

Keep it Simple

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Keep it Simple

Introduction.

In a consumer society, those who follow the monastic way are marching out of step, because we can be content with a simple lifestyle. A simple lifestyle means a preference for clean, clear-cut, uncluttered living. It is the opposite of a lifestyle that is fragmented, broken into many pieces, attempting extreme multi-tasking, going off in all directions at once. A simple life, in contrast, is centered, well integrated.

Allow me to begin with true confessions. For many years, my life as a monk was far more simple than it is today. It was a simple round of chanting seven times a day, manual more than intellectual labor, leisurely periods of reading and prayer, with no more personal belongings than I could put into the drawers of my desk in the library and in a couple of clothes lockers, one in my cell and one in the common locker room. I cannot pinpoint exactly when I began to lose simplicity in my life, but I no longer have much of it left on the external level. What I have now is a

whirlwind of multiplicity and complexity, a daily race against the next deadline or duty, the next liturgy to prepare, the next class, the next e-mail to answer. For me, monastic life is just more complicated than is comfortable. I realize that a large percentage of the complexity is inevitable in the context of a small aging community with a shortage of worker bees. A certain percentage of the complexity is the result of choices that I make, including mistakes that I make, in managing my time. Finally, another percentage of the complexity comes from using high tech tools such as printers and computers that are usually helpful but sometimes break down.

The result is that I find myself spinning faster and faster, not in the prayerful way of the whirling dervishes but with the mindlessness of a toy top going nowhere fast. Some days I am afraid of spinning totally out of control, like an unguided monastic missile on the way to outer space. I ask myself, how do I get off this merry-go-round and get back to the simple life, back to center, to centeredness? Where is the wisdom that will point me to simplicity of life?

Scriptural wisdom. In the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures we find this thought in Ecclesiastes: "This is all that I have

learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated” (Ec 7:29; Good News Translation). King David was in some respects a complicated man, but his devotion to Yahweh was simple, even childlike. After piling up mountains of precious metals and costly building materials for the temple, he offered it all to Yahweh in a grand gesture: “I know, my God, that you put hearts to the test and love simplicity. Wherefore I also in the simplicity of my heart have joyfully offered all these things” (1 Ch 29:17; Douay-Rheims).

Jesus seems to have equated simplicity of heart with a quality of childlike trust in God’s care. On one occasion, “He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Mt 8:2-3; NAB as also in subsequent citations). Jesus himself in his public ministry lived in radical simplicity as an itinerant preacher, freely receiving and freely giving: “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (Lk 9:58). He cautioned against crass materialism to the neglect of the spirit: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay

destroys, nor thieves break in and steal” (Mt 6:19–20). He told the parable of the rich man who tore down his barns and built larger ones to hold all his goods but that night had to face his eternal judgment. “Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God” (Lk 12:21).

Simplicity described. What do I mean by simplicity of life. Simplicity as I understand it has two levels, material and spiritual. On the material level, a simple life means a life that is uncluttered, free of the superfluous, content with the necessities. St. Paul reminds Timothy: “We brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it. If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that” (1 Tm 6:7–8). Such a list prompts us to ask how much is really enough. I myself would prefer to add at least a couple of items to Paul’s short list: food, clothing, a roof that does not leak, and a computer.

On the spiritual level, a simple life suggests simplicity of heart, a heart that is centered on the one thing necessary (Lk 10:42), that is, the love of God or the kingdom of God. On this level, simplicity is a rich and full experience, a life that is integrated, not fragmented but unified in the sense of the Greek *monos*, which is the root of the word *monk*. (By the way, I use

monk inclusively of male and female). This spiritual meaning of simplicity as an integrated, unified life relates to the very etymology of the word *simple*. Its root is the Latin **sem-* "one, together" (cf. Sanskrit *sam* "together;") + **plac-* "-fold." *Simple = one fold*. To reach this level of interior simplification usually takes a conscious ascetic effort in order to detach oneself from all distracting desires and complications.

