

Enough is enough: what are we really worth?

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Thank you for inviting me to talk to you today in response to the film of 'The story of stuff.' I certainly agree with the film's main point, that the way we are living is unsustainable and we need change. The film suggests that our global society is built on the principle that consumption is what gives value to the human person – that our worth can be measured by how much we can afford to buy. In *this* version of global society, the film suggests, 'If you don't own or buy a lot of stuff, then you don't have value.' It is clear to me though, and to many of us, that to build our global society on this principle does not help us to become better people, or even to be happy. It doesn't work for us, and it doesn't work for society. It doesn't work for us, because we end up working more, using up time we could spend in other ways to buy more stuff, stuff that we throw out when it loses its 'cool'. And it doesn't work for society, because we end up competing instead of cooperating – we end up as a disparate group of individuals rather than a community. There is nothing intrinsically evil about shopping, or business. But we do need to be concerned about the distortion of 'shopping' – especially the emphasis on, 'I want, therefore I must have.'

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If we throw out our stuff so soon, can we really say that we needed it? In fact, have we yet worked out what the difference is between 'needing' and 'wanting'? In a society built on the principle that you have no value unless you buy a lot of *stuff*, 'having more' obviously becomes more important than 'being more.' Yet our faith teaches us, that being more, is infinitely more important than having more. I'm sure you know the parable of the fool and his barns (*Luke 12:16-*

21). He hoards what he has, and builds more and more barns, to hold more and more of his wealth, when actually he won't even live to enjoy it.

We live on a planet with finite resources – so this way of living is unsustainable.

Though government and business will tell us that we need more and more economic growth, which can only be achieved through the making and buying of more stuff, this constant drive has not made us into a happier or healthier society. In fact, some would even suggest that current high levels of mental *ill*-health in rich countries are in fact sane responses to a world view that does not lead us to real happiness or fulfilment – we are not helped to flourish mentally by being driven to consume more and more.



Photo: Tom Ormiston

What is it that we really need to flourish as human beings? A safe and sustainable environment? You don't get that by 'trashing the planet' to make more stuff. Would it help us to flourish if we had more time with our family and friends, or time to ourselves to relax and enjoy the world around us? You don't get that when you have to go out to work more and more hours to buy more and more stuff. Would we flourish with more time for fun, or for silence, or for prayer? I think we would, *yet* we find ourselves inexorably driven by our quest for more of something. What *is* that something? – because I don't think it is really the stuff itself. Are we, in fact, looking for status?

Wealth? Or power? Or is it as fundamental even as the drive to increase our own self-worth? We are constantly and repeatedly told through advertising, media and peer pressure that 'without *this*, life is barely worth living;' 'if you only had *that*, your life would be complete.' Our whole sense of self, our identity has become bound up with what we do, and how much stuff we have. How are we coping now that increasing unemployment and higher inflation in our own country leaves us with less money and the capacity to buy less stuff? *If* we see our own value as human beings defined by how much we can earn and how much we can buy – if we see our contribution to society only as a financial transaction – where will our self-worth, our value, and our very identity as human beings come from when more and more of us literally can't afford to participate in the system as it stands?

I'm guessing that here I'm talking to people who know this already – people who, as Christians, know that our value as human beings is simply that – that we are human, that we are created and loved by God, that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that money is not God... I believe that too, but at what level do I truly know it? We are made in the image and likeness of God, and yet our self-image is sometimes so poor that we rely on shopping for more stuff to make us feel good and worthwhile. The messages we hear day after day become a subconscious voice saying: '*I have contributed to society today- I have bought a Coco Chanel or a Mulberry handbag – I feel good*'. We are bombarded with so many negative messages about our value and our worth that we may start to question ourselves, even though our faith gives us a different paradigm – a different framework for living. Our attachment to money and to stuff is deep-rooted, because it is not just about worth even – it is also about security and adequacy. Everyone, rich or poor, needs to find their own sense of security. The theologian Walter Brueggeman pinpointed one of the key differences between those who live in poverty

and those who live in wealth. Those who are rich, or comparatively rich, live in fear that they will lose it because they trust in the security offered by money – therefore they hoard it, and are loath to share it. Those who are poor can't put their trust in money, they must trust in other people (in their neighbours), so those who have a little share it with others around them to maintain that network of trust and security. They live by generosity and by solidarity.

