

Round Table Comments
Consumption and Family Life
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I have been asked to make some comments on how participants in this conference can apply Catholic Social Doctrine in their own lives, within their own families, particularly in their consumption decisions. And I have been asked to do this from a practical, not an academic perspective. Since I am by profession an academic, that might be hard for me—but I am also a family man, so I will try. The specific text from *Centesimus Annus* that is guiding the comments for this roundtable is:

In order to overcome today's widespread individualistic mentality, what is required is a concrete commitment to solidarity and charity, beginning in the family with the mutual support of husband and wife and the care which the different generations give to one another. In this sense the family too can be called a community of work and solidarity (#49).

So the question I'm going to address is how do we apply solidarity and charity in the family in our consumption decisions: in our decisions about what to buy, what to eat, what to wear, what kinds of entertainment; for ourselves and for our children.

The biggest challenge we face in trying to make these decisions well is the temptation of disordered consumption—of consumerism, which is the addiction to what Blessed John Paul II called the “web of false and superficial gratifications” (#41). Two years ago I spoke in this conference about how consumerism arises from a misunderstanding about the meaning of life and the real source of human happiness: consumerism is the mistaken idea that the consumption of things and

experiences leads to happiness. It is an addiction to buying things, to spending money, as a solution to the lack of happiness and peace in one's life, in one's family.

I quoted the Pope's proposed response to consumerism, which is to allow "truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others" (#36) to guide our choices as consumers and investors. Today what I'd like to do is go into more detail about this, about *how* we might go about promoting lifestyles of truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others, in our families.

A useful guide, as we go through this, is the German philosopher Joseph Pieper's clarification, in his book *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, of what true leisure is. *Leisure* is what we do for its own sake; *work* is what we do for some other purpose. God created us as free human beings. We live that freedom best in leisure. It is true that some people are free to make choices about what kind of work to do, how and where to do it, and so on, but it remains the case that when we work, we work for some purpose other than the work itself: for money, for prestige, out of a sense of responsibility. None of these are bad things, of course, but it remains the case that work always *serves* something else, it is servile, while leisure, properly understood, is an exercise in freedom.

So what does true leisure look like? Is working out in a gymnasium leisure? It depends: are you doing it for the fun of it, or are you doing it to lose weight, or to improve your physique? If the latter, then it's not leisure—it is servile, it is serving the purpose of losing weight or improving your physique. Again, these are not bad things; they are important in their own ways, even necessary in some cases. But they are not leisure. Here's a good test: if the same result could be accomplished by

taking a pill, for example, would you still do it? If no, then you're not doing it for its own sake, so it's not authentic leisure.

Why is this so important?

For many reasons, of course, but let me focus on one. Two Christian psychiatrists, Drs. Conrad Baars and Anna Terruwe, made a strong case that if all your focus is on achievement, rather than on leisure, then you—and particularly your children—never reach true emotional maturity. You will never reach that feeling of being loved and being valuable just for who you are. You'll spend your time trying to achieve things, to prove to others that you are worthwhile. Lacking a feeling of being loved, you will never be able to love others very well. Because it is paradoxically in the act of letting go of your own achievements that you come to know your own worth—that you open yourself up to knowing the Father's love for you.

Authentic leisure, therefore, leads to emotional maturity, greater peace and happiness, and a greater ability to give of ourselves to others. So the first suggestion, if you want to build lifestyles of truth, beauty, goodness and communion, is to **spend time as a family on authentic leisure**—doing things that are worthwhile in themselves, joyful in themselves, rather than doing utilitarian, servile things. More time making music, reading aloud, going for hikes or picnics, together, and less time on work at the office, school, or even in the home. Of course, work is important and necessary, and work in the home, together as a family, is vitally important for strengthening the family, as the sociologist Allan Carlson has argued¹—but leisure is

¹ *From Cottage to Work Station: The Family's Search for Social Harmony in the Industrial Age* (Ignatius Press, 1993)

vital *also*. And I don't think there is much danger that the people in this room are not working hard enough. I suspect that the danger is in the opposite direction: and if all our time is spent on servile work, our children will never reach the emotional maturity they need to in order to live out a commitment to solidarity and charity.