Poet T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* may be speaking of material and spiritual simplicity at the same time when he describes "A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)" (*Little Gidding* V). Does he really mean "everything"? Isn't that going to an extreme? Or does simplicity beckon us to an extreme because there is something godlike about it. The simplicity of God, even in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The closer we draw to God, the simpler we become. St. Teresa of Avila says "God alone suffices" ("solo Dios basta"). God alone. Catholic scholastic theology talks of God as a reality not only without component parts but without any composition whatsoever, not even essence and existence, for God is God's own existence (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, PP 3). The Holy Trinity is not a composite of parts. Therefore the lovely ballad in Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* is right on the mark with the words: "Sing God a

simple song: Lauda, Laude/ Make it up as you go along; Lauda, Laude/ Sing like you like to sing/ God loves all simple things/ For God is the simplest of all.” [The triune God is oneness in togetherness]

Simplicity and monasticism. Christian monastic tradition fosters a life of simplicity by trying to surround the monk with some degree of silence, enclosure, natural beauty, a predictable schedule, daily and seasonal rhythms, and limited contact with society outside the monastery. In such conditions, a monk’s mind and heart can drop their defenses and open up to all that is true and good, open up to the seed of God’s word in Scripture. That is simplicity as openness. The monk can gather all of himself/herself into one and center his/her heart on the love of God. That is simplicity as singleminded singleheartedness.

Monks accustomed to a simple life are secure and comfortable being who they are. They are unpretentious in what they say and how they act, without duplicity or hidden agendas. They are the same outside and inside. I do not mean they are simpletons in the negative sense, but in a positive way they are grounded in truth, humility, gratitude, and love. They are ready to love with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, because their heart is undivided and uncluttered.

Concern for simplicity has led monks to reject the superfluous and to discover that less—not more—of something is often more beautiful and tasteful. I do not wish to get into the controversies about architecture, church furnishings, liturgical music and ceremonies, and religious art that sometimes set black monks against white monks in the middle ages and later. I think there is room for various expressions of a common ideal. But in this context it may be worth recalling some recent non-monastic witnesses like British economist Ernst Schumacher (1911–77), who promoted “technology with a human face” in his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Then there is the twentieth-century movement of minimalism in art, music, literature, the performing arts, and especially architecture as, for example, in the Czech Cistercian abbey Novy Dvur designed by London architect John Pawson, completed in 2004. These are contemporary witnesses to simplicity.

Examples. I can give you further examples—non-monastic examples—of living simply: first some groups that are characterized by their simplicity, then some examples of individuals.

There is the phenomenon of new monastic communities in the US, such as:

1) www.thesimpleway.org Located in Philadelphia area. the Simple Way

is a web of subversive friends conspiring to spread the vision of 'Loving God, Loving People, and Following Jesus' in our neighborhoods and in our world.

2) Anathoth Community in NW Wisconsin. Self sustaining group dedicated to non-violence.

http://anathothcommunityfarm.org/component/option,com_wrapper/Itemid,8/

Without going too far back in history we find other communities, often of religious inspiration, that choose to live frugally, close to the land, at a horse-and-buggy pace, cherishing the values of family and community, content with the basics when it comes to food, furnishings, and clothing. In the eighteenth century there was an influx of these groups to the U.S. I am thinking of the Amish, the Mennonites, the Shakers. In the mid-twentieth century the Bruderhof immigrated to this country and joined with the Hutterites but since have split from them.

To return to the Shakers for a minute, they had a community called Pleasant Hill [Shakertown], located about 70 miles east of Gethsemani Abbey, KY, that was active for slightly more than a century until 1910, was restored in the 1960s, and is now a National Historic Landmark. There is a Shaker hymn entitled "Tis the gift to be simple." It was a Shaker dance also.

The tune of “The Lord of the Dance” was based on the tune of this Shaker hymn (words by Sidney Carter, 1963). I am unable to sing it, but I can quote the lyrics:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

The words reflect some basic themes in Shaker theology: freedom or salvation, the Incarnation, humility, conversion or turning.