But in spite of all this information, even though I know that generosity and solidarity eventually lead me to flourish and in spite of my faith, that I am created and loved by God, I am still easily tempted by fast cars, exotic holidays and, especially, by the latest mobile phones and iPads. I am seduced by the consumerist vision of what it means to be happy - the 'if only' vision – if only I had an iPad 2, or an iPhone 4 my life would be complete. I would be happy. Being happy in *other* ways, ways that have nothing to do with stuff, has got a serious image problem – it is seriously not cool not to have all that stuff. You are 'weird' if you don't have it – you have no sense of humour, you are no fun. Isn't it possible, your friends will say, to buy a new handbag without stressing about it, isn't it possible to just go out shopping for fun? It's just a little escapism – but I have a question – escapism from what?

The system and vision of consumerism for economic growth is very powerful. It has all the tools to make you believe. There are many people, and powerful people who think that the answer to all life's problems is to grow the economy a little more and to keep it growing. Even if, counter-intuitively, growing the economy actually means throwing people out of work, or cutting back on education or health, or arts or museums. Economic growth as the only answer has become almost unquestionable. So we need to ask the questions: What is the true cost of economic growth? What is not being added in to the balance sheet? If the true cost of development through the industrialized model that we have embraced so

whole-heartedly is climate change – has that been factored in? If the true cost of this model is lost time, time for family and friends, time for community, time for art, time for music, time for prayer – has that been factored in? No, the mantra is clear: 'Development can be achieved through economic growth alone'. Progress means replicating the industrial capitalist model throughout the world, regardless of local and national cultures or belief systems.

We need to ask the question: how can it be progress when it makes people unhappy and destroys the planet? How can it be progress when it doesn't mean food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, work for the unemployed, or freedom to live life to the full?

CAFOD is not saying no to progress, but it is asking the question, 'What is progress? What is development? What does it mean to flourish as a human being? And how can we enable everyone to flourish?'

One of the answers is that global systems such as economics and business, and politics, must serve people, not the other way around. One of the most consistent themes of Catholic Social Teaching is that the human person is more important than any system, than any amount of money, than any type of work or other activity. If it doesn't enable people to flourish then it isn't a good system. CAFOD believes that the current model of development is based on an inadequate understanding of what it means to flourish, it is based on an *acquisitive* model – thinking that the more people have, the more they will flourish. It is, of course, true to say that if your choices and chances in life are suffocated by poverty you will not flourish, but we now know that neither will you flourish if you are driven only by the desire to have more and to have it to excess. We need to rediscover the concept of 'enough'.

Even our politics has become about little more than economics and it is true that a degree of economic

growth in developing countries may be necessary for reducing poverty and increasing human well-being but it is certainly not sufficient, and economic growth *ad infinitum* in any country is not sustainable. CAFOD is arguing that any economic growth should be low carbon, and that economic policies should be targeted principally at poverty eradication rather than at economic growth for its own sake. But thinking about human beings in terms of economic policies alone is not enough. What about culture? What about society? And, critically, what about our relationship with the environment? How have we got into the habit of thinking only about economic benefits, without registering the true costs – for our health, for our well-being, our human relationships and our relationship with God and with the world we live in? How have we allowed ourselves to be persuaded that our individual freedom and choice and our own personal desires are more important than the common good? We have allowed the good of economic growth for the good of all to become the good of economic growth for its own sake, regardless of its consequences or costs. Yet a Christian vision of human flourishing points us towards the importance of human dignity, the need for right relationship with each other, the earth and with God; and the need to modify or even replace structures and systems that keep *anyone* from flourishing. And today, because our world is so inter-connected and we as peoples have become ever more inter-dependent, our common good is global. We cannot truly flourish, whilst others do not.

