

Every Day CATHOLIC

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The Christian Consumer— A Contradiction?

by Jim and Susan Vogt

Q: What do bottled water, home computers and cell phones have in common?

A: None of them were common a generation ago. Today, most of us take these items for granted. And they do make life easier—much of the time. However, with more choices and modern conveniences also come more complexity and moral dilemmas. How can things so helpful be bad, we ask?

Bottled water was once a traveler's safeguard against impure water. But plain tap water in U.S. municipalities meets higher standards than bottled water and eliminates the production and disposal wastes of throwaway bottles. Sure, water is an improvement over soda to quench a thirst, but is it that difficult to put tap water into a reusable container or take a water jug to a picnic?

Home computers—love 'em when



they're working, curse them when they bring spam or a virus or crash. And that doesn't include separating the beneficial information from the pornography or marketing scams that computers bring into our homes.

Yes, a cell phone is a wonderful safety device when the car breaks down on a lonely road. Yes, it helps family members keep in touch and saves extra trips to the store. And yes, it causes car accidents,

distracts from face-to-face conversation and is annoying to bystanders.

Of course, these are only a sampling of modern conveniences that shape our lifestyles. How did we function without DVD players, microwave ovens and the Internet, much less iPods? Well, in some ways better and in some ways worse. Certainly, a lot of paper was used on snail mail, and parents couldn't always find their teenagers. (Of course, calling a cell phone doesn't verify *where* a teen is.) The point is not that we should throw all modern conveniences into our overloaded landfills but that we should wisely use modern technology and not just buy because we can.

Guard against greed

These are subjective and thorny lifestyle decisions. Jesus isn't posted at the check-out lane prompting us on the morality of our purchases. Yet, Jesus does speak to us

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When Jesus calls the poor 'blessed,' he is not praising their...poverty, but their openness to God.... When he summons disciples to leave all and follow him, he is calling them to share his own radical trust in the Father and his freedom from care and anxiety.

—*Economic Justice For All*, #50



MOVIE MOMENTS



CNS PHOTO/PARAMOUNT

Last Holiday

by Frank Frost

There comes a moment in *Last Holiday* when Georgia Byrd (Queen Latifah) realizes there are some things that money can't buy. The imperious and—until now—uncaring hotel clerk Ms. Gunther (Susan Kellermann) has just asked, "Why are you here with all these terrible people? You should be with someone you love."

"All these terrible people" happen to

be among the world's richest and most powerful. They are at a luxurious winter resort where Georgia has gone after discovering that she has only three weeks to live.

Georgia hails from a poor New Orleans neighborhood where she has watched her pennies and calories to live a responsible life on her department-store clerk's salary. A scrapbook she calls her "Book of Possibilities" sums up her life and dreams. In it are photos of food she cooks but won't let herself eat, a famous chef she wishes to meet and Sean (LL Cool J), a co-worker she dreams of marrying but is afraid to talk to. So when she is diagnosed with brain tumors and imminent death, she sets out to blow her savings on an over-the-top vacation.

At first glance, this might seem a materialistic response. But what transpires is quite different. Her eye for beauty, respect for people, love for food and appetite for life transform the people

around her. Hotel guests are first attracted to her because she appears powerful and wealthy. These include a congressman, her state's senator and Kragen (Timothy Hutton)—the owner of the store that employed her. By the time Kragen tracks down the "truth" about her and un masks her as a "nobody," it doesn't matter. She has won them over by who she is at her core and what she teaches them all—that your self-worth doesn't depend on what you own.

Next time you watch *Last Holiday*, ASK YOURSELF:

In her running dialogue with God, what do you suppose Georgia Byrd was saying at movie's end?

Which character, who experienced a change through exposure to Georgia's values, was your favorite? Why?

Where do you find *your* self-worth?

PUTTING SHOES ON THE GOSPEL

Bob Waldrop

by Joan McKamey

Friends and family tease, "Bob, if you had a wife, she wouldn't let you do this." But that doesn't deter Bob Waldrop.

Bob's voluntary simplicity, involvement in the Catholic Worker movement and environmental efforts have roots in growing up on an Oklahoma farm, being a homeless runaway in the 1960s and experiencing poverty in the 1980s. At 55, he says his lifestyle is still "evolving."