As for individuals, we sense it when we learn about or meet someone who has a radically simple lifestyle. We sense their integrity and substance, their dedication to their chosen path. It is enough to invoke the names of some of these people who are better known, apart from Jesus himself.

- 1) St. Francis of Assisi, 1182–1226
- 2) Thoreau, 1817–62
- 3) St. Bernadette Soubirous, 1844–79
- 4) St. Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873–97
- 5) Gandhi, 1869–1948
- 6) Pope John XXIII, 1881–1963
- 7) Dorothy Day, 1897–1980
- 8) Peace Pilgrim, 1908–81

1) The life of St Francis was a paradigm of simplicity, poverty, peace, and love. Although he was raised in wealth, he voluntarily left it all behind for a life of a wandering beggar, preaching a gospel of universal love.

<http://franciscan-sfo.org/fw/Fwriting20.htm>

“The mission St. Francis received from Christ on the San Damiano Cross was simple, yet, profound - "Rebuild My Church which you can see is in ruins". His simplicity is so beautifully revealed in his response to this mission - beginning with bricks and mortar, St. Francis, in simplicity, attracted several friends and companions of his youth to join him in a rebuilding project close to home - one that all could understand and relate to.” Only gradually did the deeper meaning of Christ’s words become clear, that he was to rebuild not just the church at San Damiano but the entire Holy Roman Catholic Church. First he sought approval of his Order from Pope Innocent III. The pope “had been given a vision of a "little man" dressed in rags, holding up the Church.” He gave his approval to the first Franciscan Rule.

We now have a pope who has taken the name of Francis. We may wonder, can Pope Francis live up to the name he has chosen? Time will tell. Commentator Charles Reid asks:

“Can Pope Francis practice the humility and transparency of St. Francis? Can he reduce the trappings of a papal monarchy grown stiff with rigor mortis? Can he confront and transform an economic order as unequal and unjust as any since the industrial revolution? Can he reconcile the marginalized? Can he, in short, practice the love without limits that Jesus asked of his followers and that St. Francis sought to emulate in all things?” Charles Reid http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-j-reid-jr/st-francis-radical-for-love_b_2887699.html

2) Henry David Thoreau was an American essayist and philosopher who chose to live alone in a rustic cabin at Walden Pond near Concord MA for two years and write about his simple style of life there. He said: ““I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” A well knowing quotation from his book *Walden* (1854) gives advice on bookkeeping, keeping accounts of one’s expenses: “Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. [He was not talking about a thumb drive for his computer.] . . . Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.”

[For following, see:

<http://www.johnshepler.com/articles/thoreau.html>] Before dropping out of consumer society as Thoreau did, people are asking themselves, “What am I doing with all this stuff, and why am I working harder and harder to get more and more of it? I'm not sure what I'm doing with half of it now.” Thoreau reached a point where he had enough material goods and he wanted to be self-sufficient and to live more deliberately, that is contemplatively. He was satisfied with less rather than more. He was willing to trade affluence for spiritual fulfillment.

In a letter of March, 1848, he writes: “I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; . . . So simplify the problem of life, distinguish

the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run.”

After leaving Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote and published for a number of years until he died from tuberculosis at 44.

3)

St. Bernadette Soubirous, 1844–79 At the age of 14 in 1858 she experienced the first of eighteen apparitions of BVM. Later in 1866 she joined a convent where she lived a very ordinary life, eventually dying from TB of the bone and other illnesses at age thirty-five. Her body is still incorrupt. *Song of Bernadette* is an inspiring book and movie.

When Mary told her to go and drink from the spring, Bernadette thought she meant the nearby River Gave, since there was no spring in the vicinity. Mary made it clear that she meant a spring, and Bernadette scratched the earth with her fingernails until she found moisture, and then more moisture until she could collect a handful of the muddy water to swallow. It was the beginning of the miraculous waters of Lourdes, a spring that today produces 27,000 gallons a week. On the same occasion Mary told Bernadette to eat grass. In her simplicity she pulled up a tuft of grass and tried to chew it; she said it was difficult and bitter to eat.

