The Pope Francis Consumer Challenge

By Stephen Calme ’05 M.Ed.

I have shared my reflections on the experience of tracking my spending, but I invite you to do the same and find your own insights. Take two weeks and note down the following information for every expense you have. (Or make up your own questions.)

• What did I purchase?
• From where did I purchase it?
• Do I consider this item a "want" or a "need"?
• In deciding on this particular version of the item, what was the primary criterion/value I used (e.g., color, durability, price, environmental impact)?
• What would have been the most ethical version of this item I could have purchased?
• If I did not purchase the most ethical version, why not?

FAQ

As I have invited friends and family to join me in trying this exercise, they have raised some good objections and questions that have forced me to think more deeply about this activity. You might find them helpful.

"Why did you not keep track of the amount of money you spent?"

That seems important to an examination of consumerism.” While that could be a worthwhile activity, I was afraid it would feed into my inaccurate presumption that consumerism is only about how many dollars I spend. Often being an ethical consumer requires spending more money, not less, because you’re paying for the true cost of an item, including a decent wage to those who made it.

“I have a special event/unusual schedule/etc. this week and so it wouldn’t be an accurate sample of my habits. I’ll do it later.”

One thing I noticed as I analyzed my purchases is that I always had an excuse for why this particular purchase was abnormal and so not representative of my habits or overall ethics. In other words, you are unlikely to find any two-week period that you would find completely average. So just do it, no matter what the situation you are in. The exercise is more about the process, anyway—noticing how you decided to make each purchasing decision, whatever it is.

“I know I’m going to be spending a lot this week, so I don’t think I’d get very good results.”
You do not receive a grade at the end of this exercise. The goal is not primarily to measure how ethical or unethical I am as a consumer. The primary goal is to understand more clearly that I am making decisions as a consumer (i.e., that I do have choices) and why I make the decisions I do. This seems to me a necessary first step before radically changing my consumption.

“What do you mean by ‘ethical’? What criteria do you use?”

I have no easy answer to this, but I would point to Francis’s repeated theme in *Laudato Si*, that we must promote the good of both the natural environment and the human community, which are inextricably intertwined. In terms of purchasing goods, this means looking at how the production and eventual disposal of an item affects the natural environment and how it affects the lives of those who interact with it at all points in its lifecycle. Some potential guiding questions are below:

- Is it made of sustainable and/or recycled materials?
- Is it produced in an environmentally-friendly way?
- Is it durable enough to be useful for an appropriately long period of time?
- Is it recyclable, compostable, or reusable?
- How far do I have to travel to purchase this item?
- How are the workers who make this product treated and compensated?
- What do the company's actions show about its values?
- When I am finished with this product, how will it affect the people who must dispose of it and the community where that will happen?
- Am I buying only the version that I need, or am I paying for unnecessary extras that cost money that could be better used elsewhere?