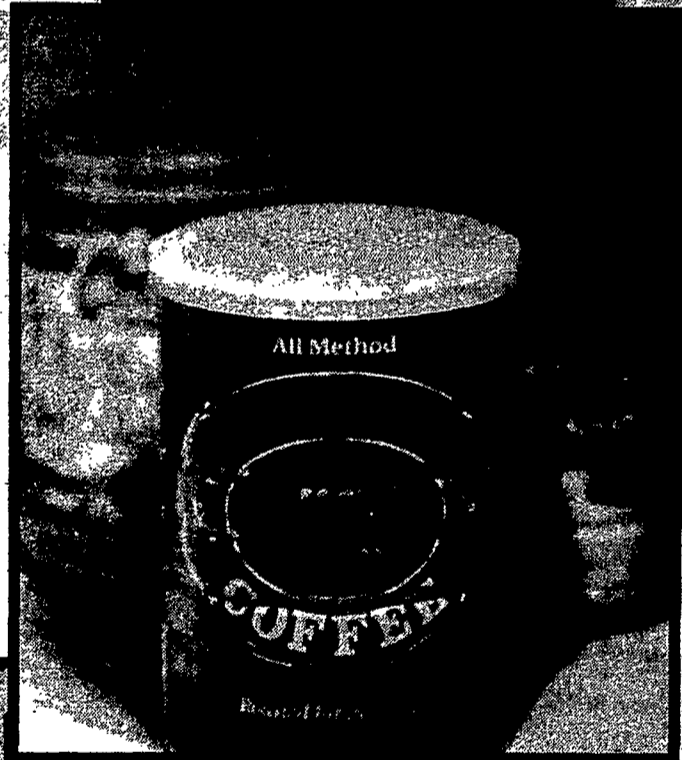




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What is the real cost of the items we buy?

Rose Benz Ericson, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Rochester, is like all shoppers when it comes to buying an item — she calculates its cost before deciding whether to purchase it.

Yet the cost that Ericson calculates involves more than the dollars and cents she'll have to shell out. Ericson also thinks about how well the laborers who made the product were treated, and how the environment was affected by the production process.

"How do you feel about spending money while others are being abused just so you can have something at a lower price?" Ericson said she asks herself.

In doing so, Ericson has responded to a request made by the nation's bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All."

The bishops — and labor advocates since then — pointed out that some imported goods in the U.S. are manufactured by labor that is underpaid, underage, ill-treated and even, at times, enslaved. Such factors enable some importers to sell goods at a lower cost than would be possible under a fairer system of labor management, the bishops stressed.

"The United States should do all it can to ensure that the trading system treats the poorest segments of developing countries' societies fairly and does not lead to human rights violations," the bishops wrote.

Workers' human rights abroad have been highlighted in recent months by the controversy surrounding a line of clothing marketed by TV talk show host Kathie Lee Gifford. According to the Associated Press, the clothing, made by Global Fashion in Honduras, was allegedly manufactured by girls as young as 12 who worked as much as 75 hours a week to make \$22 weekly in sweatshop conditions. Gifford, who said she was not aware of the conditions, has since become a public opponent of worker exploitation, and Wal-Mart, the major purchaser of Gifford's clothing line, blacklisted Global Fashion.

Gifford may have taken the heat over workers' conditions, but nearly all of us buy and purchase items made by underpaid, exploited labor, according to workers' rights advocates. That's why Ericson promotes what she calls "conscious consumption," the idea

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