

The Culture of Consumerism: A Catholic and Personalist Critique

Gregory R. Beabout
Saint Louis University

Eduardo J. Echeverria
Conception Seminary College

In this article, we present an understanding and critique of consumerism in the tradition of Christian social thought that is both Catholic and personalist. We consider various approaches to the problem of consumerism. Is consumerism simply the necessary result of the modern capitalist economy? Is it, from another perspective, simply the reflection of our culture's overall worldview? In answering these questions, we examine briefly five approaches to consumerism, that of John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., David F. Wells, Christopher Lasch, Gabriel Marcel, and John Paul II. Each is critical of consumerism, but their approaches bring out different aspects of the problem of consumerism. We also sketch an anthropology of Christian personalism. We do so because the culture of consumerism betrays significant confusion about the nature of the human person. This is followed by an account of the concept of consumerism. Finally, we clarify a personalist understanding of the relation between consumerism and the market economy.

*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world,
and loses his own soul?*

—Matthew 16:26

Introduction

In addressing the apostles about the nature of our calling to Christian discipleship, Jesus raises this penetrating question that speaks now more than ever to the heart of our culture of consumerism. This culture is preoccupied with

acquiring, consuming, and possessing materials, goods, and services, in short—things. One author expands on this meaning of consumerism as follows: “Consumerism implies foolishness, superficiality, triviality, and the destruction of personal and social relationships by means of selfishness, individualism, possessiveness, and covetousness.”¹ This preoccupation, Jesus’ question suggests, involves a fundamental misunderstanding of one’s stance before God and, in effect, a lack of true self-understanding and significant confusion about the nature of the human person. Further, this is not only foolishness but also idolatry, because at the root of this preoccupation is covetousness, which is idolatry, according to Saint Paul (cf. Col. 3:5). At its religious root, the culture of consumerism involves the false worship of another god, the god of consumption; in short, of materialism. And recall, in this connection, Jeremiah’s prophetic warning (Jer. 13:1–11) that the fate of idolaters (“those who follow the dictates of their hearts, and walk after other gods to serve them and worship them”) is ruin, becoming just as worthless as the gods they worship (“which is profitable for nothing”). Consumerism, then, is ultimately a form of idolatry.²

This essay addresses the question of how we got to the point of adopting this new form of idolatry. Our goal is to present an understanding and critique of consumerism in the tradition of Christian social thought that is both Catholic and personalist. The paper is organized as follows. In section 1, we consider various approaches to the problem of consumerism. Is consumerism simply the necessary result of the modern capitalist economy? Is it, from another perspective, simply a reflection of our culture’s overall understanding of life, its worldview? We will examine briefly five approaches to consumerism, that of John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., David F. Wells, Christopher Lasch, Gabriel Marcel, and John Paul II.³ Each is critical of consumerism, but their approaches bring out different aspects of the problem of consumerism. In section 2 we sketch an anthropology of Christian Personalism. We do so because the culture of consumerism betrays significant confusion about the nature of the human person.⁴ Section 3 provides an account of the concept of consumerism. Section 4 seeks to clarify a personalist understanding of the relation between consumerism and the market economy.

Various Approaches to the Problem of Consumerism

Schindler, Neuhaus, and a Contemporary Debate

Does the capitalist economic system itself necessarily lead to consumerism? Or is consumerism an effect of the excesses of that system? Later in this paper, we tackle the question of how consumerism relates to market activities. For now, we raise these questions because how one answers them determines, in part, one's approach to the problem of consumerism. In this connection, consider the ongoing debates among certain Roman Catholics regarding John Paul II's 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*.

How does the pope understand the relationship between consumerism and the capitalistic system? In reply, Father Richard J. Neuhaus rejects the view that the pope's critique of consumerism is essentially a critique of the capitalist system. He writes: "[The pope] is not so much criticizing an economic system as he is warning against the excesses that the efficient working of that system makes possible."⁵ "The question [of consumerism] is not," adds Neuhaus, "certainly not most importantly, a question about economics. It is first of all a cultural and moral problem requiring a cultural and moral remedy."⁶

Other critics of consumerism, such as David Schindler, disagree; these critics hold that there is something inherent to the capitalistic system that makes consumerism its necessary complement. Schindler argues, in particular, that the market system itself actually presupposes cultural and moral presuppositions. He explains, "Any actual market system will always-already embody, however implicitly, some definite notion of self-interest, of the self's relation to the other, of the self in terms of a primacy of 'being' or 'having'—and thus, some definite disposition toward what the pope calls 'consumerism.'"⁷

Would Neuhaus disagree that these notions are at work in *some* interpretations of the capitalist system? In making the distinction between the economic order, on the one hand, and the cultural-moral order on the other, does Neuhaus claim that the former is *neutral* with respect to a definite cultural-moral order and its philosophical presuppositions? Of course not; the difference between Neuhaus and Schindler is a matter of emphasis. The subtle disagreement between them, in our judgment, is not that Neuhaus denies the role of definite cultural and moral presuppositions in the actual market system but, rather, that Schindler holds there to be something about the market system as such that

disposes it toward consumerism and thus, the market requires criticism and necessary correction. In this regard, Schindler argues that a free economy, the profit motive, economic freedom, and human creativity, which are all characteristics of a market economy, must be ordered to the proper end of love of God and neighbor.⁸

Kavanaugh on the Commodity Form of Life

In his book *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, John Kavanaugh argues that consumerism is a “Commodity Form” of life. It is “a system of reality (a philosophy of what is most real and valuable) and a religion (a belief in what saves us and gives us ultimate meaning).”⁹ As a Commodity Form of life, consumerism is “a total worldview” that “affects the way we think and feel, the way we love and pray, the way we evaluate our enemies, the way we relate to our spouses and children.”¹⁰ The Commodity Form of life disposes us to view everything—ourselves, others, nature, and religion—as a commodity, as replaceable and marketable commodities.¹¹ “We consume what is marketable and we are marketable according to our powers of consumption. ‘You are what you eat.’ ‘More is better.’ ‘What does your car say about you?’ We consume ideas, junk food, news, the latest unneeded plastic gadget, or other persons. Anything has the potential for being sold, once a need can be artificially created and then identified with a marketable commodity.” “The Commodity Form,” adds Kavanaugh, “reveals our very being and purpose as calculable solely in terms of what we possess. We *are* only insofar as we possess. We are *what* we possess. We are, consequently, possessed by our possessions, produced by our products. Remade in the image and likeness of our own handiwork, we are revealed as commodities.... We are robbed of our very humanity.”¹² In short, the Commodity Form of life is a total way of perceiving, valuing, and behaving.

We perceive others and ourselves as replaceable objects whose value is dependent on, indeed reduced to, the qualities of commodity: quantifiably measurable, nonunique, price-valued, replaceable objects. For example, says Kavanaugh, “Our bodies, like ourselves, are objects, packages, tools, and instruments. Commodification splits sexuality from selfhood. And sexuality, no longer the embodied expression of our now repressed personhood, itself becomes a thing for exchange and price, a battleground for competition, a stage for aggression and self-infatuation.... The body is a commodity. The body is a thing.”¹³ In sum, the Commodity Form of life has dispossessed us of our very humanity:

What this means, in effect, is that there is no intrinsic human uniqueness or irreplaceable value. The person *is* only insofar as he or she is marketable or productive. Human products, which should be valued only insofar as they enhance and express human worth, become the very standards against which, human worth itself is measured. If our life's meaning is dictated by mercantilism and production, then our purpose and value are defined essentially in relation to what we can buy, what we can sell, or—at the very least—what we can hold on to. The uniqueness of an individual's way of being, of the unrepeatable personal qualities in knowing and loving, of relating to life in such a way that can never be duplicated by another person, much less by a thing—these human qualities inevitably disappear in a universe whose ultimates are productivity and marketing.... The Commodity Form touches our experience through the style of life we are expected to assume: consumerism, competition, hoarding, planned obsolescence, and unnecessary waste.¹⁴

Father Kavanaugh seems to hold that capitalism, with its inherent values of marketability and consumption, necessarily leads to the Commodity Form of life. For example, he groups together “consumerism and liberal capitalism”¹⁵ and asks whether “there are economic conditions that foster the breaking of the Ten Commandments?”¹⁶ In another place, Father Kavanaugh argues that the problem with the Commodity Form of life is not a problem with what is marketed but with “marketability.”¹⁷ Consumerism, then, on this perspective is simply the necessary complement, from the viewpoint of consumption, to the capitalist market economy. It is largely brought about by the sellers of products and is the effect of the artificial stimulation, chiefly by means of media manipulation, of an ever-increasing need for mass-produced consumer products. This criticism of consumerism as a necessary complement of capitalism is drawn, to some extent, from Marx. Father Kavanaugh writes that “The notion that an economic way of life might serve as a religious surrogate was first suggested to me when I read Karl Marx.”¹⁸ In particular, Kavanaugh is drawn to Marx's claim that we relate to material possessions in an idolatrous manner, treating them with a “fetishism of commodities” wherein material possessions become substitute gods, giving us meaning and purpose.

In Father Kavanaugh's writing, it is not always how far he goes with Marx on this point. As a materialist, Marx held that the fundamental problem of human life can be understood in material terms. If we were to abandon the system of capital, Marx thought that we could then solve the basic problems of human life. Given this materialism, Marx's critique is fundamentally an objection to an economic system: capitalism. As noted, Father Kavanaugh

seems to share Marx's claim that capitalism leads necessarily to the fetishism of commodities. Father Kavanaugh describes capitalism as the principal cause of the Commodity Form.¹⁹ He writes, "If capitalism is unchecked by any other universe of values but its own, however, it necessarily leads to the Commodity Form." However, the relation between capitalism as an economic system and the Commodity Form as a philosophy and religion seems more complicated for Father Kavanaugh than for Marx. First, Father Kavanaugh is not a materialist, and so, on his account, the world of spirit and ideas can have some power. Second, there are places in his writing where Father Kavanaugh draws helpful distinctions. He writes, "Productivity, marketability, consumption, technique, and scientific method are not evil themselves. They are beneficial to the well-being of humanity and, as such, are 'graced' values. It is only when the relation of persons to production is reversed, when the instrumentalities become the measure of the persons, that the Commodity Form of life rules and ruins us."²⁰ In short, Father Kavanaugh seems to hold two views on the relation between consumerism and capitalism. Sometimes, he seems to hold with Marx that the problem is capitalism, since it causes the Commodity Form. For example, in one place, Father Kavanaugh describes his project as "a critique of capitalism" and of "the very nature of our economic system,"²¹ but in other places, Father Kavanaugh seems to direct his criticism against a widespread moral and religious ethos, one in which the dignity and irreplaceable worth of the human person is undermined because human beings are treated as a commodity.