At one apparition, Mary asked Bernadette to pray for sinners. Bernadette, in her great simplicity and innocence, asked, what are sinners? Mary smiled in reply.

In the convent, Bernadette was humiliated and given the most lowly tasks. Mary had told her, “I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the next.” Her novice mistress expressed surprise that the BVM would appear to a peasant girl instead of to someone from the nobility. Bernadette’s explanation was that Mary appeared to her because she could not find anyone more ignorant.

4) Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873–97. There are books and articles written about the simplicity of St Thérèse. She talks about a “wholly surrendered soul.” She herself was such a soul, and therefore she was simple. To whom was Thérèse surrendered? [See: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/18048277/THE-SIMPLICITY-OF-ST-THERESE-OF-THE-CHILD-JESUS>] To the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love, who longed to possess her totally. . . . “This is simplicity; a soul reduced to one single movement,

one single tendency, one resolution, one sole occupation; the desire to love, to please God its Father in all things; a sincere and deep, but wholly simple, desire.”

According to St Thérèse’s Little Way of Spiritual Childhood, “all that is necessary is one desire, only one, a desire wholly simple and uncomplicated, the sincere desire to love God; that is to say, in the concrete, the desire to please God in everything.” This is simplicity of heart, when the heart’s desire is focused on doing God’s will. “As for exterior simplicity, of behavior, in our words and actions—these follow naturally from the simplicity of the heart. Without that, everything exterior will be but a facade, a want of simplicity.”

One of her sayings goes: “Our Lord needs from us neither great deeds nor profound thoughts. Neither intelligence nor talents. He cherishes simplicity.”

Thérèse herself said on her death-bed, "I only love simplicity. I have a horror of pretense."

5) Gandhi, 1869–1948 He has been called “the ultimate minimalist,” because he could get along with the bare minimum of material possessions. He gave up wearing Western style clothes in favor of “the traditional Indian dhoti and shawl, woven from yarn that he had spun by hand himself. [A dhoti is a long loincloth wrapped around the hips and thighs with one end brought between the legs and tucked into the waistband, something like baggy, knee-length trousers.] [He washed his own clothes.] He ate simple vegetarian food, and experimented for a time with a fruitarian diet.” [http://www.motivationalmemo.com/mahatma-gandhis-simplicity-faith/] [also the following quote] : “Gandhi spent one day of each week [Monday] in silence. He believed that abstaining from speaking brought him inner peace and made him a better listener. This influence was drawn from the Hindu principles of *mauna* [vow of silence] and *shanti* [meaning *peace*]. On such days he communicated with others by writing on paper.”

When Gandhi was assassinated, he left behind less than ten personal possessions including a watch, spectacles, sandals, and eating bowl. He didn’t need knife and fork because Indians eat with their fingers. This was a man who came from a wealthy family and had earned a law degree at University College in London. From his life and writings, five rules for simple living can be gleaned. [from post by Arvind Devalia: <http://www.apsense.com/article/140507.html>]

- a) Accumulate little. By having fewer things to keep track of, fewer things to lose, our life becomes simpler in proportion. However, if we have obligations to others or to the monastery, we may have to accumulate more things than if we were on our own.
- b) Eat simple but nourishing food. Gandhi never had a weight problem. His problem, which he shared with millions of his countrymen, might have been malnourishment. Eat wisely, without daily excess.
- c) Dress simply. In the climate of southern and central India, Gandhi could get by without winter clothes. Once when he met the King of England wearing his trademark dhoti, someone asked him “Mr Gandhi, did you feel under-dressed when you met the King?” Gandhi answered: “The King was wearing enough clothes for both of us!” Gandhi also shaved his hair.
- d) Lead a stress-free life. Gandhi countered stress with daily prolonged meditation. He also took time to play with children; he himself had four boys. One of Gandhi’s saying is: “If one has wealth, it does not mean that it should be thrown away and wife and children should be turned out of doors. It simply means that one must give up attachment to these things.”
- e) Let your life be your message. Gandhi wrote a lot and gave many public addresses, but it is said that in private he spoke very quietly and only when necessary. He was something like the desert fathers who refused to give advice except to say “Do as I do.”

