

*Michael H. Crosby, O.F.M.Cap.*

## **Living Compassionately in a Consumer Culture**

I was asked to write this article while visiting Ann and Ted Bradley, friends in South Bend, Indiana. He is a cardiologist; she just received her master's in theology from Notre Dame. While society might consider them prosperous because of their professions and comfortable home, their own concerns have taken them beyond the consumer lifestyle. In fact, just before checking my voice mail and the request for this article while at their house, Ann had shown me materials she had received from a group called "Alternatives for Simple Living." In her effort to find information to help her and a small group in her parish address consumerism and live more compassionately, she had discovered "Alternatives" through a Web search.

I was delighted about this for two reasons. First, the Bradleys' concern about living non-violently and compassionately is a shared passion. Secondly, I was happy her interest had taken her to Alternatives in Sioux City, Iowa; I have been serving on its board for the last five years. As far as I know, Alternatives is the only religiously-oriented group whose purpose is to address the issues of living in a consumer culture in creative ways. Our Mission is to "equip people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly and celebrate responsibly."

Unfortunately, the more Ann talked about what she wanted for her group, I realized we at Alternatives would not be able to give her the materials she really needed. She said: "What you provide seems oriented toward people who have already made a commitment to live simply. How can we find ways of approaching people in the pews who have 'bought into' the culture, who don't even think about the effect our U.S. materialism has on people and the planet, and invite them to voluntary simplicity?"

This article is an attempt to address this concern. Following Ann's remark I will divide my remarks into three sections: (1) How does the average Christian "buy into" the consumer culture, (2) How does our consumer culture affect other people and the planet, and (3) How can we invite people not to live more simply but to a compassionate lifestyle?

I prefer to talk about living compassionately rather than promoting voluntary simplicity (VS) for one main reason: VS has already become a growth industry for producers and marketers who know how to capi-

talize on new trends. Years ago I remember reading a futurist-oriented magazine describe the marketing potential of the VS movement. Now it is estimated that 15 percent of our country's 77 million baby boomers constitute the "simplicity" market. There's money to be made for those concerned about voluntary simplicity; I want no part of this insofar as it only reinforces the exploitive nature of our consumer-form of capitalism.

With this disclaimer I would like to examine the three points raised by Ann. In the process I hope I might offer a pastoral approach to the issue of contemporary consumerism.

#### HOW THE AVERAGE CHRISTIAN "BUYS INTO" THE CONSUMER CULTURE

Before discussing what I mean by a "consumer culture," we need to agree on what we mean by *culture* itself as well as what the ethos of the culture of consumerism entails. Not having had the benefit of the definitions used in other articles in this issue, I'll have to rely on my own.

Culture is an integrated system of beliefs, values and traditions that are received and handed on in a way that defines the character of a people. These influence relationships among a society's members and the way resources will be allocated within systems that support and give expression to those beliefs, values and traditions. Culture serves as a society's glue. It gives people a sense of identity, meaning, cohesion, security and continuity.

The ethos of a people reflects its culture. A community's ethos involves those styles of operating, customs and practices that are not only considered acceptable but normative in the way they take on religious and ideological legitimation. An ethos reflects a network of habits, values, expectations and the like that give communities their unique character.

Since both culture and ethos are connected in ways that include dimensions related to the character of a people, what do we mean when we say a culture can be characterized as being a "consumer" culture?

A culture has become consumeristic when its members effectively define themselves in terms of their wealth (power, possessions and prestige) rather than their personal significance vis-a-vis others, be these "others" humans, living creatures or creation itself. When people define themselves by what they have (or don't have) rather than who they are and with whom they share this earth, they are no longer subjects but objects. They have become commodities. They are "homo consumens" rather than "homo sapiens." When the ideology of the culture's political economy serves this definition via advertising and the goals of education you have a system of consumerism. When this symbiotic relationship takes over the social forces of consumerism

people are dehumanized; they no longer are individuals or persons but a potential share in a certain demographic area or market.

