

STATIO CONFERENCE  
CONSUMERISM, NEW EVANGELIZATION AND CONVERSATIO  
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INTRODUCTION:

We live today in a rapidly changing world. To face the challenges of this world, Pope Benedict XVI has placed the topic of the new evangelization at the top of the Church's agenda. This term is relatively new and its objective is to reawaken the zeal and ardor of the first evangelizers in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. According to the Lineamenta, it is not merely re-evangelization but rather a "new evangelization; new in its ardour, methods, and expression. (Lin. Ch. 1) It is not just redoing what has been inadequately done in the past but "it is the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the Church in her call to proclaim and live the Gospel today." (ibid)

As Benedictines this new evangelization is necessarily linked with our vow of conversatio morum which is our vow to continual conversion, always beginning anew and forging ahead. It is with the zeal of this vow that we participate in the new evangelization that the Church is calling us to commit ourselves in our times.

CONSUMERISM

Our present society is characterized by a quantum leap in technological advancement but likewise by a profound secularism that has affected people's capacity to listen and understand the message of the Gospel. One of the characteristics of this secular society is: CONSUMERISM.

As human beings, we have to consume in order to survive—we need houses to live in, food to eat, and other material things to let us live comfortable and safeguard our well-being. We need to strive to fulfill these basic necessities to live a proper human life with dignity.

Consumerism is something else. In the encyclical Centesimus Annus, Venerable John Paul II refers to the phenomenon of consumerism as a lifestyle which "maintains a persistent orientation towards 'having' rather than 'being.'" It is an insatiable urge to acquire more and more beyond one's needs. It is wanting to "keep up with the Joneses" even if it means getting into debts that one cannot pay. It is measuring one's value by one's possession, social standing, position of power. On the side of manufacturers, consumerism is a mentality where providers and producers spend time competing for existing market share and replacing products that are still functional. It creates a "disposable, throw away" attitude and a craving for instant gratification.

## IMPACT OF CONSUMERISM ON RELIGIOUS LIFE

Although the extent of consumerism and consumerism mentality in the convent would not be as bad as in secular society, we cannot deny that we also have been influenced by consumeristic attitudes, values, and practices:

### 1) VALUE IN HAVING RATHER THAN BEING.

When we have time to reflect, for example during our Statio days or Retreat, we have to admit that we, religious, also succumb to measuring worth of people by what they have rather than by what they are. We do have different ways of treating people because of their social status, level of education, wealth, etc. We are deferential to people with status and we do tend to condescend to those we think are lower than us in any way. For example, do we lose our patience, get irritated, actually say hurtful things to people we think higher than us? How come we cannot exercise the same control of our impatience or irritation when we deal with employees, helpers, etc.? Even when we look at ourselves we tend to compare ourselves with others like—she has a doctorate, I don't have. She comes from a prominent family, I come from a poor family. She is popular, I am not, etc. Our self esteem seems to depend on these things which we have or do not have rather than on the fact that we truly are all children of the same God.

### 2) ACQUIRING MORE THAN ONE'S NEEDS

This consumeristic attitude, I believe, is one of the factors that cause our environmental crisis. If human beings only get from the earth what they need, the earth would be able to supply all the needs of humankind for all ages. But since for the sake of profit, industries have to have surplus production, they also have to get from the earth more than what people need. And so the ecological crisis that we are facing today. It is said that the indigeneous people of the mountain province have the custom of getting kangkong from a lake when they go home after work to eat during their supper. But they only get what they need for the supper because they know other people will also need to have some for their supper. That is what they call "sapat lang" mentality. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this mentality could be adopted by everyone?

We, religious, have also to admit that we do acquire more than what we need. We do make resolutions to get rid of our superfluities but it is really difficult to maintain a truly simple lifestyle. Even in the matter of food. Surely our meals are more than enough and have greater variety than people outside. And yet, don't we catch ourselves complaining about it?

### 3) THE LURE OF ADVERTISEMENTS

One of the greatest promoters of consumerism is advertisement. And we see how preposterous their claims are – about getting that super abundant, supper glossy hair, getting rid of pimples in seconds, wiping away colds and coughs like magic, etc. Again we are not totally immune from the deceptions of advertisements and of colonial

mentality—preferring branded goods, imported toiletries, etc. Our campaign in our schools for integrity and truth may help in providing an antidote to deception and lies that is actually at the core of advertisements.

#### 4) CUT-THROAT COMPETITION

The consumerist mentality promotes cut-throat competition because companies use all means to capture their share of the market. So they resort to deceptive advertisements, bribery and political maneuvers to gain control of the market.

Again we cannot say that competition does not exist in religious convents. Maybe it is lesser in virulence and certainly it is not for market shares but maybe it is about having influence, wanting to be perceived as a better principal, a better directress, a better superior than our predecessor. It is not unknown to us that a newly appointed administrator can discontinue all the projects of her predecessor instead of building on them. Professional rivalry is not totally absent in religious institutions.

#### 5) INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Another product of consumerism is instant gratification. That is why there are so many instant products—instant coffee, instant noodles, instant this and instant that. There is a veering away from natural processes because these take too long.--or an example, the unhealthy way of breeding chicken for 40days and injecting them with hormones and enclosing them in smaller cages so they can get fat quickly. Since there are many choices, people go from one to the other tasting this and discarding that and preferring those that gratify their wants in the shortest time possible.

Again we are not unaffected by this tendency. In fact when we are looking at the TV, we keep on changing channels to see to what pleases us or it can happen that we are looking at three programs at the same time, fleeting from one channel to the other. I think my computer gets confused because when I get impatient with delay, I push so many buttons that the computer no longer knows which command it should obey.

I think here is where we can exercise the virtue of patience, practice the asceticism of waiting and choosing natural processes rather than accelerated artificial ways of answering our needs or wants.

#### CONSUMERISM AND CONVERSATIO

Since as we have seen and admit in the depths of our hearts that we are also infected by the consumeristic virus with its attendant erosion of values, it is clear that this is an area where we can put into practice our vow of conversatio morum. We need a continuing awareness of our love of comfort, of the seduction of material things, of our

competitive tendencies, of our lack of patience, of our lack of asceticism, of our tendency towards superfluities, and so forth. These actually show that in actual practice we are not really “preferring Christ above all things.” And as Bishop Victor Dammertz, OSB defines *conversatio morum*, this is exactly what *conversatio morum* means: “The life of a monk has meaning only when he is “seized by Christ” and prefers nothing to the love of him. He knows that he has not yet reached his goal and remains on the path to the great goal of a life lived in the strength of the Gospel.” To succumb to consumerism is precisely what is meant “to prefer the mammon.” Our *conversatio* gives us the opportunity according to Joan Chittister “to demonstrate to the postmodern world that happiness is found in God and God is found in relationship with others—community.” Struggling against consumerism is not a one time battle but is a continuous one and *conversatio morum* according to Sr. Aquinata is “constant conversion, going ahead, always beginning anew. I can never say I have arrived” but it is also great that God gives me constantly the chance for beginning again.”

## QUESTIONS

1. What consumeristic tendencies can we find in our community?
2. Which of these tendencies do I personally struggle with?
3. What concrete steps can we do to overcome these tendencies?
4. What new features can we adopt in our new evangelization to help overcome consumerism in our society?