How do we bring about change? If we believe in the common good, above individual desires and a well-being that goes beyond the material we need to bring about change, to transform the world into a sustainable planet with vibrant communities. I firmly believe that in order to transform the world we can't just rail against the system. Anger is not enough. We have tried it, and it works for some people. Even I am tired of anger. I want hope. I have

campaigns on so many issues and I have seen great changes, but there is more to do and we are called to do it. Development has not been achieved through economic growth alone. In 1967 Pope Paul VI said that development was not just 'eliminating hunger and reducing poverty... not just ...fighting wretched conditions... It involves,' he said, 'building a human community where people can live truly human lives...It involves building a human community ...where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich man at the same banquet table.'
(*Populorum Progressio*)

Well, I was 7 when those words were written and I'm 50 now and the poorest are still not sitting at the same banquet table as the rich. In fact, it looks to me as though the richest have built themselves new banqueting halls with higher fences and louder alarms. I am still angry, but anger is a bit like guilt – it's too negative a platform on which to build a movement of change. The world is full of bad news. My nephew won't even watch the news because it makes him depressed. We, as Christians, are supposed to be bringing the 'good news' – the Gospel is good news. It brings hope, not despair. The reason the vision of consumer happiness is so seductive is because its pictures are painted in vibrant Technicolor – 'this is what you can have, this is what it looks like, this is how you will feel when you have got it.' If we want things to change we have to paint the alternative in colours as vibrant as a new Sony Bravia, in practical pictures so that we can touch and feel it in our imaginations as easily as I can touch and feel an iPad 2 in my own hands, even though I don't have one!

Jesus knew how to paint pictures through his story telling, through his parables and examples. In Mark's gospel in particular we can find examples of what the kingdom looks like. Here we can find the principles upon which our changed world can be built.

This world is inclusive and welcoming – Jesus eats with tax collectors and

sinners, and women, not just men. It is built on love of God and neighbour, not on money and status; it is not about following rules, but about doing good; it is built on sharing, not on hoarding.

To bring about change we need to be able to imagine and describe the alternative in ways that capture the imagination. We need to inspire others with our passion and our vision. We need to be good news.

In order to *be* good news, we need to *become* good news. Becoming is a process, a long-term challenge, not a quick fix. According to Aquinas, becoming good is a process of repeated good actions '*habitus*': he says that the soul has a number of different actions to choose from, and so it needs a habit which forms it to choose well. In order to become a different person I need to repeat the actions I want to acquire over and over again. So, if we have become conditioned by practice to buy new stuff, stuff that I want, rather than stuff I need, every time it comes out, we need to practise resistance. The more I choose to buy, the more I get used to buying, and the more resistance becomes difficult. We may not be able to resist every time, but the more often we resist the easier it will become. As the old slogan says, we need to be the change we want to see. Inspired by our faith in our vision of a different world we need to practise resisting what the consumerist model of the world offers us. We witness, through our actions and not just our words, to a different way of being that is good news, that leads to human flourishing.

In Catholic Social Teaching we have a resource that helps us to think about the way we want to live. Much of this teaching is profoundly counter-cultural, because it puts value on what contemporary society devalues. First, it puts the human being to the foreground of its concerns. Not profit, not economic growth, not progress, but the human being. The human person has value because of who he or she is, not because of what we buy or what we own.

Secondly, it confirms that the earth is not just there as a resource to be used up. The earth has value in and of itself, because it too is created by God and reflects the glory of God in all its diversity and wonder.

Thirdly, it values gift, relationship and community over profit, individualism and self-centredness. We need to demonstrate and witness to these values, to model resistance to the systems that undermine them, and only then will we inspire others to join us. And we need to join others, to connect, to make common cause with people of other faiths and all people of good will. Now is not the time to retreat into ourselves, now is the time to reach out. But above all, we need to celebrate life, and live it to the full.

Stuff was never enough; stuff is not going to fulfil human needs. The consumption of ever-increasing mountains of stuff reduces us, and offers us a false understanding of what it means to be fully human. Our identity is reduced in the consumerist model of human well-being to a passive receiver of goods rather than a creative being. We are made in the image and likeness of God, made to shine with God's glory, created to reach our full potential as human beings in solidarity and in community with others. The glory of God is the human being, fully alive, flourishing in relationship with God, with each other and with the earth that sustains us. 'God our creator, send us out to shine with your glory. Send us out to love with your gentleness. Send us out to become what you imagined we might be.'

Linda Jones/CAFOD.
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For further reading on the topic, 'Rising to Life', a book of theological reflection and prayer is available from CAFOD Resources on 020 7095 5680. Visit www.cafod.org.uk/worship for downloadable prayer and reflection resources.