



Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

3025 4th Street, N.E. • Washington, DC 20017 • 202-527-7575 • 1-888-364-3388 (toll free) • 202-527-7576 (fax)

FRANCISCANS AS CONSUMERS: Ethical Responsibilities

David B. Couturier, OFM. Cap.

Introduction

It is estimated that the average American spends about **\$370.06** of their consumer dollars per week on food, housing, transportation, apparel, health care, entertainment, personal insurance, and other miscellaneous expenses. That comes to about **\$52.86 per day**. (Other estimates put the consumer spending of the average American per day in the range of \$90-100 per day.)¹

While there is no comparable consumer expenditure index for Franciscans, a recent survey of one major province of Franciscans in the United States indicates significant consumer influence. Franciscans spend money on the development of their ministries and fraternities. Because Franciscans generate economic activity to support their religious lifestyle (i.e. food, housing, health care, insurance, etc.) *and* to bolster and improve their ministries, we can estimate that the average Franciscan's consumer spending could be as high as **\$190.69 per day**. This means that Franciscan Provinces can generate consumer activity in the tens of millions of dollars every year.

Franciscans don't often think of themselves as consumers. Our Franciscan vow of poverty often keeps us from identifying with the streams and currents of modern economic life. Our stress on a life "*sine proprio*" ("without anything of our own") heightens our sense that we should be exempt from the turbulence of the market and the troubles of Wall Street. But, the fact is, we are consumers and we spend.

We go to the local pharmacy for our medicine and to the corner *bodega* for our milk. We shop at *Macy's* and *Wal-Mart*, *Target* and *Piggly-Wiggly's*. We buy from *Amazon.com* and *QVC*. Whether as Provincials or Guardians, local ministers or directors, ordinary brothers or sisters, we are constantly making choices about what to wear and buy, what to purchase and use, what comes into our convents and friaries, and what ends up on our dinner table.

¹ *Consumer Expenditure Survey*, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010. http://www.bls.gov/opub/focus/volume2_number12/cex_2_12.htm

Average Annual Consumer Expenditures

Average annual expenditure	\$48,109 per unit (2.5 per unit)	19,243.60 Per person 370.06 per week 52.86 per day
Food	\$6129	
Housing	\$16557	
Transportation	\$7677	
Apparel	\$1700	
Health Care	\$3157	
Entertainment	\$2504	
Cash Expenses	\$1633	
Personal insurance/pension	\$5373	
All else	\$3379	

Consumer Expenditure Survey 2010

But, how do we think of ourselves as “consumers” and what drives our economic choices? What role does our Catholic faith and our Franciscan commitment play in the choices we make as consumers? What impact might our economic choices have on the lives of people around the world?

In this paper, I explore the great issue of “consumerism” and how it impacts our religious and spiritual lives. I want to highlight why we as Franciscans need to develop a new language of desire and a more assertive spirit and practice of *ethical consumerism*. I will treat one area where Franciscans can use their new found ethical consumerism for a moral good today, i.e., to stop the spread of human slavery in the global marketplace.

The Religious Challenge to Consumerism

A look at any Franciscan house or province budget signals immediately that Franciscans are consumers. Our line items are filled with diverse economic categories – electricity, heat-oil-gas, new equipment, health insurance premium, dental, food, telephone, internet & ISP fees, books, liturgy supplies, etc. We share with other Americans the daily tension of making ends meet as prices go up and we find ourselves as religious caught living off “stipends” and not “salaries” (‘stipends’ being the equivalent compensation that is ½ or 2/3 of what ‘salaries’ are worth for the same job).

Beyond this and alongside it, we also struggle as do other Americans with the philosophy of life that is said to fuel the economic engine of progress, *consumerism*. Long before we ever think of entering religious life, we are children immersed in a culture of consumption, such that every aspect of our lives is touched by the “need and greed” mentality of modern aggressive consumerism.² Studies show that children as young as four are now seriously and continuously targeted by marketers for their ability to influence their parents’ economic decisions, their “consumer potential.”³ Children receive a ceaseless barrage of TV messages about the connection between self-image, identity and product. Experts tell us that this “consumption mentality” is eroding childhood and evidence is mounting that children are suffering the physical, social, emotional and cognitive deficits that arise from consumerism’s assault on childhood.⁴ It should come as no surprise then that Franciscans today, especially younger Franciscans, face the same cultural temptation that their secular cohorts face – seeing and judging themselves by the tenuous tenets of *having* rather than *being*.

