**Reflections March, 2018 Vol 40 No 7**

**James J. Bacik**

**Pope Francis on Consumerism**

Pope Francis, who has served as the Bishop of Rome since March of 2013, is well known for his simple lifestyle. As a priest and bishop serving in Argentina, he lived in a small apartment, cooked his own meals and used public transportation. After his election as pope, he decided not to move into the ornate papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace but to take up residence in a three-room apartment on the second floor of the Vatican guest house, where he does his work, meets with people and eats in the cafeteria. People around the globe have been touched by the simple authenticity of the first pope to take the name Francis, honoring the saint from Assisi who embraced simplicity in solidarity with the poor.

Consistent with his lifestyle, Francis has often warned against the dangers of our consumerist culture, which promotes excessive consumption and makes an idol out of wealth and possessions. In a homily on the story in Luke (16: 19:-31) of the rich man who ignored the plight of the poor man, Lazarus, Francis points out that the man who enjoyed the pleasures of wealth has no name, suggesting that he lost everything that is really worthwhile for a truly fulfilling life. The rich man represents a “culture of indifference” which turns a blind eye to those banished to the margins of society. In another homily, the pope spoke of a society “intoxicated by consumerism,” which celebrates hedonism and extravagances while neglecting the message of Jesus, who calls us to a simple life filled with compassion and nourished by daily prayer.

In addition to his homiletic message, Francis provides an insightful analysis of the roots and consequences of the consumerism he finds so prevalent in the United States and other developed countries. Jorge Bergoglio was greatly influenced by his never completed doctoral studies on Romano Guardini (1885-1968), the Catholic priest scholar who wrote *The End of the Modern World*, cited eight times by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. From Guardini, Francis learned the ambivalence of modern technology, which has provided cures for illness, opportunity to travel, and access to information, but has also given us great power, including the power to destroy ourselves by nuclear weapons. It has created what the pope calls a one-dimensional “technocratic paradigm” that emphasizes rational, scientific control over every aspect of life. Applied to personal relationships, it turns individuals into commodities to be controlled or used for selfish purposes. In the economic realm, this mentality tends to accept every advance in technology that increases profits without concern for its impact on human beings**.** Francis insists: “When money, instead of men is at the center of the system when money becomes an idol, men, and women are reduced to simple instruments of a social and economic system, which is characterized, better yet dominated, by profound inequalities. So we discard whatever is not useful“ (2014 interview).

Francis urges a radical critique of consumerism and the technological paradigm from various perspectives. Morally, economic systems must be judged not just by internal factors, such as the ability to maximize profits, but by external transcendent criteria, especially serving the common good and the integral development of persons, especially the poor. Economics should be rooted in a solid anthropology which emphasizes the virtues of solidarity and the inherent dignity of all people. Christianity sets priorities that challenge consumerism: being is more important than having; cultivating virtue is more important than acquiring more material goods; and serving others is more important than satisfying every personal desire. Spiritually, Francis advocates moderating our desires, simplifying our lifestyles and attending to the less fortunate. The pope wants us to stand back and reflect on the role technology plays in our lives, recognizing the ways it reduces our freedom and fosters an enslaving consumerism.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, which integrates care for our earth and for the poor, Pope Francis himself provides us with guidance for the reflection he recommends. In the sixth chapter on ecological education and spirituality, the pope proposes a spirituality to counter the “competitive consumerism” fostered by the technocratic paradigm that equates freedom with being able to consume (203). This paradigm, spread by globalization, creates a “collective selfishness,” fosters personal greed, and promotes a “consumerist lifestyle” that leaves many people today feeling deeply dissatisfied and spiritually empty. The pope puts it this way: “The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume,” creating a lifestyle that ignores the common good and the needs of others (204). Reminding us that purchasing is always a moral act, the pope encourages us to reject the technocratic paradigm by simplifying our lifestyle and exercising compassionate care for our brothers and sisters (206).

The pope recognizes that those of us who have grown up in a “milieu of extreme consumerism,” will have to cultivate “sound virtues” that enable us to resist excessive consumption and be satisfied with fewer creature comforts and material goods. It is in the family setting, reinforced by the church and educational institutions that we can best develop those virtues that lead to a “responsible simplicity of life.” In the family, we learn to appreciate life, to respect nature, to use things properly, to control our greed, to express gratitude for gifts received and “to ask without demanding” (213). Francis puts special emphasis on “aesthetic education,” which teaches us to “see and appreciate beauty.” If we get into the habit of admiring beautiful things, we are less likely to abuse the goods of this world by excessive consumption (215). The pope envisions an integrated educational effort which helps us develop the virtues needed to challenge consumerism and to enjoy a more authentic and fulfilling lifestyle.

Francis goes on to propose an “ecological spirituality,” grounded on gospel teaching, which recognizes that “our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork” is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (217). This spirituality, that involves a conversion of heart, challenges “an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness” (219). In a paragraph (222) worthy of prayerful reflection, the pope recommends a “prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.” He invites us to reflect on “an ancient lesson” found in the Bible and other religious traditions: “Less is more.” In our affluent society, where we are constantly bombarded by new consumer goods ”that can baffle the heart,” Christian spirituality advises a fulfilling alternative: “be happy with little, cherish “each moment and each thing,” “stop and appreciate the small things,” be “spiritually detached from what we possess,” do not “succumb to sadness for what we lack,” and be “serenely present” to each reality, no matter how small.

The pope argues that a moderate, simple lifestyle, freely and consciously chosen, is liberating, freeing us to live “life to the full,” and to shed “unsatisfied needs.” The pope insists: “Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer,” such as “fraternal encounters,” contact with nature, service to others, enjoyment of the arts, and the practice of prayer (223).

According to Francis, we must cultivate the virtue of humility to counter the consumerist temptation to replace God with our own ego, “enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything” (224). We also need an inner peace, grounded on prayerful contemplation of the Creator God that enables us to live a “balanced lifestyle” that avoids “frenetic activity” and excessive consumption (225). Jesus taught us this “attitude of the heart” when he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. By his practice of “being present to everyone and everything,” Christ “showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us “superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers” (226). Francis encourages us to engage in the practice of praying before and after meals, which has many positive effects, “reminding us of our dependence on God for life,” strengthening the sense of gratitude for the gifts of creation, recognizing the workers who provide us with our food, and reaffirming “our solidarity with those in greatest need” (227).

The pope’s insightful analysis of the consumerism that pervades our society could prompt a reflective personal examination of conscience. In what ways, perhaps subtle, am I influenced by a consumerist mentality? Does my lifestyle include any examples of excessive consumption? Do I know anything of the “spiritual emptiness” that prompts excessive buying and consumption? Do I agree with the claim that purchasing is a moral act? Can I identify any specific ways that the technocratic paradigm influences my attitudes toward wealth and possession? What virtues do I need to resist the allure of consumerism? What did I learn from my family about how to enjoy a happy, fulfilling life? Am I able to stop the busy routine of my life and enjoy the beautiful things of life? How could education help us overcome the consumerist mentality that dominates our society? What would a simpler, more contemplative lifestyle look like for me and what concrete steps could I take to move in that direction? Do I find any practical wisdom in the Christian claim that a moderate and simple lifestyle contributes to a happier, more fulfilling and more serene life? What inspiration do I find in reflecting on the simple, engaged lifestyle of Jesus and his teaching on overcoming anxiety by trusting God, who takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field?

Pope Francis reminds us that all of our efforts to overcome consumerism and simplify our lifestyle are definitely worthwhile. “We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread” (212).