6) Blessed Pope John XXIII, 1881–1963 He came from a simple, poor, country family in Italy but divine providence drew him to the highest honors of the Church, while his heart remained the heart of a simple country boy. From being Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, he was elected pope at age 78 and died five years later. Many expected him to be a placeholder, an interim pope between two other strong leaders. But it was this elderly gentleman who fulfilled the prophecy, “Old men shall dream dreams (Joel 2:8).” In the simplicity of his senior years, he summoned the first Church council a hundred years (since Vatican I), a council that a younger pope might never have summoned, considering all the logistical and political

problems it would entail, a council that has altered the Church for generations yet to come. Commenting on his decision, he said: "The Council. God knows that I opened my small soul to this great inspiration with the utmost simplicity. Will he grant me enough time to finish it? May he be praised if he does not grant it. I shall see the happy conclusion from heaven, where I hope, and am even certain, Divine Mercy will allow me to enter."

He kept a daily journal, eventually published as *Journal of a Soul*. In it he says: "The older I grow, the more clearly I perceive the dignity and winning beauty of simplicity in thought, conduct, and speech: a desire to simplify all that is complicated and to treat everything with the greatest naturalness and clarity (*Journal of a Soul*)." That was his rule of life. He talked simply, not using fancy theological terminology. He had simple tastes.

In a letter he says: "I owe, in part, the tranquility of soul I feel as I rest in the arms of Divine Providence and of holy obedience, to having been born in the country and of a family, poor in earthly goods, but rich in faith and in the fear of God and used to the simple daily and yearly things of nature." (to his family, April 30, 1930). The ability to be content with simple things put him in touch with nature's annual and daily rhythms.

I think all will agree that being pope is one of the most complex jobs yet devised, but John XXIII was able to preserve his peace and good humor in the midst of all these duties because he operated out of a center of peaceful simplicity. He was centered in simplicity without being a simpleton. Yes a pope's task is tremendously complex, but if the pope is in harmony with God's plan, God's will, then everything simplifies down to the one thing necessary.

In 1963, Pope John died of stomach cancer. In 2001, a year after his beatification his body was exhumed and found to be still preserved in perfect condition.

7) Dorothy Day, 1897–1980 Dorothy, a New Yorker, was in her twenties during the "roaring twenties," and she roared along with everybody else, but converted to Catholicism at age 30 after the birth of her daughter Tamar. That conversion caused a break with her irreligious partner who lived with her. In 1933, along with her mentor Peter Maurin, she founded the Catholic Worker Movement, which is still going strong today, in more

than 200 houses in the US that give hospitality and other social services to marginalized men and women.

I will list some of the ways in which Dorothy Day lived in simplicity. She was simple in her clothing, probably picked up at thrift stores. She was simple in her hair style. She was simple in her living quarters at a CW house that was also a women's shelter. Sometimes she shared her bed with one of these women because of lack of space. She lived with the poor and as the poor, experiencing their discomforts, their lack of privacy.

She was simple in her religious practices: she did the basics, prayed psalms, went to Mass and Eucharist, said the rosary, fasted. She was simple in her theology, which was completely Biblical, centered on the sermon on the mount, Matthew 25, Acts 4, and the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor, non-violence, and a passion for justice for the poor.

Dorothy practiced simplicity in her work. She was a journalist; she edited the broadsheet called "The Catholic Worker," beginning in 1933, for which she charged a penny a copy. Getting the paper out on schedule seven times a year was her work until she died. Currently (2013) the paper has a circulation of 27,000.