No religious figure in modern history has written or spoken more loudly or clearly about the growing dangers of consumerism than John Paul II. In his encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he defined consumerism as the condition of “an excessive availability of every kind of material goods,” which makes us “slaves of ‘possession’ and of immediate gratification.”⁵

² Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

³ Jennifer Ann Hill, “Endangered Childhoods: How Consumerism is Impacting Child and Youth Identity,” *Media Culture Society* (April 2011) 33:3, pp. 347-362.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), 28.

According to John Paul II, consumerism is one of the most pronounced moral and ethical dangers facing people today. He taught that consumerism erupts when economic life trumps every other value in the social order of things, when “*the production and consumption of goods become the center of social life and society’s only value – not subject to any other value.*”⁶ It emerges when every other good is made subordinate and subservient to it.

John Paul was not an ethical or cultural troglodyte, railing against scientific achievement and technological development. He was not criticizing the desire to have good things in life. He was not against efforts made to improve the quality of human life through the goods we produce and the services we provide. Far from it! For John Paul II, the Gospel was the sign and witness of human progress and he reminded us that Christianity was in its service. However, he also warned that what was at stake in today’s business-mentality was the very definition of human progress. What was wrong, he suggested, “*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.*”⁷

What is troubling about consumerism, he and others have noted, is that it proceeds from a reductionist philosophy of the human person, one that narrowly defines men and women by their economic potential and the satisfaction of their material wants.⁸ Consumerism reduces us to what we can earn, what we can spend, and to what we can purchase. Consumerism turns our values upside down and inside out. Truth, beauty and goodness are no longer the human’s person terminal, theocentrically-ordered self-transcendent values. These values are reduced to emotional tools and slogans to serve commercial interests. In this way, Beabout and Echeverria remind us, wisdom, virtue, community, intimacy, happiness and the common good are inverted and made to serve the economic aspirations and financial greed of the marketplace.⁹

Fr. John Kavanaugh, in his book *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, defines consumerism as a system of life, a religion, a total worldview that “disposes us to view everything – ourselves, others, nature, and religion – as a commodity, as replaceable and marketable commodities.”¹⁰ Fr. Kavanaugh goes further in his hard description of consumerism or what he calls the “commodity form of life”:

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.

⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 36.

⁸ Gregory R Beabout and Eduardo J. Echeverria, “The Culture of Consumerism: A Catholic and Personalist Critique,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5:2 (Fall 2002), p. 342.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ John Francis Kavanaugh, SJ, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986; revised edition, 1991), 22,10

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 experiences through the style of life we are expected to assume: consumerism, competition, hoarding, planned obsolescence, and unnecessary waste.¹¹

David F. Wells, in his book, *Losing Our Virtue*, summarizes the anthropological inversion that consumerism creates when he describes its modern psychological dogma, “I shop, therefore I am.”¹² We are prone to consumerism, he says, because “*our self-understanding as human beings created, fallen, and redeemed by God, has vanished, leaving us with a sense of emptiness, or depletion. We now lack a substantive self-identity of human beings that Christian theism made possible.*”¹³ What contemporary culture has created is an “empty self” set up for demographic definition, commercial construction, marketable options, and profitable identities. 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.¹⁴

Five years ago, I wrote a book entitled *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* in which I described the dangerous impact that consumerism has on our ability, both personally and corporately, to make good decisions.¹⁵ I came to the conclusion that an unrestrained and un-reflected attachment to consumption, the kind of attitude that consumerism promotes today, has a devastating impact on a Franciscan’s ability to desire what God desires for the world and for humankind. Consumerism atrophies our transcendental desire for God and our efforts to seek the good, especially for those who are most vulnerable in our society. Let me trace that for you.

How Consumerism Atrophies Desire

There are various ways that Franciscan desire is atrophied in the new global consumerist economy.

First, there is the limitless *proliferation of desire*. In a consumer-based society, we simply want more and more and more. Focused on people as objects of desire or competition and nature itself as a commodity, we no longer want to *be* or become more; we simply want to *have* more. Thus to accomplish this for a consumption-based economy, marketing and advertising must over-time

¹¹ John Francis Kavanaugh, SJ, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986; revised edition, 1991), 22,10.