David Wells on Self-Fulfillment and Consumerism

In *Losing Our Virtue*, David F. Wells provides an analysis of the relation between the contemporary quest for self-fulfillment and consumerism. This connection is captured in the new attitude: "I shop, therefore I am."²² According to Wells, we live in a definite cultural-moral order that makes this search possible. In a word, our self-understanding as human beings created, fallen, and redeemed by God, has vanished, leaving us with a sense of emptiness, of depletion. We now lack a substantive self-identity of human beings that Christian theism made possible. This is the view, as Wells puts it, "that beneath all of the surface particularities of gender, ethnicity, age, education, occupation, and culture there was a shape to human life that was the same in all places and times."²³ Thus, the notion of a common human nature, that all human beings are created in the image of God, logically excluded believing that man is the chance product of matter-in-motion, or simply the product of his circumstances, gender, and ethnicity.

Many factors have contributed to the phenomenon of the empty self. Tradition is no longer normative, defining our moral and religious self-understanding, our relationships, careers, and lifestyle choices. In addition, social and cultural pluralism, the reality of change, given our highly mobile society, has been uprooted from place, community, and family and has thrown us back on ourselves with the idea that we now have multiple options, that we can choose to change ourselves, because who we are is a matter of individual choice. This includes even transforming our fundamental bodily identities as men and women.

The idea of the self that is emerging, says Wells, is of “a self that can adjust and transform its public presentation as circumstance requires. And it excites the thought that even the self could be different from what it has been. The self can be liberated.”²⁴ But, liberated for what end?—Liberated for unlimited self-expression, self-gratification, and self-fulfillment. As Wells notes, “As the self emptied out it became a receptacle to be filled with the impressions of others. Thus, the freedom to ‘be one’s self’ was soon held hostage by the views of others, the world of fashion, and the pressure of social trends.” “Standards became blurry,” Wells adds, “and without a religious framework of meaning to give sense to reality, people began to experience a troubling and painful sense of dislocation.”²⁵

Indeed, with the crisis of moral truth brought on by the increasing cultural acceptance of moral relativism came a shift from the view that the self must be understood in terms of *character*, of virtues to be acquired and practiced, of moral inwardness, to *personality*, to the image, which needs fashioning and that came along with the newly won freedom of self-invention. Wells explains: “A liberated self, it turns out, is no longer tethered to what used to be thought a virtue: [moral] consistency. [Moral] [c]onsistency, in this new, postmodern framework, becomes the hobgoblin of foolish minds. If consistency was once the hallmark of firm, rooted character, it is now the major impediment to the successful construction of the self. A flexible biography, a self that can adapt as needed to different environments, that can remake itself, refurbish itself, reinvent itself, reimagine itself and even remake its body, is the obvious psychological counterpart to our market-driven economy with its plethora of choices and required adaptation.”²⁶

The upshot is this: We have been transformed from moral actors into consumers, from created beings made in the image of God and grounded in the order of truth and good proper to the human person into consumer beings driven by the need for self-fulfillment. And hence, says Wells, “We also find that we must become patients, for the sense of well-being that we seek and

that we think can be bought, remains elusive. The very emptiness of the modern self sustains both our psychologists and our merchants.”²⁷ Father Kavanaugh makes a similar point when he writes that “friendship, intimacy, love, pride, happiness, and joy are actually the *objects* that we buy and consume, much more so that the tubes, liquor bottles, Cadillacs, and Buicks that promise them and bear their names. And since none of these deepest human hopes can be fulfilled in any product, the mere consumption of them is never enough; ‘more’ of the product, or a ‘new improved’ product, is the only relief offered to our human longings.”²⁸ We have become consumer beings, whose pursuit of the good life has been replaced by the pursuit of the good *things* in life, says Wells, and who hope to be fulfilled through purchase and consumption of goods and services. Wells writes, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

Across a broad front we gather materials for the construction of ourselves. We build a public self in what we buy and what we voluntarily choose to do. This front runs from cuisine (Thai, French, or Mexican tonight?), to fashion (Ferragamo shoes or faux furs?), to particular products (antiques or Swedish contemporaries?), to music (Bach or the Grateful Dead?), to sexual lifestyles (monogamous or casual, heterosexual or gay?), to beliefs (Christian, New Age, or postmodern doubt?). Beneath it all is the same compulsion to be in a state of constant inward evaluation, taking an inventory of needs and wishes, and then reaching out for a “product” to satisfy the felt emptiness and to project who we are. The “product” may, indeed, be a product like a new car, but it also may be a new face, a new diet, or a new hormonal therapy to hold off the approach of old age, or a new projection of the kind of person that we would like to be. This takes channel surfing to a high art as we slide from product to product, from relationship to relationship, from style to style, seldom lingering long before the shape of our internal inventory tugs us in another direction in search of different fulfillment.²⁹

The full picture then is this: The self is liberated from history, tradition, society, nature, and God, but this freedom has been purchased at the price of emptiness, and sensing this emptiness, consumption is offered as a means to fill the emptiness of the modern self.

Christopher Lasch on the Culture of Consumption

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch offers an historical account of the culture of consumption. In a section titled “The Propaganda of Commodities,” Lasch begins his account with the rise of industrial capitalism.

While the early capitalists saw the worker merely as a producer, after World War I some saw that the worker might be useful to the capitalist, not just as a producer but also as a consumer. Industrial mass production prompted manufacturers to educate the masses in the culture of consumption. Advertisers began to promote consumption as a way of life.

Advertising upholds consumption as the answer to the age-old discontent peculiar to the modern age. It plays seductively on the malaise of industrial civilization. Is your job meaningless? Does it leave you with feelings of futility and fatigue? Is your life empty? Consumption promises to fill the aching void.³⁰

On this account, the maturing of industrial capitalism brings with it cultural changes, including the rise of a new “culture of consumption.”

Lasch claims that the culture of consumption serves two functions: First, it encourages the tired worker to despair of the possibility of changing the conditions of work. Instead, renewal is to be found in the consumption of new goods and services. Second, the new culture of consumption turns alienation into a commodity.

It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate all the old unhappiness to which flesh is heir; it creates or exacerbates new forms of unhappiness—personal insecurity, status anxiety, anxiety in parents about their ability to satisfy the needs of the young. Do you look dowdy next to your neighbors? Do you own a car inferior to theirs? Are your children as healthy? As popular? Doing as well in school?³¹

Mass production succeeds not only by producing high quantities of material but by selling dissatisfaction as a means to create expanding markets.

Finally, Lasch argues that the culture of consumption aligns itself with the progressive forces of modern society: public education, free speech, and the circulation of ideas. The cult of the avant-garde, with the continual desire for what is new, is central to this new cultural attitude. It favors fashion rather than family, since the family inherently tends to promote custom and living for others while the fascination with fashion tends to promote the desire for something new merely because one’s old possessions have gone out of style. It favors immediate gratification rather than temperance. It claims to side with women and children, encouraging them to be liberated from patriarchal structures, but “only to subject them to the new paternalism of the advertising industry.”³²

Gabriel Marcel on *Being* and *Having*

Although the writings of the Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) do not include an extended analysis of consumerism, some of his ideas have proved seminal for later thinkers, including Pope John Paul II. In particular, it is helpful to consider Marcel's writings on *being* and *having* as a background to understand some of John Paul II's comments about consumerism. There are several initial difficulties in understanding Marcel's thought. First, his ideas are not presented in a clear and systematic manner. For example, much of what he wrote about the relation between *being* and *having* is presented in the form of diary entries. While these entries are often rich, they are not systematized. Second, Marcel was consciously opposed to certain kinds of systematization. In particular, he held that the effort to gain a detached, systematic understanding of the being of the human person did violence to the mystery of the person. The philosopher can try to show the mystery of *being*, but any effort to reduce that mystery to quantifiable categories misses the richness of *being* and the person. Given this about Marcel's writing and his thought, it is difficult to offer a systematic summary of his ideas, but even recognizing these difficulties is one way of beginning a presentation of his philosophy.

In *Being and Having*, Marcel aims to gain a metaphysical understanding of *being* through a phenomenological analysis of *having*. He does not think there is a simple distinction between *being* and *having*, as if *being* is related to the spiritual and *having* is related to the physical. *Having* implies *being*, since having is a mode of being. Hence, one way to come to a fuller understanding of *being*, which is Marcel's goal, is to gain a fuller understanding of *having*. He writes "A phenomenological analysis of *having* would constitute a useful introduction to a renewed analysis of *being*."³³

The text of *Being and Having* includes a diary with entries from the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as several essays, including one with the title "Outlines of a Phenomenology of Having." His approach is phenomenological in that he provides a description of concrete human existence, especially of the relation between human acts and their real objects. The human person is not an instrument "had" by others, since we exist in our own right as persons. Neither is the human person a pure being that exists without any dependence on other things or other persons. The human person needs to have things in order to be a person. Human reality, then, is a combination of *being* and *having*.

The experience of *having* involves treating something as an “it,” not as a “thou.”³⁴ In having something, there is a desire to take it in, to possess and contain it, to hold on to it and accumulate more of it, never letting it go. For this reason, there is a basic tension between the possessor and the thing possessed. The thing possessed is initially an alien to the possessor, and there is a vain attempt to incorporate the thing possessed into the self of the possessor. This leads to a dialectic where the possessor, by becoming attached to the thing, gives power to the possession, the power to absorb the self of the possessor in the thing possessed. As Marcel writes, “I hug to myself this thing that may be torn from me, and I desperately try to incorporate it in myself, to form myself and it into a single and indissoluble complex. A desperate, hopeless struggle.”³⁵ Hence, the things that one has are not only external, “They are seen to exercise a power over me which my attachment confers upon them, and which grows as the attachment grows.”³⁶ In this way, “our possessions eat us up.”³⁷

While this description of *having* reveals one mode of being a person, the main point of Marcel’s distinction between *having* and *being* is to draw attention to the irreducible character of the person. The fixation on *having* leads first to the desire to consume evermore. Next comes the trap of feeling consumed by the very thing that one has, but this trap of despair can also reveal another mode of *being*. Instead of becoming trapped within oneself, self-preoccupied, and self-enclosed, it is possible for a person to become vulnerable to the other, to open oneself up to the other, and to give of oneself unreservedly. This way of *being* as a person, which Marcel considers to be a more authentic expression of human personhood, he terms “disposability” or “availability.”³⁸ It includes the capacity to be open to the being of others, dwelling in an intersubjective union in which one makes responsible commitments.

