

## I BUY... THEREFORE I AM

Adela Cortina  
Ignasi Carreras

1. THE WHO, WHAT AND WHY OF CONSUMERISM ( <i>Adela Cortina</i> )	
The era of the consumer. . . . .	4
The neoliberal argument . . . . .	8
The reasons behind consumerism . . . . .	10
The dictatorship of manufacturers . . . . .	13
The power of the consumer. . . . .	14
Consumerism from the perspective of citizenship. . . . .	15
2. TOWARDS FAIR TRADE – SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CONSUMERISM ( <i>Ignasi Carreras</i> )	
Going against the tide. . . . .	18
Fair trade. . . . .	21
Ethical ways of investing money . . . . .	23
Fair trade activists. . . . .	24
3. AN APPENDIX FOR CHRISTIANS ( <i>Cristianisme i Justícia</i> )	
Going without in order to help . . . . .	27
Consumers as activists . . . . .	28
Be careful of advertising! . . . . .	28
And what about going without football? . . . . .	29
More Ignatian advice . . . . .	29
4. AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	31

This booklet gathers together the transcribed round-table discussions of Adela Cortina and Ignasi Carreras on the theme of consumerism, organized by *Cristianisme i Justícia* in 2003.

All the economic statistics that appear in this document refer to the state of play in 2003. It is possible that they are no longer accurate.

The Managerial Council of *Cristianisme i Justícia* thought that, despite the colloquial tone of these discussions, their content might at least help others to undertake an “examination of their conscience” on this aspect of their lives.

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# 1. THE WHO, WHAT AND WHY OF CONSUMERISM

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**Adela Cortina**

The issues that I am going to examine here about ethics and a consumer society are extensively developed in my book "Towards an ethical consumerism", and linked to another book I wrote in 1997 called: "Citizens of the World"<sup>1</sup>. In this book I examined the need for people to be citizens of their own community and of the whole world.

*A citizen is someone who is his own person, among his equals. A citizen is someone who is not a subject, someone who is not a vassal, but someone who is master of his own life. A citizen is someone who makes choices about his own life, but who does so among those who are his equals in the heart of society. The idea of citizenship will always mean being a citizen with other people, and with other people who are on an equal par. In society, it is understood that everyone should be equal. In this way, the citizen can be his*

own master, but alongside other people.

The 21st Century should be called the century of citizenship, in which *we should be our own masters*. But there is a dimension of citizenship which seems to me to be a fundamental one, and that is *economic citizenship*. *The truth is that we don't make the economy, but rather, it makes us*, and while this is the case, we cannot then be our own person, because at the end of the day, *we are made servants and vassals of this economy "that makes us"*.

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<sup>1</sup> CORTINA, A. *Por una ética del consumo*. Taurus, Madrid 2003 and CORTINA, A. *Ciudadanos del mundo: hacia una teoría de la ciudadanía*. Alianza, Madrid 1997.

Inside the economic dimension, there is a cycle that is formed by production, trade and our consumption of the end product. First of all, items are manufactured, then they are traded, and finally they are bought. Economists say that normally *the great economic questions are: what is being manufactured, for whom, and who decides what to manufacture?* But it seems to me that there are other questions that are equally important in the domain of the economy, and these are: *what is being bought?, who are the consumers?, and who decides what consumers will buy?* In other words, the famous economic questions on manufacturing could be re-evaluated through questions on consumerism.

I believe that in order for us to be economic citizens, we must also be citizens of consumerism. That is to say, we must be the ones who decide what is being bought, and consequently, we decide what should be manufactured, because at the end of the day, businesses end up manufacturing what we buy. If a particular range of items is purchased in great quantities, it will continue to be produced, (the notion of supply and demand). If we want to be protagonists in our own lives, we will certainly become protagonists in the world of manufacturing then. When we buy a certain group of products, this means they will continue to be manufactured, and we really will be masters of our own lives.

### 1.1. The era of the consumer

We will start by placing ourselves in the present day, which in my opinion could be called, the “era of the consumer”. Why the “era of the consumer”? Simply because during this time, consumerism has seen an incredibly rapid growth. In our societies, it’s no longer a question of buying goods that are basic and necessary, but rather the current trend is in buying superfluous, unnecessary goods.

We hear people talk about our consumerist society, and we have all heard said a hundred times that “we are living in a consumer society”. However, saying this is not the same as coming to terms with the fact that we are living in a society in which everyone has become a consumer, because it is logical that you have to be a part of this group in order to survive. A consumerist society is one in which the people buy goods that are fundamentally superfluous. In other words, *it is a society in which people don’t buy that which is necessary to live, but that which is superfluous*, and one in which buying such goods legitimizes both the society’s politics and its economy.

What does it mean, to legitimize the politics of a society? Simply this, if it ever happened that a political party didn’t want to win an election, one thing they could do is to say in their electoral campaign: “If we win, we’re going to lower the level of consumerism.” If it should ever oc-

cur to a party to say this, they will not win one single vote, and not by mere chance. Everyone knows that what they should be saying is in fact the contrary: “We’re going to raise the level of consumerism, and increase this country’s wealth”, and on hearing this the people will say: “These are the ones we have to vote for”.

What is it that makes people go for these economists? The desire to achieve economic growth. This is welcomed with great enthusiasm in society. Where there is growth, there is enthusiasm. If there is no growth, everything is a disaster, a failure. It destroys people to think about lowering their economic level; this has been proven beyond doubt. Instead, when one talks about raising one’s social status, everyone is happy to do so. When someone has become used to living in an elite area, and has reached a certain social level, it becomes very difficult to accept a change for the worse. In this sense then, it can be said that being a consumer legitimizes politics. A political party legitimizes itself if its politicians are capable of bringing about economic growth for their people.

The economy can legitimize itself if it succeeds in producing goods that get more and more sophisticated. When a person is going to buy a car, they can choose from a huge variety of models, so that nowadays you can practically buy your car à la carte. People have the option of choosing

the model of their car, the latest types of navigational systems, cars with in-built computers and a multitude of extras, such as electric windows, mirrors, air conditioning, etc., so that nobody else has a car quite like it! And even though we know that a person’s character is shown in things other than the car they drive, the fact is that people ultimately believe that their personality comes across in the car they own, or the clothes they wear... and so it happens that ultimately the trick works: people buy themselves a car because they believe that this is how they are able to reveal their true nature. The economy legitimizes itself from this perspective, and the citizens are delighted.

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In this way then, a consumerist society is one whose central dynamic is made up of superfluous goods; and furthermore, one in which people link their success and happiness with their material possessions. This is what happens in our

societies, where people are convinced that being successful means being able to show off their cars, clothes, etc. And what's more, this is what actually brings them happiness. It isn't that people reflect on it at great length, but rather that they actually feel it in themselves. For this reason, we are able to say that we are living in a consumerist society.

