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The Rise of Consumer Culture and *Cura Personalis*

By David J. Burns

The rise of consumer culture has provided conveniences and entertainment that earlier populations could only dream of. Indeed, most today live with luxuries like air-conditioning and virtually unlimited assortments of foods unimaginable by royalty in times past.

Consumer culture is arguably one of the most pervasive and most difficult issues of our time. Although it has brought many beneficial advances, negative effects of consumer culture on society and individuals are far-reaching. Several of the most significant societal and interpersonal problems today, be it human trafficking or the commoditization of individuals, arise from and/or are energized by consumer culture.

More specifically, consumer culture is reframing individuals' lives and their relationships with others – issues at the forefront of the focus of Jesuit education and Jesuit concern. A recent document from Xavier University, “Seeking Integration and Wisdom: The Xavier Way,” states that the university is rooted in the Catholic ideals of:

- the sacred character of all creation,
- the dignity of every human person
- the mutually informing relationship between faith and reason, and
- our moral responsibility to care for creation and for those suffering in the world.

To integrate these ideals within today's culture, it is necessary to address the consumer culture and its manifestations.

To further attention onto consumer culture, I had the opportunity to lead a Lilly Summer Seminar for College Teachers on “What Does it Mean to be Human in Consumer Culture? Implications for the Church and Christian Scholars.” Twelve scholars and I spent three weeks last summer at Xavier University examining the social significance of consumer cul-

ture, analyzing its effects on individuals and society, and exploring appropriate and effective individual and group responses.

As a consequence of the seminar, each participant is preparing to integrate discussions on consumer culture into at least one if not all of the courses that they teach. Furthermore, several are planning to offer entire courses focusing on aspects of consumer culture, bringing the discussion to their students.

Each participant is also developing a research paper exploring various aspects of consumer culture from the viewpoints of their particular disciplines. The papers will likely form the basis of a book of readings to serve as a pedagogical resource and to spur additional research on this subject.

Given its ubiquitous nature, consumer culture affects and infiltrates all areas of life, raising important philosophical, ethical, and religious questions. Jesuit colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to take a lead in examining and addressing the effects of consumer culture on individuals and societies. By doing so, Jesuit colleges and universities can best help students to be whole persons – understanding that they were created for relationships with God, with others, and with oneself and how these relationships can be best manifest. Consumer culture interferes with these relationships and attempts to offer relationships of different natures as inferior substitutes. Giving students a clear understanding of the effects of consumer culture provides them with the tools needed to lead truly productive and meaningful lives for themselves, but more importantly for society. ■

David J. Burns is professor of marketing at Xavier University and has previously served as director of faculty programs in the division of mission and identity.