Marcel sees the modern emphasis on *having* to the neglect of authentic *being* as a symptom of the rationalist and idealist weakening of the ontological sense. By focusing only on problems that can be solved following a quantifiable technique to the neglect of mysteries in which we dwell, there is a sense of loss, alienation, and despair. To respond to these, we attempt to have more, but this leads instead to an increased sense of enslavement to our possessions and a neglect of the authentic mystery of the human person in which we dwell. While Marcel does not explicitly take up an analysis of the concept of consumerism, his writing on *being* and *having* prefigures some of the central aspects of the idea of consumerism—ideas that have been developed by later thinkers, including John Paul II.

John Paul II on Consumerism

According to John Paul II, consumerism is one of several problems, indeed dangers, emerging within the more advanced economies of Western culture.³⁹ The modern self is left with a “*radical dissatisfaction*,” as John Paul II calls it, because “the more one possesses, the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.”⁴⁰ Hence, consumerism is contrary to the order of truth and good proper to the human person.

The pope draws a clear distinction between capitalism as an economic system and consumerism as a moral and cultural attitude. He writes: “These criticisms are directed not so much against an economic system as against an ethical and cultural system. The economy, in fact, is only one aspect and one dimension of the whole of human activity. If economic life is absolutized, if the production and consumption of goods become the center of social life and society’s only value—not subject to any other value—the reason is to be found not so much in the economic system itself as in the fact that the entire socio-cultural system, by ignoring the ethical and religious dimension, has been weakened, and ends by limiting itself to the production of goods and services alone.”⁴¹ This criticism of consumerism calls attention to the vital importance of religious, moral, and cultural foundations for an adequate account of the whole of human activity. Consumerism endangers man rather than helps him experience his personhood in an authentic way, which is according to the order of truth and good proper to the human person.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote: “It is what a man is, rather than what he has, that counts.”⁴² The failure to honor the fundamental distinction between “being” and “having” is at the heart of John Paul’s criticism of consumerism. This distinction means that the choices we make should be based on the nature of the human person and human action rather than on the covetous desire of accumulating or consuming, grasping, and possessing as much as we possibly can of material goods and services. The pope makes clear that his criticism is not aimed at those who want to have good things in life, who want to live better, and to have a qualitatively more satisfying life through the quality of goods and services enjoyed, as well as the quality of the environment and, generally, of life. Rather, says John Paul, “What is wrong is a style of life that is presumed to be better when it is directed toward ‘having’ rather than ‘being,’ and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment [of things] as an end in itself.”⁴³ It is wrong precisely because “to ‘have’ objects and goods does not in itself perfect the human subject, unless it contributes to the maturing and enrichment of that

subject's 'being,' that is to say, unless it contributes to the realization of the human vocation as such."⁴⁴ "It is therefore necessary," adds the pope, "to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors that determine consumer choices."⁴⁵ Truth, beauty, goodness, communion—these are goods essential for realizing man's basic human vocation.

This claim brings us to the related point that consumerism is the effect of artificial stimulation, chiefly through media manipulation, of new needs and new means to meet them. The danger here is that manipulative advertising ensnares people in a web of false and superficial gratification. Recall, in this connection, Wells' point that such advertising is not just informative about the goods for sale, but they also offer up a vision of life, an alternative lifestyle.⁴⁶ What is more, these new needs arise and are defined in terms of a concept of man and of his supposed true good, ultimate goal. As John Paul notes, "A given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption. It is here that *the phenomenon of consumerism* arises. In singling out new needs and new means to meet them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man that respects all the dimensions of his being and that subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones."⁴⁷ Yet this is precisely the problem. Consumerism reflects a culture of materialism and secularism, which results either in reductionist fallacies that ignore all the dimensions of the human person, or in the subordination of everything—ourselves, others, nature, and religion—into a commodity, as replaceable and marketable commodities. Insightfully, John Paul likens the affluent society or the consumer society of the Western world to Marxism for, like the latter, our society reflects a pure materialism "insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture, and religion." In this respect, like Marxism, our consumer society "totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs."⁴⁸

Thus, consumerism rests on a reductionist philosophy of man: reducing the totality of man's being to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs. In this light, we can well understand John Paul's critical point that (a) an economic system in itself does not possess criteria for distinguishing basic human needs from artificial needs, and (b) there are qualitative human needs that escape the logic of the market mechanism. Human goods satisfy these human needs, says John Paul, that "by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold." "Certainly," adds the pope, "the mechanisms of the market offer secure advantages: They help to utilize resources better; they

promote the exchange of products; above all, they give central place to the person's desires and preferences, which, in a contract, meet the desires and preferences of another person. Nevertheless, these mechanisms carry the risk of an 'idolatry' of the market, an idolatry that ignores the existence of goods that by their nature are not and cannot be mere commodities."⁴⁹ Friendship, intimacy, community, love, pride, happiness, virtue, solidarity, goodness, truth, knowledge, and last but not least, the reality and vocation of man seen in his totality, namely, according to his *interior dimension*, called to share in the truth and the good that is *God Himself*—the nature of these goods are such that they are not and cannot be mere commodities. Consumerism fails to recognize this basic truth because it absolutizes the economic dimension of human activity, regarding man as a producing or consuming being rather than as a subject who produces or consumes in order to live and experience his personhood in an authentic way.

At the root of the choice to absolutize the economic dimension of human existence is a reversal of the hierarchy of values. Says John Paul, "There are some people ... who do not really succeed in 'being' because, through a reversal of the hierarchy of values, they are hindered by the cult of 'having'; and there are others ... who do not succeed in realizing their basic human vocation because they are deprived of essential goods. The evil does not consist in 'having' as such, but in possessing without regard for their *quality* and the *ordered hierarchy* of the goods one has. *Quality and hierarchy* arise from the subordination of goods and their availability to man's 'being' and his true vocation."⁵⁰ The point about quality is simply this: There are basic human goods that cannot be reduced to mere commodities without inhibiting the realization of man's true vocation.

Finally, John Paul's allusion to the hierarchy of values or goods is important because knowledge of the proper order and hierarchy of goods is basic for the choices that man makes in order to realize his true vocation. Put differently, the decisions he makes as consumer are relative to the supreme good of human life, its ultimate goal: true happiness. This brings us back to John Paul II's critique of the dialectic of having and being that is at the root of consumerism. "A person who is concerned solely or primarily with possessing and enjoying, who is no longer able to control his instincts and passions, or to subordinate them by obedience to the truth, cannot be free: *Obedience to the truth about God and man* is the first condition of freedom, making it possible for a person to order his needs and desires and to choose the means of satisfying them according to a correct scale of values, so that ownership of things may become an occasion of growth for him."⁵¹ The pope is making three

points here: (1) Obedience to the truth is the very source and condition of authentic freedom; (2) The knowledge of this truth orders a person's needs and desires, so that they are subordinated to the last, supreme good of human life, its ultimate goal; and (3) Only under these conditions may possessing things become an occasion of authentic human development.

In sum, consumerism is a form of man's self-alienation, because the economic dimension loses its necessary relationship to the human person and results in alienating and dispossessing him of the order of truth and good proper to the human person. What we need is a Christian anthropology, a comprehensive concept of the human person, that recognizes and respects the hierarchy of the true values of human existence in order to help man to experience and develop his personhood; in brief, his *being*, in an authentic way.

The Anthropology of Christian Personalism

Basic Needs of Human Nature

John Paul II supposes that we have an understanding of universal human nature and its basic needs.⁵² By "needs" the pope does not mean merely biological mechanisms or psychic impulses that are instinctive and inferior, or blind and compelling. This understanding of human nature would ignore the reality of the human person as intelligent and free, but human nature exists only in persons, and a person, precisely *qua* person, is rational and free, endowed with independent existence, is inviolable, inalienable, is an end in itself and not only a means, and created in the image of God. Against this background, we can easily see that in speaking of needs he has in mind *natural*, that is, *creational*, human needs that actually belong to the human person. What needs belong to human beings? Is there a hierarchy of needs with some needs being more basic than others? John Paul urges us to respect man in the totality of his being, but his understanding of the human person subordinates man's material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones such as inclinations to truth, goodness, and life in society. Consequently, the need to satisfy our thirst is not as basic as the needs to know and understand the truth, to contemplate, and to create. This understanding of the human person and his basic needs is necessary, he claims, in order to live a fully human life, indeed, as the conditions for human flourishing.

John Paul II and, along with him, Dominican scholar Father Benedict Ashley, follow Saint Thomas Aquinas by developing their understanding of human needs in light of the human good. Basic needs define a human being as

such in terms of what he lacks, suggesting his distinctive incompleteness. These human needs are fulfilled by human goods, and the most basic needs by the most basic goods, according to Father Ashley. Aquinas, says Father Ashley, proposed four basic needs and the goods that satisfied them: “*life* (health), *reproduction*, *society*, and *truth*.”⁵³ Elaborating on these, Father Ashley writes: “(1) Life, bodily and spiritual; (2) The propagation of the human race; (3) God-centered community life with other created persons; and (4) Truth about reality, above all, about God, ourselves, and other persons.”⁵⁴ “These four needs are interrelated,” adds Ashley, “and form a hierarchy. Truth is the supreme value, since with wisdom comes all other goods and particularly the knowledge and worship of God. But the fullness of truth is attainable only as the common good of a human community (society) and such a community cannot exist and function without the reproduction of its membership and the health that makes this possible. Thus, integral human fulfillment requires health, family, and society and culminates in wisdom.”⁵⁵

In other words, life, indeed, and self-preservation is necessary in order to strive for these other goods. We need sexual union and the rearing of offspring because human community cannot be preserved without the propagation of the human race. We cannot attain the knowledge and understanding of the truth, nor indeed share our achievements with others, without community and, hence, the human need to live in society.⁵⁶ Finally, as Ashley puts it, “We need truth, because it is necessary to guide our lives and to give them their ultimate meaning in the knowledge and love of God, ourselves, and other persons in the kingdom of God.” While Aquinas held that each of his four basic goods—life, reproduction, society, truth—is a good in itself and not a mere means, says Ashley, he “also believes that they are mutually ordered in the way just indicated, so that the first three are subordinated to the last, supreme good. Thus, the ultimate goal of human life to which all other goods are ordered is friendship with God in his kingdom, which includes all other persons who are God’s friends.”⁵⁷