We are living in an era of consumerism, because this is what is at the very heart of our societies. In this consumerism, "we live, move and have our being". It seems to be the most natural thing to us, and it would seem artificial for us to change our ways. It is natural that someone goes out and has a drink, and then someone else buys one, and another... it's only natural!

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Let's focus on the way our society works. When Christmas comes, people start to receive gifts, and every year we see more and more catalogues of items in which sto-

res list out everything that can be bought. We no longer see as many nativity scenes around the place, but instead we see Santa Claus, because after all, he's the one who brings the gifts on Christmas Eve...and to top it all, the Three Kings come on January 6th, making the amount of presents infinitely multiply. This means that the announcement of Christmas to the people is no longer about the birth of the Infant Jesus, but instead about the arrival of catalogues of things to buy. And if it occurs to someone at Christmas not to enter into this whole dynamic, and not to offer gifts to anyone in the family who got presents for them, they will appear completely evil to all around them and become a social outcast. The result of this is that *all rituals have been taken over by the idea of presents* and so people continue to be consumers.

Finally, we begin to realize that nowadays we are all part of this mass of consumers. Another example of this could be weddings. When you talk about weddings, everyone understands that a wedding is something that is organized while keeping in mind the venue where it will be celebrated. Everyone knows that there is a range of venues, and that people no longer wait to see if a Church is available when fixing the date of their wedding, but rather check to see if the function room is available. To my amazement, I have met with people who say: "*We're getting married in two years time*",

and on asking them the reason for their wait, the surprising answer is: “*The function room isn’t available until then*”. And when people get to the function room, even though all wedding venues are the same and offer more or less the same package, like playing the Wedding March when the couple arrive, and following a series of standard guidelines, people believe that their venue really is unique. And everyone else falls for it too.

We could continue along the same lines, about how death has even become commercialized. The person that is brought to hospital and dies there goes to the morgue. We don’t tend to bring them home anymore, because the morgue has a chapel already prepared with flowers, where everything has been arranged. People no longer think about the church or the style of the service, but rather about the place in which everything is so well organized and nobody needs to go to any trouble, nor is there any need to hold a vigil, or anything like that. And similar things happen in other circumstances. If we have to go and get a job, we can’t go in any old outfit. You have to dress yourself up a bit. And it is absolutely impossible to come to a successful business agreement if you’re not driving a car that’s half-way decent. So suddenly we realize that our whole life is impregnated with consumer goods that, no matter how costly they are, can offer us more success and greater possibilities.

I think that if we are characterized as being human by the fact of having a conscious mind, the first thing we should do is to use it to take stock of what we are doing. This to me seems to be the first step. We should realize that this is the very dynamic of our societies. To start with, let’s reflect upon this, and then take another step. Let’s ask ourselves if we like the way things are. Do we want to continue as we are or not? Assuming that we are all free human beings, we should all ask ourselves the following questions: What products are being bought? Who are the consumers? Who decides what is bought?

While reflecting on this, we are going to concentrate on three common answers that should be taken into account. Afterwards, we will look at a fourth answer that I am putting forward. Here are the three most common answers:

a) There are people who say that the consumer rules. The consumer can freely buy what he wants. This answer makes up the neoliberal argument.

b) Others say that the consumer is a vassal, because it is the manufacturer who is a tyrant. Manufacturers and business empires produce goods and manage to get people to buy what they want them to. This is the argument of Galbraith and his school of thought, which is still very active today.

c) The third viewpoint is that of Daniel Miller, who believes that we

have entered into a new era. In the past, people thought that the proletariat were at the forefront of social transformation; but now it is the consumers who are at the forefront of history. The working classes are no longer at the helm; instead it is the class of consumers. As consumers we can transform society and bring about a revolution. If people formerly believed that the working classes were the ones who could bring about social change, it is now in the hands of the consumers to do so.

d) The fourth stance, which is my own belief, is that of the “consumer as a citizen”, which we will look at in a moment.

Much has been said about consumerism from a variety of different viewpoints: economical, psychological, sociological, and of course, from a marketing perspective. Many studies on consumerism exist, but what caught my attention is that none of these have been done from a moral perspective. It is particularly interesting that consumerism hasn't been evaluated from an ethical point of view, when it is supposed to be at the very root of our behaviour.

In order to be able to evaluate consumerism from a moral point of view, I have chosen four parameters to work with: a) if it seems to us to be liberating, b) if it seems to be just, c) if it seems to be responsible, and d) if it seems to make us happy.

So when it comes to judging consumerism, we should focus on

whether it is in fact just, whether it is liberating, whether it brings us happiness and whether we buy responsibly. We will now analyze these different stances around the phenomenon of consumerism, looking at both its advantages and disadvantages.

## 1.2. The neoliberal argument

The neoliberal argument affirms that the consumer is his own master. The consumer is considered as a social agent who makes his decisions in a rational, single-minded way, fully informed on all the possible choices and consequences, and in this way, he is master of the circumstances on which his decision may depend. In other words, when the consumer can be described as a rational agent, and when he is faced with a variety of consumer choices and fully informed on them all, he single-mindedly decides: “*I want this product, not that one*”.

Thus the consumer “votes”, not just as he would in an election, but something more. In the elections, a party is voted in, and makes its own decisions from then on; instead, in the case of the consumer, we vote for a product because it is what we want, and we buy it again if we like it, which would be the same as voting for someone again. For this reason, it is said that the consumer can express his liberty more through consumerism than through politics, because as a consumer he is voting for

and getting the product he wants. Consequently, the businesses that work best are those that receive the most public votes, and herein the consumer is able to express his greatest freedom.

What does “greatest freedom” mean according to this neoliberal perspective? To have a greater possibility of acquiring consumer products. The wider the range of possibilities, the greater the liberty. And everyone –if they were asked– understands by greater liberty in society, having more consumer choices. Societies with less liberty are those that buy less consumer goods, and that are made up of “unfortunate” people who don’t have as many choices. The advantage of this neoliberal position is that, in my opinion, it eliminates oligopolies and protectionism, at least, in principle. Everything that protectionism stands for has been very damaging for the consumer. In this sense, there are advantages from an economical point of view.

There is also a second advantage: that of refusing to accept that the consumer has no alternative but to buy what he buys, and that he is forced into making his choice. In the past, when we were young, the devil usually took the blame for all the bad that happened. More recently, when I was studying in university, “the system” was responsible for everything. And now, it is globalization. It seems that someone else is always to blame.