¹² David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 221.

¹³ Beabout and Echeverria, *op.cit.*, p. 344.

¹⁴ Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹⁵ David B. Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* (South Bend, IN: Cloverdale Books, 2007).

collapse the distinction between need and want and between necessity and superfluity. We never know when enough is enough. We don't know where to draw the line of excess. The reach of our need and want simply run to infinity. Consumers are trained to exceed their satisfaction and to desire above all else a steady, indeed an infinite, array of goods, products and services.¹⁶ St. Francis once noted that the only thing a Franciscan owns is his/her sin. Everything else truly belongs to God. That ontology provides Franciscans with their proper life orientation: we belong to God and we find our way to God through the virtues we develop, with the help of God's grace. But, consumerism corrodes the incentives toward character development through the inhabiting of the virtues. The proliferation of (commercial) desire requires only the acquisition and consumption of material things. It subordinates all else to its commercial interests.

Second, there is the *materialization and commodification of desire*. In classical Christianity, the end or purpose of desire was the divine, since as Scripture reminds us, "We have no true and lasting city here." (Hebrews 13:14). St Augustine would give this desire its classical enunciation in his phrase, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O God."¹⁷ In classical Christian thought, our deepest desire was God, because, after all, we are creatures dependent on a good and gracious God and only God can satisfy the longings of the human heart.

However, in early 21st century economic thought, God is privatized and desire becomes first and foremost a material reality.¹⁸ Our deepest desires are reduced and refocused on things and products. The desire for the infinity of God is translated into the desire for an endless array of goods and products, which have little meaning or substance, except in their surplus. While our desire remains infinite in its expectations and demands, it remains forever unrealizable and unfulfilled. By a slight of hand, consumerism turns even the desire for God into a commodity, swapping the infinity of God with the infinity of goods.¹⁹ It may be said that consumerism conditions us to accept the eternal exchange and redundant replacement of what we desire. In a consumptive world, there is no substance, only substitution. Franciscan life is oriented around the key value and experience of "Gospel brother/sisterhood." Consumerism weakens those bonds, as things encroach and substitute for fraternity.

And, finally, desire undergoes *segmentation and isolation*. What I mean by that is that consumerism destroys the possibility for communion, because, devoid of truth, beauty and goodness, it has no power to unite us or bring us together in any substantial way. (Think of the faux camaraderie and then the fatal stampedes created when stores open early on Thanksgiving for Christmas holiday shopping!)

Consumerism can only polarize and divide. Marita Wesely-Clough is a trend expert for the Hallmark Card Company, the one responsible for projecting the wants and desires of Hallmark's customers. In detailing retail trends on customers in the 21st century, she describes two powerful

¹⁶ Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy*, p. 81-84.

¹⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5)*.

¹⁸ For a recent exploration of this privatization of God, cf. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), p. 211-240.

¹⁹ This is the fundamental confusion and swap that attends today's "prosperity Gospel" in some evangelical churches today. David W. Jones and Russell S. Woobridge, *Health, Wealth and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, 2010).

effects of consumerism – emotional overload and the inability to discern what’s right and good. Here is how she phrases it:

*Trend cycles seem to be emerging more rapidly as a result of technology, accelerated social diffusion, instantaneous communication and more willingness to accept – or inability to escape new ideas... When everything is accessible instantaneously, the ability to assimilate, to differentiate and to choose becomes more difficult.*²⁰

Wesely-Clough describes the cultural and emotional damage of today’s globalization on consumers, when she says –

*“Under those circumstances, a culture can suffer from a feeling of mental and emotional paralysis, a kind of frozen frame – like kids in the candy store of the world. It becomes increasingly difficult to discern the truth – to sort out what’s best.”*²¹

A sad consequence of consumerism ensues – isolation and division. In her catalogue of 12 retail trends in the early years of the twenty-first century, Wesely-Clough predicts increased polarization, not only in politics but also in our stores, in our businesses, and in our malls:

*Look for increased polarization – whether political, economic, religious or philosophical. Regardless of age, ethnicity or affiliation, individuals long for the security of alignment with those ‘like us’. Ethnic ‘tribes’ within countries and cities; elite social clubs; gatherings of loyal brand devotees, as well as group identities created via fashion, language or symbols. Increased gravitation toward communities of like minds – people whose interests, worldviews or values reinforce our own.*²²

Franciscans under the sway of a consumer culture live by taste and inclination, by palate and preference. Desire loses the moral dimension of dedication and perseverance, as Franciscans make their choices on principles of partiality and temperament. Franciscan desire follows the tenets of commercial desire.