Finally, this account of the human good is based on the priority of happiness as the ultimate end of integral human fulfillment. *This natural desire for happiness is of divine origin*. God created man with this desire in the human heart in order to draw us to himself, because God alone can fulfill this desire. “Man is created *by* God and *for* God”—in the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 27). God has sought man out, a search that is biblically spoken of as the finding of a lost sheep (cf. Luke 15:1–7), and something that is attested in the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Man. True God made true man, Jesus Christ reveals God’s true nature to man

but also shows him the path by which God may be reached. Christ is the answer to this desire in the heart of man, says John Paul II, “the only response fully capable of satisfying the desire of the human heart.”⁵⁸ Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). God calls us to his own beatitude, which is the perfect happiness of eternal life with him, promised us through the grace of Christ. “God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him, and so to come to paradise. Beatitude makes us ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) and of eternal life. With beatitude, man enters into the glory of Christ and into the joy of the trinitarian life. Such beatitude surpasses the understanding and powers of man. It comes from an entirely free gift of God: Whence it is called supernatural, as is the grace that disposes man to enter into the divine joy.”⁵⁹ Friendship with God in his kingdom is sharing the life of the Holy Trinity. “For our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). We are brought into this fellowship through the grace of Christ in conversion and baptism. And this fellowship is brought to its fulfillment, indeed, its eternal fullness in the Trinity’s intimate revelation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the *beatific vision*. In short, this is our true happiness, our beatitude, which is the perfect happiness of eternal life with God, promised us through the grace of Christ. As Father Ashley puts it,

Only by entering into the life of the ever-living Triune God, who is the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty, can every desire of created persons such as we are be satisfied. If we possess anything less than God, no matter how good it may be, our intelligences can always conceive of something better and our wills desire that better thing. Only in God can we find that inexhaustible and infinite goodness that lacks nothing and thus can totally satisfy us as creatures endowed with intelligence and freedom. That cannot be said of any other things that humans desire, whether fame or fortune, health or pleasure, success or achievement, or the love of any creature.⁶⁰

The implication that follows from believing that beatitude is the ultimate end of human existence is foundational for the Christian in dealing with the dialectic of *being* and *having* that is at the root of consumerism. Let us be clear that consumerism is finally about human sinfulness because it involves exchanging the truth about God for the lie. We suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18–23). As a result, we are inclined to be immoderately attached to the goods of this world. Beatitude frees man from his disordered attachment

to the world's goods, having now been freed from the covetous desire of accumulating or consuming, grasping and possessing as much as he can of material goods and services.⁶¹ This is the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "The beatitude of heaven sets the standards for discernment in the use of earthly goods in keeping with the law of God."⁶²

Concupiscence, Covetousness, and Asceticism

"Man is divided in himself"—so states the Second Vatican Council in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The root of this internal conflict is original sin. According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, the doctrine of original sin has the following four features. First, original sin is *universal sinfulness*, which includes tendencies that incline us to sin. The Council of Trent called this inclination to sin, *concupiscence*, and held it to be contrary to God's will, because it is at odds with his holiness. Concupiscence is present in all men and in all areas of their lives; it is born of original sin but is not itself a sin. Second, original sin is *natural sinfulness*: It belongs to the nature of man in a real sense, and is present from birth; in short, we are born with a fallen human nature. Third, original sin is *inherited sinfulness*: This fallen human nature is inherited, resulting in human beings who are born in a state of hereditary moral weakness and alienation from God. Fourth, original sin is *Adamic sinfulness*: It stems from Adam, whose transgression provides a historical beginning for original sin, and which has left its consequence in every descendant of Adam, so that the sinful situation of man is connected with the fault of Adam, the first man and progenitor of the race.⁶³ "Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle."⁶⁴

It is in the context of this spiritual struggle against concupiscence that we can best understand the disorder of covetous desires such as greed, avarice, and envy. What is the general relationship between concupiscence and disordered desires? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives the following definition of *concupiscence*: "Etymologically, 'concupiscence' can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason. The apostle Saint Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the 'flesh' against the 'spirit.' Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man's moral faculties and, without being an offense, inclines man to commit sins" (no. 2515). Suppose, then, that I have an intense desire to acquire, consume and/or possess material goods. In itself, this desire

is neither good nor evil. This concupiscent desire requires taming and discipline, however, for without asking ourselves about what and how much to consume, and why this desire may spawn greed, avarice, and envy. The ninth and tenth commandments of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21) forbid these covetous desires. Greed is the vice of amassing earthly goods without limit. Avarice arises from a passion for riches and their concomitant power. And envy is the immoderate desire to acquire another's goods, even unjustly.⁶⁵

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that "in economic matters, respect for human dignity requires the practice of the virtue of *temperance*, so as to moderate attachment to this world's goods" (no. 2407). What is a virtue? Briefly, *a virtue is an acquired and stable character trait or disposition enabling the whole person to do well what is morally good*. It is primarily concerned with intelligently disciplining our feelings, desires, and emotions, or rightly ordering them, to the purposes or goals of a virtuous life.⁶⁶ Temperance is the moral virtue that helps us to live moderately and it may be expressed by making important changes in established lifestyles, as John Paul II suggests, with the aim of developing one that is consistent with the purposes and character of God.⁶⁷ Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to carry out this aim. In particular, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are a gift of God's grace, the basis of the whole Christian moral life, directing it as well as giving life to all the moral virtues (cf. no. 1813). Father Ashley gives a practical application of the pope's suggestion. He writes, "We ... need to moderate the pleasure we take in being well-dressed and in our houses, automobiles, and other external possessions. The way we use goods also expresses moral attitudes and no doubt influences them."⁶⁸ "Thus, with a touch of dry humor, the Bible indicates the three purposes of clothes," adds Ashley, "protection of the body, moderation of sexual attraction by modesty, personal beauty, and dignity. The most common moral failing in the use of clothing regards the second two purposes when people dress immodestly, or when they dress ostentatiously and extravagantly. What is true of our clothing is true of our homes: We need shelter, privacy, and a pleasant environment worthy of human dignity."⁶⁹

Temperance includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery and self-possession that we call Christian *asceticism*. Man is "the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake," which means that God created each human person as a being of his own, existing in self-mastery; and yet, "Self-mastery is ordered to the gift of self."⁷⁰ As John Paul II says, "Man is precisely a person because he is master of himself and has self-control. Indeed, insofar as he is master of himself he can give himself to the other."⁷¹ We must exercise our

freedom to give to others because man “can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”⁷² We are made for self-donation, for communion with other persons. This is why man can fully discover his true self only in making a sincere gift of himself. It is no wonder, then, that in the New Testament the vices of greed, avarice, and envy are condemned and the rich are instructed as follows: “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

In the Old and New Testaments, extravagance and luxury in housing and clothing of the rich is denounced not only for ignoring that this world and its treasures are indeed passing away but also for neglecting the poor and for social injustice. “Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!* Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just” (James 5:1–6). These admonitions and others (cf. Matt. 6:19–21; 1 Cor. 7:29–31) warn us today against our culture of consumerism. They are not aimed at those who want to have good things in life, who want to live better, and to have a more satisfying life through the quality of goods and services enjoyed. Nor are they aimed against the idea of accumulating wealth, being rich, and so forth. They warn us against an *immoderate attachment to the goods of this world* because “lack of moderation,” as Father Ashley rightly notes, “can lead to serious harm and mortal sin if the extravagance or immodesty is grave.”⁷³

Earlier we noted John Paul II’s thesis that one who is concerned solely or primarily with possessing or enjoying cannot be free. Of course, this claim presumes an understanding of freedom that is ordered to a purpose. What is this purpose? “Freedom is not the liberty to do anything whatsoever. It is the freedom to do good, and in this alone, happiness is to be found. The good is, thus, the goal of freedom. In consequence, man becomes free to the extent that he comes to a knowledge of the truth, and to the extent that this truth—and not any other forces—guides his will. Liberation for the sake of a knowledge

of the truth which, alone, directs the will is the necessary condition for a freedom worthy of the name.”⁷⁴ This is an ordered liberty, in which freedom is ordered to truth, with obedience to the truth being the very source and condition of authentic Christian freedom.

Christian Freedom

Catholic philosopher John Crosby succinctly states the problem that some critics see with the idea of claiming the dependency of freedom on truth and its corollary that the good is the goal of freedom. He writes: “[M]any contemporary men and women are afraid of the truth about good. They want freedom on their own terms. They see in the truth about good, which is the law for their freedom, a threat to their freedom. They fear that a higher law not of their own making can only interfere with their acting through themselves and hence interfere with them as persons. They claim that they would lose their individuality if they were to submit to a law that is the same for all persons. And so they think that to save themselves as persons, they have to become subjectivists about good, that is, people who think that each person creates his or her own concept of good and of the moral life.”⁷⁵ The claim that freedom has its own standard or higher law, which is the truth about good, is thought to be alien to the autonomous self and therefore false. It is a *heteronomy*, says John Paul II, “as if the moral life were subject to the will of something all-powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom,” and heteronomy is itself a servitude and nothing but a form of self-alienation. Such a heteronomy calls up its opposite, which is the *autonomous* self, who sets the standards of right and wrong. Indeed, this self is free to make right whatever he chooses, because to be subject to the law of another, to a law that depends not on himself but on nature and the Author of nature, is heteronomy.⁷⁶

Christian freedom overcomes the dialectic of heteronomy versus autonomy. On the one hand, a person must act through himself as the source and cause of his own deliberate acts. In acting through himself, he exercises a rightful autonomy as the personal subject of his actions through interiorizing the truth about good, which is the law for our freedom. The Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain rightly argues that the law of our freedom is not incompatible with autonomy, rightly understood as a person acting through himself, for the autonomy of the moral agent is realized through *interiorization* of this law. We interiorize the law of our freedom through the intellect and through love. As Maritain says, “The only authentic autonomy for the human being is to fulfill the law—the law of another—which he has made his own through reason and through love.” On the other hand, though the relation between freedom

and the law is heteronomous in one sense, inasmuch as this law is not of our own making, “This heteronomy is not in itself a servitude,” says Maritain, “for this law established by another is the law of our own nature—it requires us to act as men, or according to what we are essentially—and it corresponds to our will’s radical desire for the good.”⁷⁷ Let us call Maritain’s understanding of the relationship between human freedom and the law of this freedom, *theonomy*, or theonomous participation, in order to avoid confusing his view with a vulgar heteronomy, as I described it above. According to John Paul II, theonomy describes the state in which “Man’s free obedience to God’s law discloses that human reason and human will participate in God’s wisdom and providence.”⁷⁸ In short, theonomy expresses the conviction that authentic freedom is a *freedom grounded in truth*.