Work less—play more. Why would that be a hard message? But it is, isn't it? Ironically, in this area, what makes it harder is something that is making life easier in so many other ways—technology. According to the philosopher Albert Borgmann, technology is a major cause of disordered consumption, in large part because it allows us to separate *pleasure* from the *effort that it would take* to realize that pleasure, and therefore from the natural limits to the enjoyment of the pleasure. If you have to cook every meal from the raw ingredients, there's not much chance you're going to get very fat. But if you can microwave a prepared meal, and in addition have as many pre-packaged snacks as you want, then you can consume to excess much more easily. Hence we have this massive obesity problem, not just in the United States now, but here in Europe also; one recent study showed that 45% of Italian children between ages 5 and 13 are overweight.²

This lack of limits can be seen very clearly in videogames. Videogames give us the pleasure of games, without as much effort. If children had nothing to do except play soccer/football, they would do that for a few hours, but eventually the need for rest and food would overpower the desire for more football, and so there's a natural limit. This does not appear to be the situation with videogames. There are

² Freeman, David W., "American Kids Aren't the Fattest After All: Go Spain and Italy!" CBSNews, 25 June 2010 (accessed October 3, 2011) http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20008848-10391704.html

several documented cases of people who have played videogames non-stop until they literally fell down dead; a Korean man a few years ago played the game Starcraft for 50 hours without break, and then died of exhaustion.³

As a result, young people today spend an enormous amount of time playing videogames; by one estimate, 10,000 hours before they reach the age of 21.⁴ Now if it's fun for them, then why is this a problem? If they are doing it for its own sake, then isn't this an example of authentic leisure, according to Pieper? The problem is, first, because anything done to excess is harmful, physically—people get fat from eating too much, and they die from playing video games for too long.

But more importantly, it's because pleasurable activities where the pleasure is easily to get, tend to crowd out other activities, where we have to put in more effort to get enjoyment. And the specific activities that are crowded out, according to Borgmann, are the things that have “a life and dignity of their own.” They are the things that our civilization—and most civilizations—have valued as the greatest in terms of truth, beauty, and goodness: the beauty of nature, great art, music, theatre. **Things that you can wonder at again and again, things that you never get tired of**, so you don't need a constant supply of new pleasures. But you need to spend time with such things in order to appreciate them, and it takes some effort.

³ Naughton, Philippe, “Korean drops dead after 50-hour gaming marathon,” Times Online, August 10, 2005 (accessed October 3, 2011), <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article553840.ece>.

⁴ McGonigal, Jane, *Reality is Broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.

The problem with artificial pleasures, from video games or from processed foods, is that *all* they deliver is pleasure. Whereas when you spend time playing the piano, for example (and here I'm talking about playing for fun, not practicing because your parents made you do it), you get *both* the pleasure of the music, and you get a little bit better at playing the piano. Getting better is not the purpose, but it happens anyway. Likewise when you cook a great meal, you get the enjoyment of cooking the meal and eating it, and you also improve your cooking skill.

So we have two opposite problems. On the one hand, we spend too much of our time on things that give us results, on work. On the other hand, we look for pleasure without effort. It's not really surprising: if we spend all our time working, we need to find ways to get our pleasure very efficiently, because we don't have much time left for it! But neither of these things fosters lifestyles of truth, beauty, and goodness. Instead what we need are activities which are pleasurable in themselves, and which also engage us with things of dignity and wonder.