Desire in the consumerist culture dissects the world into market shares where the unprofitable are increasingly and swiftly replaced, marginalized or ignored, as the definition of common good collapses into only that of common wealth, whatever can be exchanged, made transparent or proliferated for profit.

Consumerism’s Dark Side Today: Corporate Human Trafficking

²⁰ Marita Wesely-Clough, “Twelve Consumer Trends and Counter Trends for 2004 and Beyond,” accessed 11/15/04, www.retailindustry.about.com/cs/retailtrends/a/bl_trends2004.htm.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

One may have assumed to this point that consumerism was simply a minor ethical annoyance, a sad but unavoidable byproduct of today's engine of human progress. A few good homilies and some sturdy penances during Confession should set Franciscan attitudes straight. But, there is an even darker side to consumerism today, a very dark side that should trouble the conscience of every Franciscan. And that is the reality of corporate human trafficking, a resurgence of human slavery in the marketplace.

Amid the barrage of goods and products flowing across our air and seas are men and women, girls and boys, being exploited and enslaved as commodities in the global market place. Not only is human slavery making a comeback, it is more pronounced and stronger than at any other period in human history.²³ And the fact is that it proliferates because it flies below the radar screen of our expectations and assumptions. But, we must recognize that human traffickers today are using some of our most respected businesses, the products and services we use regularly, to cover their criminal deeds of human exploitation. They use forced and child labor in the long and sometimes intricate supply chain that leads from the production to the distribution of the goods and services we rely on every day. It is up to us as Franciscans to identify those illegal chains of human exploitation in our transactions and try to dismantle them.

It is hard to imagine that, in the year 2012, we even have to address the issue of human slavery and the supply chains that lead to corporate human trafficking. But, we must. We know that there are more than 30 million slaves living and suffering in our world today.²⁴ And it is estimated that there are about 17,000 to 20,000 foreign nationals trafficked into the United States each and every year, with upwards of 200,000 "domestic slaves" living and working within the United States itself. Human trafficking is the second most profitable form of transnational crime in the world after the sale of drugs, more profitable even than the sale of arms.²⁵

Human trafficking is big business. It is not simply the work of individual criminals in back alleys, on side streets, in foreign countries. It is a diversified corporate enterprise that exists in almost every trade imaginable and it uses many of our most cherished and respected industries to advance their ever more desperate forms of exploitation. All across the world, tens of thousands of men and women, girls and boys are forced every day to destroy their bodies in the sweatshops of Europe and Asia and to sell their bodies in the massage parlors and escort services of major American cities, like Boston, Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles.²⁶

To accomplish this, human traffickers are using many of the American companies we admire the most as a cover for their criminal deeds. They use our hotel chains, our car rental agencies, and our airlines as part of the supply chain that provides and serves up modern human slavery to the cities and suburbs of America. Just a few weeks ago, a story crossed the wires of a Chinese runner in Quincy, MA, who was convicted of being part of a trafficking ring that would pick up young women from Logan Airport and South Station and deliver them to customers in Stoneham, Wellesley, Malden, Burlington and Newton. The local traffickers were running their

²³ For the reasons for this resurgence and proliferation, cf. <https://www.freetheslaves.net/SSLPage.aspx?pid=301>

²⁴ David Batstone, *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade* (New York: Harper One Publishers, 2010), p.1.

²⁵ Louise Shelley, *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.7.

²⁶ Louise Shelley, *ibid.*, p.201-228.

ads on *Craigslist* and in the *Boston Phoenix*,²⁷ providing the cover of corporate legitimacy to a form of human cruelty that is ever ancient and sadly ever new.