We experience the law of our freedom as a form of servitude because our capacity to know the truth and to will freely the good, has been weakened and wounded by sin. “As a result of that mysterious original sin, committed at the prompting of Satan, the one who is ‘a liar and the Father of Lies’ (John 8:44), man is constantly tempted to turn his gaze away from the living and true God in order to direct it toward idols (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9), exchanging ‘the truth about God for a lie’ (Rom. 1:25). Man’s capacity to know the truth is also darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and skepticism (cf. John 18:38), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself.”⁷⁹ As a result, the freedom that man, made in God’s image, receives from God is, itself, wounded by sin. How, then, do we free ourselves from the servitude of the law?

The brief answer to this question here has to be as follows: We interiorize the law of freedom, which is the moral law, making it our own; and having internalized the law, we need no coercion in order to live by its demands. Internalization is a matter of first and second degrees of autonomy. Moral action, when it recognizes that the law is true and good, is ruled by reason. In obeying the law I am obeying my own reason, which is the immediate rule of human acts. Maritain calls this interiorization “the first degree of autonomy.” Yet, there is more: “But insofar as our heart remains evil and our will turned toward evil, this first degree remains imperfect and does not eliminate servitude.”⁸⁰ It is our very freedom that is wounded by sin and cannot turn itself efficaciously toward our nature’s law and the author of this law of freedom without the grace of God. As a result, man rejects the Truth and the Good, setting himself up as an absolutely autonomous self. And so, freedom itself has to be set free, and it is Jesus Christ who sets it free from the servitude of the law. He “has set us free for freedom” (cf. Gal. 5:1): “Christ reveals, first and

foremost, that the frank and open acceptance of truth is the condition for authentic freedom: ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (John 8:32).⁸¹ Without a life transformed by grace in Christ and, consequently, animated by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, I remain bound to the law in servitude, because “It is through fear of this law, which I have made my own through reason and which coerces me, that I refrain from doing what my heart desires and my will inclines to.” “But there is a second degree of autonomy,” adds Maritain, “which proceeds from the interiorization of the law through love.”⁸²

This love puts an end to all servitude and brings with it complete freedom. Says John Paul, “We must first of all show the inviting splendor of that truth that is Jesus Christ himself. In him, who is the Truth (cf. John 14:6), man can understand fully and live perfectly, through his good actions, his vocation to freedom in obedience to the divine law summarized in the commandment of love of God and neighbor. And this is what takes place through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, of freedom, and of love: In him we are enabled to interiorize the law, to receive it and to live it as the motivating force of true personal freedom: ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty’ (James 1:25).”⁸³

When the divine Spirit by love inclines the will to the true good to which it is naturally directed, he removes both the servitude [the heteronomy, as we would say today] whereby a man, the slave of passion and sin, acts against the order of the will, and the servitude whereby a man acts against the inclination of his will, and in obedience to the law, as the slave and not the friend of the law. Wherefore the apostle says [2 Cor. 3:17]: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” and [Gal. 5:18]: “If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.” For then, in doing what the law prescribes through love of the law and of the Author of the law, man is following the deepest desire of his whole being—a desire, which, through his love, he has himself rendered more intimate and more natural to his heart than any other desire of his nature. Perfectly interiorized through love, the law has become connatural with him. He is no longer *under* the law, says Saint Paul, he is doing what he loves. This is the privilege of those whom Saint Paul calls the “sons of God”; they have come to be not above the law but above the constraining imperative that it imposes. There is no higher autonomy than that of Christ on the Mount of Olives ... [when He said] to His Father: Thy will be done, not mine.⁸⁴

It might seem that we have strayed a long way from the problem of consumerism, but actually all we have done is to expound on the three points we took John Paul II to be making: (1) Obedience to the truth is the very source

and condition of authentic freedom; (2) The knowledge of this truth orders a person's needs and desires so that they are subordinated to the last, supreme good of human life, its ultimate goal; and (3) Only under these conditions may possessing things become an occasion of authentic human development.

What Is Consumerism?

While the concept of consumerism is used rather widely in recent contemporary debates, it is not always clear exactly what is meant by the concept. First, the concept is rather new. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term to the 1940s. Second, there have been relatively few efforts to clarify the idea of consumerism.⁸⁵

There are two meanings of consumerism that are quite distinct from the one being analyzed here. In one sense, consumerism refers to the movement for the protection of consumers against defective products and false advertisement. This is sometimes referred to as "ethical consumerism." There is another sense in which the word *consumerism* is used in economics to mean that an ever-expanding consumption of goods is beneficial to the economy. In this sense, consumerism is solely an economic claim. Separate from these two ways of using the concept of consumerism, there is another meaning for the term that has been used by philosophers, theologians, and social critics. It is this meaning of the term that we are seeking to clarify where consumerism refers to a preoccupation with the consumption of goods and services.

When philosophers, theologians, and social critics refer to consumerism in recent discussions, consumerism is almost always considered to be something negative. But just what is it that is wrong with consumerism? For that matter, what exactly *is* consumerism? To answer these questions, we will address six themes and then return to a more complete definition of the concept of consumerism.

Consumerism As a Way of Being in the World

One preliminary way of getting at the concept of consumerism is to describe the phenomena involved in acting as a consumer. Walker Percy richly provides such a description in his book *Lost in the Cosmos*.

The self [of the consumer] sees itself as an immanent being in the world, existing in a mode of being often conceived on the model of organism-in-an-environment as a consequence of the powerful credentials of science and technology.

Such immanence is a continuum. At one end: the compliant role-player and consumer and holder of a meaningless job, the anonymous “one”—German *man*—in a mass society, whether a backfence gossip or an Archie Bunker, beer-drinking, TV-watcher.

At the other end: the “autonomous self,” who is savvy to all the techniques of society and appropriates them according to his or her discriminating tastes, whether it be learning “parenting skills,” consciousness-raising, consumer advocacy, political activism—liberal or conservative, saving whales, TM, TA, ACLU, New Right, square-dancing, creative cooking, moving out to country, moving back to central city, et cetera.

The self is still problematical to itself, but it solves its predicament of placement vis-à-vis the world either by a passive consumership or by a discriminating transaction with the world and with informed interactions with other selves.⁸⁶

In another place, Percy provides an insightful phenomenological description of the stages of consumption. His example describes the transformation of desires with regard to female clothing fashion, but, in a note, he suggests that there is a common parallel in male desires for automobiles. The stages move from (1) seeing a style that looks outlandish, to (2) seeing more people wearing it, to (3) trying it on as the saleslady says, “It’s you,” to (4) buying and wearing it, to (5) having the style become “everyday” and boring, to (6) discarding the style and considering it an oddity.⁸⁷

Among the authors considered in section 1 of this paper, several of them offer phenomenological descriptions of consumerism. For example, the 1991 revised version, Father Kavanaugh’s *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, is filled with descriptions of consumerism. He describes (1) the empty interior, (2) the broken relationship, (3) the craving for things, (4) the degradation of injustice, and (5) the flight from the wounded.⁸⁸ In a similar way, David Wells provides a description of the contemporary self as empty, decentered, displaced, and uprooted, a self that turns to channel surfing and the mall for new images, gratification, and even a sense of oneself.⁸⁹

Consumerism As a Moral-Cultural Attitude Expressive of Life-Orienting Beliefs

The way of being in the world described in the previous section is an expression of a moral and cultural attitude, and ultimately of a religious world and life view.⁹⁰ To call consumerism “a religious world and life view” means that it offers a philosophy, a way of answering life’s ultimate questions about meaning and purpose. To call consumerism “a moral and cultural attitude”

means that it posits standards informing our choices sustained and articulated by social and cultural patterns.

To think of the answers that we give to life's ultimate questions about meaning and purpose as a world and life view means that the beliefs informing my perspective function as basic presuppositions, in terms of which I live, think, and act. These beliefs are especially important because they give overall direction, shape, and value to life. They systematically underlie a wide range of thoughts and actions. We may call these basic beliefs "life-orienting beliefs," because holding them dramatically affects the shape of one's life as a whole, not only in what one does but also in what one thinks. Life-orienting beliefs make up the starting-point of consumerism. Of course, they also reflect one's ultimate commitment to a way of being in the world. Thus, consumerism is a world and life view for three reasons: First, it is comprehensive, a total way of looking at life; second, it involves an intellectual commitment to certain beliefs about man and the world; and third, it enters deeply into the life, actions, and thinking of people.⁹¹

Yet we have also referred to consumerism as a moral and cultural attitude, and this is important because we are consciously distinguishing it from other social spheres. It is common to draw a distinction between the political sphere, the economic sphere, and the moral/cultural sphere. While the attitude of consumerism has implications for the political and economic spheres, it is a phenomenon in the moral/cultural sphere. Like other moral and cultural attitudes, it provides answers to life's fundamental questions. These questions include (1) What is the ultimate purpose of life? (2) What are the main problems in life? and (3) What should be done to overcome life's problems?

Like any moral and cultural attitude, consumerism has implications for both the political sphere and the economic sphere. Two further clarifications between the spheres will help. First, consumerism obviously is not a political system or an economic system. Second, consumerism is closely connected to the economic sphere and has a complicated relationship with the market economy. In a later section of this paper, we will try to untangle the connection between consumerism and the market economy. Earlier in this paper, we indicated that there is a debate among contemporary Catholic thinkers about the relation between capitalism and consumerism. Some hold that capitalism necessitates consumerism, while others disagree. However, those on both sides of the debate hold that consumerism is expressed in a moral and cultural attitude.

Consumerism in Industrial and Post-Industrial Societies

The moral and cultural attitude of consumerism seems to be most prevalent in industrial and post-industrial societies. Earlier, we traced Christopher Lasch's account of the rise of the culture of consumption in response to industrial capitalism. There are two points worth noting here. First, Lasch's account seems correct historically. After the rise of industrialization and systems of mass production, there seems to have been a cultural shift away from temperance, self-control, and virtue to a more explicit celebration of consumption as a key to happiness. It seems accurate to claim that the moral and cultural attitudes of consumerism are prevalent in industrial and post-industrial societies.

Could it not be argued that these same attitudes have been present in earlier cultures as well? After all, the ancient Greek Epicureans held that the best life is the pursuit of pleasure. Further, the medieval tradition includes warnings against avarice and gluttony. Are not these vices merely earlier versions of consumerism?

Several things can be said in response to this objection. First, with regard to the Epicureans, while they taught that happiness is to be found in the life of pleasure, they further argued that *pleasure is to be found most fully in the life of restraint and self-denial*. The early Epicureans espoused a philosophy much closer to asceticism than to consumerism. Second, while there are similarities between consumerism, avarice, and gluttony, there are differences as well. Saint Thomas defines avarice as "immoderate love of possessing."⁹² Thomas defines greed as an inordinate desire to consume, especially by eating and drinking.⁹³ While there are similarities between consumerism, avarice, and gluttony, there are clear differences as well. Most critics of consumerism would agree that it includes an immoderate love of possessing and an inordinate desire to consume, but there are differences.

