

BEING CONSUMED

Economics and Christian Desire



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V. Conclusion

Is this a call, then, for state intervention in the market? No. It is a false dichotomy to limit the possibilities to either requiring state intervention or blessing the unfettered reign of corporate power. Neither state intervention nor its absence ensures the freedom of a market. There is no point in making broad utilitarian claims about the benefits of “the free market” as if we could identify a market as “free” merely by the absence of restraint on naked power. Giving free rein to power without ends is more likely to produce unfreedom than to produce freedom. There is simply no way to talk about a really free economy without entering into particular judgments about what kinds of exchange are conducive to the flourishing of life on earth and what kinds are not. Though my purpose in this chapter has not been to go into detail about the specific ends of human work and material possessions, the Christian tradition provides a wealth of reflection on these matters.⁵⁵ I believe it would be counterproductive to expect the state to attempt to impose such a direction on economic activity. What is most important is the direct embodiment of free economic practices. From a Christian point of view, the churches should take an active role in fostering economic practices that are consonant with the true ends of creation. This requires promoting economic practices that maintain close connections among capital, labor, and communities, so that real communal discernment of the good can take place. Those are the spaces in which true freedom can flourish.

55. For example, the Catholic social encyclicals *Laborem Exercens*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and others.

DETACHMENT AND ATTACHMENT



In January 2005, a twenty-year-old Nebraska college student auctioned off advertising space on his forehead. The winning bid was over \$37,000. For that princely sum, the young man spent thirty days with a temporary tattoo on his forehead extolling the virtues of a snoring remedy. Although his actual forehead would be seen by a limited number of people, the manufacturer of the product hoped to benefit by the worldwide publicity that the human ad campaign generated. The human billboard himself was quoted as saying, “The way I see it I’m selling something I already own; after thirty days I get it back.”¹

It would be easy to approach this story — and the subject of this chapter, consumerism — with some stern finger-wagging about the greed of people these days. “People will do anything for money. Everybody wants more, and nobody wants to share with those who have less. The world would be a better place if we all

1. “Man auctions ad space on forehead,” BBC News, 10 Jan. 2005, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4161413.stm>. For information on the winning bid, see Ina Steiner, “No Snooze for this eBay Auction: Ad Space Wins \$37,375 Bid,” AuctionBytes.com, January 25, 2005, at: <http://auctionbytes.com/cab/abn/yos/moi/125/507>.

shared." And so on. But what makes consumer culture worth talking about from the point of view of moral theology is not primarily greed. The Nebraska man pulled this stunt to pay for his college education, not apparently out of plain greed. What is interesting about this story for our purposes is the way it illustrates something more basic about a consumer culture: its ability to turn virtually anything into a commodity, that is, into something that can be bought and sold.

The Christian tradition has always condemned greed (also called avarice). Jesus denounces storing up treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19-21); Paul attacks greed as a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5); Pope Gregory the Great included avarice in his list of seven deadly sins, which would serve over the centuries as a catalogue of perils for the soul to avoid.² Greed usually signifies an inordinate attachment to money and things. We think of the miser counting his money and storing it in the bank, or we picture the person reveling in her possessions, obsessed with stuffing her big house or houses with more things. But this view of greed does not really capture the spirit of our consumer economy. Most people are not overly attached to things, and most are not obsessed with hoarding riches. Indeed, the United States has one of the lowest savings rates of any wealthy country, and we are the most indebted society in history. What really characterizes consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things.

In a consumer society, detachment occurs in both selling and buying, and *anything* can be sold: healthcare, space, human blood, names ("Tostitos Fiesta Bowl"), adoption rights, water,

2. Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 12.

genetic codes, the rights to emit pollutants into the air, the use of one's own forehead. The Nebraska man describes himself as the "owner" of his forehead, which he can sell and get back. Consumerism is the remarkable ability to be detached even from those things, such as our foreheads, to which we are most obviously attached. But the detachment of consumerism is not just the willingness to sell anything. The detachment of consumerism is also a detachment from the things we buy. Our relationships with products tend to be short-lived: rather than hoarding treasured objects, consumers are characterized by a constant dissatisfaction with material goods. This dissatisfaction is what produces the restless pursuit of satisfaction in the form of something new. Consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else; that's why it is not simply *buying* but *shopping* that is the heart of consumerism. Buying brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies consumerism. This restlessness — the moving on to shopping for something else, no matter what one has just purchased — sets the spiritual tone for consumerism.