Trafficking victims are the disposable and easily expendable labor pool deceived into accepting job offers that promise them a better life. They come to the capitals of Europe and to the suburbs of America hoping for an education, longing for a better future, ready to build that possibility with hard work at a decent wage. But, they find themselves in short order trapped in a terrifying cycle of isolation, intimidation and threat, forced to work without relief or compensation, treated as commodities and held captive through constant forms of physical and psychological abuse.

Human trafficking is a hugely profitable business. At the end of 2010, it was estimated that the 4% of the world's 30 million people who were used as trafficked sex slaves generated \$38.7 billion dollars in profits for those managing the human slave industry.²⁸ Human trafficking is both a global and a local problem, one that exists all around us. It is a neighborhood industry with long supply chains, a *commercial* network that uses legitimate businesses that we have come to rely on and respect as a cover and shield for criminal activities.

And the fact is that, without knowing it, we are all implicated. Each and every day, before we ever get to work, we are, as Kevin Bales indicates, "*eating, wearing, walking and talking slavery*"—getting out of bed and walking on a rug hand-woven by slaves from the carpet belt of Pakistan, India and Nepal, wearing a tee shirt made of cotton harvested by slave labor in West Africa and Uzbekistan. We sip coffee cultivated by slave labor in Africa or Latin America, with sugar harvested by enslaved Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic. We step out the door with our cell phones and laptops at the ready, unaware that the mineral used in these devices, tantalum, was dug out of the ground by poor farmers indentured to armed gangs in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Again, Kevin Bales reminds us with chilling directness-- "*Every one of us, every day, touches, wears, and eats products tainted with slavery. Slave-made goods and commodities are everywhere in our lives...*"²⁹

How can this be? If human slavery is illegal on every inch of the planet Earth, how does the post-modern world tolerate and even accommodate its proliferation?

Consumerism and the Challenge of Corporate Human Trafficking

What is human trafficking? An official definition helps. Article Three of the *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons* defines the "Trafficking in Persons" as the -

... recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of

²⁷ http://articles.boston.com/2012-03-17/metro/31202047_1_asian-prostitution-ring-prostitution-business-federal-prosecutors

²⁸ Siddharth Kara, "Designing More Effective Laws Against Human Trafficking," *Northwestern Journal of Human Rights* 9:2 (Spring, 2011), 127.

²⁹ Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, *op.cit.*, p. 137,

*the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs...*³⁰

On the basis of this definition, we see that there are three constitutive elements to the situation of human trafficking.

First, there is **the act** (what is done) and that is the *recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person*.

Second, there are **the means** (how it is done) *through the use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person who is in control of the victim*.

And third, there is **the purpose** (why this is done) – *for the purpose of exploitation, the forms of possible exploitation to include the prostitution of others, forced labor, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs for profit*.

While sexual trafficking is a well-known form of human trafficking and slavery, today we are concentrating on **trafficking for the labor** of those who will produce or distribute the goods and services wanted or required by businesses and corporations today.

Specifically, we are looking at companies and individuals who use sub-contracted labor, businesses whose supply chain includes trafficked labor. One of the most concrete examples involves *Wal-Mart*.

Wal-Mart, the biggest private employer in the world (with 2 million employees) and the largest retail company on the planet, sub-contracted with janitorial companies to clean their stores across the United States. For their part, these janitorial companies hired undocumented workers and forced them to work long hours without overtime pay, in unsafe conditions, handling toxic chemicals without protection. The US government brought a case against *Wal-Mart* that involved 345 illegal immigrants at 60 *Wal-Mart* stores in 21 states. In the end, twelve of the sub-contractors pled guilty to hiring the illegal workers and paid \$4 million in fines. *Wal-Mart*, for its part, denied any wrongdoing, except for failing to provide proper supervision. It settled with the US government in a judgment that came to \$11 million.³¹

Can we as Franciscans really influence the way our companies do business? Can we put pressure on our corporations to engage in ethical practices? Can we do away with human slavery in the supply chains that produce, market and distribute the goods we eat and the products we wear? I believe we can, if we understand the power we have as ethical consumers and recognize the moral and spiritual hazards of today's aggressive consumerism.

³⁰ <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>.

³¹ This example is recounted in Ruth Rosenberg, "Tackling the Demand that Fosters Human Trafficking: Final Report," USAID, August 2011, Doc ID: EDH-I-00-05-00004, P. 34.