On the one hand, because consumerism does involve an immoderate attachment to the goods of this world, as we have argued in section 2, we have traced this attachment to concupiscence and covetousness and have argued that we need the practice of Christian asceticism. On the other hand, consumerism is different from, say, gluttony, in that gluttony has primarily to do with consuming food and drink. Contemporary consumerism includes not just physical desires for food and drink but an entire way of life—the moral and cultural, and ultimately, the religious and spiritual. Furthermore, part of the difference is that mass production has made goods and services available on an unprecedented scale. Another difference is that avarice and gluttony always have been widely considered to be vices—bad habits that are destructive in the pursuit of

human flourishing. Consumerism is different in that it includes behaviors and attitudes that much of secular culture does not necessarily consider to be vices. In other words, during premodern times, there is no doubt that there were people who developed the vices of avarice and gluttony, but the dominant culture taught that those habits were vices destructive of authentic human flourishing. In contrast, the behaviors and attitudes of consumerism are much more widespread in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies, even to the point that quality of life is often measured merely solely in terms of consumption.

There is a second point worth noting about the relation between consumerism and industrialization. While it seems correct to say that consumerism is a prevalent moral and cultural attitude in contemporary society, the precise nature of the connection is not clear. Since there is considerable debate about the relation between consumerism, capitalism, industrialization, and mass production, it seems unhelpful to resolve that issue in the definition of the term. Instead, we will set this question aside for now, returning to it in a later section. What is clear is that consumerism is prevalent in contemporary society, especially in industrial and post-industrial societies.

There seem to be at least two elements common to industrial and post-industrial societies that are involved in the very concept of consumerism. First, with mass production comes a superabundance of material goods and a wide array of products and services. As David Wells puts it, one company “makes 177 shades of lipstick to ensure that just-the-right shade is available for its discriminating customers. Where there once was one style, we now have multiple options.”⁹⁴ How is contemporary society different that it makes consumerism possible? “What is new about our situation is both the intensity of the barrage of choices—the many things among which we must choose—and the fact that we now think that who we are can also be a matter of choice.”⁹⁵

Industrialization brought about not only mass production and the multiplicity of choices, but it also brought about advances in technology, including changes in the mass media. From the printing press through radio, television, movies, and the Internet, the mass media seem to be a necessary ingredient in the cultural attitude of consumerism. On the one hand, the news and entertainment industries move constantly back and forth between advertisements and programming. There is a tendency for the cultural attitudes of advertisers to creep into the approaches of those involved in programming. This includes an emphasis on immediate gratification, a concern with “the interesting” over a concern for responsible moral commitments, a fascination with the material world and a neglect of the transcendent, a celebration of progress and a deni-

gration of tradition; in short, a secular outlook that disregards the concerns of historical religions and the wisdom traditions.

Later, in this paper, we will try to argue for the claim that industrialization, mass production, and capitalism do not necessarily “cause” the attitude of consumerism. Whether this argument is found to be convincing, it seems clear that consumerism as a moral and cultural attitude is prevalent in industrial and post-industrial societies where there is mass production and a mass media.

The Anthropology Implicit in Consumerism

As a moral and cultural attitude prevalent in industrial and post-industrial societies, consumerism rests on a specific understanding of the human person. This understanding of the human person is both reductionistic and materialistic.

The anthropology of consumerism is reductionistic in the sense that the self is understood in terms of an organism in an environment. Every organism has specific desires either genetically encoded or learned through conditioning. When those desires are stimulated, the organism will act on those desires to pursue, to flee, to be aggressive, or to mate. Following the powerful credentials of modern science, the consumer attitude understands the human being to be fundamentally similar to every organism. Human beings have desires, and to satisfy those desires, we consume. Happiness is understood as the satisfaction of desires. Of course, the consumer mentality recognizes that human beings have desires that are more complicated than those of other organisms, but there is a presupposition that this is merely a difference in degree, not a difference in kind. On this account, every human desire can be understood in terms of a stimulus-response model. Even the desire to buy new clothes is reducible to the desire to be accepted by others and to fit into the “herd.” Advertisers act, recognizing or stimulating consumer needs, even needs not consciously recognized by the consumer. The entire transaction is assumed to be understandable in terms of a stimulus-response model.

The anthropology of consumerism is materialist in the sense that it assumes that only matter has power. The consumer attitude proposes that material goods and services can satisfy human desires. Even apparently higher order desires such as the desire for romance, the need to belong, and the need to have a sense of self-esteem are seen as having a material basis. Even among sophisticated consumers with discriminating tastes, among those who are aware of the subtle techniques of advertising and marketing, the human being is seen still as a consumer, a bundle of desires seeking satisfaction.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline all of the problems with this reductionistic and materialistic philosophy. From a Catholic and personalist perspective, these include both problems that are internal to reductionism and materialism as well as deep incompatibilities with central tenets of Catholicism and personalism. In section 2 of this paper, we articulated a Christian and personalist anthropology that recognizes and respects the hierarchy of the true values of human existence in order to help man to experience and develop his selfhood in an authentic way. This brings us to what is perhaps the most telling objection to the anthropology of consumerism: It treats human beings as consumers rather than as persons. It neglects the person's capacity for creative self-giving as well as the human person's capacity for transcendence. It treats humans as mere consumers rather than as persons who consume. For these reasons, it seems accurate to say that consumerism rests on a flawed reductionist and materialist philosophy.

Consumerism and the Primacy of Things

Flowing from this materialist anthropology, consumerism is a moral and cultural attitude that places a primacy on *things*. The attitude of consumerism encourages the desire for *things*. In fact, it seems correct to say that consumerism encourages a love for products and services.

As noted by Kavanaugh, Wells, Lasch, Marcel, and John Paul II, consumerism plays on the feelings of malaise, alienation, and discontent. These negative feelings are then used with the promise that products and services will satisfy the heart's longing. Traditional wisdom and the Christian faith has taught that our highest love should be for God; that from this, should flow love for our neighbor; and, that from both of these, flows a responsibility to use properly the material goods of the earth. In contrast, consumerism inverts this hierarchy. Instead of loving people and using things, consumerism advocates, often quite subtly, that we should *love* things and use people, with God no longer part of the equation.

Consumerism and the Emphasis on *Having* Over *Being*

The attitude of consumerism involves an overemphasis on "having" and a neglect of authentic human being. As we have seen, this concern is developed in the thought of Marcel and in the writings of Vatican II. It is also a central theme in the writings of John Paul II.

The force of this point lies in the claim that the attitude of consumerism involves an overemphasis on "having" and a neglect of "being." Authentic

growth in one's being involves an appropriate role for "having." What is needed is a moral and cultural attitude that strikes a proper balance between "having" and "being" by placing a primacy on "being," and subordinating "having" to "being" without neglecting the appropriate role of "having" in human life. There are two, possible extremes to be avoided. One extreme might be characterized as a disordered asceticism where having material possessions and enjoying the material goods of the earth is seen as an evil to be avoided absolutely. While this kind of cultural attitude seems alien or even nonexistent in advanced Western societies, it is imaginable for there to be a culture that emphasizes austere detachment from material goods. For example, the film *Babette's Feast* depicts a pietist community in rural nineteenth-century Denmark where material possessions are almost entirely disregarded.⁹⁶

In contrast, at the other extreme lies the attitude of consumerism, an attitude that places absolute emphasis on having to the neglect of *being*. *Having* more comes to be seen as an end in itself; the ultimate goal in life is considered to be enjoyment, the satisfaction of one's immediate desires, and having rich and varied experiences.

Among those who are critical of consumerism, the goal is not to create a culture that denigrates "having" but to subordinate "having" to "being." This is captured in *Babette's Feast* in the culminating scene. After Babette is informed of an unexpected inheritance, she uses her small fortune to present an extravagant French feast to the simple, pietist community. The film contrasts the total disregard for the life of "having" in the rural, Danish, pietist community with Babette's former community, the secularized and bawdy society of urban France. We see in it a society that luxuriates in the lavish material goods, but a culture that seems morally hollow and empty. The feast that Babette prepares introduces to the rural pietists the excellence and quality of material possessions in a feast shared with others. Babette's offering of the feast is an act of self-giving that aims to share the beauty and goodness of her possessions with others. At the feast, she and her fellows are not mere consumers; they are a community of persons. Having the feast contributes to their development as persons and deepens their community.

To understand the richness of the feast, of the solidarity, beauty, and truth shared in communion in the meal, one has to appeal to a personalism that goes beyond consumerism. Consumerism is deficient as a moral and cultural attitude because it treats every person and relation as a commodity that can be had—everything has its price—rather than recognizing the existence of goods

that cannot be reduced to commodities. This, too, we argued in section 2 where we sketched the anthropology of Christian personalism.

The Concept of Consumerism

Putting together these six themes, the following understanding of consumerism emerges. Consumerism is *a way of being in the world expressed in a moral and cultural attitude that is ultimately based on life-orienting beliefs that are prevalent in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies. It rests on a flawed reductionist and materialist anthropology that places a primacy on things by emphasizing having rather than being.*

How Does Consumerism Relate to Market Activities?

Early in this paper, we indicated that there is a debate among contemporary Catholic thinkers about the relation between consumerism and the market economy. Some hold that consumerism is inseparably connected with capitalism, while others hold that consumerism is a distinct phenomenon. It is worth trying to sort out this relationship in order to know whether a criticism of consumerism is also a criticism of capitalism.

The emerging school of thought known as economic personalism tends to hold that there is a distinction between the economic sphere and the moral/cultural sphere. Capitalism is an economic system; consumerism is a moral and cultural attitude. Economic personalism seeks to promote authentic human freedom in each of the social spheres. This includes a free market as well as a moral/cultural sphere devoted to authentic human freedom. Given the importance of freedom to the dignity of the human person, economic personalists “call for creative uses of the cultural and moral institutions of free societies to exercise influence over individuals in the marketplace” rather than relying primarily on political structures to regulate markets.

Does capitalism necessarily cause consumerism? At first glance, it might seem that the pattern of deregulation that occurs with capitalism and free markets carries with it a moral/cultural pattern of deregulation, so that each individual is left free to do whatever he or she wants to do and results in treating every action, relation, and person as a commodity. However, the argument that consumer culture is necessitated by the market economy assumes a false reductionistic determinism. Instead, it seems more helpful to recognize that the free market is an expression of the human capacity for free choices.