Her politics were simple and also radical, based on non-violence. She was a pacifist and believed in peaceful resistance, defense of civil rights, protest against nuclear weapons, and the primacy of conscience even if it meant imprisonment as conscientious objector. Dorothy was jailed about four times for picketing and the like, including for ten days when she was 75. After addressing the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia in 1976, she had a heart attack and was obliged to spend most of her remaining four years in bed until her death at 83.

She was the subject of a Paulist Productions movie called "Entertaining Angels," produced by Fr Ellwood Kaiser. That and her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, are worth knowing about. She visited HTA for a few hours once in 1971, on the occasion of being in Salt Lake City for the funeral of Ammon Hennessey, who was an activist connected with the Catholic Worker (and perhaps related to Dorothy's son-in-law who was also a Hennessey).

The Diocese of New York is leading Dorothy Day's cause for canonization, which has been endorsed by the US Conference of Bishops. Her official title is "Servant of God." The next step is "Venerable." Some

miracles would help.

8) Peace Pilgrim, 1908–81 Her real name was Mildred Norman, from New Jersey. She was a peace activist, a vegetarian, and a fantastic walker for 28 years until the year she died at age 73. After 11 years of walking back and forth across the US, she completed her first 25,000 miles and then stopped counting; that was in 1964, and she still had 17 years of life and walking ahead of her. She went from coast to coast six times. She took the name *Peace Pilgrim* when she began her walking pilgrimage in 1953 in Pasadena, CA.

A long-distance walker has to travel light, has to simplify everything: clothing, food, lodging, finances, basic needs. How did Peace Pilgrim do it? She made a rule for herself. “I own only what I wear and carry. I just walk until given shelter, fast until given food.” She was a vegetarian but got enough energy to keep her going on those long daily walks. She said she rarely missed more than four meals in a row. If no one offered a place to sleep, she would sleep at a bus station or in a cornfield. At that time it was possible to undertake something like that in the US and not starve to death, because good people helped her out. She said, “I don’t even ask; it’s given without asking. I tell you, people are good; there’s a spark of good in everybody.” She wore the same clothes every day: tennis shoes, navy blue slacks, and a blue tunic that had her name printed on it and also had deep pockets. In these pockets she kept notebook and pen, a comb, a toothbrush, a map and leaflets to hand out. That’s all, if you want to believe her. She took no money with her, no credit card. She was not afraid of being robbed. She had nothing they wanted. She said: “You see, I love people and I see the good in them. . . . The world is like a mirror: if you smile at it, it smiles at you. I love to smile, and so in general, I definitely receive smiles in return.”

She was religious but not a member of any church. She offered her life to God to use her in any way he wished. Her philosophy of life sounds like it came from the Sermon on the Mount. She says: “This is the way of peace: overcome evil with good, and falsehood with truth, and hatred with love.”

She chose a life of simplicity because she did not want to have more than she needed while others had so much less. For her it was a liberating

experience. She told an audience: “Some people think that my life dedicated to simplicity and service is austere and joyless, but they do not know the freedom of simplicity. I am thankful to God every moment of my life for the great riches that have been showered upon me.”

How did Peace Pilgrim die? She died in Indiana on the way from one lecture to another. In order to get to the next venue on time, someone drove her. On the way, an oncoming car crossed the median strip and hit their car head on. Both Peace Pilgrim and her driver were killed but not instantly. She was 73. It is perverse that someone who had walked safely for 28 years should meet her death when she accepted a ride in a car.

See abundant material in: www.peacepilgrim.org

Countercultural. The simple lifestyle of such people is countercultural, no matter when they lived. If monks today opt for a simpler lifestyle, we too will go counter to the consumer society around us. Our choices will challenge the greed and wastefulness, the pollution and sheer noise that people today accept as inevitable parts of life, especially urban life.

Consumerism, fed by incessant advertising, is an addiction to buying unnecessary and often impractical new merchandise in order to fill an inner incompleteness. People forget that “Whoever dies with the most toys is still dead.”