Our Franciscan “Power” as Ethical Consumers

What does all this mean for corporate human trafficking and the supply chains that feed them? I think it means that we will never be truly successful in dismantling the supply chains that feed corporate human trafficking as long as we ourselves are aligned with or beholden to a consumerist mentality that puts economic aspirations above all other values and refuses to acknowledge the primacy of human dignity over and above all other economic interests or “necessities.” To break the supply chains that lead to slavery we must look at our own desires and what has happened to our desire for the infinity of God and how often we have allowed that desire to be replaced with the primacy of goods.

Catholic social teaching would remind us that consumerism will not be solved or even ameliorated by government action alone.³² Fundamentally, but not totally, consumerism is, as Richard John Neuhaus described it, “a cultural and moral problem requiring a cultural and moral remedy.”³³ Therefore, each of us must become more conscious of our moral responsibilities as consumers and do all we can to promote ways of living where the search for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others is not sacrificed to expedient consumer choices and unfettered profit generation.³⁴

We must undertake an examination of consciousness when it comes to corporate human trafficking:

- Do I care whether the products I buy or use are tainted with human slavery?
- Are the price, convenience and availability of goods more important to me than the possibility that those goods might be the result of slave labor?
- How much time and effort am I willing to invest in determining whether a product is the result of trafficked labor?
- How willing am I to make this problem of human trafficking personal?
- How willing am I to work with others to eradicate slave labor from my home and dinner table?

The issue of corporate human trafficking, though arguably complex, must become personal, because, when all is said and done, it is not about market shares, profitability, and government policies. It is about people, human beings bought and sold, tortured and exploited by fraud and for greed.

This is what Pope John Paul II meant when he continually proclaimed that the human person must always and everywhere be the “*subject of the economy*” and never its object.³⁵ What allows

³² John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus* (1991), 36.

³³ Richard John Neuhaus, *Doing Well and Doing Good* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 52.

³⁴ For an analysis of the debate between culture and government regulation in the control of consumerism in secular and Catholic literature, cf. Andrew V. Abela, “The Price of Freedom: Consumerism and Liberty in Secular Research and Catholic Teaching,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 10:1 (Spring, 2007), p. 7-25.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981); cf. Eileen Kelly, “Papal Economics: John Paul II on Questions of Labor and Capital,” *Catholic Social Science Review* (1999), pp. 11-20, accessed:

corporate human trafficking to flourish is the subtle erosion of the social and cultural primacy of each and every individual's human dignity and the inviolability of their human rights.

Consumerism is corrosive of those rights by fomenting, as John Paul II told us, a “*radical dissatisfaction*” with life and then creating the commodities that serve as an artificial stimulation or synthetic palliative against the alienation that consumerism and its marketing agents have created.³⁶ We must understand and then resist this deadly game.

And the deadly game is this -- those who are trafficked are hidden below the bottom line, as it were, as the collateral damage of an affluent consumerist society that reduces the human person to an object of material things (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 19). And not only those trafficked, every one of us, whether on the supply or demand side of human trafficking, we are all damaged by the “radical dissatisfaction” that attends consumerism. As John Paul II, reminded us – the more we possess, the more we want, while our deeper aspirations remain unfulfilled or even stifled.³⁷

In lieu of this, as I said in my 2007 book, we must build an alternative economy.³⁸ We must create a fraternal or relational economy that places a new primacy on compassion and relationship and not on aggression and competition, one that recognizes our fundamental vocation to give ourselves freely to others and to God, at church, in the home and in the marketplace.

Beyond this, as Franciscans we must use our most forceful language to describe with accuracy what corporate human trafficking and the supply chains that feed them truly are – they are sin, social sin, and they require from the Churches the most comprehensive response to sin we can muster.

