

John Paul II and the Problem of Consumerism

BY RAYMOND J. DE SOUZA

Pope St. John Paul II places his teaching about economics and the social order within the framework of his Christian personalism, in which the human person is the starting point of his analysis and the primary criterion of his evaluation. He has made the cornerstone of his entire pontificate the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that the true nature of the human person is fully revealed in Jesus Christ and that every person has a fundamental vocation revealed by the commandment to love, to give himself to God and to others. John Paul's approach is that of a pastor who asks whether the social order recognizes the human person for what he is and whether it renders him more or less free to live out his human vocation.

It is in this context that John Paul's repeated and strong condemnations of consumerism should be understood. He regards consumerism as a threat to the freedom of the human person to live according to the higher demands of love rather than to the lower pull of material desires. It is important to understand why the pope sees such a danger in consumerism and how this is related to questions of economic liberty, which the pope has endorsed as an integral part of human freedom. It is a subject in need of greater attention than it has been given to date, so it might be useful to begin by asking some preliminary questions.

Every human person has a dual role in the economy. He is both a (potential) producer and a consumer. John Paul's social teaching has emphasized both roles. In the sphere of production, he has emphasized that only economic liberty can allow man's creativity to be exercised, a creativity that leads to the twin goods of the creation of wealth and the development of the personality through work. This approach grounds man's creativity in the biblical account of Creation, which is the starting point for Christian anthropology. John Paul takes this approach in his "theology of work," when he writes that man—created in the image of God—is called to be creative in exercising dominion over the physical world.

When John Paul endorses "capitalism" or the free economy, as he prefers to call it, it is because it best allows for the freedom the human person needs to exercise his creativity. In addition, the free economy encourages producers to be attentive to the needs of others—namely, their customers—and to cooperate with others, in freedom and trust, in order to meet those needs in an efficient way. In short, it encourages economic actors, as producers, to be of service to their neighbors.

The "Same Basic Mistake"

It was from this perspective that John Paul diagnosed the fatal weakness of communism. Communism treated the person as only a factor of production, an object to be controlled and not as an acting subject in his own right. Communism did not allow for the freedom necessary for the person to be creative and to give himself to others. It is striking, therefore, that the pope diagnoses consumerism to be another manifestation of the "same basic mistake" in which the "affluent or consumer society" reduces man to an object of material things (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 19).

John Paul is not saying that communism and the free economy suffer from the same basic mistake, otherwise he could not have endorsed the free economy as the best hope for the development of nations. Yet within the context of the system of economic liberty—a good in its own right—there arises the potential for persons to give in to a consumerist way of living that does make the same materialist mistake of communism—not on the side of the person as a producer but on the side of the person as a consumer.

What is consumerism? It is not very easy to define, but a good, working definition might be that consumerism is a way of living in which the person, at least in practice, makes consumer goods the object of his heart's desire; that is, they become the source of his identity and the goal toward which his life is oriented. Consumption is obviously necessary—there would be no economy without consumers. Consumerism arises when the person becomes—in his own mind or in the view of others—primarily an object that consumes solely for himself, rather than a subject who uses material goods in order to give himself to others. For the person to be reduced to a consuming object does indeed repeat the same basic mistake of reducing him to a producing object. The human person whose nature is fully revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be treated—or, as is often the case with consumerism, cannot treat himself—as an object, when in reality he has been given the human vocation to love.

Richard John Neuhaus provides a felicitous definition of consumerism in *Doing Well and Doing Good*, his commentary on *Centesimus Annus*:

Consumerism is, quite precisely, the consuming of life by the things consumed. It is living in a manner that is measured by having rather than being. As Pope John Paul II makes clear, consumerism is hardly the sin of the rich. The poor, driven by discontent and envy, may be as consumed by what they do not have as the rich are consumed by what they do have. The question is not, certainly not most importantly, a question about economics. It is first and foremost a cultural and moral problem requiring a cultural and moral remedy.

Whether or not consumerism afflicts the affluent more or less than others is a practical question that needs to be addressed later. But Neuhaus here locates the problem of consumerism where John Paul locates it, in the sphere of culture, and specifically in the relationship of authentic human freedom to the possession of material goods. Neuhaus alludes to the emphasis in the pope's teaching of the primacy of the "person over things" and of "being over having."

What is needed therefore is an examination of the relationship between the free economy as it is currently lived out and the culture of consumerism. Consumerism may well be a cultural phenomenon, but the economic order is not insulated from culture, and neither is culture unaffected by economics. It is necessary, then, to ask whether the affluent, consumer-oriented societies in which we live pose a constant temptation of living according to "having" rather than "being." This is not, at least from a moral point of view, a minor problem that is outweighed by the wealth-creation benefits of free enterprise. Consumerism is a major moral threat to the salvation of souls—the primary concern of religious thinkers. John Paul teaches that what is at stake is man's fundamental vocation to give himself to others and to God, and a consumerist society that makes this more difficult is a society "alienated" from its true purpose.

Set Free for Freedom

The challenge is to embrace economic liberty without putting it in the service of corrupting the human vocation. As Saint Paul puts it: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:5). According to John Paul, consumerism constitutes a form of slavery, which the pope does not hesitate to liken to drug abuse or pornography. It is not the possession of goods alone, or the desire for a better life that is sinful, but rather “... in possessing without regard for the ordered hierarchy of goods one has [and] ... the subordination of goods and their availability to man’s being and true vocation” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 28).

