



Caring for God's Creation

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The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem of Consumption

by Monsignor Charles Murphy

“Christianity is not about feeding yourself. Christianity begins with what people do with the leftovers.” —Professor McKenna, whose field is social ethics, alluded to the biblical miracle of the sharing of the loaves and the admonition that the leftover fragments be gathered (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 by-products 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 over-consumption and the fundamental requirement of love of neighbor; and, finally, the recent social teachings of the Church based upon both 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 for 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 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 for living on earth and were incorporated by the church fathers in their syntheses of Christian life.

Among the 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 is 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. This 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*, contrasts 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 argues. "Out of the whole Christian tradition," Schumacher concludes, "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 that means knowing when "enough is enough."

The Gospel and Wealth

When Pope John Paul II paid his first visit to the United States in 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 and 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 peoples is the first condition for 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 notable in the parable is that the rich man is condemned because he is rich. Enclosed in his world of wealth and 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; he continues to regard Lazarus as a social inferior and begs Abraham to dispatch Lazarus with a message of warning to his brothers. Abraham explains that this is impossible: the "abyss" between Lazarus and the rich man is "too great" (Lk 16:19ff).

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 take up the same theme of personal consumption, they not only have 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 need (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 to 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 up in our closet belongs to the naked, the shoes that 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 Social Teaching

Part of the background of Pope Paul IV'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 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* that 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 writes; "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 goes 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."

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 calls this the "subjective" value of work. The good life should include also a certain leisure for, as Josef 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 reemphasis 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.

Thomas Merton in his *Thoughts in Solitude* raises the specter of the desertification of life on this planet. The desert, he writes, 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 says 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 concludes.

In her enlightening book, *Ancient Futures, Learning from Ladakh*, Helena Norbert-Hodge offers hopeful patterns for future living from the ancient ways of a once isolated Himalayan village. In Ladakh she encountered a society "in which there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually non-existent, communities are healthy and strong, and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle or affectionate with his mother or grandmother."

Perhaps we cannot save pockets of ancient wisdom like Ladakh from modern influence. What we can do is discover "ancient futures" in the abundant resources of Catholic social teaching and make our own choices for living based upon its wisdom.

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