Consumerism is not a necessary by-product of the market but, rather, a very common distortion of freedom. That we can raise this sort of question about the consumer culture and sometimes avoid falling into the lures of consumerism shows that consumerism is not necessitated by the market. We recognize in ourselves and in others the tendency to choose to give in to the consumerist model. This shows that the moral vision of consumerism is not a necessary by-product of the market but, rather, results from poor choices made by free individuals in response to an anxiety-inducing new situation.

This line of reasoning seems to accord with a careful reading of John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*. The key to understanding John Paul II's teaching on the free market is to begin by drawing a distinction between three social spheres: the political sphere, the economic sphere, and the moral/cultural sphere. The twentieth century saw a great debate about the relation between these spheres. In the Soviet experiment, the government attempted to exercise almost total control over each. After the fall of communism, it seems evident that Socialist-style economic models do not work in practice. Capitalism seems to be the only remaining economic model. But has not the pope, too, been critical of capitalism?

Here, it helps to pay careful attention to the exact words of the Holy Father. At one point in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II asks, "Can it be said that after the failure of communism, capitalism is the victorious social system?" The answer, John Paul II tells us, is "obviously complex" (no. 42). To sort out the complexity, the Holy Father points out that there are two ways of understanding the term *capitalism*. "If, by "capitalism," is meant an economic system that recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property, and the resulting responsibility for the means of production as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative." In other words, if we understand capitalism to be an economic system where the government allows a relatively wide range for business and economic decisions to be made without intrusive government intervention, then capitalism is in accord with the dignity of the human person. Since we are endowed with the responsibilities of freedom, and since capitalism allows us to make responsible use of our freedom, the Holy Father explicitly affirms its strengths, but the pope knows that the term *capitalism* has other connotations. "It would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a business economy, market economy, or simply a free economy" (no. 42).

Many people use the term *capitalism* to mean an entire philosophy of life where money and material acquisition is seen as the ultimate goal of existence.

It is this consumerist attitude that is roundly criticized by the Holy Father. “If, by *capitalism*, is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework, which places it at the service of human freedom in its 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” (no. 42). In other words, if capitalism is understood as including a moral and cultural attitude where money is seen as more important than anything else, then capitalism’s victory should not be celebrated.

So the heart of the Holy Father’s view of capitalism rests on the claim that there is a difference between the business economy and the culture of consumerism. The business economy is an instrument for effectively utilizing resources and responding to needs. It places a prominent role on disciplined and creative work, initiative, and entrepreneurial ability, operating in the economic sphere in a manner that accords with human dignity.

In contrast, the culture of consumerism involves life-orienting belief with a purely materialist answer to the meaning of life. Why live? To consume. How does one find happiness? By having nice things. The culture of consumerism seduces us with appeals to our material desires but offers us instead a hollow and unsatisfying answer to life’s deepest questions.

The pope makes this distinction explicit when he states “These criticisms are directed not so much against an economic system as against an ethical and cultural system” (no. 39). So the pope favors the market economy but is critical of the culture of consumerism. Does not one lead to the other?

The answer to this question is difficult, since wherever the free market springs up in full force, consumerism is quick to follow, but there is no necessary connection between the business economy and consumerism. As evidence, consider the fact that we can, at least to a degree, reject to participate in the culture of consumerism. The freedom of the market makes the conditions for consumerism possible, but we are also free to reject the moral and cultural vision of consumerism, and we are free to reject it in how we live and act.

To ensure the healthy functioning of the market, it is necessary to surround the market with a flourishing moral/cultural sphere that emphasizes human dignity. That means stable families, strong social associations, and an appropriate place for the Church to be a voice for justice in the public square.

In short, the position that is advanced here is that when capitalism is understood as an economic system that recognizes the positive role of business, the market and private property (rather than an entire philosophy of life in which money and material acquisition are seen as the ultimate goal of existence), then capitalism does not necessarily cause consumerism. However, it does

seem to be the case that there is a tendency for the habits of mind used in capitalism to extend beyond their appropriate sphere. Though this adoption of the consumer mentality as a total philosophy of life is a subsequent bad move made by self-determining agents, it is a choice to adopt an attitude and way of being in the world *for which the agent is responsible rather than the necessary result of a "system" to which the person falls victim.*

It is worth trying to respond to the objections of thinkers who hold a different account of the relationship between capitalism and consumerism. As noted earlier, David Schindler argues that every market system entails cultural and moral presuppositions. The force of Schindler's objection is that the market system involves an individualistic account of human action, one that necessarily leads to consumerism. There are several problems with this position. First, the business economy does not rest on an entirely individualistic understanding of human action. Many actions in the business economy include the cooperation of people working toward a shared goal; the business environment includes a community of persons. Second, the account of human action developed by John Paul II is consonant with human action in a business economy.⁹⁷ Third, Schindler seems to presuppose that participation in liberal institutions, such as the free economy, automatically causes a change in one's moral and religious mentality. Yet, not all who participate in the free economy necessarily undergo a change in their moral and religious mentality. It seems, rather, that the adoption of the attitude of consumerism is a subsequent move made by the individual rather than a necessary consequence of participation in the market.

Father Kavanaugh seems at times to hold that capitalism causes consumerism. His main criticism, as he makes very clear, is against a false moral and religious mentality that treats people and relationships as commodities. If that is what is meant by "capitalism," then, clearly, capitalism should be criticized. At other points, Father Kavanaugh seems to follow Marx in being critical of the business economy, holding that the free market necessarily causes consumerism, but he does not have a well-developed argument to defend this claim. Instead, he seems to be using the word *capitalism* to include a moral outlook. If the concept of capitalism is understood in that way, then Father Kavanaugh's criticism of the Commodity Form is well-taken.

Christopher Lasch offered a historical account of the rise of the culture of consumption. At times, his account makes it seem that industrialization, mass production, and the market economy necessarily lead to the culture of consumption, but just because the events unfolded historically in that manner does not demonstrate that there is a necessary connection between them. While

industrialization, mass production, and the market economy may be elements that are necessary for the possibility of consumerism, it does not follow that those conditions cause consumerism.

The understanding of the human person that has been advanced throughout this paper holds that the person is free in the sense of having the capacity to make self-determining choices, and that authentic freedom involves choosing in accord with goodness and truth. In section 2, we articulated a view of freedom that is consistent with a Catholic and personalist anthropology. Any view that claims that consumerism (or any moral attitude) is caused by the market (or any social institution), culminates in resting on a different anthropology. The market is, no doubt, a factor that conditions one's moral and religious attitude, but the adoption of a moral attitude involves a free choice. In this sense, critics of the culture of consumption, such as Schindler, Kavanaugh, and Lasch can be understood as helping to bring to light, conditioning factors that influence us in our adoption of a moral and cultural attitude as well as warnings against the undue spread of market attitudes to the realm of goods that transcend commodification. However, these critics go too far when they imply that the market causes consumerism.

Conclusion

We have defined "consumerism" as a way of being in the world expressive of a moral and cultural attitude based on life-orienting beliefs that are prevalent in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies that rest on a flawed reductionist and materialist anthropology that places a primacy on things by emphasizing *having* rather than *being*. Further, we have offered a critique of consumerism in the tradition of Christian social thought that is both Catholic and personalist, arguing that consumerism betrays a deep confusion about the human person. Finally, we have argued that consumerism is a modern (and post-modern) phenomenon that has arisen with the market economy, and that consumerism is a distinct cultural distortion of human freedom that occurs in the context of free markets; it is not a necessary result of free markets. The critics of the culture of consumption, some of whom seem to hold that consumerism is a necessary result of free markets, nonetheless provide a helpful aid in awakening us to the undue spread of market attitudes to the realm of goods that transcend commodification.

Notes

1. Craig M. Gay, "Consumerism," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life*, ed. Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 220–22.
2. On idolatry, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (e.g., satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the State, money, et cetera. Jesus says, 'You cannot serve God and mammon' [Matt. 6:24] ... Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God" (no. 2113).
3. John Francis Kavanaugh, S.J., *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986; revised edition, 1991). David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998). John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Encyclical Letter on Social Concern (December 30, 1987); *Centesimus Annus*, Encyclical Letter on the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (May 1, 1991).
4. The Catholic and personalist anthropology we present is drawn from the Church's social teaching, particularly as John Paul II has developed it. See John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997). Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community, Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). See also, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Social Agenda: A Collection of Magisterial Texts*, ed. Rev. Robert A. Sirico and Rev. Maciej Zieba, O.P. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000). In addition, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d edition, especially Part III. Particularly helpful in developing this anthropology is the work of Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. See especially, *Health Care Ethics*, 4th edition (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997), especially 3–21, 166–68, 180; *Living the Truth in Love* (New York: Alba House, 1996), especially 92–118; and *Justice in the Church: Gender and Participation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 1–34. See also the magisterial work by Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, translated from the 3d edition by Sister Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), especially Part 3. In addition, see G. C. Berkouwer's work, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1962). See also the instructive review of theological anthropology and personalism in *Human Nature and the Discipline of Economics: Personalist Anthropology and Economic Methodology*, Volume 2 of *Foundations of Economic Personalism*, Patricia

Donohue-White, Stephen J. Grabill, Christopher Westley, and Gloria Zuniga (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), 11–45.

