

Living Simply In An Age Of Austerity



*Talk by Fr. Rob Esdaile to National Justice & Peace Network
Crawley, February 21, 2009*

1. Introduction:

'Live Simply': it's a great slogan and, as most of you will know from reading various *Live Simply* publications, it's accompanied by a good logo, of a loaf of bread (or is it a host?) and a cartoon fish – taking us already into the territory of the Sermon on the Mount and the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Eucharist. In other words, first of all, *Live Simply* is an attractive brand, a nifty piece of marketing. So before we get into theologising about the questions it raises, it's worth spending some time thinking about that phrase itself, walking around it, looking at it from different angles, noticing how it works, what it says, what it implies.

First of all we should note that the phrase, *'Live Simply'*, has the form of a command, an injunction: you could put an exclamation mark after it (or, I suppose, even a threat: *Live simply ... or else!*). And, secondly, you have a choice when you speak those two words: you can place the emphasis on either the first or the second – on 'live' or on 'simply'. Since, whatever else it may be, it is a slogan, an advertising tool, let us assume it seeks to attract, rather than to repel. But for it to attract it has to convince the target audience that the first word is not in competition with the second; that the choice of simplicity will augment and not diminish our vitality; and that the organisers' aim in promoting simplicity of lifestyle is not to act as kill-joys.

However you point or parse the phrase, taken together the two words invite this response: *Why?* Why should we live simply, after all? Why not just grab as big a slice of the cake as we can? What is the ethical imperative which draws us to choose the path of simplicity? It is very easy to assume our own correctness. But we had better have some responses ready for those who do not share our assumptions. It may seem thoroughly obvious to people such as ourselves that living simply is the morally correct thing to do, is the way to fulfilment and is the basis for a happy life, but we should not assume that this will be obvious to everyone.

Not everyone is trying consistently to 'down-size' or trying to 'reduce, re-use and re-cycle', after all. Somebody buys all those SUVs on our streets (or was doing so until very recently), and there are plenty of people (few of them – I would guess – living on a flightpath) who can see absolutely no reason why we should not build a third runway at Heathrow airport. For them (and for the government, it would seem) cheap flights and safeguarding employment count for considerably more than protecting the environment. Similarly, there is enough in the press and in the business management sections of bookshops about 'healthy stress' to show that many people are addicted to the 'buzz' of overly-complicated lives. Meanwhile, 'Generation Y' thinks instinctively in terms of networked living: a teenager's bedroom may contain literally thousands of pounds worth of electronic kit, from computer to games console to cell-phone to i-pod, all interconnected and used interchangeably with (to older eyes) dizzying agility – from *MySpace* to *Facebook* to *Bebo*. Perhaps it is simplicity, Jim, but not as we know it.

So whatever simplicity we may aspire to for our future, it will not be a Luddite, pre-digital 'arts-and-crafts' simplicity. Nor will it, most likely, mean a quiet life for many of us. The air-waves will remain clogged with sound and fury (much of it signifying nothing), while the information superhighway already often resembles the M25 on a bad day. Many people will remain over-stimulated and over-communicated and only a minority will seek inner silence or try to march to the beat of a different drum. But that is our job, amidst our busy-ness and activism: to become that minority.

2. *Live Simply* Before The Crash:

It seems to me significant that the *Live Simply* project appeared when it did, in the ‘Noughties’, in that rapidly receding age of unprecedented wealth and unlimited credit, after Gordon Brown’s declaration of ‘the end of boom and bust’ and before the discovery that the Emperor had no clothes, that the economy had been built on sand, that the banking sector had feet of clay and that various other over-used clichés were also applicable. *Live Simply* was – as you will doubtless remember - put together to mark the fortieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*. A coalition of Catholic charities and NGOs came together in the now-lost age of affluence, in response to the increasingly obvious injustices and inequalities underlying our growing wealth and to a growing sense of unease which these provoked.

Three years ago, living ‘*simply, sustainably and in solidarity*’ seemed like a modest act of resistance, a good way to remember an important marker in the development of Catholic ethical reflection and, almost incidentally, a quiet, polite, well-intentioned but not all that heroic rejection of the dominant social and economic models of the age. It certainly implied a critique of Growth Economics, a refusal passively to accept the immutability and inevitability of the ‘Laws of the Market’, in much the same way as Pope Paul had himself taken a stand in the Vietnam War era against the Cold War rhetoric and proxy wars of the Superpowers and their ideologically driven understanding of Progress. Of course, Pope Paul got accused for his pains of producing ‘*warmed over Marxism*’ (by *The Wall Street Journal*, no less!) whereas I’m not aware of any such significant Brickbats having come the way of *Live Simply*, perhaps because, when it came out, *Live Simply* sounded more in tune with our supposedly post-ideological, more touchy-feely age (or possibly simply because I read the wrong papers!). In any case, we can perhaps at least claim this much for the *Live Simply* campaign at its launch: that it put a small question-mark alongside the overweening self-confidence of our culture, and that it invited ordinary people to make simple pledges to do something that would both make themselves think and mark them out from the herd caught up in rampant consumerism.