The process of dehumanization inherent in a consumeristic culture begins for its members at their birth; it continues throughout life and into death. Thus we even have an “American” way of dying. The main vehicle for this gradual alienation of persons from each other and creation itself comes through the media. The media is the conduit through which marketers reach out to influence people to buy various goods and services. Most of these resources are “sold” to the consumer as life-enhancing and meaning-making. While people have been “worried about” and “running after” items that will satisfy cravings of the body from the beginning (see Matt 6:25-34), it seems that our consumer culture has found ways of enticing people at ever-younger ages. In an article showing how the youngest of our people have become seduced into the consumer culture, Leslie Kaufman wrote in *The New York Times* in 1999:

While children have always used fashion to fit in with their peers—demanding the Air Jordans that are de rigueur at the playground—their desire to match the clothing popular among older siblings and even adults is rising. The change is not so much that second-graders are asking for sexually suggestive clothing (though that happens), but that their taste is no longer the cute and innocent-like T-shirts with hearts and teddy bears. Instead, the desire is for the culturally clued in, like the henna-style tattoo necklaces that ape the stencils worn by the pop diva Madonna (1999).

#### *Unwitting Or Voluntary Addicts?*

While many people give voice to their frustration in being personally coopted and by having their loved ones manipulated by the consumer culture or find themselves “overspent” in material and spiritual ways, an increasing number of social critics now contend that our culture’s consumer lifestyle has not been the result of exploitation. The U.S.-brand of consumerism has found us eagerly embracing it. In his book *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism*, James B. Twitchell argues that, if we have found ourselves swimming in a consumer culture, it is because we have freely entered its waters. In the past it was argued that people were led into this lifestyle by manipulative advertisers. While the manipulation continues, we have not embraced it like innocent sheep led to the slaughter. Twitchell writes that consumers have not been victims in this process. In fact, we have eagerly participated. And while producers conspired, to be sure, we consumers have always been willing buyers. In effect, as Pogo would say, “We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.” The result of this,

Twitchell declares, is a transformation of the key controlling element in all cultures: shame. He notes: "In the last generation we have almost completely reversed the poles of shame so that where we were once ashamed of consuming too much (religious shame), we are now often ashamed of consuming the wrong brands (shoppers' shame)" (1999, 27).

Twitchell also makes the point that consumerism has become the operative religion in our culture. Where once communities organized themselves around the cathedral, we now congregate at the mall. Buying and selling become dominant rituals. The ideology behind this form of consumerism belies a form of idolatry in the way materialism has wrapped itself in packaging of religious overtones meant for spirituality and the soul. [We exchange the glory of God that is the human fully alive for images resembling ourselves as our way of salvation (see Rom 1:25).] Thus, decades ago, we had an ad campaign that promised redemption and liberation through transportation: "Datsun Saves; Datsun Sets You Free." Penelope Green wrote a 1999 piece in *The New York Times* showing how images of the spirit are being used in unnecessary consumer items related to cosmetics: "Last week I bathed in purple water ('I Trust' bubble bath, made by Philosophy), and powdered up with pink powder (Rebirth, by 5S, 'to renew the spirit and recharge the soul'). My moisturizer was Bliss (Chakra VII by Aveda, for 'the joyful enlightenment and soaring of the spirit'); my nail polish, Spiritual (by Tony and Tina, 'to aid connection with the higher self')" (1999).

When the average Christian in the U.S. has a priority identified with seeking wealth in consumer-identified forms of power, possessions and prestige, it is difficult to preach the gospel of seeking first the reign of God and God's way of justice in a way that "all these things will be given you as well" (Matt 6:33). In fact, in my own ministry of promoting socially responsible investing, I have found it virtually impossible. For over twenty years, in my efforts to find a pastoral approach to consumerism, I have been stymied by the addictive dimension of consumerism and how the people in the pews live under its effective control. The only viable alternative seems to be involved in reaching out to people when they bottom out (or to help them "bottom up" by becoming aware of its addictiveness and its affect on their lives). When people find their lives and others' becoming unmanageable they seem more open to alternative ways of living (Crosby, 1980:62-73).