I mentioned that on average children will spend 10,000 hours playing videogames by the time they reach the age of 21. That 10,000 hours is a magic number: it is the number commonly understood to be the requirement for achieving a world-class standard in any skill: piano, football, chess, basketball, whatever.⁵ In this context, it would seem that 10,000 hours of videogaming is a terrible waste. What do you think will lead to more long term satisfaction and happiness for your

⁵ Ericsson, K. A. and A. C. Lehmann "Expert and Exceptional Performance: Evidence of Maximal Adaptation to Task Constraints." *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 47: 273-305 (February 1996)

child, and his or her future family: having the abilities of a concert pianist, or being outstanding at videogames?

Why is playing piano—or playing football—better in terms of leisure than playing video games? It's because leisure activities performed *without* much use of technology have more dignity, more scope for wonder, than leisure activities that are dependent on technology. Football has more dignity than videogames, because it has more depth and breadth to it. More depth, because technology is typically designed for a specific purpose, and therefore the activities it facilitates are predetermined, and tend to lack the depth of more natural activity. And more breadth, because technology is designed to be as efficient as possible to achieve its intended goal—pleasure in this case—so it does not engage as much breadth of human activity as more natural activities do.

Let's stay with the comparison of playing football vs. playing a video game. Everytime people get together to play a game of football, it is a different game. There is a *depth* to it; you could play football all your life, and never say: oh yes, we've played this one before—how boring. Whereas with a video game, you get tired of it—that's why individual games have to come programmed with different levels of play, to keep you interested, and that's why there's such a flood of new videogames coming out all the time.

And if you never get bored of football, how much more true is this for something with still greater dignity, such as great literature. For really great books, you can read them again and again and keep getting more out of them each time (that in fact is the definition of a Great Book). Right now I'm reading Victor Hugo's

Les Misérables for the second time in my life (all 900 pages) and I'm getting a lot more from it, and enjoying it more, than from the first time I read it.

It's not just depth of engagement, it's breadth. With a videogame you use hand-eye coordination, and maybe some logical problem-solving skills. With football you use your physical skills, mental endurance, leadership, even your social skills.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not against technology. I own three laptops, personally—a Mac, a PC, and a netbook—and an iPad. But I use them all for work, I try to stay away from them during my leisure time.

Think of something as mundane as family dinner. You could think of it as just work: we need to provide so many calories to the family per day—what's the most efficient way to do so? Perhaps each member of the family eats their own meal, while doing homework, or watching TV—or maybe its not even a meal, just a series of snacks. Or you could look at it as a form of leisure, where the joy of cooking and eating it, and the conversation around it, is more important than the nutrition. Not every night, perhaps, maybe just on special days, on feast days. People still get the nutrition, but that is more of a by-product. The main point is the joy of the meal, as a family.

Does something like how we think of family meals really make a difference? My colleague at the Catholic University of America, the economist Dr. Maria Sophia Aguirre, has published a paper reviewing the research on the importance of family dinners—there really is such research—and she has found a number of interesting things: families who spend fewer meal times together have greater tension in the family, and the children are less likely to speak to their parents about concerns they

have. In such families, the children do worse in school, and are more likely to do drugs.⁶ All this, from something as simple as family meals together.

What we're talking about here is really a more direct engagement with life, with our families, unmediated by technology. But this is a challenge, and it is only getting harder. One of the newest emerging trends in marketing, for example, is what is called "gamification." Gamification is the attempt to make more aspects of life—particularly our life as consumers—more like videogames. Using the lessons of what makes videogames addicting, marketers are trying to redesign their retail websites and mobile apps to make them more like videogames, and hence more addictive to us.⁷

To counter this, I have suggested three things:

1. Spend time as a family on authentic leisure, activities that are worthwhile for their own sakes
2. Be willing to put in the extra effort that engaging with things of dignity and wonder require, unmediated by technology; it's worth it
3. Start with making home-made family dinners a priority

Thank you.

⁶ Aguirre, M.S. "Family Dining, Diet and Food Distribution: Planting the Seeds of Economic Growth," in Excellence in the Home Conference: Balanced Diet, Balanced Life, London, May 8-9, 2006.

⁷ Cf. Zichermann, G. and C. Cunningham, *Gamification by Design* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2011)