

Protecting God's Creation • Embracing Gospel Justice • Nurturing Spiritual Fulfillment

Consumption

Our Lenten practice this week is to reconsider our relationship to "stuff."

Buying Less, Wasting Less

Everything that lives must consume. But currently humans are consuming at an unsustainable pace—with damaging consequences for our society and our planet.

"Over a few short generations, we in the affluent fifth of humanity have become car drivers, television watchers, mall shoppers, and throwaway buyers." —Alan Durning, Sightline Institute

Too often we fail to consider the damaging consequences of our lifestyle on the planet and the impact this will have on our children. Many people are now becoming concerned about the greed, selfishness, and conspicuous consumption that have taken over our society. It crowds out meaningful time for family, community, and spiritual fulfillment.

The Bible has plenty to say about consumption. The tenth commandment is blunt: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." Jesus was unwavering: "Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (Matt 6:19).

In the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis finds kinship with the teaching of Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church. "He asks us to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which 'entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs.'"

For Christians, simplicity is not frugality or penny-pinching. Rather, it is a faith-inspired way of living that wants to be more responsible. The Gospel value of Christian simplicity motivates us to make consumer choices that respect the limitations of our planet's resources and make a good life possible for everyone. The hallmark of this lifestyle is outer compassion and inner contentment.

"If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

—Matthew 19:21

What the Church Is Saying

1. Dangers of Excessive Consumption

"We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society. . . . The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits."

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*

2. The Morality of Shopping

"It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral—and not simply economic—act. Hence *the consumer has a specific social responsibility*."

—Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*

3. Becoming Environmentally Responsible

"Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings."

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*

4. Beware of Selfishness

"Human beings let themselves be mastered by selfishness; they misunderstood the meaning of God's command and exploited creation out of a desire to exercise absolute domination over it. But the true meaning of God's original command, as the Book of Genesis clearly shows, was not a simple conferral of authority, but rather a summons to responsibility."

—Pope Benedict XVI

5. Care for the Common Good

"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. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness—both individual and collective—are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence."

—Pope St. John Paul II

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

—Luke 12:15



Imagine Earth divided equally among all of us. Each person would receive 4.2 acres. Now imagine that everything you need—food, energy, home, clothing, appliances, gadgets—must come from those 4.2 acres. But it takes 17.2 acres per person to maintain the average American lifestyle. Inspired by Pope Francis, Lent 4.2 is a new way of observing Lent that helps us care for God's creation by taking steps toward using only our fair share of its resources. Moving in the direction of 4.2 is essential for anyone walking in the footsteps of Jesus today. Information online at www.lent42.org.

Action Steps

Everyday life is sustained by materials from Earth: food, clothes, cell phones, appliances, and even toilet paper. The United States has 5 percent of the world's population but consumes about 30 percent of the world's resources and creates almost 30 percent of the world's waste. But there's only so much timber for paper, steel for cars, silica for computers, and other materials to go around. The more we consume, the less is available for others. In the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis reminds us to be "more conscious of the negative effects of certain lifestyles and models of production and consumption."

Christian simplicity doesn't mean giving up everything good. It does mean cutting back, reducing harm, choosing wisely, and acting on the Gospel value of simplicity whenever purchasing or disposing of anything.

From the suggestions, check the box of the steps you can take this week.



If There's Only One Thing You Can Do . . .

Stop unwanted junk mail. The average American adult receives sixteen pieces of junk mail a week. That's forty-one pounds each year, requiring 100 million trees and 28 billion gallons of water annually to produce and recycle. Forty-four percent goes into landfills unopened. Visit www.catalogchoice.org to stop unwanted junk mail. Less mailbox clutter means saving natural resources, less pollution, and less waste.



Avoid Unnecessary Consumption

- ☐ Shop less. Resist the urge to shop as entertainment. Replace recreational shopping with Sabbath time.
- ☐ Ask when shopping, "Do I really need you?" Then wait twenty-four hours to eliminate impulse buying. Craving drives much of our consumption, depleting God's creation.
- ☐ Reuse stuff. Our disposable culture encourages tossing out what could be easily fixed or reused.
- ☐ Use paper responsibly. Conserve, print on both sides, set default margins narrower, and use recycled paper.

Prayer



*O Giver of Life,
you are the source of all creation.
Through the healing power of Jesus
you brought sight to the blind.
Open our eyes to the pervasive
consumerism in this country.
Free us from its grip
so we might enjoy spiritual freedom.
Teach us to use your creation
with moderation and compassion
for those who do not have enough.
You are our hope. Amen.*

The Average American

- Consumes twice as much as they did fifty years ago.
- Sees more advertisements in one year than people fifty years ago saw in a lifetime.
- Spends three to four times as many hours shopping as Europeans do.
- House size has doubled since the 1970s.
- If everybody consumed at US rates, we would need four or five planets.

- ☐ Clean closets. Discover what's forgotten. Donate anything not used for two years.

Buying: What Comes Into Your Home

- ☐ Buy conscientiously. Understand the environmental and social impacts of products you purchase with *The Better World Shopping Guide*.
- ☐ Buy in bulk. Reduce packaging waste that fills the planet with trash.
- ☐ Buy products from environmentally and socially responsible companies. Is the company a polluter or a good steward of God's creation?
- ☐ Buy fair-trade products to ensure a just wage for workers and artisans around the world.

Trash: What Goes Out of Your Home

- ☐ Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. First, reduce your consumption. Second, use reusables, forgo disposable paper napkins, towels, and cups. Third, recycle by returning waste naturally to Earth. Overall, only 34 percent of waste is recycled in the United States. We throw away approximately 161 million tons of material each year, which amounts to about 3 lb. of garbage per person per day. We can do better at recycling.
- ☐ Pay bills online. This minimizes paper consumption, saves trees, and reduces fuel consumed by vehicles that transport paper checks.
- ☐ Join the Zero Waste movement, an anti-garbage strategy.

Steps Continued

1. Visit the website of the Center for a New American Dream. Learn to consume responsibly in order to protect Earth and live justly.
2. Learn about Caritas International and its mission to serve the poor and to promote charity and justice throughout the world.
3. Watch a twenty-minute online video, *The Story of Stuff*.
4. Raise humans, not consumers. Visit the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood and learn to prevent the manipulation of our children's values by advertising.
5. Study garbology. On average, each person in the United States generates 1,600 pounds of trash each year. Find out what happens to your garbage.

All this and more available online at www.Lent42.org.