#### HOW OUR CONSUMER CULTURE AFFECTS OTHERS (PEOPLE AND THE PLANET)

Production for the sake of consumption and consumption to increase production defines our political economy. According to Amitai W. Etzioni, production/consumption is the "central project" of our so-

ciety. We produce resources during our working hours to consume them during leisure time. In other words, James P. Gannon notes: "We Americans work hard so that we can play hard: earning more to spend more, driving ourselves so we can drive our cars, producing and consuming in an ever-intensifying cycle that keeps gobbling up a growing portion of the earth's limited resources." While this "central project" may have been so for the 2 percent who were served by serfs, now "we are all out there producing and consuming hard every day, executives and steelworkers alike, doing the proper American thing of filling our production quotas and sales goals so that we can fill our gas tanks, vacation homes and two-car garages" (Gannon, 1974).

Close to 90 percent of the U.S. workforce produces consumer goods and services either directly or indirectly. Direct consumer goods include foods, medicines, toys, furniture and cars. Indirect consumer goods are the products by which we make other products: tractors and other kinds of machinery, bottling machines and trucks and trains for hauling.

With its obsession for increased production and consumption, our society rarely concerns itself with issues related to distribution. However, domestically the consequences of our consumer-driven economic system witness to an ever-increasing disparity between rich and poor to the point where the wealthiest 2.7 million have as many after-tax dollars to spend as the poorest 100 million. The ratio has more than doubled since 1977, when the top 1 percent had as much as the bottom 49 million people. This means that the richest 2.7 million people and the 100 million at the other end of the scale will each have about \$620 billion to spend. Since the \$620 billion that must be shared by the 100 million comes to \$6,200 per person we know the consumer lifestyle is not a viable option for the poor, although poor people are as tempted to "buy into" the consumer culture as are the rich. Thus when we speak of "consumerism" we are actually speaking about the lifestyle that is promoted for everyone but is available only to the top 40 percent of the population who have 71.7 percent of the income.

When we consider the international scene the disparity between the rich and the poor is increasing as well. A 1999 World Bank study showed that the number of people living on less than \$1.00 a day appears to be rising. It reached 1.5 billion people by the end of 1999. The bank noted that, while 1.2 billion people lived on less than \$1 a day in 1987, this figure had risen to 1.3 billion by 1993. Assuming the proportion of people living in poverty will remain unchanged, the bank reached its figure of abjectly poor people at 1.5 billion as we start the new millennium. At the same time one in every three citizens of the U.S. describe themselves as heavily or moderately in debt because of their consumer choices.

*Implications of the Data*

The consequences of such disparity in the midst of the globalization of the world's economy via consumerism ("McDomination") are evident: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. When Christians are reminded of this fact the tendency for them is to reject the message (or messenger preaching it) or to squirm. In a special way, since white ethnic Catholics are among the new rich in the U.S.A., issues related to wealth and poverty are particularly difficult for Catholics in the pews to hear (to say nothing of those of us in the pulpits!).

This became clear to me as I watched Pope John Paul II on his first visit to the United States in 1979. As he entered Yankee Stadium in New York, October 2, the people were jubilant. However their effusiveness went flush when he said in his homily "It is not right that the standard of living of the rich countries should seek to maintain itself by draining off a great part of the reserves of energy and raw materials [to sustain their lifestyle] that are meant to serve the whole of humanity" (1979, 315).

In 1998 Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. While she praised the notion of the "free market" that is at the heart of capitalism, which has "the greatest capacity to create employment, income, wealth and investment," she also recognized its shadow side. She highlighted three consequences of such a system that is based on meetings peoples' unlimited wants rather than responding to their legitimate needs:

1) "We are creating a consumer-driven culture that promotes values and ethics that undermine both capitalism and democracy." Just consider the way corporations effectively control who the candidates will be in elections and how they alone have access to the huge media markets.

2) "Consumer capitalism" is undermining the "kind of work ethic [and] postponement of gratification . . . historically associated with capitalism." Since corporations seem to show no care for their workers (as evidenced in their downsizing and outsourcing), workers have little or no loyalty to the corporation. Furthermore the sense of "entitlement" (I worked for it; I deserve it) gives people the sense that they have a right to whatever they can get as soon as they can get it.

3) "Because we are dominated by commercial television, we have a relentless, unstoping message of consumer materialistic pleasure." The whole purpose of "commerical" television is not entertainment but to provide a meeting place for advertisers and consumers. The earlier that can happen in peoples' lives, the better.