Consumerism is an important subject for theology because it is a spiritual disposition, a way of looking at the world around us that is deeply formative. In many ways, consumerism has affinities with the traditional Christian view of how we should regard material things. We will need to explore where consumerism and Christianity converge and where they part ways. In the first section of this chapter, I want to examine some of the economic conditions that typify consumerism and its detachment from production, producers, and products. In the second section, I will look at consumerism as moral formation and compare it with some themes from Christian moral theology. In the third section, I will explore the Eucharist as a Christian practice that offers an alternative way to practice consumption.

I. Detachment

Some critiques of consumerism are content to complain about the greed and materialism of the present age: people have abandoned God and the higher, more spiritual values of life for the base pleasures of material objects. There may be some truth to these complaints, but they miss the mark in at least two ways. First, they set up a false dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. In the Christian tradition, which believes that God became flesh (John 1:14), the material world is sanctified and charged with spiritual significance. The Christian is not meant to choose between God and the creation, because all of creation sings of the glory of God. In the Catholic tradition especially, the sacraments show us how we encounter God in everyday material elements. The second problem with such a critique of people's values is that most people do not simply choose material goods over spiritual values. The person who deliberately decides to become a hedonist and materialist is rare. Even pop singer Madonna, the self-declared "Material Girl," is involved in spirituality, a de-Judaized version of the ancient Jewish mystical practice called Kabbalah. Consumerism is not simply people rejecting spirituality for materialism. For many people, consumerism is a type of spirituality, even if they do not recognize it as such. It is a way of pursuing meaning and identity, a way of connecting with other people. Many others, finding themselves in relentless pursuit of the requisite material things of the American dream, sense that something is awry. They read reports of Thai women being worked to death making the plastic toys and gadgets that litter our lives, and they recoil. The problem is not people deliberately choosing their own comfort over the lives of others because of their skewed values. The problem is a much larger one: changes in the economy and society in general have detached us from mate-

rial production, producers, and even the products we buy. I will take each of these in turn.

Production

Take a look around your home or room at the things you and your family own. How many of these items did you make? If you are a typical Westerner, the answer is "very few." Even meals are often prepackaged affairs to be microwaved and consumed. We take this situation for granted; almost all the things we have, we have bought. In most homes in most cultures for most of human history, however, the situation was radically different. Before the advent of industrialization, the typical home was a site of production, not merely consumption. Most people lived on farms, and they made the majority of the goods they used. People had less, and life was often hard. There is no need to romanticize pre-industrial society. But the difference in our attitudes toward material things can hardly be overemphasized. We used to make things; now we buy them.

The Industrial Revolution depended on people moving from subsistence farming and handicrafts to factory labor. This was accomplished in several ways. The forced enclosure of common lands in England and the Continent often made subsistence farming untenable. The enclosure movement privatized common lands, dividing them up among landowners, usually to the advantage of large landholders and the detriment of subsistence farmers.³ Cottage industries were wiped out by the flood of cheap manufactured goods from the new factories, often forcing people

3. For a detailed account of this process in England, see J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832: A Study in the Government of England before the Reform Bill* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

to seek work in the same factories that put them out of business.⁴ The movement from handicrafts to factory work was significant. Today, however, we are even further removed from the production of goods. Fewer and fewer Americans or Europeans have any idea what factory work is like, since the process of globalization has sent many manufacturing jobs overseas, with more such transfers coming every day. Not only do we not make the things we use; more and more, we don't make any things at all.

Why should we care? Perhaps because it has something to do with widespread negative attitudes toward work in our society. "Thank God it's Friday" is a common sentiment, and not only among blue-collar workers. The cartoon *Dilbert* expresses a deep discontent among white-collar cubicle-dwellers as well. Many people do not see their work as meaningful, only a means to a paycheck. One's labor itself has become a commodity, a thing to be sold to the employer in exchange for the money needed to buy things. For many people, work has become deadening to the spirit.

Though negative attitudes toward work are common, it was not meant to be so. Our work was meant to be an outlet for creativity, a vocation to make our impress on the material world. Work is the way we put our very selves into the world of material objects. As Pope John Paul II has said, "Work is a good thing for man — a good thing for his humanity — because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being.'"⁵ According to John Paul II, work is

4. Rodney Clapp, "Why the Devil Takes Visa: A Christian Response to the Triumph of Consumerism," *Christianity Today* 40, no. 11 (Oct. 7, 1996): 18.

5. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work [Laborem Exercens]* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), §9. I would have preferred inclusive language, but I have quoted this passage as it appears.

the key to the whole social question, because the question facing society is how to make life "more human."⁶ Being more human means, at the same time, participating in the creative activity of God. "The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator."⁷ This is the true meaning of the call in Genesis to "fill" and "subdue" the earth, and to have "dominion" over it (Gen. 1:28).⁸ This spiritual view of work has an evocative appeal to many people who feel alienated from their work and detached from creative engagement with the material world. But this spiritual view of work has not waned simply because people have bad attitudes and negative values; rather, it is because our whole system of production has changed. The system has shown a tremendous capacity to increase the volume and variety of goods produced, while it also detaches us from the creation of things.

Producers

If labor has become a commodity to be sold, it is also a commodity to be bought. The people who make our things are less often ourselves or our neighbors, people with names and faces and aspirations to self-realization, and more often an impersonal "work force." In a reversal of Genesis, "man is treated as an instrument of production, whereas he... ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator."⁹ The people who make our things are referred to as "labor costs," which naturally need to be "minimized." And one of the key ways to reduce labor

6. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*, §3.

7. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*, §25.

8. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*, §4.

9. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*, §7.

costs is to move production overseas, where wages are much lower and protections for workers are much more lax.

Hip-hop star P. Diddy launched his Sean John line of designer clothing with the slogan "It's not just a label, it's a lifestyle." Of the forty dollars or more that consumers in the United States pay for a Sean John shirt, the women who actually make the shirts, from start to finish, get fifteen cents. Lydda González is a young Honduran woman who worked at Southeast Textiles, a factory in Honduras sewing clothes for Sean John, Old Navy, Polo Sport, and other popular brands. The factory is located in Honduras's San Miguel Free Trade Zone, a compound surrounded by tall metal fences and armed guards. Lydda began working in a bakery at age eleven, and then went to work at Southeast Textiles at seventeen, hoping to pull her family out of poverty. This is what she found instead: miserable wages, twelve-hour shifts six days a week, and mandatory unpaid overtime. She was subjected to random searches, sexual harassment, and compulsory pregnancy tests. Her supervisor was abusive, the air in the factory was filled with textile particles, and the drinking water was tainted with raw sewage. When Lydda and fourteen coworkers got together to demand better working conditions, they were all fired and their names put on a blacklist to be shared with other factory owners. She has been subjected to death threats for speaking out.¹⁰

Many transnational companies are now pulling out of Central America, but not because of concern for the Lydda Gonzálezes of Honduras. The companies are moving to Asia because they can cut their labor costs in half: instead of the 65 cents an hour Lydda

10. Sarah Stillman, "Made by Us: Young Women, Sweatshops, and the Ethics of Globalization," the 2005 Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics, at: http://www.eliewieselfoundation.org/EthicsPrize/WinnersEssays/2005/Sarah_Stillman.pdf.

received, they can get away with paying 33 cents an hour in factories in China, with some documented cases of wages as low as 12 cents an hour.¹¹ Workers making Disney children's books at the Nord Race factories in Guangdong Province, for example, must work 13-15 hours a day, seven days a week, and earn only 33 cents per hour in abusive conditions.¹² Such conditions tend to be the norm, not the exception. The Chinese have even coined a word — *guolaosi* — for death from overwork. A *Washington Post* article highlighted the death of Li Chunmei, a nineteen-year-old woman who collapsed and died after working 16-hour shifts for sixty days straight in a toy factory making stuffed animals for children in the "developed" countries.¹³

We shop; they drop. What is the connection? It's often difficult to find out. The young writer Tom Beaudoin tells a story that many middle-class Westerners can appreciate. He had a vague sense that other people were suffering because of the way his things were made, but he was too busy to know what to do about it. One day he took some of his favorite brand-name items from his closet and decided to call the companies directly to ask how they were made. He often found himself on hold fifteen or more times, as he was routed through various managers, public relations representatives, even mailroom attendants. On the few occasions that he was allowed to talk to someone knowledgeable about production, that manager would refuse to take responsibility for the well-being of workers, since most production workers

11. Philip P. Pan, "Worked Till They Drop: Few Protections for China's New Laborers," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2002, A01.

12. National Labor Committee, "Disney in China," at: http://www.nlcnet.org/news/china/pdfs/Nord_Race.pdf.

13. Pan, "Worked Till They Drop," cited in Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 16-17.

were distanced from the branding company by means of "outsourcing" work to independent contractors.¹⁴

Naomi Klein argues that the goal of a transnational corporation is a kind of transcendence of the material world. Such a corporation

attempt[s] to free itself from the corporeal world of commodities, manufacturing and products to exist on another plane. Anyone can manufacture a product, they reason. . . . Such menial tasks, therefore, can and should be farmed out to contractors and subcontractors whose only concern is filling the order on time and under budget. . . . Headquarters, meanwhile, is free to focus on the real business at hand — creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name.¹⁵

According to Klein,

. . . after establishing the "soul" of their corporations, the superbrand companies have gone on to rid themselves of their cumbersome bodies, and there is nothing that seems more cumbersome, more loathsomely corporeal, than the factories that produce their products.¹⁶

We are invited to participate in this transcendence of the material world of production and producers. We are invited to buy products that miraculously appear on store shelves without inquir-

14. Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2003), pp. ix-xiv.

15. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 1999), p. 22 (quoted in Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, p. 69).

16. Klein, *No Logo*, p. 196 (quoted in Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, p. 69).

ing into their origins. And yet Beaudoin's dilemma haunts us. As I write this, I stop to look at the clothes I am wearing: my shirt was made in Indonesia, my jeans in Mexico, my shoes in China. My undershirt, whose label instructs me to "have a nice day," was made in Haiti, where a nice day for most people is a day when there is enough food to eat. Most of us would never deliberately choose our own material comfort over the life of another person. Most of us do not consciously choose to work others to death for the sake of lower prices on the things we buy. But we participate in such an economy because we are detached from the producers, the people who actually make our things. Not only are the people who make our things often a world away, but we are prevented from learning about where our products come from by a host of roadblocks. And so we inhabit separate worlds, worlds that have entirely different ways of looking at the material world. The "happy meal" toys from McDonald's that we easily discard reveal nothing of the toil of the malnourished young women who make them. We spend the equivalent of two days' wages for such women on a cup of coffee for ourselves — without giving it a second thought. We do so not necessarily because we are greedy and indifferent to the suffering of others, but largely because those others are invisible to us.

Products

On a road that passes close to the house I grew up in, shopping malls have replaced corn. On one particular stretch stands a new McDonald's fast-food joint, built in a retro style to look like the original McDonald's from the 1950s. Next to it stands a restaurant with a medieval English castle theme, built with drawbridges and turrets. On the other side of the castle is a Mexican fast-food joint, with some features that are meant to suggest an eighteenth-century Spanish mission. It shares space with a seafood restaura-

rant, decorated with a scattering of nets and life preservers and piracy paraphernalia. All of this stands in the middle of an Illinois cornfield.

This kind of scene is so common that it hardly even strikes us as odd anymore. Of course, we know it's all fake. But what would "authentic" mean in this context? We take for granted that other times and places — 1950s America, medieval England, colonial Mexico, the high seas — are all available for our consumption. The expansion of the global economy has brought the world to our fingertips. Music, food, products, and ideas from around the globe are commodities for our enjoyment. This applies not just to low-end products such as fast food, but also to high-culture products such as single-malt Scotch whisky and yoga accessories. Globalization has increased our awareness of, and sympathy for, other times and places. At the same time, however, it produces a detachment from all times and places.

What is "authentic" suburban Illinois culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century? It is, I suppose, fragments of traditional rural Midwestern life and urban Chicago themes, mixed with a hodgepodge of other times and other places. We stand back from culture like a shopper in a supermarket and pick and choose our culture from the infinite variety of experiences marketed to us. Because our consumption can take us anywhere, we are nowhere in particular. The stretch of road I have described is the same as other stretches throughout the country and throughout the world. If you were dropped out of the sky and landed on this road, it would take some investigation to figure out if you were near Chicago or Dallas, Montreal or Sydney.

This detachment tends to characterize our attitudes toward the products we buy. Far from obsessively clinging to our stuff, we tend to buy and discard products easily. We don't make them ourselves or have any connections to the people that make them;

increasingly, we have no connection to the people that sell them either, as small local businesses are replaced by gigantic chain retailers. Under these conditions, our connections to products become very tenuous and fleeting as well. The products we buy are mute as to their origins, and the people we buy them from can tell us little. Products say nothing about where they come from and how they are produced, and we scarcely bother to wonder. We simply take for granted that we can buy fresh bananas in Minnesota in the dead of winter. Meat comes not from cows and pigs but from little Styrofoam trays wrapped in clear plastic. We simply dump them in our carts and keep on shopping.

