

GROWING Together

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Shop 'til you drop



It should be easy. You're in the mall, shopping for runners for your teenager. The sales clerk shows you two pairs of shoes, one almost twice the price of the other. Somewhere in the far corner of your mind you are aware that these shoes come from a dark factory in the Third World, where wages are minuscule and working conditions deplorable. The teen who made them probably doesn't know how to read and could be supporting a family of ten. You hope that the difference in price between the two shoes means better working conditions for those who made the more expensive shoe, but you're not really sure. It's late Saturday afternoon and you're worn out. Which shoe do you buy?

Later, sitting down to watch the National, you see images of a sweat shop, row on row of sewing machines, dismal faces, worn hands pushing fabric through at an exhausting rate. Well, Thank God, you say, it doesn't happen here. *It* does: you discover that those "Made in Canada" labels are no guarantee of fair labour practice. Many immigrants are working in their own homes for less than minimum wage and no benefits. Can't anybody buy a sweater anymore without feeling guilty?

Even a cup of coffee becomes questionable when you learn about the effect of coffee production on Third World economies. As forests are destroyed to make room for increased production, the land succumbs to erosion and flooding. How did having a cup of coffee become so political?



North Americans consume much of the world's resources. As part of the "global village", we can't dissociate ourselves from the images of poverty and tragedy around the world. We are becoming more aware that other parts of the world are poor because of our demands for cheap consumer goods. It's easy to criticize big corporations; but every time we buy even simple things – shoes, coffee, sweaters - we contribute to the crushing debt

of Third World nations. We can't deny the evidence that we are part of the problem.

We are like the rich young man who approaches Jesus, wanting to know the key to eternal life. "*Give up all that you have and follow me,*" Jesus says. The wealth of the young man is an obstacle to his relationship with God, not because of the goods themselves but because the young man believes that they are *essential to his life*. He leaves the encounter with Jesus deeply troubled.

When we begin with the knowledge that we are deeply and spiritually connected to the people who produce our goods, our shared essence becomes the most important part of any exchange. Linking ourselves to others spiritually shifts our focus from what they make for us, to the quality of life for all of us. Daring to learn and to be honest with ourselves, praying for people in the Third World, discovering cultures, sharing in their joys and accomplishments, empathizing with pain, fighting to ease their debt load: these are just a few ways of raising our consciousness. We are human together.

We have the power to make choices that connect us to each other and to God. We can buy running shoes from companies that practise good labour relations, leave that sweater on the rack because we don't really need it anyway, or drink fair trade shade-grown coffee in the morning with deep gratitude in our hearts.



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