According to this neoliberal vision of consumerism, we too hold some responsibility. It isn’t that “the consumer is forced into buying, and has no other choice”, but instead we will at least admit that he has other options. What happens in reality however, is that the consumer is not the master, and this is where we find the disadvantages of this neoliberal perspective.

In the first place, it is said that the economic system is at the service of the needs of the people. So someone says: “*Great! We’re going to sell oranges to the Africans then because they’re so hungry*”. But of course, there’s a problem: African countries do have needs but they’re not as clear-cut as that. The need for this economic system can only exist when it is accompanied by the necessary ability to buy goods. The system needs a financially *solvent demand*. The system only pays attention to the needs of those that have money to pay for them: otherwise, the system will not consider them as actual needs. For this reason, the Africans don’t “need” oranges, because they have absolutely nothing to pay for them with, and as a consequence, they remain excluded from the system.

To say that the consumer is his own master is therefore a little exaggerated. Those who lack the ability to buy are not in control of their own situation, and are excluded from the system. You have to read the small

print, because it is important to look more carefully at those who need the system: is it the person who can pay for their consumer needs, or the person who, though he has a need, remains excluded from the system because he is not financially solvent? This does not sound like being in control!

Secondly, the consumer cannot be his own master because as consumers we do not know what consequences the products we buy might have for the environment, or for humanity. But there is another issue, which to me is particularly interesting, and that is the lack of knowledge we have about our real reasons for buying what we buy. This theme is fascinating, and opens another completely different discussion.

### **1.3. The reasons behind consumerism**

Above all, it must be said that the motivations behind our consumer choices do not come from straightforward questions, but are arrived at in a more comparative way. We buy products, comparing ourselves with others. When we ask, “*How are you?*”, we should answer, “*Compared with who?*”, because everything is relative. If we’re in a place where everyone is poor, and we ask a question about consumerism, the answer will be different than if we were in another richer country. The problem is that we are always comparing ourselves with others, and when we see

that someone else has something different, whether consciously or subconsciously, we begin to want it too.

Thus begins the phenomenon of “emulative consumerism”. Our constant attempt to emulate others is the principal reason behind consumerism. This issue has been studied in depth through the theory of Veblen on “the leisure class”. We want to have what our neighbour has, we want to have what we see on TV, because it belongs to an ideal social class that we would like to be a part of.

When this happens among young people, its effects are negative, as it’s hard to be part of a group if you’re not wearing what everyone else is wearing. You become a leper, in the Biblical sense of the word. And the poor parents in this situation find themselves torn, because although they would like to resist this consumerist trend, it is also important to them that their son or daughter fits in with their friends, and reflects the same social status as they do. A taxi driver once said to me: “*I’m worn out, because my kid wants a video game that costs 150 euro. Do you know how much that is to me? And my wife says that I have to buy it, because how else can he show his face in school when all his friends have it?*” Among young children, there is a great desire to copy others. And young children seem to know all about the latest products on the market.

I remember a lady once chatting to me about this who said: “*We’re trying to solve this problem by buying less, but how can we do this to our kids? It hurts them. When we see our kid going to school and hear that other kids treat him badly because of our decision, it’s awful for a parent. We as parents are willing to go without, but how can we explain this to a child? We tried to tell him that we should stick together more, and share more, but the child is young, and doesn’t understand this very well. All he understands is that the other kids are rejecting him.*”

In school, children are more than able to tell which car their friends’ parents come in, and what type of clothes they wear.

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Another reason behind consumerism, apart from the desire to copy others, is the desire to be somehow compensated. When someone is upset, they say: “*Well look, I’ll go and buy myself something nice.*” Or the phrase we hear a lot nowadays: “*You*

*have to pamper yourself*”, and so the argument follows: “*Well, they tell me I have to put myself first now, and so I’m going away to Guyana... and I’m paying for the holiday because I should be kinder to myself, and I don’t look after myself as much as I should...*” The idea is that you have to make up for something that went wrong.

And then we have the person who wants to show off their success. This explanation comes mainly from economists like Amartya Sen, an Indian economist who won the Nobel Prize in Economy in 1998. This author says that what has happened in our society is that people have changed. In a secularized society like our own, nobody thinks about attaining salvation in another life, but instead, they have to get it in this one. There is nothing else to hope for; everything ends here, so you have to save yourself now, because if you don’t, there is no reward afterwards. So what does this kind of salvation mean? It simply means “success”. And how is this success revealed? By showing off costly purchases. When someone is able to buy expensive things, they are demonstrating that they have been successful. For people who believe that life ends here, and that afterwards there is nothing, it is logical that they should then look for salvation here. And by saving oneself here, that means being successful; and being successful means being able to wear and buy expensive items. How mar-

vellous! *“I left this town. I was the son of a nobody, and nobody respected me. Now I’ve come back with a swanky car, and everyone is saying: Look how successful that nobody has become!”*

People then realize that “they are someone”, and their self-esteem grows, as does the respect they get from others, because we base our self-esteem on what others think of us.

This trigger mechanism is very important, because it means that when others respect me because of my great quantity of riches, I begin to value myself based on this too. If it occurs to an adult person who is capable of reflecting on things that this is wrong, there may be a remedy; but if this occurs to a young person, he is likely to be influenced by what others say: *“Wow, look what that young kid is driving now! Just look at what he’s wearing now!”* On a worldwide scale, as we are all neighbours now thanks to modern means of communication, Third World countries want the same as developed countries. The result is this: instead of saving money, they waste what they have on superfluous items. The desire to emulate others is seen not only in the vicinity of “my neighbourhood” with “my neighbours”, but is now also seen at a global level, because we have all become each other’s neighbours through modern technology.

As we have the desire to be successful, so does a country. Which is the most successful country in the world? According to modern ways of judging success, the country that has the most cars, the most computers, etc. These are the most successful countries, where people say they are happier, and have more fullness of life, etc.

In fact, the very reasons behind consumerism could bring about a change in modern thinking. I suggest that from now on, all those who dedicate themselves to educational work should set themselves the task of deactivating the mechanism whereby happiness consists in consumer goods. If this mechanism, which is like a time bomb, is not deactivated, we can do what we want, but we will not have sorted this problem out. People will carry on thinking that consumerism represents happiness, and that it is the symbol of having succeeded in life; they will think that other theories are just stupid ideas made to keep the “Bible-bashers” happy.

Another element in the domain of comparative consumerism is in the beliefs people hold. Beliefs are fundamental things, and for this reason we must examine all the beliefs and habits surrounding consumerism. When people believe they are buying what they need, this isn’t strictly true, because in reality, they are buying what society thinks they should.