This does not mean that we have become indifferent to the products we buy. On the contrary, as human relationships fall away from the process of buying products, relationships become more direct between ourselves and our things. The relationship of consumption has largely been reduced to the bare encounter at the store (or on the computer screen) between consumer and thing. But marketers know that consumption could never keep pace with production if encounters with products were encounters with inert things. The product must be made to sing and dance and create a new kind of relationship between itself and the consumer. Over the course of the twentieth century, marketing moved from primarily offering information about a product to associating certain feelings with a product. Soft-drink commercials say little about the actual fizzy liquid that you get when you buy a can; rather, they try to associate the product with positive images like swimsuit-clad youths frolicking on a beach. As one marketer says, "Products are made in the factory, but brands are made in the mind."¹⁷ "Branding" — that is, getting people to identify with a particular corporate brand — is about creating re-

17. Quoted in Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, p. 76.

lations between people and things. Associating in one's mind with certain brands gives a sense of identity: one identifies one's self with certain images and values that are associated with the brand. Branding offers opportunities to take on a new self, to perform an "extreme makeover" and become a new person. Some people deal with depression by going shopping; it offers the chance to start anew, to bring something new into one's life. At the same time, branding can also provide a sense of community with all the other people who associate with a particular brand.¹⁸

Why, then, should we speak about detachment from products when much of consumer culture is about creating relationships with products? Because such relationships are not made to last. There would not be a market for all the goods that are produced in an industrialized economy if consumers were content with the things they bought. Consumer desire must be constantly on the move. We must continually desire new things in order for consumption to keep pace with production. The "extreme makeover" is an ongoing process in the search for novelty, for bigger and better, for "new and improved," and for different experiences. The shaving razor with one blade had to be surpassed by the double-bladed razor, which was bested by three blades, then four, and now an absurd five blades on one razor. This is more than just a continuing attempt to make a product better; it is what the General Motors people called "the organized creation of dissatisfaction."¹⁹ How can we be content with a mere two blades when the current standard is five? How can we be content with an iPod that downloads two hundred songs when someone else has one that downloads a thousand? The economy as it is cur-

18. Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, pp. 53-58.

19. Quoted in Erik Larson, *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), p. 20.

rently structured would grind to a halt if we ever looked at our stuff and simply declared, "It is enough. I am happy with what I have."

The truth is, however, that we do not tend to experience dissatisfaction as merely a negative. In consumer culture, dissatisfaction and satisfaction cease to be opposites, for pleasure is not so much in the possession of things as in their pursuit. There is pleasure in the pursuit of novelty, and the pleasure resides not so much in having as in wanting. Once we have obtained an item, it brings desire to a temporary halt, and the item loses some of its appeal. Possession kills desire; familiarity breeds contempt. That is why shopping, not buying itself, is the heart of consumerism. The consumerist spirit is a restless spirit, typified by detachment, because desire must be constantly kept on the move.

II. Moral Formation and the Material World

Consumer culture is one of the most powerful systems of formation in the contemporary world, arguably more powerful than Christianity. While a Christian may spend an hour per week in church, she may spend twenty-five hours per week watching television, to say nothing of the hours spent on the Internet, listening to the radio, shopping, looking at junk mail and other advertisements. Nearly everywhere we lay our eyes — gas-pump handles, T-shirts, public restroom walls, bank receipts, church bulletins, sports uniforms, and so on — we are confronted by advertising.

Such a powerful formative system is not morally neutral: it trains us to see the world in certain ways. As all the great faiths of the world have attested, how we relate to the material world is a spiritual discipline. As one corporate manager frankly put it, "Corporate branding is really about worldwide beliefs manage-

ment."²⁰ This does not mean that the moral effects of consumer culture are always negative. The global economy that has arisen with consumer culture has the potential to broaden our horizons and make us more aware of other peoples and other cultures in the world. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of the powerful formative effects of consumer culture, and we need to approach it with eyes wide open. Let's look at two ways that consumerism constitutes a spiritual discipline, and then at some Christian responses.

Transcendence

Consumerism has certain affinities with the great faith traditions of the world because, as we have seen, it trains us to transcend the material world. Not only do we seek to leave behind the bodily labor that goes into making things. Consumerism represents a constant dissatisfaction with particular material things themselves, a restlessness that constantly seeks to move beyond what is at hand. Although the consumer spirit delights in material things and sees them as good, the thing itself is never enough. Things and brands must be invested with mythologies, with spiritual aspirations; things come to represent freedom, status, and love. Above all, they represent the aspiration to escape time and death by constantly seeking renewal in created things. Each new movement of desire promises the opportunity to start over.