3. A Failure Of Discernment:

But what does *Live Simply* feel like two or three years later, the other side of the *Northern Rock* debacle and in the gathering storm of a recession? Many of us can feel a little superior, if we so wish. Our gut instinct was right. The old order was not only unjust but unsustainable, even in the narrow terms of the old economic orthodoxy. Celtic Tigers and Spanish housing booms and Icelandic economic miracles were all riding for a fall, along with the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street and a good many others besides. But feeling vindicated is not going to get us very far, especially if, like myself, you said relatively little before the Perfect Financial Storm hit us to warn your neighbours about what was happening and why it would all end in tears.

In fact, if you had asked me three years ago, I would probably have predicted a housing crash, because of the eye-wateringly large sums of money that people were borrowing and the alarming gap between house-price inflation and real, ordinary, common-or-garden cost-of-living inflation. You didn’t need a maths degree to see that that couldn’t last. And alongside that critical perception of the situation, yes, I have bought *Fairtrade* goods for years, tried to diminish my carbon footprint for years, have always driven the smallest car I could buy, cycle round the parish, and so on, but – looking back – I would not dare to claim that by these private opinions and options I discharged my duty as a pastor (and a pastor in a notably leafy part of suburbia for the last two-and-a-half years). For my duty as a pastor – our duty as a Church – was precisely to call our brothers and sisters (and ourselves) away from the dangers of consumerism and its inherent materialism, valuing things above the people who produce them.

The text that comes to my mind is from the Book of Ezekiel, when the LORD God tells the Prophet:

“Son of Man, I have appointed you as watchman for the House of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, warn them from me. If I say to someone wicked, ‘You will die,’ and do not warn this person; if you do not warn someone wicked to renounce evil and so save his life,

it is the wicked person who will die for the guilt, but I shall hold you responsible for that death.” (Ezek 3.17-18)

Nobody has yet died in the flock of my parish as a direct result of the credit crunch, so far as I know, although I can think of at least two people who have gone through the pain of house-repossession and I am sure that there is a lot of hidden angst and worry behind the respectable front-doors of my patch. My parishioners are certainly not wicked and, in any case, I don't think that denunciation usually achieves very much. But the Christian community must bear some responsibility for our failure to warn more clearly both our neighbours and ourselves that we were heading for the rocks and our failure to witness collectively to an alternative future more attuned to the values of the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, we need to ask why *we* did not collectively do better: for the resources were there in our Catholic Tradition to equip us to “read the signs of the times” (as John XXIII invited us to in his encyclical *Pacem In Terris*); and surely we should have been listening more attentively, like the Seer of Patmos, to “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.” After all, the critique of unbridled capitalism lies at the tap-root of Catholic Social Teaching, already present in a crude form in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, with its insistence on the priority of labour over capital, and developed at length by later popes. But beyond the insistence in Leo's encyclical on the equal dignity of all (n.16) and its restatement of the Letter of St. James' imperative not to defraud workers of their wages (n.17 – cf. Jas 5.4), there is this:

“the wealthy owners of the means of production must take scrupulous care not to harm in any way the savings of the poor, whether by force, or fraud or usurious dealings; and this the more so both because their poverty makes them ill-equipped to counter injustice and because what few possessions they have should be held the more sacred the scantier they are.” (RN n.17)¹

For ‘wealthy owners’ here read ‘fund-managers’ and speculators; for ‘means of production’ read the financial services industry; for ‘poor’ read anyone who has entrusted not only their surplus but the prudent provision for their own old age or for their family's need.

Moreover, centuries before Pope Leo XIII wrote, the *Roman Catechism* of the Council of Trent had condemned usury in terms which might far more obviously be applied to the trading in ‘futures’ and other ‘derivatives’ today:

“To lend at usury is to sell the same thing twice, or more exactly to sell what does not exist.”²

However conscientious, good-hearted and well-meaning we may be and however inadvertent our involvement in speculation, we have virtually all been caught up in the buying and selling of ‘things which [literally] do not exist’ – commercial paper, debt-bundles, sub-prime mortgages, and the like; all those of us who have pension funds or savings accounts as well as those who actively ‘play the markets’. And, despite the resources of Catholic Social Teaching, we Catholics seem not to have been much more adept at reading the signs of the times or at listening to the Spirit than the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Gnomes of Zurich.