Relics are something that have always been a subject of interest to me. In the Middle Ages, people killed for them. Think about the arm of Saint Teresa for example: who wants to have an arm in their house? However, the commercial value that such relics came to have is incredible. It reached such a point that people really would kill for them. Now we can perhaps see that the question of the reasons behind consumerism is a lot more complex than it would at first seem.

#### **1.4. The dictatorship of manufacturers**

Galbraith talks about a new theory of dependence. This theory affirms the fact that manufacturers create a form of dependency in people through their advertising. The manufacturer creates a need in their audience through their advertising, convincing people that they really need what is being advertised. A lady once said to me: “*I just have to buy fur*”(!). A need can be created in people, so that people actually feel it as such.

On creating a need then, a relationship of dependency is brought about between the manufacturer and the consumer. The manufacturer creates this feeling of need because he needs to sell items on a large scale, because large-scale production is the only thing that will generate a good profit margin. For this to work, they need consumers to buy on a lar-

ge-scale, and it is therefore necessary to create a sort of habit whereby consumers will continue to buy the product. Ethics is about people’s characters and habits. When we become accustomed to buying, we develop a sort of addiction. This is what manufacturers have to achieve: a feeling in the consumer which makes it seem that they need to keep buying Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola for example...

My attention is always drawn to films where someone says something like: “*I need a drink*”. This “need” is the addiction we are talking about. Galbraith says that when this habit is created, a consumerist ethos or character is generated. In consumerist societies, we can never get enough. There is always this feeling of having to manufacture more items in order to satisfy the needs of the people, but what happens then is that new needs are created, and more new needs. These needs become infinite, and so there is never enough. And people in our society will always remain unsatisfied for this very reason.

For me, Galbraith’s theory has the advantage of outlining very clearly the way these needs are created. The creation of needs and desires is what makes people dependent on a series of items that they believe they need, without thinking of anything else. It doesn’t occur to them for example, to think that a fifth of the planet are buying a lot more than

they need, and are never satisfied, while in another fifth of the planet, the people don't have even the most basic items.

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But this theory also has some disadvantages. It insists too much on the fact that people are shaped by advertising. In the scheme of freedom, one must distinguish clearly between shaping and conditioning. Human liberty will always be somewhat conditioned, no one is absolutely free. It's true that we have our own motivations in doing things, but it's one thing to be conditioned, and a completely different thing to say that we have no other choice in a matter. If I "have no other choice" than to be a consumer, then what can be done about it? We don't have any choice about dying either. If "nothing else can be done", then everything else is futile.

But this is not true, because we do have freedom. We have a choice to do something or not to do something. It's not simply a question of everyone stopping buying things, because consumer goods are useful for many

reasons. Instead, buying with more prudence should be a fundamental starting-point. It is important for us to take stock of how much we are interested in consumer goods, how much they liberate us, make us happy. We do have more freedom than this theory says we have, and this is why we should examine the mechanisms that create this relationship of dependency and deactivate them.

### **1.5. The power of the consumer**

Linked to this, we can now focus on the very interesting theory of Daniel Miller. Just as large-scale production has made consumers buy en masse, in modern times, this has meant that consumer has enormous power in his hands. If consumers were to get together as a group and all decide to start buying things differently, they could change the face of manufacturing today.

This is the mechanism of revolution. If as this powerful group of consumers, we were to get together, we would have the manufacturing world in our hands, and would be able to change the fundamental mechanisms of manufacturing. If in the past, the working classes were at the forefront of history, now it is the consumers. Miller tries to examine the process that takes place from manufacturing to buying the product through the perspective of different social classes and lifestyles, from the working class to the middle class

that is at the heart of the consumerist society. He demonstrates that both consumers and the middle class have a significant power that should be exercised.

However this has many disadvantages. The largest of these is that the working class was a “class” that had “class interests”; they wanted to defend themselves as a class, and this generated a great sense of solidarity among them. The working class had nothing more to lose than the chains that shackled them. As consumers, we are not a social class, and I fear that we have so many diverging interests among us that we have a lot more to lose than “chains”.

Forgive me if I’m wrong, but it seems to me that most people do not have the slightest wish to change their lifestyle of consumerism but this desire to change is fundamental. The working classes managed to agree and band together, but as consumers, who are not a social class, we have different lifestyles, and competitive interests. For this reason, I fear that we will not be able to agree upon changing our consumer habits and thus change history. So instead of suggesting that we are at the forefront of history, I suggest that we should behave as active citizens.

#### **1.6. Consumerism from the perspective of citizenship**

I said at the start that a citizen is someone who is his own master

among his equals. Today citizenship does not just mean being a member of a political community, but rather has a more cosmopolitan dimension. We are living in a world in which, thanks to globalization, we are all citizens, and should live as equals. If we want to live as active citizens, we will inevitably be recognized as such in the domain of consumerism too.

I propose a *liberated form of consumerism*. We have to begin to realize why we are consumers; we have to become aware of the reasons behind consumerism. If we don’t become aware of our own motives, then we will not know why we are consumers, and thus we will be slaves. When all is said and done, Galbraith was right: we do what others tell us to do. Do you realize that what you actually want is to be like everyone else? We should at least be able to accept this. For example, when we go shopping just so as to forget the upset of a boyfriend or girlfriend leaving us.

It’s a good thing that we learn as we go along, because it is useful to gain in self-knowledge. Firstly, it’s useful to be aware of our own motivations, and afterwards we can then decide if we actually want to be like this or not.

Secondly, and in no particular order of importance, *consumerism must be fair*. Today, you cannot talk about consumerism or anything else, without raising the theme of justice.

Our societies are tired of saying that they believe in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, but seeing as we've heard it said so many times, I think that at some point we should begin to take it seriously. In this declaration, it says that everyone has the right to life, and the right to a lot of other things. However, it is clear is that at the moment, there is a huge majority of people whose right to life is not fulfilled, and consumerism has a lot to do with this. For this reason, what I'm suggesting is to encourage a fair and just type of consumerism, and this means one that can be universally applied, in other words, a type of consumerism that can be practiced by the whole world.

If we say that we won't buy anything, then obviously we'll die. Consumer goods are necessary and have many advantages, but these advantages should be made universal. We could distribute everything in such a way that everybody could make use of consumer goods. Instead we say that other people can't use cars because they pollute the atmosphere, while we carry on using ours... This gives us the right to use all the consumer goods we want, and go on to decide who can't use them. I think that we need to create lifestyles that can be made universal, which would therefore need us to lower the level of consumerism; in other words, create a universal middle-class. Not an upper class, such as we have in developed countries, or a poverty-stricken class, but rather a li-

festyle in which people can make use of the most basic consumer goods, and the consumer goods that bring the most happiness.