The Christian tradition also recognizes the goodness of material things — and the necessity of transcending them. The basic Christian attitude toward material goods is established already in the opening chapters of Genesis: because all things are created by God, they are good. "God saw that it was good" is a phrase re-

20. Quoted in Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, p. 44.

peated over and over (Gen. 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25, 1:31) in the creation account. But precisely because all things are created by God, created things are not ultimate. Created things, though good, are never ends in themselves; rather, they point outside themselves toward their Creator. As St. Augustine says, all created things contain within themselves traces of the Creator. Precisely because of this, they are not ends but means toward the enjoyment of God. According to Augustine, created things are to be *used*, but only God is to be *enjoyed*.²¹

So the restlessness and dissatisfaction of consumerism are already found in a different form in Christianity. As creatures in time, according to Augustine, we are passionate, desiring creatures, and this is good. The constant renewal of desire is what gets us out of bed in the morning. *We* desire because we are alive. Created things, however, though essentially good, always fail fully to satisfy because they are not ultimate. They are time-bound, not infinite. Created things fall apart, and we lose interest in them over time. They die. *We* die. Only God is eternal. Only God stops the decay of time. In the words of Augustine's famous prayer to open the *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."²² The restlessness of consumerism causes us constantly to seek new material objects. For Augustine, on the other hand, the solution to our dissatisfaction is not the continuous search for new things but a turn toward the only One who can truly satisfy our desires. This does not require the rejection of all earthly things, but an ability to see that all things point to God. People and things are united in one great web of being, flowing from and returning to their Creator. The

21. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 604 [XV.7].

22. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3 [1.1].

Christian view elevates the dignity of things by seeing them as participating in the being of God; but that view simultaneously causes us to look through and beyond things to their Creator.

Community

Consumerism is a spiritual discipline that, like other spiritual practices, lends itself to a certain practice of community. In identifying with the images and values associated with certain brands, we also identify ourselves with all the other people who make such an identification. Consumerism also allows us to identify with other places and other cultures through our purchases. White kids in Illinois can listen to reggae music and feel themselves in solidarity with the struggles of poor blacks in Jamaica. As Vincent Miller points out, however, such types of "virtual" community tend to reduce community to disembodied acts of consumption.²³ Miller cites the example of Moby's album *Play*, which sold ten million copies in 1999. On that album Moby combines samples of African-American spirituals, gospel, and blues with techno-beat dance music. The song "Natural Blues" begins with a sampling from a 1959 recording of Vera Hall singing "Oh, Lordy, trouble so hard." The sample is chopped and mixed with dance music, and though such samples allow the listener to enter into imaginative sympathy with the struggles of the African-American community in its long hard history, Moby takes the Hall samples out of context and offers them for listener consumption.

Although Vera Hall and the other artists were not even acknowledged, let alone thanked in Moby's liner notes on the *Play*

23. Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 73-77.

album, *every* song on that album was eventually licensed for use in a commercial — for such companies as Calvin Klein and American Express. Concrete suffering is abstracted from its context and offered as a commodity. No matter how much the listener feels in solidarity with others, *virtual* solidarity offers no concrete results. As Miller notes, "This abstraction impedes the translation of ethical concerns into action, reducing ethics to sentiment. The virtual becomes a substitute for concrete political solidarity, or to put it another way, a fundamentally different act — consumption — is substituted for political action."²⁴

In the Christian tradition, by contrast, one's attitude toward material goods is closely tied to an imperative of concrete solidarity with others. When the rich young man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to attain eternal life, Jesus says to him, "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). For Jesus, detachment from material goods went hand in hand with attachment to Jesus himself — "follow me" — and to his community of followers. St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) took Jesus' command quite literally. Upon hearing this passage from Matthew's Gospel read in church when he was eighteen, he gave away most of his possessions, sold the rest, and gave the money to the poor. He went off to follow Jesus without the distractions of material possessions, eventually gathering a community of monks around him.²⁵ St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) did not interpret Matthew 19 to mean that Christians need to renounce all material possessions, only the ones that are injurious to the soul.²⁶ Never-

24. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, p. 76.

25. St. Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 30-32.

26. St. Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?" §1, 15, at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-richman.html>.

theless, Clement also encouraged an attitude of detachment from material things that accompanied a concrete attachment to God and to other people. Clement treated material possessions instrumentally, that is, as a means to be used toward other ends, namely the service of God and others.²⁷ Things are to be used "more for the sake of the brethren"²⁸ than for oneself, he said, for "the nature of wealth is to be subservient, not to rule."²⁹

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) derives this attitude of detachment from material things from the fact that God is the proper "owner" of all things. This is a common Old Testament theme: "The world and all that is in it belong to the LORD" (Ps. 24:1).³⁰ According to Aquinas, humans have dominion over material things only "as regards their use."³¹ In other words, this is God's world, and we are just using it for the time being. Any dominion we have over creation is given to human beings in communion by God. It follows that, with regard to the power to "procure and dispense" property, an individual has the right to possess property. However, with regard to its use, a person "ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that, to wit, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need."³² We may possess property, but use it only for the common good, especially for the sake of the neediest among us.