Supply Chains and Social Sin

In his social encyclicals John Paul II began to teach that there was a list of social evils that could no longer be properly or fully understood within the framework of “personal sin” alone, social evils that would never be properly addressed or redeemed if seen only under the rubric of personal responsibility. Those social evils included terrorism, religious, cultural and racial discrimination, the diminution of human rights, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, and the “unfair distribution of the world’s resources and of the assets of civilization” that widens the gap that exists between the rich and the poor.”³⁹

John Paul II put the world on notice that viewing these evils (and many more like them) simply through the traditional prism of personal sin not only misunderstood the dynamics of these social tragedies but also paralyzed us in our ability to redress them, with grace, in any significant way. Therefore and thereafter, John Paul called all of us to a meditation on the dynamics of “social sin.”

http://www.cssronline.org/CSSR/Archival/1999/1999_011.pdf; Edward J. O’Boyle, “John Paul II’s Vision of the Social Economy,” in the *International Journal of Social Economics* 32:6 (2005), p. 520-540.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 28.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy*, *op.cit.*

³⁹ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), #2;

In my book, *The Four Conversions*, I define “social sin” in the following way:

*Social sin is the refusal of communion that is embedded in the conventions, customs, policies, procedures and practices of our institutions. It is the denial of free communion to certain persons or groups of people, which is structured into the way we bring our communities together. It is the attempt to achieve a type of social harmony by means of domination or deprivation.*⁴⁰

What this definition does is invite us into a deeper inspection of all our institutions, for profit and not for profit alike, to see the traces of alienation that hide in the embedded customs, policies, procedures and practices of all businesses.

One of the great lessons of John Paul’s moral teaching is that social sins cannot be solved by personal deeds alone. Evil that has become embedded as normal within the customs and conventions of the way we do business will not be eradicated even by the heroic but isolated acts of individuals. Structural in nature, social sins like consumerism and corporate human trafficking require cooperation, collaboration and united actions, in a word, *solidarity*, to redress them.

And they require our solidarity on several fronts. They certainly require new legislation that will target the demand side of human trafficking, going after companies that profit, even unwittingly, from trafficked labor. The supply chains that support human trafficking must be exposed and the mechanisms that promote trafficking must be dismantled. We must send the clear and convincing message that we do not want slave-tainted goods and products in our homes or on our dinner tables.

I believe that California has given us a model with the passage of its *Transparency in Supply Chains Act*. Beginning on January 1, 2012, the law requires retail sellers and manufacturers doing business in the state of California to disclose their efforts to eradicate slavery and human trafficking from their direct supply chains.

Specifically, the law requires those companies doing business in California with annual worldwide gross receipts exceeding \$100 million, with sales in California in excess of \$500,000 to do five things:

1. They must verify their product supply chains and evaluate the risks of human trafficking and slavery at every step. They have to disclose whether or not this verification was conducted by an outside, third-party, agent or not.
2. They have to conduct audits of all their suppliers to evaluate their suppliers’ compliance with the company’s standards for trafficking and slavery in their supply chains. The disclosure to the state (and on their company website) has to specify whether the audit was done independently and whether it was conducted unannounced. (A good model of this effort, by the way, can be found on the Hewlett-Packard website.)

⁴⁰ David B. Couturier, *The Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation* (South Bend, IN: The Victoria Press, 2008), p. 189.

3. The law requires direct suppliers to certify that the materials incorporated into the product comply with the laws regarding slavery and human trafficking of the country or countries in which they are doing business.
4. The companies must maintain internal accountability standards and procedures for employees or contractors failing to meet company standards regarding slavery and human trafficking.
5. The companies must provide training to company employees and to management, who have direct responsibility for supply chain management, particularly with respect to mitigating the risks within their supply chains of products.

California leads the way here. But, it is only a first step and one reserved to a select and restricted class of companies. We need to double our efforts to extend this legislative approach across the country, so that we can be protected from coast to coast against the dangers of slave-tainted goods reaching our churches, friaries, homes and dinner tables.

On a more personal level, I would recommend a new technology that each of us who uses an *I-Phone*, *I-Pad*, or *Android* can use to monitor our own consumer behavior with regard to human trafficking.

Free2Work is a project supported by *The International Labor Rights Forum* and created by *Not for Sale*, a not for profit organization with a goal of eradicating modern forms of human slavery. *Free2Work* provides consumers with information on how products relate to modern day slavery. Specifically, by using their website, you can learn how your favorite brands are working to address forced and child labor.