A third feature of the style of consumerism I am proposing is co-responsibility. I call it *co-responsible consumerism*, because one person on their own cannot change things. Co-responsible consumerism means that we have to make use of associations, institutions and groups. Consumer groups cannot only assert the rights of consumers, but they can also give their support to a type of consumerism that is both just and liberating. We have to make use of consumer associations and institutions on both a civil and a political level, in order to struggle for this just and liberating form of consumerism.

And finally, I suggest that consumerism should be able to *bring happiness*. All human beings want to be happy, as Aristotle said 25 or 26 centuries ago, and he was right. All human beings strive for happiness. This is what we all want at the end of the day, and the truth is that when we talk about consumerism, I wonder if this in fact does make people happy; in other words, if societies with high levels of consumerism are happier, and if as the level of consumerism rises, the level of happiness rises with it too.

Aristotle said that there are certain things that by themselves alone can make people happier.

The commercial world has invented activities that make people happy, for example, “going shopping.” “Going to do the shopping” is not the same as “going shopping”. The first is a sacrifice; you have to buy food, clothes, etc, time and again... while we would prefer everything to be given to us ready-made. Instead, when you say, “let’s go shopping”, it’s got much more appeal. You go to shopping centers where you can pass the afternoon, leave the child in the crèche, do a million and one different things, stroll around, go to the cinema... This is something that is done for the experience in itself; going shopping for the sake of it.

However, in some of the studies that I have looked at, it seems that the activities that make people most happy are not measured by the most expensive consumer goods. It’s a good thing to look at which activities make people happy,

because this has a lot to do with human relationships, for example, spending time with people one likes and appreciates. Happiness also has a lot to do with leisure activities (reading books, watching films, going to concerts), and things that require little expense.

There are activities that are worthwhile, such as working side by side with other people, and taking the time to appreciate the wonders of nature around us. Actions of solidarity have a lot to do with one’s fullness of life, and don’t need costly consumer goods.

I think it is important for us to reflect very carefully on this matter, and see if we should look more closely at the issue of activities that make us happy. Otherwise, we are only setting ourselves the task of earning money in order to buy products that we aren’t even going to use. This to me seems very unethical, and above all, ridiculous.

## 2. TOWARDS FAIR TRADE – SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CONSUMERISM

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*Ignasi Carreras*

I think that an ethical form of consumerism will always go against the norm. For example, my two sons, who go to a certain school always used to say to us: “*we’re so poor because we don’t have two cars, we don’t have two mobile phones, we don’t have two TVs, we don’t have a second residence, etc., etc.*” We did try to explain things to them, but they just didn’t understand. “*We’re so poor – they’d say – we’re the poorest people in Barcelona*”.

In Christmas of 2002, we went with them for four weeks to Bolivia and Peru in order to visit various Oxfam projects there. After two hours there, my oldest son who was eleven years old at the time, said to me: “*We’re not so poor after all.*” When they saw on arriving in the central plaza of La Paz, a young child of 6 or 7 came over to see if we wanted our shoes cleaned, they started to wonder about a lot of things. Sometimes, in order for us to understand what is really going on in

our lives, we need to look at things from an outside perspective so that we realize how ridiculous we are being.

### **2.1. Going against the tide**

However, even then it’s very difficult to go against the norm. Our youngest son wanted a football as a present. He wanted one of the famous brands that had been advertised by celebrity sports stars. He got a football at Christmas, with a note sa-

ying: “This is the best football in the world”. It was actually a fair trade football that is sold in Oxfam. After seeing it, he said: “*I don’t understand*”. So we began to explain it to him. “*Look, this football was made by adults. They received a wage for it that allows them to live with dignity. It wasn’t made by children that are forced to work in other parts of the world. Other footballs are made in socially unjust circumstances ...*” And he went off with his fair trade football to school, and came home saying: “*No one believes it’s the best football in the world. I think it’s just because you’re saying it is.*” It’s normal that kids won’t believe these kinds of arguments. That was until the day came when, there wasn’t just one of these fair trade footballs at school, but five or six of them, and his appreciation of his football began to grow. He was no longer going against the norm, and he believed that his football was a good football, because other people had it too. And this happens not just only with children, but young people and adults too.

My wife and I wrote the book “Living in solidarity”<sup>1</sup>. This book is a consumer product. The Planeta publishing house saw there was a “niche in the market”, and that people might be interested in this theme, and said to me one day: “*Why don’t you write a book about solidarity?*” I don’t know if they were any more in-

terested in themes like solidarity or responsible consumerism than any other publishing group, but what I do know is that there was business potential in it for them. We wrote this book because we saw that by going with a big publisher, we also had the possibility of getting our message through to more people, given that a lot of people ask themselves questions like: “*What could I do to help your work in Oxfam?*” There are men and women who believe it is possible to do something about changing the world, and who wonder how they might be able to help with the little they can bring, and people who ask themselves: “*How will my actions help?*” So we thought about explaining how people can contribute to building a different world, both in Spain and other countries, through their normal daily lives and activities. For this reason, one of the chapters in the book talks about consumerism.

It’s true that it would be very difficult for consumers as a group to get together to change the world, but it is also true that as consumers, we are very powerful. And our power is much greater than it was in the past. This power allows us to choose between different consumer products, so that as consumers, we have the capacity to be activists.

Forty years ago, when a business would declare its monetary value, in

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1 CARRERAS, I - OSÉS, M. A. *Vivir solidariamente*, Planeta, Barcelona 2002.

75% of cases, it would depend on its technological “know-how”, its manufacturing capacity, and its equipment... Now in 75% of cases, the value of a company is measured in its brand name. And this is something less tangible. It depends on its image, how well known it is, how it is viewed by people. And when a company has a group of consumers (and it doesn't matter how big that group is, whether 10,000, 50,000 or a million), who realize that the said company is not behaving in a correct manner, this can give a negative value to the company, caused by the same group of consumers. And businesses are very aware of this, especially the most well known ones. Just think about this: only 100 international businesses represent a startling 25% of world commerce.

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Consequently, we have the power to choose a certain type of product that answers certain social criteria for and in the countries where they are produced. We are capable of influencing the behaviour of a group

of companies. And this will happen more and more in the future.

