The Trouble With People

Essay by Vance Packard in Imprints 11 (2001 Gage Learning Corporation)

In this essay which was first published in 1957, Vance Packard, author of “The Hidden Persuaders”, discusses the dilemmas faced by marketers in trying to create successful advertising. As a result of reflection on research, marketers uncovered three significant assumptions. First, “you can’t assume that people know what they want.” When asked in research to name a preference, buyers picked a different preference when it came to the point of sale. Second, “you can’t assume that people will tell you their wants and dislikes even if they know them.” In response to survey questions people tend to want as a first priority to look good and to protect their reputations. Third, “it is dangerous to assume that people can be trusted to behave in a rational way.” Buyers often fall for named “bargain” prices, even though the price in fact is not a bargain.

Packard recalls that in the 1950s “executive planners changed from being maker-minded to being market-minded.” Advertisers concentrated on creating hunger in their audience for their products – a hunger to consume. They made it a point to stimulate “psychological obsolescence” so that people would feel ashamed to drive a car more than three years old. As one ad executive remarked: “What makes this country great is the creation of wants and desires, the creation of dissatisfaction with the old and outmoded.” (Imprints 11,404)

Almost sixty years on from the time of writing we are of course immersed in a world of marketing and consumerism. We have some awareness that this is the case, but we struggle to be free of this reality - that the commercial world is imbedded in our personal world, influencing and determining our choices from the cradle to the grave. Catholic teaching and Catholic theologians frequently allude to this issue.

A Catholic Critique of the Culture of Prosperity

In his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel Pope Francis outlines the response of Catholic teaching to some of the trends of thought and action in the current economy. What he points out is consistent with developments within Catholic Social Teaching as it has been articulated in the modern era since the late 19th century.
“...some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish idea, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.” (The Joy of the Gospel, 40)

Pope Francis goes on to critique the new idolatry of money which he believes reveals a “lack of real concern for human beings; man (sic) is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.” (The Joy of the Gospel 41) “While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control.” (The Joy of the Gospel 41)

Pope Francis challenges those in position of influence and power to allow ethics to play a role in guiding the market place and to consider the wisdom of Saint John Chrysostom. “Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.” (The Joy of the Gospel 42)