"In 1997, I thought I might enter a religious order and went to Kansas City, Missouri. That didn't work out, but I got involved with the Holy Family Catholic Worker House there," he told *Every Day Catholic*. He is attracted to the Catholic Worker movement by "the combination of the works of mercy with the works of justice. We feed the hungry, but we also ask, 'Why are there so many hungry people?'"



and then we act to reduce the numbers of the hungry." Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and the "Four Churchwomen" martyrs in Central America inspire him, as do St. John Chrysostom, Matthew 25 and Mary's Magnificat.

Bob founded the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House in Oklahoma City in 1999 and serves as its leader. He also heads the Oklahoma Food Cooperative and directs music at Epiphany of the Lord Catholic Church. Why name the Catholic Worker House for Oscar Romero? Because, Bob says, he "spoke boldly to the ruling authorities of his day in defense of the poor and in favor of peace."

So, just what does voluntary simplicity mean? "We get about 80% of our household's food directly from farmers or from our own gardens," Bob boasts. He enjoys the great gas mileage of his 1993 Geo Metro. He also takes the bus when possible. He continues, "We recycle everything we can and compost household organic

food waste. We rarely buy new clothes; we shop at thrift stores. We don't have a dishwasher. We do have a clothes washer, but we hang our clothes out on the line to dry—or inside on racks if the weather is bad." He also did extensive work on his home to improve energy conservation. He says, "I think the Church's teachings on the care of creation are very important. Social justice is also an important aspect. One reason the poor have less is because the rich have more."

Bob seems to take all this in stride. He attests, "The lifestyle itself isn't complicated. We have done everything gradually, and we integrate things into our routine before going on to something else." When asked what he gains from these efforts, he answers, "Peace of mind, authenticity and faithfulness."

When challenged by others about the impact of his choices, like the time someone said, "So what if you drive a Geo Metro? My truck will eat up everything you save," Bob responds, "Catholic Workers are not required to be successful; we are required to be faithful. Living this way helps us show others that it can be done."

Consider the Lilies

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: Create a prayer space with a Bible, a candle and paper or silk flowers. Attach a task of the gospel life to each flower (e.g., conserve energy, volunteer, abstain from shopping for a week).

OPENING PRAYER

“Good and Gracious God, rouse my pampered spirit into a new awareness of blessing. Give me eyes that see what is essential and what is not. Enkindle my desire to live in simplicity and holy order, so that life’s clutter never obscures your living Word. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these....” (Matthew 6:24-34).

Ask: What word or phrase from the Scripture speaks to me today? Share or write in a journal what this passage means to you.

INTERCESSIONS

Response: O, God, hear us.

We pray for...

those who go to sleep hungry...

the marginalized, the lonely, the lost sheep who wander from you...

those who seek happiness in possessions...

the ability to discern wants from needs...

the desire and inspiration to live simply...

RITUAL

“Loving God, I come to you with a desire for a new way of living. Guide me to make changes in my life.”

Take a flower from the prayer table. Accept this task in your effort to live a gospel lifestyle. Place the flower where it will remind you to live a just and simple life.

Pray for others in your group as they come forward. (If you are alone, pray for those without the basic necessities of life.)

BLESSING

“Let us go forth as living witnesses of what we have heard. May we have the courage to rely on God for all we need. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

PASSING ON THE FAITH



SHUTTERSTOCK / ALLEN LEE LAKE

appliances, designer furniture and everything needed to make their bungalow look like a magazine photograph. These beautiful things were acquired on credit.

A response

Many new families presume that a well-equipped, beautifully decorated home is a necessity. The days of starting out with secondhand things and purchasing items only when we can afford them is passé. Credit and comfort are “essentials” in the first-world mentality. The millennial generation, those born after 1980, seem impatient to gain a lifestyle that their parents had to work hard for. The result is a consumer culture that is racking up debt at an alarming rate.

As followers of the gospel, we note a contradiction between the consumer message and the message of Jesus. We are challenged to live simply and to not worry about storing up treasures on this earth. We have our eyes on treasures that are invisible to the eye. However, the contrast between what Jesus teaches and the way we live creates a constant tension. Too often we buy into the

mentality that we need this gadget, that timesaving appliance or another pair of shoes. The reality is that we *want* rather than *need* them because we have been convinced by marketers and the media that we deserve them and cannot survive without them.

