CST Conscious Consumer

Introduction to CST Conscious Consumer
The world is consuming goods and services at an unsustainable pace, with serious consequences for the well-being of people and the planet. At the same time, however, growing dissatisfaction with current consumption trends has led consumer advocates, economists, policymakers, and environmentalists to develop creative options for meeting people’s needs while dampening the environmental and social costs of mass consumption.

The Education for Justice Web Site invites you to join us as we unmask the negative face of consumerism and explore a variety of consumption options that promote a more just world.

OPENING PRAYER
O God, awaken us to the challenges of this day. Open our eyes to the pervasiveness of consumerism that we might see our culture, the Church, and ourselves in your divine light. Remind us that you are the source of our hope and the giver of all that is good. You alone are worthy of our praise. Bring us to new life, that we might be your people. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER
O God, we confess to you that we have sinned. In our lust for lifeless objects and our relentless pursuit for more, we have crossed the line to idolatry. We seek salvation in spiritless things, worship you for our own gratification, and see ourselves and each other as mere consumers and commodities.

Forgive us, O God, for we have sinned. In your mercy, raise us from the dead. Breathe new life into us, your people. Empower us to be a prophetic community, living the gospel of Jesus. Create in us a consuming passion to love and serve you. Amen.

REFLECTION
What is in question is the advancement of persons, not just the multiplying of things that people can use. It is a matter—as a contemporary philosopher has said and as the Council has stated—not so much of “having more” as of “being more.”

Pope John Paul II, Redemptor Hominis, #16
Activities

1. Begin session with the opening prayer and reflection on page 1.

2. Opening Discussion:

Ask participants to give their definitions of prosperity or “the good life.” Do their definitions center on wealth or the accumulation of goods? What about freedom, health, security, satisfying employment, etc.? Review some of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching (www.coc.org/ej/cst). Taking into consideration certain key values of CST—human dignity, the common good, solidarity, care for God’s creation, etc.—, how might the definition of “the good life” change?

3. Divide into small groups. Have each group go through the Consumption Quiz on page 3. One person should reach each statement, and the rest of the group should discuss and decide on whether it is true or false. Go through the entire quiz before revealing the answers on page 4. After the small groups have read the answers, distribute page 5, “Catholic Social Teaching and Consumerism.” Allow for a period of discussion around the quiz answers, the quotes from Catholic Social Teaching, and the following questions:

Were you surprised by anything you learned about consumption and/or consumerism?

What perspective do the quotes of Pope John Paul II offer on this issue?

4. Distribute copies of the fact sheet on page 6, “Private Consumption Expenditures.” After participants have read the fact sheet, discuss the following questions:

Give some examples of people being “slaves of possessions.”

Since we live on a planet that has limited resources, how does the “super-development” Pope John Paul II speaks of hinder the kind of human development where each person around the globe has the necessary basics to live a life of dignity?

What does the “Consumer Spending and Population by Region” Chart say about our values? How can these values be reordered?

Global spending on advertising reached $446 billion in 2002, an almost nine-fold increase over 1950. More than half of these advertising dollars is spent in U.S. markets. How do these figures relate to the numbers in the “Consumer Spending and Population by Region” Chart?

5. Distribute copies of page 9, “Design a Poster to Educate your Community.” The goal of this activity is to creatively educate the other members of your community (your school, parish, organization, etc.) by designing a poster about consumerism that illustrates the global disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished and the privileged status we have as residents of developed countries.

You will need to provide your group with the following supplies for this activity:

• newsprint
• markers, colored pencils, crayons and/or paints
• old magazines

6. (Optional) Distribute copies of the reflection on page 8, “A Fable,” and/or the reflection on page 9, “Overspending.” Discuss the corresponding questions:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR “A FABLE”
According to this fable, where is happiness found? Explain why you agree or disagree with the fable’s message.

Although we do not need diamonds to be happy, we do have needs: food, housing, clothing, etc. How can we cultivate a healthy gratitude for all that we have, while weeding out attachment to material goods and wealth?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR “OVERSPENDING”
How much time do you spend on consuming and taking care of the material things you own? How much inner energy do you spend desiring objects, lifestyles, etc.?

What are some ways to resist spending this kind of energy and the time devoted to a consumer lifestyle? Why is it often difficult to change our consuming habits and behaviors?

What are alternative habits, rituals, behaviors, to give us more time to live a life of faithfulness to our Faith’s call to peace and justice?

