rich man is told (and we ourselves are told): "They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them. If they do not heed Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe if someone be raised from the dead" (Lk 16:29, 31). This is precisely our situation: we attend church and hear the Scriptures proclaimed and we believe in the teachings of the Risen One. This should be enough for us to repent from our acquisitive way of life.

St. Matthew tempers the first of Jesus' beatitudes with the qualifying "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3); in Luke, Jesus boldly declares, "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours" (Lk 6:20). Why are the poor in such an advantageous position? It is because in the Bible the poor ones have only Yahweh to look to for their help; thus they are able to recognize the radical human dependency that is the condition of every creature before God. Wealth, on the other hand, creates the illusion of independence and self-sufficiency, a dangerous posture.

Going beyond human virtues like temperance, the Gospel demands a "higher righteousness." Jesus tells the rich young man who says he has observed all the commandments since childhood, "There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Lk 18:22). Jesus

demands detachment from wealth and prescribes the just use of monetary resources. As later Church teaching highlights, he asks that our preferential love go particularly to the poor. Included today with the poor and the exploited must be the whole natural world.

When the Church fathers took up the same theme of personal consumption, they had not only the spiritual dangers of wealth in mind but also the idyllic common life that Luke describes in the Acts of the Apostles. There all things were held in common and distributed according to everyone's needs (Acts 2:44-45). In his 1967 encyclical letter on the development of peoples, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI drew upon St. Ambrose to emphasize the universal purpose of all created things, a purpose not abrogated when certain things become someone's private property. St. Ambrose wrote:

You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have abrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only the rich.

St. Basil, in a much-quoted homily, once declared that the bread we clutch in our hands belongs to the starving, the cloak we keep locked in our closet belongs to the naked, the shoes we are not using belong to the barefooted. In these ways in the post-biblical age, Christians strove to keep a religious perspective on their use of material things.

CONSUMPTION IN LIGHT OF CHURCH TEACHING

Part of the background of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* was a journey he made to India, where he saw firsthand its wretched poverty. In that encyclical he proposed a fundamental human right to development, a right he saw as impeded by

the phenomenon of "overdevelopment" in some parts of the world. But even as he advocated the cause of development, Pope Paul was careful to give a distinctively Christian interpretation to what desirable development might be: it is, he said, the right not to "have" more but to "be" more.

Pope John Paul II built upon these insights when in 1991 he wrote *Centesimus Annus*. Although the occasion for this encyclical was the one hundredth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which started the whole modern phase of the Church's social teaching, John Paul focused on the new opportunities and dangers accompanying the collapse of the communist ideology. With market forces now unleashed across the world, he cautioned about consumer attitudes and lifestyles that could be improper and also damaging physically and spiritually. "It is not wrong to want to live better," he wrote; "what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being,' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself" (no. 36). "Equally worrying," he went on, "is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way" (no. 37).

Consumer choices and consumer demands are moral and cultural expressions of how we conceive of life. Is life all about working and spending and working more to have more to spend? Could not it rather all be about contemplation, what the pope calls a "disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude that is born of wonder in the presence of being and of the beauty which enables one to see in visible things the message of the invisible God who created them" (no. 37)?

THE GOOD LIFE

The question of defining more accurately what the good life is has become especially acute. In her helpful book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline in Leisure*, Juliet Schor documents how American households find themselves locked into an insidious cycle of work and spend. Households go into debt to buy products they do not need and then work longer than they want in order to keep up with the payments. She makes the telling observation that “shopping is the chief cultural activity in the United States.”

In 2005 the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families released study data collected during the previous four years about how the modern American family lives. The data revealed four disturbing trends: loss of frequent, significant contact among family members; less and less unstructured time; mounting clutter in the home; and constant flux in daily activity. Regarding the ever-increasing amounts of clutter, the study observed that the typical American family owns more than most Egyptian pharaohs in their heyday. The world has never seen consumption like this on such a scale.

The good life should allow people to work at things that are personally satisfying and expressive of themselves. In his encyclical on the subject, *Laborum Exercens*, Pope John Paul called this the “subjective” value of work. The good life should include also a certain leisure for, as Pieper wrote, leisure is the basis of human culture.

There should be opportunities to contribute to the common good as well as to pursue personal happiness. There should be time for family and friends, for worship and prayer. There also should be a certain asceticism to include a rediscovery of the benefits of fasting.

Fasting is part of the Gospel. It helps us to focus on the nourishment that can only come from God. It encourages good health and enhances our enjoyment of the good things of life, freeing us from a certain deadness in spirit. A re-emphasis on fasting may not only put us in touch again with a gospel ideal but also increase our ecological awareness as we sparingly use scarce earthly resources. Fasting in the modern world can have a strong social justice meaning.

It is becoming increasingly clear that our obsession with the automobile and our over-dependence upon limited world oil resources is fostering great political and economic instabilities throughout the globe. Increased energy efficiency and less energy gluttony must become part of our public policy for global survival.



Thomas Merton in his *Thoughts in Solitude* raised the specter of the desertification of life on this planet. The desert, he wrote, once was a privileged place for the encounter with God because there humanity could find nothing to exploit. “Yet look at deserts today. What are they?” He said they have become testing grounds for bombs as well as the locations for glittering towns “through whose veins money runs like artificial blood.” “The desert moves everywhere. Everywhere is desert,” Merton concluded.

Pope Benedict XVI, in the homily given at his Mass on inauguration as pope, also raised the specter of the deserts that are growing on the planet, deserts that are both spiritual and material. The pope said that it cannot be a matter of unconcern that so many of our contemporaries are living in the desert. “There is the desert of

poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment. . . . The external deserts in the world are growing,” he asserted, “because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction” (www.vatican.va).

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It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence.

Pope John Paul II,
1990 World Day of Peace Message,
no. 8, on www.vatican.va