In the Christian tradition, detachment from material goods means using them as a means to a greater end, and the greater end is greater attachment to God and to our fellow human beings. In

27. Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man?" §14.

28. Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man?" §16.

29. Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the Rich Man?" §14.

30. See also, e.g., Exod. 19:5: "The whole earth is mine," says the LORD."

31. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II.66.1.

32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.66.2.

consumerism, detachment means standing back from all people, times, and places, and appropriating our choices for private use. Consumerism supports an essentially individualistic view of the human person, in which each consumer is a sovereign chooser. In the Christian tradition, the use of material things is meant to be a common use, for the sake of a larger body of people. We do not help each other as individuals but as members of one another. According to Paul's famous image (1 Cor. 12), we are all members of the same body, the body of Christ. There is pluralism in the body: some are eyes, some are hands, some are feet. And yet precisely because of that differentiation, all are needed. No member can say to another, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). Furthermore, Paul says, the members of the body who seem weakest are the most indispensable (12:22-24). The poor and the needy are not just objects for individual charity; rather, they are indispensable because they are part of our very body. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (12:26). The reason that we do not cling to material things is precisely because of our attachment to others. We must constantly be ready to relinquish our claim to ownership, and to use our goods for the common good of the whole body.

III. Being Consumed

There is no question about whether or not to be a consumer. Everyone must consume to live. The question concerns what kinds of practices of consumption are conducive to an abundant life for all. In the Catholic tradition, the Eucharist is a particularly important locus for the Christian practice of consumption. Let's conclude this chapter by considering this sacramental practice and how it might affect our daily practices of consumption.

In the Eucharist, Jesus offers his body and blood to be consumed. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry'" (John 6:35). The insatiability of human desire is absorbed by the abundance of God's grace in the consumption of Jesus' body and blood. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life" (6:54), that is, they are raised above mere temporal pursuit of novelty. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life" (6:27).

It would be easy enough to assimilate the consumption of the Eucharist into a consumerist kind of spirituality. The presence of Jesus could become another kind of commodity to be appropriated for the benefit of the individual user. Indeed, much of what passes for Christianity in our culture today is addressed to fulfilling the spiritual needs of individual consumers of religion. Many kinds of religion — or more commonly, "spirituality" — are largely about self-help, using God to cope with the stresses of modern life. The practice of the Eucharist is resistant to such appropriation, however, because the consumer of the Eucharist is taken up into a larger body, the body of Christ. The individual consumer of the Eucharist does not simply take Christ into herself, but is taken up into Christ. Jesus says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (6:56). Paul writes to the Corinthians: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

The act of consumption is thereby turned inside out: instead of simply consuming the body of Christ, we are consumed by it. St. Augustine hears God say, "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like

the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me."³³ In the Christian view, we do not simply stand apart, as individuals, from the rest of creation — appropriating, consuming, and discarding. In the Eucharist we are absorbed into a larger body. The small individual self is de-centered and put in the context of a much wider community of participation with others in the divine life. At the same time, we do not lose our identities as unique persons, for as Paul says, each different member of the body is valued and needed for the body to function (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

If we remain satisfied with the unity of our own communities, however, we have not fully grasped the nature of the Eucharist. For becoming the body of Christ also entails that we must become food for others. And this often involves moving beyond our own communities and comfort zones. Jesus teaches this lesson in a dramatic way in his depiction of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. When the Son of man comes in glory, he will gather all the nations before him and separate those who will inherit the kingdom from those who will be sent into eternal punishment. To the former group he will say: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt. 25:34-36). When the blessed cannot remember ever attending to Jesus when he was hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, Jesus tells them that, whenever they did it to the least of his brothers or sisters, they did it to him (25:40). Here "brothers and sisters" does not refer merely to Christians, for the Son of man is judging "all the nations" (25:32).³⁴ All the downtrodden are Christ's broth-

33. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 124 [VII.16].

34. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* notes that the term *adelphos*

ers and sisters. To those who are condemned for not attending to Jesus, he says, "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (25:45).

What is truly radical about this passage is not that God rewards those who help the poor; what is truly radical is that Jesus *identifies himself* with the poor. The pain of the hungry person is the pain of Christ, and it is thus also the pain of anyone who is a member of the body of Christ. If we are identified with Christ, who identifies himself with the suffering of all, then what is called for is more than just charity. The very distinction between what is mine and what is yours breaks down in the body of Christ. We are not to consider ourselves as absolute owners of our stuff, who then occasionally graciously bestow charity on the less fortunate. In the body of Christ, your pain is my pain, and my stuff is available to be communicated to you in your need, as Aquinas says. In the consumption of the Eucharist, we cease to be merely "the other" to each other. In the Eucharist, Christ is gift, giver, and recipient; we are simultaneously fed and become food for others.