As we raise our children in this consumer society, we need to step back and examine our values. What are we modeling by the consumer choices we make? Do we spend money we do not have? Do we have too many things and even duplicates of things? Are there possessions that actually possess us?

I suggest a great resolution for anyone wanting to lead a simple life with gospel values: Give or throw away three things each day. The joy in this is that your family will begin to think twice about what they need and what they want. As the closets and cupboards get sorted and simplified, a new sense of order takes hold in the house. This exercise restores a right order in a subtle way that is not an overwhelming task. Your life will be slowly transformed into a lifestyle that better reflects gospel values.

Having It All

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Bridget and Sean have just married. They unpack the wedding gifts and begin to create their own little love nest. Like many newlyweds, they want a perfect life together, so they begin by furnishing their home with state-of-the-art

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through Scripture. Let's start there. He said, "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions" (Luke 12:15) and "Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matthew 6:26). And let's not forget that disturbing passage about the rich young man whom Jesus told, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor" (Matthew 19:21).

How are we to take these challenging words of Jesus? To say they are only historical metaphors that are unrealistic for life today seems intellectually dishonest. Likewise, to quit our jobs, sell our possessions and move to Haiti (assuming we have saved enough money for airfare) seems irresponsible. After all, we might have a family to support, a job that contributes to the common good and people who depend on us.

Living simply

We propose focusing on the spirit of Jesus' words and keeping close enough to the materially poor to let them check our conscience for rationalizations. We suggest:

- **Travel light through life.** Free yourself and your household of unnecessary possessions and clutter. We asked ourselves whether we really need cable TV, two cars, three cell phones and four computers. We only owned one of these items (a car) when we started our family and somehow were quite happy. We nixed cable TV, ditched one car since we both work from home, will be down to one cell phone when our youngest leaves home, and will lose two computers when our two young adults move out—soon, we think. It's good for the soul, the psyche and our pocketbooks to try living with less.

- **Evaluate the impact of purchases on God's creation.** How much of the earth's resources are used in overpackaging items to make them look bigger or better? A

hybrid car may cost more but puts less stress on the earth's resources. Of course, driving less is even better, and walking makes workouts at the gym less necessary. The trade-off is usually time. Walking or taking public transportation may give you time to pray or just decompress—if you don't miss your stop.

- **Resist advertising.** Just because we can afford something, do we need it? Be a savvy consumer. Realize that the purpose of marketing is to persuade us that we will be happier if we part with our money. Remember the birds in the sky? True happiness usually comes from the contentment of a life well-lived in harmony with God's design, not by accumulating the most toys.



SHUTTERSTOCK / TATIANA POPOVA

- **Recover values like frugality.**

Frugality comes naturally to some and is a stretch for others. It is not primarily a good in itself but rather a way to save room for others at the table. To follow Jesus' words to the rich young man, consider that whatever we have, it is probably a little more than we need.

Take one more step to let go. At the same time, beware of becoming too proud of one's "poorness" lest you become self-righteous.

- **Buy for the future.** Buying for the future may sound contradictory to traveling light and moving toward a simpler lifestyle. Cheapness, however, is not always a virtue. Sometimes buying a bike that will last or food that is more nutritious may be more expensive in the short run but economical in the long. Quality and nondisposable goods don't have to be replaced as often, and sometimes beauty itself is worth the price as it lifts both our souls and the income of the artisan.

The bottom line is that we have to get beyond thinking our worth is counted by how much we consume. We must make our lifestyle consistent with the spirit of the Gospels. When Jesus promised himself as "living water" (John 7:38), we don't think he had bottled water in mind!



Jim and Susan Vogt have four adult children and live in Covington, Kentucky. Jim directs the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. Susan speaks and writes on marriage, parenting and spirituality. Learn more at www.SusanVogt.net.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

What is your attitude about living more simply? What experiences have shaped your attitude?

How can you travel more lightly through life? Are any of your possessions weighing you down? Causing anxiety? Consuming you?

Make a commitment to simplify your life in one way this month, e.g., start to recycle, walk or bike instead of drive, sacrifice a luxury and donate the savings, clean out a closet and give away the things you no longer need or use.

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