How can people work together to challenge the all-pervasive consumer society, both in terms of our individual lifes and in terms of what it means to bringing about a more just world?

7. End the session with the closing prayer on page 1.
Consumption Quiz

1. Private consumption expenditures—the amount spent on goods and services at the household level—have increased fourfold since 1960, topping more than $10 trillion in 2000. True or False?

2. The 12% of the world’s people living in North America and Western Europe account for 60% of this consumption, while the 1/3 living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa account for only 3.2%. True or False?

3. The U.S. consumes 40% of the world’s gasoline and more paper, steel, aluminum, energy, water and meat per capita than any other society on the planet. True or False?

4. New homes in the U.S. were 25% bigger in 2000 than in 1975, despite having fewer people in each household on average. True or False?

5. In the United States today, there are more private vehicles on the road than people licensed to drive them. True or False?

6. The average American produces 1.5 times as much garbage as the average European. True or False?

7. The United States, with just 4.5% of the world’s population, releases 15% of global carbon dioxide emissions. (These emissions contribute to global warming.) True or False?

8. Recent scientific estimates indicate that at least four additional planets would be needed if each of the planet’s inhabitants consumed at the level of the average American. True or False?

9. Thanks to increasing news coverage on the negative impacts of consumption on the environment, consumption levels lowered slightly in 2003. True or False?

10. All consumption is bad for the global community. True or False?

11. Wealth and well-being go hand in hand. True or False?

12. Excessive consumption diminishes the quality of life for many people. True or False?
Consumption Quiz Answers

1. False. Private consumption expenditures topped more than $20 trillion in 2000.

2. True. The 12% of the world’s people living in North America and Western Europe account for 60% of this consumption, while the 1/3 living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa account for only 3.2%.

3. True. The U.S. consumes 40% of the world’s gasoline and more paper, steel, aluminum, energy, water and meat per capita than any other society on the planet.

4. False. Despite having fewer people in each household on average, new homes in the U.S. were actually 38% bigger in 2000 than in 1975.

5. True. Today in the U.S., there are more private vehicles on the road than people licensed to drive them.

6. False. The average American produces 2 times as much garbage as the average European.

7. False. The U.S., with just 4.5% of the world’s population, releases 20% of global carbon dioxide emissions.

8. True. At least four additional planets would be needed if each of the planet’s inhabitants consumed at the level of the average American.

9. False. There is little evidence that the consumption locomotive is braking—particularly in the United States.

10. False. People must consume to survive, and many products and services improve our lives while providing quality jobs. Moreover, the world’s most impoverished citizens will need to increase their level of consumption if they are to lead lives of dignity and opportunity—which will require that the rich cut their use of energy and materials.

11. False. If a person is impoverished, there is no doubt that greater income can improve his or her life. But once the basics are secured, well-being does not necessarily correlate with wealth. Findings from the World Values Survey, an assessment of life satisfaction in more than 65 countries conducted between 1990 and 2000, indicate that income and happiness tend to track well until about $13,000 of annual income per person (in 1995 purchasing power parity). After that, additional income appears to yield only modest additions in self-reported happiness.

12. True. Higher levels of obesity and personal debt, chronic time shortages (Americans are some of the most overworked people in the industrial world, putting in 350 hours—nine work weeks—more on the job each year than the average European), less satisfying social relationships and a degraded environment are all signs that excessive consumption is diminishing the quality of life for many people.

The challenge is to mobilize governments, businesses, and citizens to shift their focus away from the unrestrained accumulation of goods and toward finding ways to ensure the universal common good.

Sources: Worldwatch Institute, Center for a New American Dream
Catholic Social Teaching and Consumerism

. . . alienation—and the loss of the authentic meaning of life—is a reality in Western societies too. This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way . . . Humans are alienated if they refuse to transcend themselves and to live the experience of selfgiving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards their final destiny, which is God. A society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people . . . People who are concerned solely or primarily with possessing and enjoying, who are no longer able to control their instincts and passions, or to subordi-nate them by obedience to the truth, cannot be free: obedience to the truth about God and humanity is the first condition of freedom, making it possible for people to order their needs and desires and to choose the means of satisfying them according to a correct scale of values, so that the ownership of things may become an occasion of growth for them. This growth can be hindered as a result of manipulation by the means of mass communication, which impose fashions and trends of opinion through carefully orchestrated repetition, without it being possible to subject to critical scrutiny the premises on which these fashions and trends are based.

Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, #41

It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, whiles masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness—both individual and collective—are contrary to the order of creation, an order that is characterized by mutual interdependence.

Pope John Paul II, 1990 World Day of Peace Message, #8

All of this can be summed up by repeating once more that economic freedom is only one element of human freedom. When it becomes autonomous, when humans are seen more as producers or consumers of goods than as subjects who produce and consume in order to live, then economic freedom loses its necessary relationship to human persons and ends up by alienating and oppressing them.

Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, #39
Fact Sheet: Private Consumption Expenditures

**Private Consumption Expenditure** is the amount spent on goods and services at the household level. Private Consumption Expenditures topped **$20 trillion** in 2000, up from $4.8 trillion in 1960. Some of this four-fold increase occurred because of population growth, but much of it was due to advancing prosperity in many parts of the globe.

[S]ide by side with the miseries of underdevelopment, themselves unacceptable, we find ourselves up against a form of superdevelopment, equally inadmissible, because like the former it is contrary to what is good and true to happiness. This superdevelopment, which consists of the excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, easily makes people slaves of ‘possessions’ and of immediate gratification, with no other horizons than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better.

Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, #28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Share of World Private Consumption Expenditures</th>
<th>Share of World Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. and Canada</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia and Pacific</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American and the Caribbean</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe and Central Asia</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia and New Zealand</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Worldwatch Institute, Center for a New American Dream
Activity: Design a Poster to Educate your Community

Our world is one of marked contrasts. While the consumer class thrives, billions of people languish in poverty. As many as 2.8 billion people on the planet struggle to survive on less than $2 a day, and more than one billion people lack reasonable access to safe drinking water. Yet there are many people in the developing world who are unaware of—or unwilling to acknowledge—the great disparity of wealth that exists today. They take for granted their privileged status on the globe.

The goal of this activity is to creatively educate the other members of your community (your school, parish, organization, etc.) by designing a poster about consumerism that illustrates the global disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished and the privileged status we have as residents of developed countries.

Divide into small groups. Each small group will design their own poster. Arrange the information from the two charts below in your poster in such a way that people stop, read and think. Be sure to emphasize the contrast between the money spent on luxury items and the money needed to achieve the social/economic goals. You may draw, color, paint and/or use photos/images from magazines. You may also want to use some of the information from the chart on page 5, and/or one or more of the Catholic Social Teaching quotes.

We are bombarded by information everyday—it would be quite easy for a member of your community to walk past your poster without a second thought, even if it is posted in a highly visible area. So be creative and grab their attention!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Annual Expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ocean Cruises</td>
<td>$14 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfumes</td>
<td>$15 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet food in Europe and the U.S.</td>
<td>$17 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeup</td>
<td>$18 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice cream in Europe</td>
<td>$11 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social or Economic Goal</th>
<th>Additional Annual Investment Needed to Achieve Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clean Drinking Water for All</td>
<td>$10 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Literacy</td>
<td>$5 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elimination of Hunger and Malnutrition</td>
<td>$19 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunizing Every Child</td>
<td>$1.3 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indeed everyone is familiar with the picture of the consumer civilization, which consists in a certain surplus of goods necessary for people and for entire societies—and we are dealing precisely with the rich highly developed societies—while the remaining societies—at least broad sectors of them—are suffering from hunger, with many people dying each day of starvation and malnutrition. Hand in hand go a certain abuse of freedom by one group—an abuse linked precisely with a consumer attitude uncontrolled by ethics—and a limitation by it of the freedom of the others, that is to say those suffering marked shortages and being driven to conditions of even worse misery and destitution.

Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, #16

Sources: Worldwatch Institute, Center for a New American Dream
An American, on the last day of a business trip to India, was idly shopping for souvenir gifts in a teeming open market in Bombay. As he strolled from stall to stall, he noticed a beggar sitting on the ground with a few dust-covered trinkets spread before him on a blanket. Curious, the American walked over to get a closer look. He was quickly drawn to several almond-sized items that, in spite of the grimy dust that covered them, sparkled brightly in the hot noonday sun. The beggar motioned him to pick them up. When he did and looked more closely, his heart almost stopped. Diamonds. Diamonds worth maybe a million dollars or more.

