

Ethical Reflections on the Role of Sufficiency for the Ecological-Social Transformation

Lars Schäfers

(Mag. theol., Research Associate at the Catholic Central Institute for Social Sciences in Mönchenglabbach, Germany and Secretary General of Ordo socialis)

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1. Introduction

On his first trip to Asia after his election as head of the universal Catholic Church, Pope Francis visited the Catholics of South Korea in 2014. At that time, during Holy Mass on the Assumption of Mary, he called on people to renounce materialism: “May the Christians of this nation be a generous force for spiritual renewal at every level of society. May they combat the allure

of a materialism that stifles authentic spiritual and cultural values and the spirit of unbridled competition which generates selfishness and strife.”¹⁾

In this speech, the Pope is following in the tradition of his predecessors, who often and forcefully criticized modern *materialism, consumerism*²⁾ and the *technocratic paradigm* that accompanies it. Criticism of consumption thus has a tradition in Catholic Social Teaching. In *Laudato si'*, the Pope writes, “Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals.” (LS no. 203).³⁾ Pope John Paul II, for example, also expressed corresponding criticism of consumerism in his social encyclical letter *Centesimus annus*: “The choice of certain forms of production and consumption always expresses a certain culture as an overall conception of life. Here arises *the phenomenon of consumerism* [emphasis added; L.S.]” (CA no. 36). However, Catholic Social Teaching in no way unilaterally rejects today's freedom of consumption and abundance of goods.

In this essay, the term “consumption” refers to the utilization of scarce goods and services, which can either be produced by oneself or obtained through the market, with the aim of satisfying the needs of economic subjects. Consumption is necessary for humans not only to sustain their basic needs and survival, but also to cultivate their lives and refine their lifestyles. While

1) Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Republic of Korea on the occasion of the 6th Asian Youth Day. Holy Mass on the solemnity of the Assumption. Homily of Pope Francis: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140815_corea-omelia-assunzione.html(lastaccess:01-28-2023).

2) Cf. for a brief overview Markus Vogt: *Christliche Umweltethik. Grundlagen und zentrale Herausforderungen*, Freiburg i.Br. 2021, 65ff.

3) All magisterial documents are quoted according to the respective English-language version on the Vatican homepage.

human consumption results from the necessity to satisfy various needs, consumerism is a maladjustment and a loss of the right measure. The high degree of freedom of choice and consumption that we enjoy in Germany as in Korea becomes problematic when the pursuit of acquiring goods, promoted by advertising and incentives, leads people to define themselves primarily through consumption and constantly strive for growth in wealth and status.

2. Ethical Orientation in Times of Earth Crisis

Criticism of the excesses of modern consumer societies in times of climate change and ecological crises comes, of course, from many other quarters. You don't have to be an activist of the worldwide *Fridays for Future* movement, which is also active here in Korea, to recognize that we urgently need a socio-ecological change of economy and society in view of the scientific facts about climate change and its consequences. It is about stopping the dangerous dimensions of climate change, the destruction of biodiversity as well as the plundering of resources. It is also about humans and humanity and thus about securing the future of all of us on a planet worth living on. These and other questions surrounding the Earth Crisis call for ethical orientation. Ethics asks: What should be? What should we do? What should we change, and how, for the good and the just? These questions also arise in the area of consumption. Consumer ethics, as a branch of economic ethics, normatively analyzes “the economic process of value creation, distribution, and demand from its ultimate end, the consumer”.⁴⁾

⁴⁾ Stephan Wirz: Konsumethik, in: Staatslexikon8 online: <https://www.staatslexikon-online.de/Lexikon/Konsumethik>(lastaccess:01-28-2023).

2.1. The Pope, sustainability and the need for socio-ecological change

Returning to the Pope, Francis exhorts in his widely acclaimed social and environmental encyclical letter *Laudato si'*: nature is “our common home” (LS no. 1) therefore it needs as “house rules” the solidary use of global resources to protect people and the environment. The ethical principle behind this is well known and is called *sustainability*. It means, first of all, that no more of something may be consumed than is available. The ideal of sustainable development, which has been widely recognized since the 1992 UN summit in Rio, is about reconciling social and ecological justice with economic growth. Today, sustainability has long since become a global guiding principle and is now often understood within church and Christian social ethics as a further social principle of Catholic Social Teaching.⁵⁾ With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in September 2015, a political framework has been set against which every debate on holistic development must be measured in the next years. The SDGs combine social and ecological goals. But how can a corresponding socio-ecological transformation, including a change in production and consumption, be shaped? After all, the final declaration of the UN Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 stated that “changing consumption patterns and modes of production [...] are the overarching goals and the essential preconditions of sustainable development.”⁶⁾ And my following reflections on consumption ethics, committed to the idea of sustainability, are also based on

⁵⁾ Cf. esp. Markus Vogt: *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit. Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive* (Hochschulschriften zur Nachhaltigkeit 39), München 2009 [3rd. ed. München 2013]; cf. also Vogt: *Christliche Umweltheik*, loc. cit., 639-673.