The main consequence of consumerism is heart disease. But this disease is not something physically debilitating like hardening of the

arteries; it is the kind of spiritual sickness expressed in the biblical notion of “hardness of heart.” In contemporary language this is called indifference.

I believe that the capital sin of the rich, of people and a culture controlled by consumerism, might be expressed in a contemporary notion connected to sloth: indifference or *acedia*. Both reflect something that is chronic: the inability to care or show concern for the others (be these others creatures or the planet itself) in the wider community. Indifference and lack of care are the consequences when consumerism defines a culture. In his apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, Pope John Paul II spoke about a kind of religious indifference that has been “shaped by the climate of secularism and ethical relativism” (1994).

At the heart of indifference is apathy or lack of care. Consequently people defined by consumerism *just don't care* about others as long as they get what they have defined as theirs by right or entitlement. In commenting on the Congressional Budget Office's statistics noted above about domestic inequality, Alan Wolfe, director of the Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College wrote in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*: “If anything is a truism in American politics, it is that people do not care about income inequality” (1999).

#### HOW WE CAN INVITE PEOPLE TO A COMPASSIONATE LIFESTYLE

Since indifference or lack of care corrode the heart more than anything else, their opposites must be cultivated through care or compassion. Compassion is the way we identify with others (people and the planet), especially in their pain, in ways that celebrate the good and seek to overcome the harm. In many ways compassion is the summit of the spiritual life. Since consumerism is the antithesis to a life of the spirit, compassion is the antidote to consumerism. Following the “observe, judge and act” model of personal and social transformation, compassion has a cognitive element (“seeing”), an affective dimension (“caring”) and a behavioral component (“doing”). The pastoral question for a preacher or religious educator in an addictive consumer culture revolves around how these dimensions might be tapped to bring about greater awareness, care and conversion by people that might be translated into deeper compassion rather than more spending. How might these dimensions be tapped

##### 1. *Observe.*

Cognitive awareness of consumerism and its effects can be facilitated in two main ways: (a) either through intellectual stimulation or (b) by some kind of immersion experience that jars one's traditional categories and/or worldview.

I have met a significant number of people who have been shaken out of the lethargy that consumerism induces by a good dose of education. A conscientious professor can lead his or her students to deeper care. A good course in the social sciences that makes connections between having and not-having and why the "haves" have and the "not-haves" do not have and/or some other kind of stimulating educational experience has led people to change their lives. An economics course that asks the "whys" along with the "hows" can lead to questions about the effects of economic decisions on the poor. Since most education merely serves to facilitate entrance into the consumer culture, such alternative ways of educating can help provide alternative ways of "seeing."

Another way of making people aware comes when we use opportunities to help people make connections between their consumer choices and the ensuing consequences for others and the planet. I recall meeting a young man as both of us were on the way to the library at Marquette University. I was going to the library to do some research on "The Economic Basis of Cultural Violence." Coincidentally he was wearing a Nike baseball cap. I decided to capitalize on the opportunity. After getting his permission to ask him "something," I asked him where he got the cap ("Ohio"), how much it cost ("\$17.95"), where it was made ("Probably Asia someplace") and how much the workers were paid for making it ("Probably a dollar or less"). The fact that many college students have become aware of these connections has mobilized some of them in a sense of solidarity to insist on living wages for such workers.

A second key way to promote cognitive awareness about consumerism comes from various immersion experiences. These are connected with ways people geographically move from their own cultures to enter the world of others, especially society's victims. The main ways this geographic relocation takes place comes through "volunteering," "urban plunges" or "mission trips." How many people have made major changes in their lives as a result of being inserted in poverty cultures or because they walked among people living at society's margins? How many people have changed their lives by living with the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta or at Catholic Worker communities?

Such immersion experiences are most advantageous when they are accompanied by *conscientization*. Conscientization is the way reflection on a reality helps people make deeper, societal connections that address issues of justice and right order. Here mentors help them make connections between their safe, traditional world and this hidden, covered world.

