

## NECESSARY OR SUPERFLUOUS? THAT IS THE QUESTION

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Our globalized world is blatantly governed by the laws of market forces. A society like ours, especially in the wealthy nations where this kind of globalization is at home, tends to create new needs in the opinion of the public in general and of individuals. The birth of new necessities gives rise to a desire to satisfy them and this is what is wanted because it is how we become permanently dependent upon the consumer system. Consumption guarantees production and this is the driving force of the market. The more people consume, the more is produced and one always needs to consume more, or the machine will stop. The growth of consumption is not limited to permanent basic necessities; they must be increased. And so the chain goes on. I do not like categoric statements and totally negative judgments. Generally speaking, they are not 100% true. Nobody can deny some of the positive effects that globalization and the world market have had on the quality of life in many countries. It is a shame that this is not the effect upon all people. Could it be so? Some observers and journalists of what happens in our world, which is threatened with an economic crisis, are beginning to suggest that this crisis may be the result of everybody's wanting to eat and dress well, be educated and receive medical care and equal conditions of life... and all this is not allowed or tolerated by the system. If we extend equality - and we are speaking of the minimum level of rights and of living standards - we shall be unable to continue to enjoy (we are clearly speaking of those able to do so) that standard of living which we have achieved. How dreadful and what a cheek! We get to hear that we are not all equal. Poverty is useful for the rich. It is unpleasant to recognise this and to say so publicly. One must behave properly. But the truth is that the god of money continues to reign at his will and with impunity.

Nevertheless, because of the laws of the market, which have created new needs besides our basic ones, the question asked by our consumer society and forcefully directed to both rich and poor is: what do I need? What old and new necessities do I have? People's expectations will be different, as will their abilities to satisfy their longings. Some will be able to fulfill many of their desires, but on the other hand, many will be unable to achieve the bare minimum. Market opportunities are not the same for all. Some benefit while others are damaged; the wealth of some is increased while the poverty of others grows. A globalized world gives us the opportunity to observe such contradictions. In order to have fairer development the law of the market is in need of a supplementary humanitarian factor. Those critics of the neoliberal system are not wrong when they recognise how large sections of society in the world are cut off from wealth and riches.

However, as I started this *Salutatio* I did not mean to begin a speech upon the consumer society, but upon the negative effects it has upon the lives of religious if we are unable to judge loyally and generously. Religious life, with its vows of poverty and its evangelical way, ought to be a positive role model for a world which is dominated by greed for money and for a world which is, moreover, the victim of the word-spinning powers of the brilliant and insistent advertising which is at the service of the market. One must consume at any cost so that the market, the buying and selling, will not break down, because this is how

money is made. Sometimes it matters little what is being sold or what we are invited to consume, even if it is dangerous for one's health, for our lives as social persons, for common sense or even for liberty. Advertising enters the most private parts of our homes, even our intimate and personal spaces. In the same way, advertising invades families and communities.

Without realizing it - but it would be worse if they did it intentionally - some religious only seem interested in presenting their own needs to the community. Because of the environment to which they are used, they may already enter society with such an attitude. If the beginning of life as a religious does not involve a series of breaks with the past, that religious will continue to aspire to the kind of riches similar to those outside religious life, even if they go against the evangelical spirit and way of life which has been chosen.

This is why, in order to keep that evangelical ideal of poverty alive, I recommend an exercise which involves answering certain questions in inverse order to the normal one. Firstly: what have I got which is superfluous to my needs? Perhaps one will not need to arrive at the next: what do I need? In worlds like ours we begin to consume so much that it might be better to ask ourselves not what we need but how much we have which is superfluous to our needs.

Thanks be to God, there are praiseworthy exceptions, with an austere and evangelically poor way of life. Thus, my thoughts should be borne in mind as nothing more than a warning. With apparently legitimate reasons and with great ease, we acquire thousands of things; sometimes the latest offer, the latest novelty on the market. Many of these items are unnecessary and not even useful. We get used to saving our consciences with the explanation that "it was a gift". Trying to find legitimate excuses for an accumulation of objects, garments or food, wanting to move and travel in greater comfort, desiring more refined commodities, are generally all signs of a lack of will to understand our behaviour, to try to examine it seriously from the point of view of evangelical criteria and the religious life. These thoughts of mine are not at all intended to encourage moralism. On the other hand, I see that accusations of moralism sometimes hide an unwillingness to examine our behaviour. In facing this subject we are doing nothing else but witnessing coherently to our Piarist vocation. No more than this.

"If salt loses its flavour, what use is it?" Much of our behaviour is not a "luminous" witness. We must remember this. Let us not take up defensive positions, as if we were being attacked from outside with blinkered vision, vague value judgments, inflexible moral positions, uncharitable or fundamentalist comments. These things are certainly found in the Church and in religious life. But it is not always like that, and may be very different: it may be the internal truth of a religious life dominated by market forces and consumerism. Is our evangelical life also dependent upon market laws of supply and demand. It seems as if we are led by "if it is offered to me and I can, why shouldn't I?" Are we speaking of real necessities, which are right for our way of life, or are we speaking of convenience? Needs which must be satisfied or convenient items to be used. Do not forget that radical evangelicalism presents not only options about what is superfluous, but sometimes also about what is necessary. "Only One is necessary", Jesus would say. As we go on

accumulating objects, and our offices look like mini apartments blessed with all kinds of things, can we really justify them to ourselves as necessities?

Let us take a look at this from another point of view: what is superfluous in all I own or use? What is superfluous in what is offered to me? If we begin to reply with evangelical logic, which is proper to the Piarist religious way of life, our arguments lose their strength and become illogical. Who knows if what is necessary may lie elsewhere? Yes, certainly. Faced with "One is necessary", won't we find many things superfluous?

Jesus says: "You cannot serve both God and money". Let's not become word-spinners, giving ourselves giddy headaches trying to transform our reasoning into a sophism: God needs money. If this is the answer to our question, then I wonder which book we are reading. Is it the Gospel or the Stock Exchange report? I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't keep an eye on that too, so that at least we know what our "friend Mammon" is up to.

Since we are dealing with the things of God, Jesus's reply is hard but very clear: "My house is a house of prayer" which, by bringing commerce inside, you have changed into a "den of thieves". Jesus said this in front of those who wished to transform the temple into a market so as to boast before God.

We would all like to have things; men are like that. However, it might be a good and healthy idea for religious people to practise asceticism - better than soduku - and to desire to "miss something".

Even to me this Salutatio seems sad and gloomy. Let it not be that, let us transform it into an invitation for "perfect felicity".

In November F. Gyorgy Etele is celebrating the 60th anniversary of his ordination as a priest. With great admiration and affection, we express our congratulations and greetings, together with prayers for him personally and our thanks to God for his fruitful Piarist ministry.