In what ways might we who live in a monastery simplify our lives in the interests of being more ecologically sensitive? In answer I propose three

“Rs”: Reduce consumption, Recycle, and Rely more on one’s local community.

1. Reduce consumption. The current jargon for reducing one’s impact on the environment is to “reduce your carbon footprint.” It does not mean taking off shoes before coming indoors, although that may be a good idea when you’re wearing wet muddy boots. Our carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide we as individuals or as a monastic community release into the atmosphere such as by an industry, by heating the building, by driving a truck, or by using electricity generated from coal. Some people try to give up nonessential carbon emissions for Lent. Others buy carbon credits by planting trees that consume CO₂. Vatican City plants trees in Hungary to offset its carbon footprint.
2. Recycle and repair. We live in a throwaway culture where goods are engineered to break down or become obsolete in a few years, usually right after the warranty expires. Taking a countercultural stance for simplicity, we in a monastery can sometimes mend what tears, or repair what breaks down instead of pitching it, or we can be content with using an older, less convenient

model for a little longer. When we do throw something out, we can try to throw it in the proper receptacle for recycling. Some monasteries have various receptacles for paper, glass, aluminum or other metals, for compost material, and for plastic. Jesus told his disciples, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted" (Jn 6:12). He did not approve of waste. You have also heard: "One person's trash is another person's treasure." It's true. To give one example, all the obsolete computers, monitors, televisions, and cellphones, discarded at the rate of about three million tons per year in the U.S., could be smelted down and the valuable components extracted and reused. Gold, silver, platinum and other metals can be harvested from our used electronic equipment by smelting and electrolysis. Recycling goes with a simple lifestyle, because it disciplines the instinct to hoard, the pack rat syndrome. On the other hand, too much compulsiveness about recycling can also complicate one's life instead of simplifying it.

3. Rely on oneself in order to be as self-sustaining as possible.

This advice applies to monasteries more than to individual monks or volunteers. For centuries in the Christian West, monasteries were

largely self-sustaining, according to the principle in RB 66.6: “The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practiced.” In today’s interdependent world economy, a monastery might succeed in being partially self-sustaining. Some food-needs could be met by a vegetable garden and a greenhouse, maybe by raising chickens or animals, and maybe using aquaponics (a fish-and-vegetablegrowing system. See <http://www.bing.com/search?q=aquaponics&form=MOZSBR&pc=M> OZI. Energy dependence could be reduced by use of solar, wind, or geothermal resources. For example, the Trappists at New Melleray, IA, heat and cool their casket factory by an underground geothermal system, and St Mary Monastery, Rock Island, IL, has a geothermal system to cool and heat their monastery from an artificial lake about one acre in area with five miles of piping beneath it. The Trappistines at Mount St. Mary’s, Wrentham, MA, with the help of a grant, have installed (2009) a wind turbine, 130 feet high, that generates enough electricity to meet the needs of the monastery but not all of the candy factory building constructed later.

Conclusion. I want to draw our reflections on simplicity to a conclusion. In today's interconnected world, simplified living is practically an issue of justice, that is, a moral issue. Because of this moral dimension, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on numerous occasions was a strong spokesman for responsible ecology. Another has been the Dalai Lama. How can developed countries or monks in developed countries justify patterns of conspicuous consumption and thoughtless waste when so many human beings live in near destitution in developing countries? "The fruits of the earth were given to feed all," says St. Ambrose. The best motto is "to live simply, that others may simply live."

Everything that depends on oil in our post-industrial society is costly, because the price of oil, although fluctuating, usually rises. So much that we take for granted is based on oil, beginning with fuel for transportation, but also the whole plastics industry, much of the chemical industry, much of agribusiness, with a ripple effect all down the line. For an oil-dependent economy, a petrocivilization such as the U.S, the party is over or nearly over. Perhaps that will be a good thing for us from the spiritual point of view, a blessing in disguise, if it pushes us away from consumerism and

materialism toward voluntary simplicity of life.

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