## 2. Judge.

At the second stage in the conversion process, judging or the moral dimension is stressed. An examination of the motives that bring people

into volunteerism finds one theme continually recurring: "I've been given so much; it's payback time." A variation is "what return can I make for all the good that's been done to me." Consequently, when people do move beyond their comfort zone into alternative experiences, they might be more open to see how their day-to-day living cannot continue in the same way if they truly want to make a difference. Sometimes too the moral dimension is made in a good ethics class where a professor asks simple questions about "right" and "wrong" in ways that move people beyond the limited sense of entitlement as the only right.

This second way of helping people in the pews move from being unconcerned about participation in the consumer culture deals with their affective or emotional life. Often it gets expressed as: "If I were in their situation, I'd want someone like me to do something about it. I can't keep living in the way I've been doing." I have found that, when I personalize my own story and my own "sins" related to my lifestyle, people seem much more open to listen rather than being given a bunch of statistics about the rich getting richer and the poor poorer.

Another way to impact the affective dimension of people's lives is to "capitalize" on people's disease with their lives. Wealth is like health. Without either life will be miserable. However, having it still does not define happiness. Happiness comes not from meeting one's wants but from having few wants related to possessions and finding meaning in relationships. Such an approach may help when people become disillusioned with their jobs, their "friends" or being tired. It helps when we can show how they are but cogs in the wheel of capitalism and are meaningless unless they fit into that model. It also helps when people find themselves spiritually dying in their endless pursuit of the "more." It does not hurt to remind people of what Aristotle said in his *Politics* years ago about happiness: it "belongs more to those who have cultivated their character and mind to the utmost and kept the acquisition of external goods within moderate limits."

In her book *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer*, Juliet Schor shows how "we are impoverishing ourselves" as we pursue "a consumption goal that is inherently unachievable." Consumerism's corrosive and corrupting dimensions can be found in the increasing dis-ease people find in work when it is based on a style of life that sees the paycheck as something that enables people to spend more in the "national spending spree" of competitive emulation. In other words, our identity comes from taking on the images presented us by the culture and its adherents (1998).

### 3. Act.

The third step in transformation from consumerism to compassion involves behavior changes. While I have noted ways people have taken

action around “seeing” or the intellectual dimension of observing and “caring” or the moral dimension of judging, there are certain things people can do to change their behaviors from being defined by consumer choices for choices promoting life at all levels. Some people take Pax Christi’s “Vow of Non-Violence.” Others decide that they will make choices around their core needs (housing, transportation, food, clothing, education, health care and basic insurance) rather than their wants. Still others decide to develop their own brand of “sabbath” or “jubilee” economics. I know a man who had enough and was very adept at finding ways to exploit new opportunities to make money. He continued his pursuit but, instead of keeping the monies realized by his new ventures, turned the monies over to programs meant to help promote social justice and empower the poor.

While all of these may be commendable, they still do not a compassionate person, group or society make. Compassionate living finds us decentering ourselves from making choices that place ourselves at the center of the universe to considering how we are to live in ways that will heal the hurts of others, be these “others” people or the planet. It is extending our “compassion for the crowd” into our economic, political and religious decision-making. It involves resistance to the sin of consumerism and the creation of communities of compassion.

As we walk with people who have become tired of the “rat race,” it is important that we promote such alternative communities of compassion to support them when they make changes. In this I think of a young man I met in Louisville. He was on the fast track at General Electric. However, as he became disillusioned with the pace and dehumanization of the workplace there, he decided to leave it and enter secondary teaching. While this found him “leaving” his friends at work, he found even deeper meaning at his local Catholic parish which was committed to the promotion of compassion in the culture.

If our culture truly is addictive and if we have become a nation of addicts, we must learn to apply the wisdom of Twelve-Step spirituality as a way of “recovery.” At the heart of this process of being freed from the addiction is the role of community or support groups. At her talk in Davos, Hillary Rodham Clinton tried to offer ideas as to how the “consumer-driven culture” could be countered. She pointed to the benefit communities of care might offer when she suggested “schools, families, religious organizations, associations like scouting.”

If consumerism is the unique form of our culture’s capitalist model, the result will be the increase of individualism (survival of the fittest). Since this individualism undermines the possibility of community, the only effective antidote to consumerism will be viable, alternative communities of resistance and compassion. Supporting the efforts to resist the encroachments of the culture such communities will be known for

the ways they make and support life-choices that show their concern beyond their own interests to extend their care to all people and the planet itself.

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