

the world like a cloak

Paul wore the world like a loose cloak. He did not let the world smother him. He could enjoy it or put up with it. He could savor a gourmet meal or be content with a hurried snack. He lived what we would call "a simple lifestyle."

A simple life as opposed to what? Not as opposed to complicated. It would be hard to imagine a more complicated life than Paul's. But his life was complicated by people and concern for them, not by concern for things.

Not that he just sat back and let people take care of him. On the contrary, Paul insisted on supporting himself by plying his trade as a tentmaker.

Paul's simple lifestyle left him supremely free for others. He measured his worth in terms of people, not of things.

For a human being to be measured by things is dehumanizing. Something seems wrong when one thinks more highly of having three cars than of promoting families that are loving or serving families that are hurting.

A simple lifestyle reminds Christians not to let possessions or status blot out human values. A simple lifestyle allows people to be human themselves, not slaves to a twisted value system.

Jesus put it this way: "Wherever your treasure lies there your heart will be" (Luke 12:34).

•If our treasure is people, our hearts will be fixed on them and that is ennobling.

•If your treasure is in things, our hearts will be enslaved to them and that is debasing.

But when it comes to defining a simple lifestyle specifically, it's not easy. It is so relative. A simple lifestyle in the United States or Canada might seem positively luxurious in Third-World countries.

Every Christian has to determine in his or her own circumstances whether or not a particular lifestyle is in harmony with gospel standards. These are standards that insist on the primacy of human values over material ones.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

The way to spend time, resources, energy: That is what a simple lifestyle is about, said Patricia Davis.

The simple lifestyle grows out of a perspective — one that "recognizes God is the creator and ultimate owner of all," she said. It means recognizing that "all people are equally valuable and entitled to a life of human dignity."

"As children of one creator, we are obliged to be aware of others and share. We have no unlimited right to accumulate things while others are dying," Ms. Davis commented. She is a nurse who holds a master's degree in theology and who currently works in Washington, D.C., as an addictions counselor.

Experience "teaches me that less is more," she observed. For her there's a danger in accumulating things thoughtlessly: "Possessions can begin to possess you. It's so easy to accumulate more than you can care for."

And possessions can give people a "sense of self-sufficiency. To think, 'I deserve all these possessions. I don't need others or God,'" she said.

For Ms. Davis, living simply doesn't necessarily mean embracing a life of poverty. Most people need some security and

possessions to "make us happy and comfortable," she said.

Instead, it's adopting a certain attitude or approach toward life, making practical decisions in light of the values of Jesus.

Living simply "encourages me to community life," Ms. Davis said. For instance, having only one car in a family "calls on family members to cooperate, to negotiate who goes where when," the mother of three now-adult children explained. "This draws us toward intimacy and community" and it "reinforces the truth that we are dependent on each other. We learn to share."

Ms. Davis told of attending a meeting connected with her work as an addictions counselor. There a former drug addict spoke about how he developed a whole new slant on his life.

The young man explained how annoyed he was after a long and low period in his life to find that after paying his rent, making his car payment and buying food, he had only \$23 left.

But as he brooded, it occurred to him that he wasn't sleeping in an alley anymore, he had a car, his bills were paid and he "still had \$23." Then he realized that he "had what he needed," Ms. Davis said.

community-style simplicity

Lawrence, speaks next. He suggests that parishioners could learn something about simplicity of living by participating in group discussions on the U.S. bishops' proposed pastoral letter on the U.S. economy.

He explains: "I don't agree with everything in the letter. But I was particularly impressed when the bishops said the highest priority ought to be placed on fulfilling the basic needs of the poor. Again I was impressed when they said that meeting the needs of the poor and increasing their participation in society should be a priority when investing wealth, talent and human energy."

Sister Lupe Martinez is parish coordinator of religious education. She thinks people "learn by seeing and doing." She suggests having parish family evenings during Lent.

"We could start with a modest supper of lentil soup and prayer," she says. "Then we could show films about the starving people in Ethiopia and other countries. People might be encouraged to make their personal suggestions about simple living."

Emil Sapansky, director of social services, suggests that each year the parish sponsor the training, transportation and the ministry of several volunteer missionaries from the parish who would serve in

Central or South America.

In Sapansky's view, the missionaries would return with "personal stories of their experience of people who are obliged to live a simple life. We could all learn from them." He adds that he was a missionary years ago and "the experience changed me for life."

The director of the parish thrift shop, Betty Franklin, suggests that during Lent each parishioner practice "living a simple life." One way is: "Abstain from or, better yet, don't serve that extra dish of food at dinner. We Americans can all get by on a lot less."

The chairman of the finance committee, George McCoy, speaks now. "I've been waiting to say this for years. Before we can sponsor anyone or anything, something else must start first. We must begin to give much more in this parish. It is learning by doing. It will remind people each week to live a simple life and to help others. I've been tithing for seven years, and the Lord has blessed me for it."

Six of the 12 members of the parish council have now given their suggestions. What ideas on the simple life would you offer if you were next to speak?

(Father Sherry is director of the U.S. bishops' committee on Priestly Formation.)

...for discussion

1. Father John Castelot wonders what distinguishes a simple lifestyle — and what it is distinguished from. He poses the question this way: "Simple as opposed to what?" He asks the question after looking into the life of St. Paul and finding it simple, but complicated as well. How would you answer his question?

2. Father Castelot suggests that a simple lifestyle has the effect of freeing people. What is it that people pursuing a simpler lifestyle might be freed from, in your opinion?

3. Father David Monahan and Cindy Liebhart both write about couples who pursue simple lifestyles. Yet the lifestyles of the two couples are quite different. What does this suggest about the meaning of the word "simplicity"?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Re-treat Your Family to Lent," by Sister Sandra DeGidio, OSM. Suggestions for keeping a Lenten journal, for providing Lenten support to family members and for a renewed understanding of fasting and almsgiving are discussed in this four-page publication. Lent is "a time to get back to the basics of Christian living," the writer says. She suggests that Christians think about fasting from some TV viewing, from impatience or from drugs, including alcohol; that they think about almsgiving in terms of sharing personal energy, sharing one's time or sharing oneself, e.g., babysitting without pay for a mother who doesn't get out very often; adopting a family that is needy in some way and sharing material goods, time or compassion with them." (Catholic Update; St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio, 45210. Cost: 25-99 copies, 20 cents each.)