Surely the way the banking sector has developed in recent decades is a clear instance of what Pope John Paul II meant when he spoke of ‘structures of sin’ in his encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, back in 1987? There he characterised the forces at work in the international economy at the end of the Cold War as typified by two qualities, indissolubly united:

*“On the one hand, the **all-consuming desire for profit**, and on the other, **the thirst for power** ... In order to characterise better each of these attitudes, one can add the expression: ‘at any price’. In other words, we are faced with the **absolutising** of human attitudes with all its*

¹ Joseph Kirwan's translation in his *Study Edition* of *Rerum Novarum* (London, CTS, 1983) chooses to translate locupletes and proletarii as ‘wealthy owners of the means of production’ and ‘the unpropertied’ respectively, rather than the simple ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ of the earlier edition.

² *Roman Catechism* of the Council of Trent Pt. III c.8 n.11, (quoted by J. Kerwin, *Rerum Novarum. Study Edition*, London, CTS, 1983, 41)

possible consequences ... it is a question of a moral evil, the fruit of many sins which lead to 'structures of sin'." (SRS n.37)

It is poignant, also, to re-read the words of Cardinal Etchegaray, introducing the Vatican document, *International Debt. An Ethical Approach to the Question*, just a year before the publication of the Encyclical:

*"... once again strongly repeating that economic structures and financial mechanisms are at the service of the human person and not vice versa, and that relationships of exchange and the mechanisms of finance which go with them can be reformed before shortsightedness and egoisms – be they private or collective – degenerate into irremediable conflicts."*³

It seems that 23 years just wasn't long enough to tackle our myopia.

4. Moving On – Simplicity, Sustainability and Solidarity:

What has been has been. Now we have to find ways out of the malaise, and I believe *Live Simply* can be part of the solution. But my hunch is that the campaign now has a quite different role to play from the role it had at its inception. No longer is it an abstraction or an option for poets, dreamers and idealists. Our take on the three key elements of the project, living *simply*, *sustainably* and *in solidarity*, has altered radically. *Living simply* is something being forced on people by economic circumstance (however ill-equipped they feel for the choice after years of over-consumption). In a matter of months it has become a commonplace that as a country we were living **un-sustainably**, beyond our means, and that somehow 'we had it (i.e. this credit crunch) coming to us'. And *solidarity* is no longer going to be about a token gesture towards some scarcely known-about people half-way round the world but something experienced much closer to home, a matter of helping family members, close neighbours and fellow parishioners.

I think that *Live Simply* could become a tool for making sense of what is happening to many people in the current economic crisis and helping them to develop a spirituality to cope with the experience. Nothing has proved secure. Somewhere along the line we inadvertently entered a looking-glass world, where debt, the absence of money, became a tradable asset and 'borrowing' became the much nicer-sounding (and less urgent) 'credit'.

Banks, which once seemed to be the very epitome of dependability and security, have shown themselves not to be what they seemed. Until recently, I naively thought that banks were institutions which loaned the money which their own savers had deposited with them. It turns out that they are allowed to lend many times the value of those deposits – and that they have lost track, through *Collateralised Debt Obligations*, *Credit Default Swaps* and other fantastical creations, of precisely who owes what and what that debt is worth. The whole system depended entirely on *bragadoccio*, *chutzpah*, sleight of hand – and the confidence which underlay this performance has simply evaporated. It isn't just banks, either. We can assume that Life Assurance and Pension Funds and most other 'financial products' are equally wobbly, while the old claims that something is 'as safe as houses' and that 'an Englishman's home is his castle' seem rather ironic in a time of tumbling house-prices and growing job insecurity.

The whole situation is breathtaking. Yet from a theological point-of-view, there is something healthy going on here, amidst all the pain and the upset. We are being reacquainted with the fundamental truth of our humanity – that we are contingent beings, that we cannot make ourselves invincible or protect ourselves from the vagaries of fate, that we have to embrace that web of limitation and interdependence. Professional success, fame and fortune, health, a large pension pot – none of these things can insulate us from either our own mortality or our interdependence. Planning ahead is good – but if you want to make God laugh tell Him your plans, as the old quip goes. We remain what we always were, creatures:

³ *International Debt. An Ethical Approach To The Issue*, Pontifical Commission *Iustitia et Pax*, London, CTS, 1987

“Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life? ... So do not worry; do not say, ‘What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?’ It is the gentiles who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well.” (Mt 6.17, 31-33)

The question is how we can re-appropriate for ourselves as believers this ancient – and divine – wisdom; and how we can draw from this an ethical programme to share with all, believers and non-believers alike.