Socially responsible consumerism should answer questions like: Do I know what I'm buying? Why am I buying it? What is the social reality behind each one of the products I'm buying? In reality, things can be very different. For example, I bet that 99% of people reading this had a cup of coffee this morning. The coffee we drink every morning is linked to a very difficult social reality. At this moment, 25 million families, (around 125 million people), are living in absolute poverty, because in the last five years the price they receive for each kilo of coffee has gone down by 75%; in other words, for each kilo of coffee they receive less than it cost them to produce it. On the other hand, there are four multinational companies who produce nearly 50% of the world's coffee. The profits of these companies haven't stopped growing over the last few years. We drink coffee, and for each cup of coffee, the producer only receives 7% of what we have paid. Similar things happen in the clothes sector. The shirt we wear was probably not produced in our own country. What is more likely is that it was produced in a free zone, a zone outside the limits of the legal market of a country. Perhaps in Honduras, Indonesia, or Malaysia, where the people who work in the factories that make these shirts have long working days, and lack all sorts of workers' rights, receiving the mini-

mum economic compensation for their efforts. And as we have already talked about footballs: in one area of Pakistan, in the Punjab district, and in a certain zone of this district, there are 7000 children working at making footballs. They are 7000 children aged between 5 and 12 years old (I'm not even counting the 12 to 14 year olds), working 8, 10, 12-hour days, and sometimes up to 14 or 16-hour days. They are not children who just occasionally help out; they are children who see their childhood completely lost, because they have to dedicate it to something they shouldn't have to, in conditions of absolute exploitation.

Let's ask ourselves: Can we change this reality from our position of consumers? Yes, we can, even if the effects may not be immediately noticed, by buying fair trade products. But we can also change things in the short-term, by influencing companies to follow practices that are more in keeping with fundamental human rights. In the case of coffee, which we mentioned earlier, prices have been lowered by 75% over five years. When we buy a packet of coffee in a fair trade shop, the fair trade system makes sure that a minimum price is paid to the coffee producer.

The African, Latin American or Asian producer is today receiving twice as much as the producer who sells his kilo of coffee to a conventional commercial organization.

## 2.2. Fair trade

But fair trade still doesn't represent very much. The country where coffee has the highest market quota is Switzerland, and there it reaches just 5%. In Spain it doesn't even reach 0.1%. This is very little, but on the other hand, the 5% of Switzerland and also the 3% of Great Britain and Holland should mean something, and for all the families of coffee-producers, this would double the income they get through a conventional company. Many families in Africa and Latin America that are dedicated to the cultivation of coffee have been ruined. Many of them have had to take their children out of school, they can't pay for medicines, they lack food, and any prospects for the future. On the other hand, the farmers who benefit from fair trade can live with dignity. Therein lies the difference.

Nowadays, something that is as important, or even more important than selling more fair trade coffee, is making the four dominant multinational companies, along with the governments of the countries of the main coffee producers and the governments of the countries where the most coffee is consumed, set in action a plan which will save the 25 million families that are in crisis. But these multinational firms should act not only out of good will, but also because they feel pressured by both consumers and the UN from all corners of the world. Through good-

will, they will only reach a certain level, but they will not take decisive action or change their behaviour unless something forces them to do so. And that something is the group of consumers who can participate in campaigns run by non-governmental organizations or by consumer organizations, and thus exercise a very strong influence.

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Fair trade is still an area that is little known about by the majority of consumers. We can ask ourselves many questions about this. The first is: how do I know if a product is from a fair trade background? A fair trade product is one which is produced under conditions where there is no child labour involved, where decent salaries are paid, where workers' rights are adhered to, where the environment is respected, etc... But then there is this question of how are we going to know if a product is fair trade or not, or what indication should we look for to know that a certain shirt fits into the fair trade category? There are two possibilities:

one is that products are labeled with some reference to "fair trade". In Spain, this labeling system still doesn't exist, but it does exist in other countries. The second possibility is that products are sold or commercialized by organizations that have already subscribed to the "fair trade" agreement, and have a guarantee that all their products belong to this category. In Spain, there are about 60 "fair trade" shops. In the whole of Europe, there are about 3000.

As can be seen then, Spain is still in an early phase in relation to this cause. Fair trade shops have only existed for about the last 10 years; among them 22 belong to Oxfam, and 6 to 8 new shops are opened every year, but there is still a long way to go.

In all of our 22 shops we have, over the course of one year, between 100 to 125 thousand buyers, but let's compare this with the Carrefour chain that has one million people passing through its doors every day. For this reason, what we are endeavouring to do is sell our products not only in our commercial outlets, but also in the large stores, which gather the highest number of consumers. Our consumerist habits mean that we don't normally make an effort to buy things that are more expensive and that require some sort of compromise on our part. So if we don't go to where the majority of consumers are, people won't buy this type of product.

At the present time, fair trade products, such as coffee, other groceries and other types of products, can be found in the shops Caprabo, Eroski, Alcampo, Carrefour, Condis, Bonpreu, Gadisa, and other supermarket and hypermarket chains.

One big difficulty that fair trade products have is that they are more expensive. With one packet of coffee, 60% of the final sale price is in the cost of the coffee bean. In the fair trade system, we are giving twice as much to the producer, and this then affects the public sale price that will be higher than a conventional brand of coffee. The Oxfam packet of coffee costs P1.99, while a cheaper conventional brand of coffee costs P1.30. Multinational companies pay a much lower price for each kilo of coffee, which thus explains the difference between the price of fair trade coffee and conventional coffee. Fair trade organizations pay a higher price for the same quantity of coffee allowing the coffee producer to live with dignity. Even so, fair trade coffee is normally of a higher quality than conventional coffee, and its sale price should be compared with a packet of high quality conventional coffee, and not with the cheaper conventional packets.

It's not easy to buy fair trade products. In a study made by the Barcelona town council to find out what people thought about fair trade, they obtained the following statistics: 45% of people said that they already

knew what fair trade was without being given any explanation. When it was explained a little more to them, this statistic increased to 71%. But only 29% of Barcelona's citizens knew where they could buy fair trade products. About 67% of those asked said they would be prepared to pay a little more, but the question is, how much more. 5% said they would pay between 30-50% more. In this survey, those most interested in the subject of fair trade were people aged between 25 and 40. 22% of these said they had bought fair trade products, and 80% of these considered them to be of a good quality; only 3% thought they were of bad quality, and the rest thought they were of an average quality.

As we can see, in theory, the prospects don't seem too bad. But it isn't easy; firstly you have to convince the big supermarket chains to include fair trade products in their establishments.

We had to organize a meeting with the heads of Carrefour, Caprabo and Eroski so that they introduced these products, given that talks between the sales departments of these companies and the fair trade section of Oxfam were not enough.

### **2.3. Ethical ways of investing money**

Another way of acting as socially responsible consumers is through our savings, when we decide to manage them in an investment fund.

One initiative that was promoted by Oxfam in conjunction with *Morgan Stanley* was an “ethical investment fund”. This is a normal form of investment, but one that only invests money in companies that fulfil a series of conditions that are favourable to the development of Third World countries, and favourable to the health and well being of the population. This allows the consumer to know that he is investing money in something that does not contradict his principles. And it also brings about a new way of thinking. If such investment funds were in the majority, instead of being in the minority, companies would want to fulfil the established ethical criteria, because if they didn’t, funds wouldn’t be invested in them, and the value of their shares would significantly diminish. This is another initiative whose effects will only be seen in the long-term, but still that makes it no less important.