5. Father Richard John Neuhaus, *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 52.
6. *Ibid.*, 52–53.
7. David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 130–31. It is unclear why Schindler’s criticism of Father Neuhaus does not apply to John Paul II, since the pope expresses in almost the same words the very point that Neuhaus seeks to make, namely, “These criticisms are directed not so much against an economic system as against an ethical and cultural system” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 39).
8. *Ibid.*, 122–26.
9. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 31.
10. *Ibid.*
11. On religious consumerism, Craig M. Gay writes: “The rise of denominational, and now religious, plurality in modern societies has led to a situation in which we are increasingly encouraged to ‘shop for,’ and so to be consumers of, religion itself. The consumption of religion, furthermore, suggests a fundamental change in the meaning of religious belief such that it has increasingly less to do with conviction and more to do with personal preference. Many churches and religious organizations have responded to the changing meaning of belief by obligingly repackaging religion to make it conveniently and easily consumable. Such trends have contributed to the emergence of a kind of religious marketplace in which modern consumers are faced with a veritable smorgasbord of religious options” (“Consumerism,” *The Complete Book*, 221).
12. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 23, 26.
13. *Ibid.*, 43, 35.
14. *Ibid.*, 22, 10.
15. *Ibid.*, 28.
16. *Ibid.*, 31.
17. *Ibid.*, 33.
18. *Ibid.*, 26.
19. *Ibid.*, 58.
20. *Ibid.*

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 221.
23. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 81–116, at 104.
24. Ibid., 95.
25. Ibid., 99.
26. Ibid., 95.
27. Ibid., 113. Wells insightfully notes that “*malls* symbolize for us the consumer culture in a secularized world ... *our* cathedrals. They are a unique blend of high commercialism and undaunted fantasy.... [M]alls have become ‘utopia of consumption’ where ‘carnivals and spectacles of consumption gratify desires and sustain images of self.’” They are not just places to which we come to buy articles; through careful control of lighting, temperature, and visual displays, they create an alternative reality, a kind of earthly heaven in which the pleasures are endless and the gratification promises to be enduring. Here we find ourselves and construct our identities” (88–89).
28. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 23.
29. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 88.
30. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979), 72.
31. Ibid., 73.
32. Ibid., 74.
33. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*, trans. Katherine Farrer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 151.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 163.
36. Ibid., 164.
37. Ibid., 165.
38. Ibid., 69–73.
39. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul briefly analyzes, besides consumerism, the *ecological question*, which he describes as follows: “In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way.... Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, that man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up

provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him. In all this, one notes first the poverty or narrowness of man's outlook, motivated as he is by a desire to possess things rather than to relate them to the truth" (no. 37). He also analyzes the problem of the serious destruction of the *human environment*. "Too little effort is made," says John Paul, "to *safeguard the moral conditions [necessary] for an authentic human ecology*" (no. 38), which is first and foremost the family founded on marriage, and the culture of life. "Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man, too, is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.... Man receives from God his essential dignity and with it the capacity to transcend every social order so as to move toward truth and goodness. But he is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he received, and by his environment" (no. 38). "The first and fundamental structure for 'human ecology' is *the family*, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness and learns what it means to love and to be loved and, thus, what it actually means to be a person. Here we mean the *family founded on marriage*, in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities, becomes aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny.... It is necessary to go back to seeing the family as the *sanctuary of life*.... In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life" (no. 39).

40. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28.
41. *Ibid.*, no. 39.
42. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December, 1965, no. 35.
43. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.
44. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28.
45. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.
46. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 112–13. Wells writes: "None of this [advertising] would be effective, however, if advertisers, using their statistical surveillance of private life, did not project 'powerful images of selfhood' that carry 'the promise of magical self-transformation through the ritual of purchase.' In other words, the premise of the industry, and the principal explanation of its success, is that it is able to tap into the emptiness of the modern self. More than that, many advertisements boldly address that self, and for more than a century have honed messages that are replete with religious motifs. It is not simply a sense of well-being that they offer but a sense of salvation. 'The language of progress and spiritual and physical ful-

- fillment,' Stuart Ewen has observed, is suffused throughout advertising, and advertising is the voice of this progress and spiritual fulfillment" (113).
47. *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36.
 48. *Ibid.*, no. 19. John Paul's evaluation of the affluent society or consumer society is subtle in its analysis. Such a society, he argues, "seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than communism, while excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture, and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs."
 49. *Ibid.*, no. 40. Earlier in the encyclical (no. 34), John Paul writes, "It would appear that, on the level of individual nations and of international relations, *the free market* is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs. But this is true only of those needs that are 'solvent,' insofar as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources that are 'marketable,' insofar as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price. But there are many human needs that find no place on the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help these needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources. [But] even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists *something that is due to man because he is man*, by reason of his lofty dignity. Inseparable from that required 'something' is the possibility to survive and, at the same time, to make an active contribution to the common good of humanity."
 50. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28.
 51. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 41.
 52. We could also speak of inclinations rather than needs, as Saint Thomas Aquinas does in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2. The contemporary Thomist, Servais Pinckaers, O.P., follows Aquinas in his magisterial study, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, by developing the claim that morality and freedom have their source and foundation in the chief natural human inclinations. Whatever the differences between the concepts of needs and inclinations, they both are getting at certain features basic to human life and common to all human beings.
 53. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love*, 92–93.

54. Ashley, *Health Care Ethics*, 166–68, at 167.
55. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love*, 93.
56. On this, see *Gaudium et Spes*, “God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning, ‘male and female he created them’ (Gen. 1:27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For, by his innermost nature, man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts” (no. 12). For a marvelous albeit brief treatment of man’s social nature, see Father Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 432–37.
57. Ashley, *Health Care Ethics*, 168.
58. *Veritatis Splendor*, Encyclical Letter, *The Splendor of Truth* (August 6, 1993), no. 7.
59. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 27, 1718–19, and for this quote at 1721–22. In *Living the Truth in Love*, Father Ashley has an instructive discussion of the question of whether man has a natural desire to see God (99–102). A more-extended discussion by Father Ashley is found in his recent book, *Choosing a Worldview and Value-System: An Ecumenical Apologetic* (New York: Alba House, 2000), 202–9.
60. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love*, 95.
61. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2548.
62. *Ibid.*, no. 1729.
63. We have profited much from Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), especially 15–35. On original sin, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 385–421. See also, John Paul II, *Catechesis on the Creed*, vol. 2, *Jesus, Son and Savior* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 17–77. For the Holy Father’s reflections on original sin as universal sinfulness, see 31, 33–34, 36–37, 39, 41; on natural sinfulness, see 28, 30; on inherited sinfulness, see 28, 36–37, 39–43, 45–46, 48, and 55; and on Adamic sinfulness, see 23–27, 41, 43, 44–46, 48, and 60. See also, Peter Geach, chap. 5, Original Sin, in his *Providence and Evil* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 84–101.
64. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 405.
65. *Ibid.*, nos. 2536, 2539.
66. On virtue, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1803–45.
67. *Centesimus Annus*, no. 52. For two, very different interpretations of the pope’s suggestion regarding changes in *lifestyles*, see Father Neuhaus, *Doing Well and*

- Doing Good*, 222–25, and Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church*, 126–29.
68. *Living the Truth in Love*, 236.
 69. *Ibid.*, 237.
 70. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2339, 2346.
 71. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 398.
 72. Vatican Council II's *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 24): "[T]here is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love. It follows, then, that if man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself."
 73. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love*, 238. Ashley rightly adds, "Moderation in such matters depends, however, a good deal on the custom and the times, rather than on any absolute standard" (238).
 74. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, March 22, 1986, no. 26.
 75. John F. Crosby, "Human Freedom," in a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II, *Lay Witness*, June 2000, vol. 21, no. 5: 54–55.
 76. *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 40–41, and for this quote at 41. See also, nos. 32–35. Regarding the idea of autonomy, John Paul writes: "[S]ome present-day cultural tendencies have given rise to several currents of thought in ethics that center upon an alleged conflict between freedom and law. These doctrines would grant to individuals or social groups the right to determine what is good or evil. Human freedom would thus be able to 'create values' and would enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom. Freedom would thus lay claim to a moral autonomy, which would actually amount to an absolute sovereignty" (no. 35). My discussion on Christian freedom has greatly profited from Jacques Maritain's reflections, especially in *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 105–6, 436–38. For an analysis of Maritain's views on freedom, see Eduardo J. Echeverria, "Authenticity and Christian Personalism," in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 97–117.
 77. Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 105.
 78. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 41.
 79. *Ibid.*, no. 1.
 80. Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 105.

81. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 86–87.
82. *Moral Philosophy*, 105.
83. *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 83.
84. Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 105–6. Maritain has great praise for the text from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Book IV, 22) where Saint Thomas Aquinas comments on Saint Paul, “which I regard as one of the great texts absolutely fundamental for the [understanding of the] spiritual constitution of humanity.”

“We must observe that the sons of God are led by the divine Spirit, not as though they were slaves but as being free. For, since to be free is to be cause of one’s own actions, we are said to do freely what we do of ourselves. Now this is what we do willingly: And what we do unwillingly, we do, not freely but under compulsion. This compulsion may be absolute, when the cause is wholly extraneous, and the patient contributes nothing to the action, for instance, when a man is compelled to move by force; or it may be partly voluntary, as when a man is willing to do or suffer that which is less opposed to his will, in order to avoid that which is opposed thereto. Now, the sanctifying Spirit inclines us to act, in such a way as to make us act willingly, inasmuch as he causes us to be lovers of God. Hence, the sons of God are led by the Holy Ghost to act freely and for love, not slavishly and for fear; wherefore the apostle says [Rom. 8:15]: ‘*You have not received the Spirit of bondage again in fear; but you have received the spirit of adoption of sons*’” (quoted in *Moral Philosophy*, 437).

Aquinas’s interpretation of Galatians 5:18, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law,” is very instructive, but most of all, it is correct: “To be under the [moral] law can be taken in two ways: either as to its obliging force, and then all the faithful are under the law, because it was given to all—hence it is said: ‘I have not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it’ (Matt. 5:17)—or as to its compelling forces, and then the just are not under the Law, because the movements and breathings of the Holy Spirit in them are their inspiration; for charity inclines to the very things that the Law prescribes. Therefore, because the just have an inward law, they willingly do what the Law commands and are not constrained by it. Accordingly, the just are under the Law as obliging but not as compelling, in which sense the unjust alone are under it: ‘Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ (2 Cor. 3:17); ‘The Law,’ as compelling, ‘is not made for the just man’ (1 Tim. 1:9)” (*Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, Saint Thomas Aquinas).

85. Seamus Murphy, S.J. “What Do We Mean by Consumerism?” *Doctrine and Life* 43, no. 2 (February 1993): 94–100.
86. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 113.

87. Ibid., 25.
88. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 3–19.
89. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 87–89.
90. In calling one’s “life-orienting beliefs” a world and life “view,” we do not mean to imply that the human person is a disengaged subject that stands outside of space and time from a detached perspective and then looks at the world through a lens. Since the human person is an acting person engaged in the world, it seems more helpful to think of life-orienting beliefs as attitudes by which one lives, rather than as a lens through which one looks. One’s life-orienting beliefs shape one’s being in the world.
91. Del Kiernan-Lewis develops the concept of “life-orienting beliefs.” See his *Learning to Philosophize: A Primer* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 2000), 61–65.
92. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 118, 1.
93. Ibid., II-II, 148, 1.
94. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 87.
95. Ibid.
96. Seamus Murphy makes use of *Babette’s Feast* to clarify the meaning of consumerism.
97. For a detailed account of how the account of human action in the thought of Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) is consonant with the market economy, see Gregory R. Beabout, Ricardo F. Crespo, Stephen J. Grabill, Kim Paffenroth, and Kyle Swan, *Beyond Self-Interest: A Personalist Approach to Human Action*, Volume 1 of *Foundations of Economic Personalism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), chap. 3, 37–73.