5. A Pauline Perspective:

As this is the Year of St. Paul, you will I hope allow me to dip briefly into the Apostle’s thought at this point, because I think our economic situation, rediscovering the precarious nature of our wealth-creating structures, is in some ways comparable to the necessary choice which he saw between Justification by Faith and Justification by Works. Justification by Works is a reliance on our achievements, establishing our own respectability, our own goodness, our own position in the sight of God. Justification by Faith is, firstly, the recognition that we’re simply not capable of that degree of performance; that we can only rely on God’s mercy; secondly, and more importantly, that we may do so; that we don’t need to earn God’s acceptance, which comes as pure grace.

Now I’m certainly not going to suggest that the economic malaise is going to be resolved by grace alone. It’s going to need an awful lot of hard work and an even greater amount of human ingenuity. But I do want to suggest this small economic parallel to Paul’s theological insight: the recognition that we can’t simply establish our own prosperity, pull up our drawbridge and live on the proceeds for ever more; that individuals and superpowers alike are entirely dependent on others; that we remain individually mortal and collectively vulnerable – that seems to me to be essential – the truth which we forgot in the gadarene rush to the markets. That truth, our contingency, rules out both egocentrism and isolationism as responses to the financial crisis. But it also provides the basis for a renewed ethics of solidarity: we hang together or we shall assuredly hang separately; I am my brother’s keeper, as he is mine.

There is another piece of wisdom I would like to draw into our discussion from the Apostle. He wrote to the Philippians:

“I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength.” (Phil 4.12-13 – JB translation)

We all need to learn that lesson if we wish not only to survive the recession but to flourish as people during it. For believers it shouldn’t be impossible. If we know that God is the God of love; if we live from the truth that Jesus gave himself for us; if we trust that the Spirit is abroad, working in ourselves, our community and our world; then we should also know that it isn’t ‘things’, ‘stuff’, ‘possessions’, that form the basis for our sense of well-being. Our value as human beings, our dignity and our giftedness, is not diminished by unemployment or financial difficulty (or infirmity or old age, for that matter) and – this is the audacious bit - neither need our joy be diminished by such hardships. In commenting on this passage, Markus Bockmuehl offers the simple observation that *“Contentment is indeed a quiet secret known and cherished only by the few.”*⁴ Our task is to make the secret more widely known by the witness of our lives.

6. Teaching Contentment:

The significant phrase in the Philippians passage is this: *“I have been through my initiation”*. The equanimity with which Paul can face both feast and famine, both ease and danger, derives, firstly and fundamentally, from his experience at his conversion of the Risen Christ, the one who had (as he had

⁴ M. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle To the Philippians*, London, A&C Black, 1997, 261

reminded the Philippians earlier in the same letter) been himself first humiliated and then exalted; but also from his experience of the life of the Christian community, where material possessions were viewed in a way that contrasted with the prevailing mores of contemporary Hellenistic culture. The social divisions expressed at the Eucharists of the Corinthian church (and which Paul condemns in 1 Cor 11) certainly show that the communist model of Christian community living which Luke reports in Jerusalem – “*And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed*” (Ac 2.44-5) – was not universally adopted; yet Paul goes on to express his confidence in the generosity of those self-same selfish Corinthians in the matter of the collection for the ‘poor ones’ of the Jerusalem Church (2 Cor 8-9).

We, in our day, need to offer a similar initiation into a life of contentment, which must involve training people in the art of detachment, how not to be defined by possessions or prestige, how not to be consumed by our consumption. That’s not just a tool for surviving recession, though. It’s also a way of living the second element in the *Live Simply* Credo – sustainability. The acquisitive society cannot live sustainably. Consumerism cannot tolerate contentment. All advertising is predicated on the stimulation of the unknown need, is aimed at eliciting the response: “I’ve got to have that. I’ll be a better person if I’ve got that. People will look up to me if I’ve got that. Even: I’ll use less of the world’s resources just as soon as I’ve got that!” Consumerism depends on dissatisfaction and we’ve heard the weird places it can take us: Americans being told it was their patriotic duty to go shopping after 9/11 to show those terrorists that they couldn’t defeat the American Way of Life; ourselves being told to keep on spending our way out of debt, in order to prevent recession from becoming depression.