⁶⁾ Oliver Stengel: *Suffizienz – Die Konsumgesellschaft in der ökologischen Krise* (Wuppertaler Schriften zur Forschung für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung, Bd. 1), München 2011, 129.

this assumption. The necessity of a socio-ecological transformation of economy and society on the basis of the guiding principle of sustainable development is thus the normative framework and starting point of my reflections on consumer ethics in times of the Earth Crisis, which are formulated here only in broad outlines.

My main reference text is the 2021 study of the “Global Economy and Social Ethics expert panel” of the German Bishops' Conference entitled: “How socio-ecological transformation can succeed”.⁷⁾ This study emphasises: “To achieve sustainable development and the Global Sustainability Goals (SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals) a socio-ecological transformation of the economy and society is indispensable.”⁸⁾

In other words, a clever transformation of the successful socio-ethical model of the social market economy into an ecological-social market economy is required, and this as globally as possible. Despite all the challenges involved, however, “the necessary transformation is not an unattainable utopia but a realistic option for the future”⁹⁾, according to the study's hopeful basic perspective. Socio-ecological transformation requires a smart, politically set regulatory framework that creates incentives for social transformations that promote the common good and sustainability, technological innovations and changes in harmful consumption patterns. This requires an energy turnaround, a consumption and mobility turnaround, and an agricultural turnaround. The

⁷⁾ German Bishops' Conference Commission on International Church Affairs (ed.), How socio-ecological transformation can succeed. An interdisciplinary study within the framework of the dialogue project on the contribution of the Catholic Church to a socio-ecological transformation in the light of *Laudato si'*. Research results of a study by the 'Global Economy and Social Ethics' expert panel. No. 22: https://www.dbk-shop.de/media/files_public/fb797b4e6dc212e7e5a30440c480eb27/DBK_1522001.pdf(lastaccess:01-28-2023).

⁸⁾ How socio-ecological transformation can succeed, loc. cit., 1.

⁹⁾ Ibid.

challenges are enormous.

According to the current state of science, sustainability in the context of the necessary transformation processes can only be achieved with a threefold strategy:¹⁰⁾ *Efficiency* in the sense of increasing resource productivity and reducing resource consumption. *Consistency* as the transition to nature-compatible technologies that use the materials and services of ecosystems without destroying them. And finally, *sufficiency* in consumption. I will now take sufficiency as a starting point for my ethical reflections which corresponds to sustainable consumption and has become important for the necessary turnaround in consumption.

2.2 Sufficiency as a guiding principle of consumption ethics

Sufficiency comes from the Latin *sufficere* and can be translated as “to suffice” or “to be enough”. In the context of consumer ethics, sufficiency means “an internally controlled, voluntary change in environmentally relevant behavior patterns.”¹¹⁾ “‘Less is more,’ ‘Small is beautiful,’ ‘Live well instead of having a lot,’ ‘Live more, buy less,’ ‘Goods happiness is not true happiness,’ ‘Time prosperity instead of goods prosperity’ are frequently mentioned maxims of sufficiency.”¹²⁾ One key point is, that in earlier times, crises sprang from scarcity; today, a global crisis springs from abundance. The sufficiency strategy is therefore also seen as innovative because, for the first time in history, the restriction of resource consumption is not forced by poverty and scarcity, but can and should be aimed at out of insight into ecological interrelationships.

¹⁰⁾ Cf. Stengel: Suffizienz, loc. cit., 127ff.

¹¹⁾ Ibid., 129.

¹²⁾ Ibid., 140.

Sufficiency or *sobriety* can be justified not least in Christian ethical terms if we take another look at *Laudato si'*; here Pope Francis writes: “Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full. In reality, those who enjoy more and live better each moment are those who have given up dipping here and there, always on the look-out for what they do not have. They experience what it means to appreciate each person and each thing, learning familiarity with the simplest things and how to enjoy them. So they are able to shed unsatisfied needs, reducing their obsessiveness and weariness. Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer.” (LS no. 223).

The question of what sustainable or sufficiency-oriented consumption can look like in concrete terms is therefore becoming increasingly important. This includes, for example, using the potential of sharing economy. In the spirit of Pope Francis and an ethics of the art of living, there is much to suggest that a more frugal way of life can also be a more fulfilling one.

There are *two different basic approaches* to more sufficiency: “Sufficiency considerations range from a personally voluntarily practiced asceticism in the sense of concentrating on the essentials to a collectively prescribed frugality that is limited to the satisfaction of existential needs.”¹³⁾ In other words, a change in environmentally damaging behaviors can be voluntary, or it can be

¹³⁾ Wirz: Konsumethik, loc. cit.

mandated by state law. Thus, a sufficiency-based consumer ethics must always be seen as both a virtue ethics and an institutional ethics.