In giving a brief history of these type of investments, we can see that they started in 1971 in the USA, where shareholders managed to exclude any companies linked to the Vietnam war from any potential investments, and later in the 1980s, they successfully excluded the tobacco industry when the link between health problems and tobacco was demonstrated. Also in the 1970s, a movement appeared in the U.K. in which social groups asked for the exclusion of any companies with investments in South Africa,

and many institutional investors, most notably those linked to British churches, were subsequently affected. Since then, ethical investments have continued to grow, and today we find them in Germany, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Spain, France, Ireland, Japan, Norway, South Africa, Sweden and Switzerland.

The process of selection of companies included in the ethical investment portfolio takes into account negative or excluding criteria, and positive, inclusive criteria, always relating to the activities and behaviour of those companies. Each form of ethical investment defines its own criteria, and these are outlined in the document in which its policies of ethical investment are established.

#### **2.4. Fair trade activists**

What more can we do for fair trade and responsible consumerism? We have already cited a few ways. Another of these could be to stop buying a product. We have already said that there are brands that use child labour in their production chain. Some people have stopped buying these brands, and this is one possible option. However, this initiative does not always succeed in changing the conditions of manufacture of these large-scale producers. What affects these companies more is when lots of people are incited to send emails, letters, letters to newspapers, etc. Normally, these cam-

paigns have far-reaching repercussions, and this allows the situation to become known by all consumers. This was the case with pharmaceutical companies. We put pressure on them so that a range of pharmaceutical products would be made generic, and could in this way reach the population of Africa that is suffering from AIDS, and that cannot afford patented products (that are 15 or 20 times dearer than standard generic products). Africa only represents 1% of the market of multinational pharmaceutical companies, and these companies were stopping the countries and nations affected by AIDS from having access to generic products with which they can battle this disease.

By launching a huge media campaign with Oxfam and Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) in just a fortnight, the attitude of the directors of these pharmaceutical companies was changed from them saying: "*This is only a utopia; this is not feasible; they're trying to take on the international system of patents...*" to saying: "*Let's talk.*" And in one year, not only did we manage to convince the companies, but also the governments and the World Trade Organization. At this point in time, we have succeeded in resolving many of the problems on this front. Although some important questions remain which need discussion, and there are still some stumbling blocks, many of the difficulties have been resolved

so that the impoverished nations of the Third World can have access to generic medication.

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We as consumers can influence those who are at the helm of consumerism, i.e. those in large businesses that generate consumer demands and commercialize products. The direct investment of transnational companies in developing countries is three times more than is offered by countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, so that these transnational companies are the ones that should be setting a standard in economic growth, and that can significantly affect the way in which this growth is brought about. When this growth does not occur in a just way, it accentuates the difference between rich and poor, and encourages exclusion and marginalisation, and subsequently worsens poverty.

These companies have an influence on the working conditions within the country, whether it is directly, or through subcontracting employment there. In other cases,

the violation of workers' rights is a habitual practice, bringing about conditions of exploitative employment, especially in the areas known as "free zones", territories that are isolated from the local economy. The exploitation of child workers is one of the main problems associated with this type of activity. The situation of women is also very difficult, given that they are counted among the most vulnerable and unprotected members of the groups employed in export industries. And yet, both women and children are together the groups that are the backbone of many countries' exporting capacity.

Transnational companies should work with a sense of social responsibility (meeting ethical, work and environmental standards in a way which conforms with human rights), and they should create a favourable atmosphere for local employment and links with small and medium-sized companies in that country. They should also facilitate access for the country in question to financial and technological resources, and to the international markets. When these conditions are fulfilled, the economic growth brought about by these companies can make a significant contribution to reducing the country's poverty. On the other hand, we should realize that for each euro that rich countries give to poor countries by

way of aiding their development, two euro is lost due to unfair international commerce. And a second fact is this: if Africa were to increase its quota in international business by only 1%, that 1% would represent five times the amount that Africa is currently receiving for help towards its development and its international debts. Financial aid towards its development must be increased, and its international debt should be cancelled. All of this is very important. But this will not be enough if international commerce does not become more just, and if companies in all areas of the world aren't completely respectful in their dealings with fundamental rights, relating to work and to the environment, and if they don't offer decent salaries enabling people to survive. If this does not happen, then we will not advance towards the development of the Third World.

Behind each consumer product, there are concrete realities which depend on us as consumers, and which can be changed.

The "Make Trade Fair" campaign ([www.maketradefair.com](http://www.maketradefair.com)) which Oxfam has launched, is one of the ways in which we can help bring about the necessary changes in international commerce regulations. Four million people have already given their support to this campaign, so that many more people can now live with dignity.

### 3. AN APPENDIX FOR CHRISTIANS

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*(... or, as Saint Ignatius would say, for “those who should desire change the most”, which should by rights be Christians, though this is not always the case)*

The previous pages have shown that the ethics and spirituality of consumerism does not just require an ascetic form of deprivation, or even some form of hunger strike in protest at what we see to be the disproportionate and irrational nature of the consumerist habits we are instilled with. It should instead be a question of some form of *communal deprivation*.

#### **3.1. Going without in order to help**

We should go back to the early Christian practice of the fast, which was summed up in this way: “going without in order to help others”. “Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every

yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...” (Isaiah, 58: 6-7).

For example, buying fair trade products is an act of solidarity and of justice, made towards many producers in the Third World. If this practice were to be generalized in our lives, we may have to pay a little more

for the products we buy. This extra expense will allow us to go without, and deprive ourselves of many superfluous items that we used to buy unnecessarily.

### 3.2. Consumers as activists

If, as Adele Cortina affirms, the axis of the economy has been shifted from producers to consumers, this means that this very important weapon of protest should greatly affect our consumer society. We are not all manufacturers, but we are all consumers, and this can give huge strength to any form of consumer protest, even if it only has a localized influence. Let's remember what happened a short time ago in Catalonia in regards to "Pascual"<sup>1</sup> milk. It would be shameful if as Christians we only became aware of our power when it came to defending national interests, and not when it came to protecting victims from the injustices of our system!

Events relating to the company Nike too should be a general standard of conduct for Christians. They were ultimately forced to abandon their manufacturing plants where exploited children worked in the Third World.

<sup>1</sup> In 2003, the dairy firm "Pascual", due to certain "trade wars", decided to stop buying milk from Catalonian dairy farmers. The drop in Catalonian consumers was so significant, that within a few days, Pascual announced that it would continue to buy Catalonian milk, and that it would furthermore invest money in Catalonia, and thus create jobs there.