Consumerism is also inherently wasteful, assured that we shall all throw things away, not because they are worn out but because something ‘better’ has come along – that’s ‘better’ as in ‘new improved’ (and we’re back to the adverts). And it is always predicated on growth: We’re making too many cars – so the first reflex is to stimulate demand: hand out car-loans. Heathrow is operating above capacity – and the knee-jerk response is to build another runway. So when we talk of sustainability we do, as a matter of fact, become enemies of the system, subversive, dangerous. We are a real threat to the economic well-being of the nation. The argument that we ought to be out there consuming for the good of the nation has an element of truth. It makes economic sense. I just happen to suspect that it’s going to destroy the planet. And if we do not witness to another possibility, another way of configuring the economy, not for growth but for sufficiency, who will do so?

7. **Prophetic Living:**

Seeking first God’s Kingdom and God’s Righteousness means living prophetically, letting ourselves be out of step in order to create spaces where God’s Reign becomes tangible, however fleetingly. Of course, the vision will be distorted and inadequate, because the misty mirror-image is all that is possible in the here-and-now, as St. Paul perceived:

*“Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles,
but then we shall be seeing face to face.”* (1 Cor 13.12)

And so, too, T.S. Eliot:

*“Our gaze is submarine, our eyes look upward
And see the light that fractures through unquiet water.”*⁵

Yet the prophetic act is not to be underestimated. The sight of the *Catholic Peace Action* protesters marking the walls of the Ministry of Defence every Ash Wednesday for a quarter-century has its effect, whether as an irritant or an illumination. So, too, do the protesters who sit down in the road outside Aldermaston or Faslane or Kingsnorth or Heathrow; the cyclists who reclaim the streets; the other, more numerous cyclists who simply dare to use their bikes despite the traffic; the heroic people who work in this diocese with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Brighton Refugees Project; the

⁵ T.S. Eliot, *From Choruses from The Rock, X*

ones who stand up to xenophobia and speak out against prejudice; the prison visitors who refuse to give up on those who have been convicted of awful crimes; people who stop to pick up cans and bottles for recycling from the pavement; shoppers who refuse to buy unethically sourced food; those who remain ‘joiners’ (of campaigns, NGOs, charities, letter-writing campaigns, and the like) in an age of ‘non-joiners’.

We may or may not agree with all of these options and these actions. But they open a space for questioning and give visibility to the issues which otherwise remain unchallenged and unexplored. They follow in the uncomfortable footsteps of Jeremiah breaking the jug (Jer 19.10); of Ezekiel joining together the two sticks representing Ephraim and Judah (Ezek 38.15-27); of Hosea marrying a prostitute (Hos 1.3); and, above all of Jesus – eating with sinners (Mk 2.15-17), choosing twelve disciples to represent the in-gathering of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Mk 3.13-19), cleansing the Temple (Mk 11.15-19), washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13.1- 15) and blessing the bread and the wine of the Eucharist (Mk 14.22-25). And we know what happened to Jesus; so, while we shouldn’t be looking for confrontation, neither should we be surprised if it should happen to come our way.

8. The Sacrament Of Living Simply:

Our Sacrament of Simplicity and Sustainability and Solidarity is the Eucharist, which speaks of a life – Christ’s life – of utter solidarity; of a communion which is entirely gift; of a way of living which is reverent, giving thanks for the fruits of the earth, and therefore sustainable. The Eucharist uses elements which are entirely ordinary. It can comprehend both boom and bust, answering to every emotion and drawing in the best of times and the worst of times – the bread of affliction and the wine of human joy.

Our action in the Eucharist, our contribution, is to make ourselves empty-handed, to give over our gifts, to lose ownership of them, to entrust them to the Lord. We confess – and celebrate – our contingency, our utter dependence and inter-dependence; because that is the only way to make ourselves aware of our hunger; because that is the only way to become ready to receive a new vision of the world, a vision in which all people share at the table and there is enough to go round because (and only because) people share the little they have – five loaves and two fish – and they all ate as much as they wanted, and there were twelve baskets of scraps collected afterwards.

Questions For Discussion:

1. What has struck me in what I have just heard? Is there any particular topic that I wish to explore further?
2. Has the Credit Crunch changed my view of the *Live Simply* project and its possibilities?
3. Which element of *Live Simply* seems most important to my own work for justice – *Simplicity*, *Sustainability* or *Solidarity*?
4. How can we live prophetically in a way which speaks to our contemporaries – in the Church and beyond?