Man has been set free in Christ in order to be more fully himself and to give of himself to God and to others. Any other good that replaces that end makes man less free to be truly human. Those “other goods” include things that are evil in themselves, such as drugs or pornography, but they also include things that are good in themselves, like the many goods we need to survive and flourish as corporeal creatures.

Man has been set free for freedom. John Paul insists that economic freedom is part of that freedom, but only part. Even in recommending “capitalism” or the “free economy” as the best option for economic organization, he cautions:

But if by “capitalism” is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed with a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative. (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 42)

John Paul’s personalism emphasizes that it is the whole person—created and redeemed by God—who is free, not just the political person or the economic person. The core of the free person is the ethical and religious actor, and economic freedom is good insofar as it remains part of that larger freedom. When it becomes absolutized and becomes the dominant organizing principle of personal actions and social relations, then man becomes oppressed by his own economic liberty. The “juridical framework” spoken of here is necessary for the smooth operation of economic relations and for a just society. It is not clear what juridical measures, if any, might be applicable in the case of consumerism, but the point remains. Capitalism requires a “framework” that places economic liberty at the service of a comprehensive freedom that is ethical and religious at its core. That “framework” needs also to be cultural, including formation in the proper use of material goods. The necessity of that framework for pastors who wish promote economic liberty cannot be overstated. Without it, the pope’s assessment of capitalism is “certainly negative.”

Yet the answer cannot be—first on a practical level but also on a deeper theological level—to abandon freedom, including economic liberty. In his book *Soul of the World*, George Weigel has posed the question quite starkly:

Can the new democracies [in east central Europe] develop societies that provide for the free exercise of human creativity in the workplace, in politics, and in the many fields of culture without becoming libertine in their public moral life? Will “consumerism”—that is,

consumption as an ideology—replace Marxism-Leninism as the new form of bondage east of the Elbe River? Has it already done so in the West? If not, how can we prevent its triumph? If so, how can we repair the damage and put the free society on a firmer moral foundation?

If we are to speak of our consumer societies as being in “bondage,” how might we seek liberation? An analogy might be drawn to the issue of welfare, where religious thinkers considered how welfare affected the persons who received it: Did it expand or contract their ability to develop as persons who embrace the responsibility to live freely? The starting point was not economics but, rather, the effect on the human person, which the church insists is the “foundation, cause, and end of every social institution” (*Mater et Magistra*, n. 218—19). The ultimate “solution” to the problem of consumerism is conversion of heart, for only that can change the object of the heart’s desire. But a complete account of economic liberty from a Christian perspective needs to inquire as to what specific dangers can arise in the free economy with respect to consumerism. Some areas suggest themselves as good starting points.

Four Preliminary Questions

Does economic policy contribute to consumerism? Is the task of combating consumerism wholly the responsibility of private sector culture-forming institutions, notably churches, universities, publishing houses, movie studios, and the like? Or are there relevant public policy measures? To employ an analogy, divorce is quite clearly a cultural problem, but recent studies have examined the deleterious effects of law on the incidence of divorce. We need to ask the same about economic policy. For example, many economic-stimulation policies focus on encouraging greater consumer spending, especially on big-ticket items. Are policies that favor consumption rather than saving subject, therefore, to moral criticism in light of the danger of consumerism?

Would there be an economic price to pay if consumerist attitudes declined? If large numbers of people heed the advice to live more simply, save more, and give more to charity, would economic growth suffer? The theological defense of capitalism has always maintained that the economy benefits from virtuous behavior (e.g., hard work, farsightedness, intelligent creativity, self-discipline, professional competence, fair treatment of customers and workers, truthfulness in advertising); might consumerism be the one vice from which capitalism benefits? If so, is the Christian willing to accept lower economic growth, if that were the consequence of a decline in consumerist attitudes?

What forms of countercultural witness are effective in resisting consumerism? That our culture is consumerist is evident. In this milieu, could Christians provide a countercultural witness by, for example, refusing to shop on Sunday or by choosing not to replace older goods that are serviceable though no longer fashionable? One also thinks of the couples who make material sacrifices in order to have large families, choosing, in a particularly vivid way, in favor of being over having.

Do high levels of consumption lead to consumerism? Father Neuhaus earlier answered “No,” and that seems right, otherwise a prosperous economy would constitute a near occasion of sin in itself. How many possessions one has is, in a certain sense, independent of how much one is

attached to those goods as defining his identity (either presently with goods he has or in the future with goods he does not yet have but desires). It is, of course, possible to be very rich and to be a saint, as history teaches us with Saint Louis of France, Saint Charles Borromeo of Milan, and Saint Thomas More of England. But it is also possible to walk away from Jesus sadly, as does the rich young man of the Gospels, leading Jesus to comment about the difficulty of the camel passing through the eye of the needle (Matt. 19:16—26; Mark 10:17—27; Luke 18:18—27). It is a grave warning. Is it sufficiently received as such by Christians living in rich societies?

One of John Paul II's social teaching achievements has been to ground the Church's traditional teaching on the productivity of man, present throughout the modern corpus of social teaching, in his distinctive theological personalism. That contribution has been commented upon and made accessible to an audience familiar with economic scholarship. The same needs to be done for his equally important teaching on the role of man as consumer, and the problem of consumerism. In a post-Communist world, it is part of the challenge of freedom.

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