### 3.3. "Be careful of advertising!"

When it comes to directing our consumer interests in a moral way, we should pay serious attention to propaganda, and boycott products that are advertised in a degrading, manipulative, misleading or forceful way. For example, a "classic TV advert" could start with the sound of a car pulling off. Further on, the car stops and a male voice asks where they are going, to which comes the reply: "Your place or mine?" And so the story ends with a disembodied voice like the ancient Greek chorus, stating only the make of the car, and adding: "Made to seduce."

But that's just it. A car isn't made to seduce, but rather to drive. Just as the purpose of toothpaste isn't to "*show off* your white teeth", but rather made for our oral hygiene.

And if we already have self-esteem, we should no longer accept that our capacity to be loved depends on the car we drive, or the clothes we wear. This is an insult to our intelligence.

Also, when a certain company or commercial chain advertises itself by saying something like "X understands your life" ... it really means that "X wants your money".

Let's not allow ourselves to be treated like idiots anymore! Something si-

milar happens with all those adverts that offer a product with the additional lure of some sort of special gift offered with it. This only means that the price of the gift was previously transferred on to the product we are buying. If they really were going to give us a present, we should then be able to get *just the product that we were originally interested in*, with a discount relating to the value of the supposed “present” we had been offered.

Finally, in a world in which we believe ourselves to be free from all external influences that can force us to make decisions, why then should we allow ourselves to be told what to do or talked into buying something we don’t want?

### **3.4. And what about going without football?**

In the context of football, it becomes necessary to recall Ali Baba’s cave and liken it to the immoral daylight robbery that football has become, and which has been allowed to reach shameful heights thanks to our passivity. This whole obsession that the advertising industry tries to inspire us with, has caused football, on a number of levels, to lead us *to wrongly identify our own greatness with an objective that will have absolutely no effect on it*. This is how clubs that owe millions in tax are able to get money for scandalous transfers, because football seems to be a fountain of never-ending mo-

ney. This money however, will never reach the hands of those who work for the good of society, and instead comes from the pockets of ordinary people who may not even be able to afford it, but who find themselves unable to go without this drug that is football. As Christians we should think very seriously about whether it is morally right for us to collaborate in this huge injustice, which, though it may seem to be only a game, has clearly become just another form of social injustice.

### **3.5. More Ignatian advice**

Finally, in 210–217 of his Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius offers some “rules of conduct in relation to eating”, which though they may seem outdated in the modern world, could have some relevance if we read them as *rules of conduct in relation to consumerism*. Let’s have a look at some examples:

5.1. The recommendation to “accustom oneself to eating nice foods in smaller quantities”, should be translated today as getting used to *not buying brand names*, or doing so in very small quantities.

5.2. It is of course understood that when one decides to live by certain rules in relation to consumerism, we should allow ourselves time to “give up our consumerist habit”. Given our human inclinations, and the seduction of consumerism that we are surrounded by, it is only in this way that we can “reach a level

of moderation”, which Saint Ignatius was also looking for. Anyone who has read the Saint’s autobiography will know that here is a very individual reflection on an experience that takes place in Manresa, and thanks to which he ultimately discovers “what is most appropriate for his physical sustenance” (SE 213).

5.3. Numbers 214-216 give some strange advice (such as thinking of Christ our Lord while we are eating, etc.), that all points to the same goal: “that one’s whole mind should not be intent on what is being consumed; and nor should the consumer be put under pressure by his appetite but instead should be his own master”. Great! This can have immediate relevance for us. Avoid shopping centers, where one is no longer one’s own master, but instead, finds oneself completely taken over by the offers that are on display. They should at least be avoided as places of leisure, where one can stroll around, and here we should recall the wise distinction made earlier by Adela Cortina between “going to do the shopping” and “going shopping”. The latter makes it very difficult to apply any sort of discipline in relation to what one buys.

5.4. Finally, a very wise rule: don’t *decide what you need to buy in hours of need* or in moments when you are taken over by a consumerist fever. In the words of Saint Ignatius which are very clear on this: “after eating or having dinner or at other ti-

mes when you are not hungry, choose what you will eat at your next meal... a quantity that is fitting to eat” (SE 217).

All these things that we have looked at here should figure much more significantly in moral and pastoral theology, which is offered to us through episcopal letters, sermons, retreats, and spiritual direction. Unfortunately however, economic morality, which is taught in many pastoral training centers, can be far-removed from real life. Instead it can sometimes attempt to neatly categorize all of Jesus’ teaching, all His human honesty and all His divine will, whose fulfillment we ultimately see in God the Father.

And, as is usually the case with moral truths, we not only risk losing our respect for moral standards and losing the help and support we get from others. In the long run, we risk losing our own freedom and our own fulfillment. We can all remember, or have experienced those scenes in which children who sit awkwardly at the table are told to “eat up and be quiet”. Here then is an excellent image of our society, whose powers are bent on shouting at us “buy this and be quiet”. Don’t ask any questions, don’t even think about it, and don’t protest against it. Just buy this and be quiet.

*Cristianisme i Justícia*  
*October, 2003*

## 4. AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FOR GROUPS

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1. Analyze what you buy in terms of clothes, food, leisure items, vehicles, sport, everything...
  - Pick out those items you consider to be necessary, those that are relatively superfluous and those that are completely unnecessary. Try to find out if you are deceiving yourself as to their real value in your life (you'll probably realize you are). And then see how you can go about having a "consumerist form of liposuction"... You'll feel better for it.
  
2. Examine your relationship with brand names. Are you dependent on them? Do they rule your life? Do you ever remember showing them off? Did you look down on those who didn't have brand names?
  - Realize that without them, you'll be exactly the same, and perhaps better, because now you are secure in yourself rather than getting your self-esteem through something else. Let's see whether in order to de-tox yourself from brand names, you join some society that could be called "Brand-name Addicts Anonymous"!
  
3. How many fair trade shops do you know? How many fair trade items have you bought, and what else could you buy in these shops? Do you

spread the word among your friends?

– Let's see if you make any New Year's resolutions to buy fair trade goods from now on...

**4.** Do something similar with your investments. Will you sleep at night knowing that some of your money is funding weapons, or supporting child labour?

– Think about it. And act upon it.

**5.** And to end with, take your reading on the consumerist thermometer!

- 36,5° = Good level of human and Christian health.
- 37° = A small amount of attention needed
- 37,5° = Look out. Your temperature is raised and you need rest
- 38° = Your temperature is quite high. Get some medication
- 38,5°-39° = You're very sick, and your consumerist fever is not going away. You need to call the doctor, or maybe even the priest...