As indispensable as it is to point out the need to change environmentally harmful lifestyles in terms of individual ethics and the need for government measures to create incentives in terms of social ethics, one should be very cautious about calling for radical measures. It is perfectly legitimate to advocate cultural and lifestyle change in the face of challenges, but it is neither appropriate nor effective in a liberal, democratic society to impose it down to the last detail. The shift in our consumption and production patterns toward a climate-compatible structure should therefore be incentive-based in social ethical terms so that a society at large accepts and supports this process. This takes the controversially discussed basic question seriously, “whether, and if so in what form, it is at all legitimate in a plural-liberal society to make individual lifestyles, provided they do not directly violate the rights of others, the subject of public evaluation.”¹⁴⁾

In addition, efforts to reduce emissions at the micro level of individual lifestyles will not be of much help in climate protection if they are not combined with the necessary transformations at the macro level of the economy and political system, which provide a framework and incentives.

Sufficiency, because of its justice implications, is a strategy for consumers, especially in the traditional industrialized nations. Their ecological footprint significantly exceeds the level of natural regenerative capacity. It has been the largest for about 200 years. By contrast, the bottom billion, nearly one-seventh of the world's population, live primarily in Africa and Asia, and they still consume far too few natural resources. These people live in slums, in self-built

¹⁴⁾ Vogt: Christliche Umweltethik, loc. cit., 641.

huts made of cardboard, corrugated iron or plywood with a few square meters of living space, usually without electricity or running water. In the bottom billion, the level of consumption must therefore rather urgently increase. Pope Francis emphatically writes: “Today, however, we cannot avoid recognizing that a truly ecological approach always transforms itself into a social approach that must include justice in environmental discussions, in order to hear the complaint of the poor as well as the complaint of the earth” (LS 49).

Many people in the world need more and better housing, medicines, transportation, books, energy, food, etc. In developing countries, sufficiency as a strategy can therefore not play a significant role in terms of consumption ethics. Sufficiency would have to be implemented first and foremost among the top billion, most of whom live in the highly developed industrialized nations, including Germany and South Korea, but increasingly also among the upper and middle classes in the emerging economies.

2.3. Change requires a positive target perspective

According to the mentioned study, if sufficiency as a strategy depends on broad acceptance, it also needs a positive target perspective: Such a target perspective for sustainable development is psychologically relevant and “can serve as a motivating and guiding force to move people and societies to profound changes. That is why the socio-ecological transformation of the economy and society aims to ensure that all people can live well now and in the future while respecting planetary boundaries.”¹⁵⁾ If we also try to discuss anew what a culture of consumption looks like in which ecologically and socially motivated sufficiency is combined with the question of the good and successful

¹⁵⁾ How socio-ecological transformation can succeed, loc. cit., if.

life, we can win over more people to rethink their patterns of living and consumption. In this context, the current debates on how to make the economy and its growth more climate-friendly also offer new opportunities for the search for answers to the question of how the economy can also be more conducive to happiness. The findings of happiness research can be helpful here.¹⁶⁾

After all, as early as 1974, the economist Richard Easterlin shook the conviction of standard economics that happiness would necessarily increase with rising GDP and the accompanying increases in income. Above a certain set point, money does not make people happy(er) per se - this thesis has long since been further substantiated empirically by the economics of happiness in a differentiated manner. The consumer ethicist Stephan Wirz summarizes the integration of this happiness perspective in an eco-social perspective as follows: "Two fundamental consumer ethical challenges arise from this expansion of production and consumption: How can the multitude of possibilities for shaping one's life be used for a good, happy life? How can consumers use their economically powerful position for socially and ecologically compatible production, distribution, consumption and disposal processes?"¹⁷⁾

2.4 Connecting macro-level and micro-level: The sustainable consumption ethics approach

The global community must not wait to transform the social and economic order until the reversal of hearts is complete. Social ethical orientation is needed for this. Nevertheless, in a world with a rising population, the sufficiency strategy in isolation cannot lead to the goal of lifting global society within the ecological

¹⁶⁾ Cf. for example Johannes Wallacher: *Mehrwert Glück. Plädoyer für menschengerechtes Wirtschaften*, München 2011.

¹⁷⁾ Wirz: *Konsumethik*, loc. cit.

guard rails. Even if consumers use fewer resources, they still need to consume energy and products, and use services to satisfy their basic needs. If these goods are not provided in an environmentally sustainable manner, and if the number of consumers continues to increase due to high population growth, the result will be the continued overuse of ecosystems. But: without sufficiency, it will not work either. All three strategies - consistency, efficiency and sufficiency - are necessary to advance an ecological-social transformation of economies and consumer societies.

In short, developing a climate-friendly economy requires not only decoupling material wealth growth and resource consumption through more efficient technology. We also need to learn, in the sense of a sufficiency-based cultural and lifestyle change, that happiness and the good life do not depend so much on material consumption as suggested by consumer society and consumerism. Further deepening of an anthropology of consumption as well as ethical reflections on an interdisciplinary basis are therefore indicated.

Christian ethics can also contribute to this sufficiency discourse, for example with the cardinal virtue of moderation. It can point out how important it is for people to transcend themselves and their diverse needs again and again. Christians ask how much consumption is enough for the goal of living a life pleasing to God. They then do not fall prey to consumerism with its collateral damage, which aims only at having and not at being. The *homo oeconomicus* strives for maximization of benefit, the *homo christianus* for maximization of love, and this in the best case combined with the desirable side effects of a higher happiness in life as well as the necessary sensitization for the groaning of the overburdened earth.

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