

The Better Life

Are ordinary Catholics too taken in by the Gospel of More?

[Kyle T. Kramer](#) America Magazine|

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By late fall, most of the crops on our fruit and vegetable farm have been harvested, and we are busy putting the land to bed for the winter. Recently our three children spent a day outside “working” with me, pulling up scores of tomato cages and knocking down spent plants. Though I tried to hold the kids’ feet to the fire, bedlam soon broke loose with a volley of green tomatoes that quickly became an all-out barrage.

We later turned to spreading old hay for a fresh layer of mulch in the vegetable plots. With a bale spear on the tractor’s rear hitch, I would back up and skewer one of the large round bales. Our twin 8-year-old daughters would usually leap onto the bale and hang on for dear life as I hauled it to a garden plot. Sometimes I raised and lowered the hitch repeatedly for a roller-coaster effect—even though, several months before, a bale once slipped off the spear and all three kids went flying in an explosion of flailing arms and legs (our 4-year-old son swore off bale riding after this incident). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration would certainly not approve.

The kids made a jungle gym out of each bale I deposited, happily tearing off hay as we unrolled the bale down the crop rows. I felt a wistful sort of joy, anticipating the rapidly approaching day when their unmitigated, simple pleasures will drown in the turbulence of their teenage years.

Later that day, our family piled in the car and drove an hour to visit relatives in the city. We stopped first at the local mall, where I had grudgingly agreed to accompany my wife for some shopping. I despised almost every minute of it. Compared to our farm, where I feel at home and at ease (even when hard at work), in the mall I felt awkward and out of place, useless but for my credit card, claustrophobic, overwhelmed by the crowds, the neon, the maelstrom-gripped teenagers chattering among themselves and into their cellphones.

I am the first to admit that I am a bit cynical about shopping in general and malls in particular. For the most part, I simply don’t like buying stuff, and I have no knack for it, even when purchasing gifts. I have had to work my way up from giving well-intentioned presents of fluorescent lightbulbs, which went over about as well as if I had wrapped up a toilet plunger for my wife.

I marvel, then, as the Christmas shopping season begins, at how our culture has managed to make such an ideal out of emptying our bank accounts and filling our homes—and eventually a landfill—with things we mostly do not need. As Colin Beavan, the author of *No Impact Man*, points out in his reflections on his family’s year-long experiment in radical urban environmentalism, the consumption habit not only wrecks the planet and enslaves many of its poorer citizens but also, like a drug addiction, is not even very satisfying or meaningful.

And at least for a few farm kids I know, it is not nearly as much fun as playing on hay bales or tossing tomatoes. I wonder if in our endless purchasing, what we have actually bought is a bill of goods.

Catholic social teaching, including Pope Benedict's encyclical "Charity in Truth," makes a vigorous critique of unchecked consumerism. Critique, however, generally falls on deaf ears. Perhaps more importantly, the Catholic tradition can also offer an alternative vision for the "good life," guided by values of humility, moderation and integral human development for individuals and communities. Articulating such values would be a very appropriate use of the Catholic megaphone in the public sphere—perhaps more helpful than strident Catholic voices condemning fellow believers for not being the right (or left) kind of Catholic.

Articulating essential values in the public sphere is good and necessary, but in the end, mere words never suffice. The real question for us ordinary Catholics, then, is whether we too are taken in by the Gospel of More or if we can find ways to embody the good life of which our tradition so eloquently speaks. I have in mind not just ideals of justice, temperance and other theological abstractions, although any well-lived life will express those virtues. I want to know if and how our daily choices—economic and otherwise—help us and others become ever more fully alive. How can our lives become a witness and an invitation to wholeness, humor and deep, abiding joy? Are we having fun yet?

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