"Don’t look too eager," the American cautioned himself, but the shrewd beggar noticed his customer’s heightened tension instantly. So when the American feigned disinterest and offered ten U.S. dollars, the beggar shook his head. The American figured that ten dollars was probably the equivalent of a full month’s earnings. "Careful," he told himself, don’t bid it up too high or too fast or the old man will figure something’s up. So he countered, "Fifteen."

The beggar smiled and nodded a polite "no." The American quickly tried another strategy. He said, "My wife collects things like those little rocks. They’ll be a little remembrance for her from Bombay. I guess I could give you twenty-five, but that’s as high as I can go."

The beggar again shook his head no, and said, "No, my friend. I can see that you want these stones very much. You must take them. Free. They are yours."

The American was dumbfounded. He stammered and thought to protest but already visions of riches danced in his head. He grabbed the diamonds with a murmured "thanks" and sped back to his hotel clutching the precious gems all the way, anxious and hyper-vigilant for the pickpockets that he suddenly sensed were everywhere. He was thrilled, and he was panicked. That night he could not sleep. He got up several times to re-check the lock on the door. He was obsessed. How would he spend the money? Where would he sell the diamonds? How could he get them out of India? Would his baggage be checked on departure? What about U.S. Customs? Should he declare the gems? Hide them? Where? Whom could he consult about their worth once he got back home? Could the local jewelers be trusted? Could they be sold for cash? What about the IRS? He craved a gin and tonic, but was afraid to call room service: the server might mug him.

He paced away the long night in his room. His head throbbed. His eyelids twitched. He vomited. When the sun finally rose, he had his bags packed, and he had a plan. On the way to the airport, he directed the cab driver to take him back to the flea market. He wandered, dazed and desperate, until he found what he was searching for. The beggar was sitting cross-legged on the ground in the same spot he had occupied the previous day.

"Hello, my friend," smiled the beggar.

The American anxiously dug into his pocket and handed the diamonds back to the humble Indian.

"But, my friend, you were so happy with the stones yesterday," said the beggar evenly.

"Yes, yes, I was. But I have learned something. I have learned that the stones, as you call them, are not so important. I thought they would make me happy but, instead, they made me miserable. Now I realize that what would really make me happy is to have the power that you have within you—the power to give them away so effortlessly."
Reflection: Overspending

Juliet Schor’s recent book, *The Overspent American*, examines consuming habits in the U.S. As a senior faculty member at Harvard University, she has conducted and reviewed a great deal of research which has led to her thesis that many Americans have been conditioned by marketing specialists and advertisers to build their sense of personal identity on what they own, constantly comparing their lives to the lifestyles they see promoted everywhere in the media—and constantly consuming to keep up.

This constant comparison is why even Americans with upper middle class incomes “feel materially dissatisfied,” walking around with “ever present mental wish lists of things to buy or get.” She looks at how the inner world of desire has been shaped by the consumer culture: “spending fantasies are commonplace.” Key aspects of modern consumer behavior are fantasy, imagination, and vicarious experience; people spend much inner energy fantasizing about material goods they would like to have, how their homes “should” look, how they will finally feel satisfied with this, or that, acquisition.

These fantasies, she notes, “reveal the centrality of gaining others’ esteem.” Displaying goods, wearing certain kinds of clothes, driving certain cars, to “get respect for them” are crucial “to our preoccupation with things.” We always see, and respond to, images of a “better pair of shoes, a better sweater, a better house, a better vacation” and become dissatisfied quickly with what we have already purchased; we must constantly upscale our desires to become competitive with others so we get noticed and affirmed in such a consumer society. Who you are depends on what you have—this is the value we act on over and over again, even though we might consciously disagree with it.

Thus “spending becomes you,” she declares. Consuming and spending has become a primary way to calm our anxieties. Consuming has become our chief form of recreation. It flatters, enhances and defines people—and it also takes over their lives. The pressure to spend and keep spending results in the overspent American, stressed, in debt, with too much “stuff” to deal with. We have little time for building community and for “faithful citizenship,” being involved in the creation of a just nation and a just and joyful world.

We are told our economy relies on consuming, and we take little or no time to consider alternatives to this kind of economy—we’re too busy at the mall.

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This is the so-called civilization of ‘consumption’ or ‘consumerism,’ which involves so much ‘throwing away’ and ‘waste.’ An object already owned but now superseded by something else is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer. All of us experience firsthand the sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism: in the first place a crass materialism, and at the same time a radical dissatisfaction, because one quickly learns—unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the ceaseless tempting offers of products—that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.

Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, #28