Our temptation is to spiritualize all this talk of union, to make our connection to the hungry a sentimental act of imaginative sympathy. We could then imagine that we are already in communion with those who lack food, whether or not we actually meet their physical needs. We might even wish to tell ourselves that our purchases of consumer goods do in fact feed others — by creating jobs. But we have no way of knowing if such jobs create dignity or merely take advantage of others' desperation unless we

(brother) in Matthew sometimes refers to a member of the Christian community and sometimes to "any human being as the object of ethical duty." The commentator concludes that Matt. 25:40 should be taken in the latter sense, noting that the word is dropped in Matt. 25:45. See Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 669.

find concrete ways to overcome our detachment from production, producers, and products.

The first step toward overcoming our detachment is to turn our homes into sites of production, not just consumption. Few of us have the means to make most of what we consume, but simple acts such as making our own bread or our own music can become significant ways to reshape the way we approach the material world. Making things gives the maker an appreciation for the labor involved in producing what he consumes. It also increases our sense that we are not merely spectators of life — for example, hours spent passively watching and listening to entertainment that others make — but active and creative participants in the material world. We can appreciate, as Pope John Paul II said, our true vocation as sharers in the creative activity of God.

Overcoming our detachment from producers is a daunting task when so much of what we need to know is hidden from our view. Nevertheless, there are ways to foster life-giving connections with the resources available to us. One way to do so is to donate time and money to those in need. Another way is to try to ensure that our choices with money contribute to a sustainable life for others. Depositing money in smaller banks that specialize in community development is a simple way to put money to the service of those ignored by most corporate banks.³⁵ Buying things that are locally produced, and at stores that are locally owned, generally increases the chances of relationship and accountability. There is also a growing Fair Trade movement that ensures fair wages and equitable treatment to producers around the world. The U.S. Catholic bishops, through Catholic Relief Services

35. The Self-Help Credit Union in Durham, North Carolina, is one successful model of small-business and home loans to lower income and minority people (see www.self-help.org).

(CRS), sponsor a program of Fair Trade in coffee, chocolate, and many other handmade items. The goal of the program, according to CRS, is "a new model of international trade built on right relationships between us and the people overseas who create the items we consume — relationships that respect human dignity, promote economic justice, and cultivate global solidarity."³⁶ Rather than leaving coffee growers to the mercy of "market forces," to middlemen who try to pay them as little as possible, Fair Trade organizations such as CRS ensure a sustainable wage for growers. They also educate American consumers, putting names and faces on those who produce what they consume.³⁷

Finally, overcoming detachment from the products we buy is not a matter of developing a fierce attachment to material things. Things are not ends in themselves; they are means to greater attachment to others. We are not to cling to our things, but to use them for the sake of the common good. But to have a good relationship with others, it is necessary to have a proper relationship with things. We must understand where our things come from and how our things are produced. Things do not have personalities and lives of their own, but they are embedded in relationships of production and distribution that bring us into contact, for better or for worse, with other people's lives. A sacramental view of the world sees all things as part of God's good creation, potential signs of the glory of God; things become less disposable, more filled with meaning. At the same time, a sacramental view sees things only as signs whose meaning is only completely fulfilled if they promote the good of communion with God and with other people.

36. CRS Fair Trade at: http://www.crsfairtrade.org/index_flash.cfm.

37. One can take a virtual tour of coffee production in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, at: http://www.crsfairtrade.org/coffee_project/index.htm.

chapter 3

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL



In this chapter, I treat the problem of globalization as a version of the ancient philosophical conundrum of the one and the many. How should the global and the local, the universal and the particular, the one and the many, be related? Along the way I will argue that the process of globalization is not, as the word implies, merely a process of universalization, the dominance of the one over the many, but that it is a peculiar proliferation of the many who are still ultimately absorbed into the one. I will then turn to the great twentieth-century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar to argue that only Christ adequately solves the problem of the one and the many. Christ is the key, therefore, to the sustenance of a sane culture in a globalizing world.

I will treat globalization as, in part, an economic and political phenomenon; but, more importantly, I will present globalization as a way of seeing, an aesthetic, that configures space and human subjects in peculiar ways. Implicit in my argument is the conviction that culture and economics are not autonomous spheres with no mutual effect. Economic relationships do not operate on value-neutral laws, but are rather carriers of specific convictions about the nature of the human person — the person's origins and