Free2Work provides the first and only mobile application that allows you and me, as consumers, to scan the barcode of an item we see in a store and instantly gain access to information on the brand's efforts to prevent child and forced labor. It allows us as consumers to use this information to understand what labor practices were used in the production and distribution of our potential purchase. For the first time, it gives us a real-time way of knowing what labor practices we may be supporting with our purchases. It provides a way to analyze our consumption habits and gives us an opportunity to make decisions as ethical consumers about supply chain workers and their working conditions. It allows us to voice our concerns about how workers are treated during the production and distribution processes, using the developing platforms of today's social media.

Conclusion: Franciscans as Consumers – Redefining the Franciscan Subject Today

In his paper, "So What is a Franciscan? Constituting the Franciscan Subject," David Flood, OFM, demonstrates how the early friars fashioned a new common language about who they

were, what they did, how they worked, and to whom they belonged in order to break society's control over them:

*They just had to remember who they were, agents of the Spirit, subverting the world to a new way of life, a life on the further side of the destructive way societies are organized, and Assisi first of all. The remnants of society whom the brothers served in the almshouses did not just happen to be there. They were put there. They were put there just as our societies today select out all sorts of people who do not fit in.*⁴¹

The friars were no longer accepting the commonly-held definition of their place as citizens and communicants in the town and churches of Assisi. The early friars were engaging in a social reconstitution of their experience as citizens and workers in Assisi, rejecting a world divided into the *majores* and *minores*, an enterprise that existed for the exclusive benefit of Assisi's ruling clans. Becoming the "servants of all" indicated a commitment to include the leper and the poor in the enterprise of citizen and church, at a time when they were excluded and shunned as "permissible victims" of church and society. Francis' declaration that the friars would live "spiritually," as agents of the Spirit's holy operation, contrasted with the socially accepted and ecclesiastically expected forms of "living carnally," i.e., according to the divisions and wars that contributed to the wealth of Assisi's prominent families at the expense of the lepers and the poor.⁴²

"Living spiritually" today means understanding and respecting the ethical responsibilities we have as consumers. It is our task as Franciscans today to inspect the matrix of meaning that shapes and surrounds our own social, cultural and religious identity as consumers. It is time for Franciscans, at the very least, to accept their responsibility to become *ethical consumers*, proclaiming and living the Gospel's insistence on the immeasurable dignity of each and every person even in (especially in) the marketplace.

But, there is more. The modern and postmodern world has constructed our agency primarily in terms of consumption and the overwhelming anxieties that evolve from it. We now satisfy the social rituals of our inclusion in this consumer world, at least in part, by "*eating, wearing, walking and talking slavery*."⁴³ We have seen how consumerism impacts and atrophies our desire. Franciscan life, by contrast, creates a new lexicon of desire and thus invites us to a form of life on the other side of the aggressive and destructive ways that society is organized today.⁴⁴ Franciscanism subverts the world as we know it, a consumptive world that would have us believe in the God of the Enlightenment who is stingy and distant and a world where we must be in a continuous "war of all against all."⁴⁵ Alternatively, Franciscanism invites us to trust and to live

⁴¹ David Flood, OFM, "So What is a Franciscan? Constituting the Franciscan Subject," *Franciscan Studies* 63 (2005), p. 39; Patricia Ranft builds on Flood's Franciscan work theology in her text, "Franciscan Work Theology in Historical Perspective," in *Franciscan Studies* 67 (2009), pp. 41-90.

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 35-47.

⁴³ cf. Bales, footnote 28 above.

⁴⁴ Louis Joseph Rouleau, *Desire, Eros and Fulfillment: St. Bonaventure's Anthropology and Mysticism of Desire* (Catholic University of America, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2012).

⁴⁵ David B. Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* (South Bend, IN: Cloverdale Books, 2007).

as brothers and sisters in the graced world of an abundant God who is good, all good, supremely good, all the time and to everyone.

David B. Couturier, OFM. Cap. PhD, DMin., is the research analyst on economic issues for the *Franciscan Action Network* in Washington, DC. He is the outgoing director of the *Office for Pastoral Planning* for the Archdiocese of Boston and the director of *Catholic Consultations International*, a ministry that provides organizational development and mediation services to Catholic and not for profit institutions. He is the author of two books, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* and *The Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation*, as well as more than fifty articles on the psychology of justice, organizational development and religious leadership. He teaches at St. Bonaventure University in New York and at the Pontifical Antonianum University in Rome.