

# Defining a family's wants, needs

Sheila Garcia/CNS

"People are being suffocated by their stuff," a home organization expert recently declared.

I'm not quite at the suffocation stage, but as I look around my home, I see how much we've accumulated over 25 years, especially such things as a home computer, DVD player and cell phone that did not even exist when we moved in. When a neighbor mentioned that she didn't have a microwave oven, I was appalled. Fifteen years ago our new microwave was a handy, if not absolutely essential, appliance. Now it has become a kitchen staple.

Like most families, mine battles the temptation to consumerism. Consumerism creeps in as we blur the distinction between wants and needs. Yesterday's wants become today's needs. We even offer plausible reasons for our purchases. We need a cell phone for safety. Electronic organizing devices help us to work more efficiently. A computer enables us to stay in touch with family and friends.

Defining the difference between wants and needs can be difficult. A co-worker from New England, for example, thought that an air-conditioned car was a luxury until she moved to the South. Yet we might reconsider how we meet what we perceive as our needs.

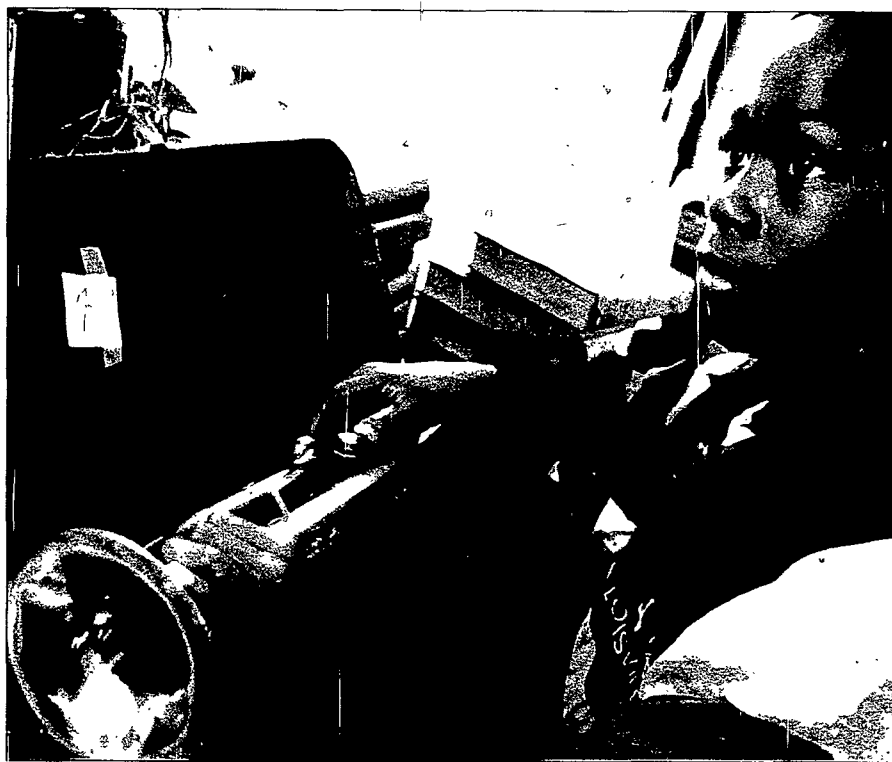
For example, most families need a reliable vehicle that can accommodate the family's size and activities. Beyond this need, they might want a vehicle that signals a particular status or lifestyle and offers an array of comforts. Families must choose between the basic car that meets their need and the "loaded" vehicle that satisfies their want.

We face similar choices with food, shelter and clothing. All are needs we are entitled to meet, yet all can become areas of excessive wanting.

## IN A NUTSHELL

**Consumerism takes consumption, and purchasing, and acquiring things to an extreme. Its overwhelming interest is with material objects a person can acquire. A consumerist may view people as commodities, too.**

**Pope John Paul II said, "It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a lifestyle that is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being.'"**



David V. Kamba/CNS

James Turner, 11, admires a used trumpet on sale at a St. Vincent de Paul thrift store in Chicago. At \$75 it is one of the more expensive items in the store.

Each day we confront judgment calls about what is too much.

Several outward signs can indicate that a family is sliding into consumerism, including an accumulation of material goods, credit-card debt and working longer hours to pay for all our things.

Consumerism, however, is not just

about possessions. It is also about an orientation to life. As Pope John Paul II said, "It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a lifestyle that is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being.'"

Consumerists become attached to possessions, yet what they have

rarely satisfies them. They judge themselves and others by the quality and quantity of what they own.

In contrast, families that reject consumerism invest in people rather than things. They have a set of rightly ordered priorities. Holding on to these priorities can be challenging.

Parents, for example, may be quite willing to spend less on themselves but unwilling to deny their children's wants. One financial columnist explained her method for resisting her children's demands for McDonald's and Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirts. "Can't, college fund," she says. Like the father in Luke's Gospel, she knows how to give truly good things to her children.

These families also realize that their responsibilities extend beyond their own members. Unlike consumerists, who are inward-oriented, they share their financial resources with those in need. In one family, where the parents routinely gave away a substantial part of their income, the grown children now continue to follow that example.

Families can resist consumerism by focusing on the Gospel values of simplicity, moderation and care for others. We need not live like paupers, but we are called to use prudently the financial resources God has given us.

Garcia is assistant director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.

## Confessions of a recovering pack rat

Brian T. Olszewski/CNS

I'm not sure who was the first to say, "Hold on to that; it's going to be valuable someday." It might have been someone whose parents dumped his or her 1959 and 1960 Topps baseball cards — which might be worth thousands of dollars today — or maybe it was the person who developed self-storage units and is reaping the rewards of this \$10-billion-a-year business.

I write these words surrounded by more than a half ton of "collectibles:" boxes of sports cards, game programs, yearbooks, historic newspapers and magazines, and political memorabilia. As a recovering pack rat, I am in the process of unloading more than 30 years worth of what I used to think was, or would become, valuable.

Our five children knew the "I need ..." litany. But early on, due to our limited budget and a desire to instill

a sense of priorities, we would respond, "Do you need it or just want it?" If a pre-schooler can program a VCR or DVD, she can tell you the difference between want and need.

At least one of them got the message. When, as an adult, our oldest son moved back home, while recovering from an illness, he noted how much "want" we had collected. One day he taped a sign inside our entry door. It read: "Simplify."

Pope John Paul II said it more strongly: "Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few" ("The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," message for the World Day of Peace, Jan. 1, 1990).

Jesus told the rich man that to inherit eternal life he must sell his possessions and give the compensation to the poor (Luke 18:18-23).

In an era when collectibles can be a contact sport (e.g. McDonald's Beanie Baby giveaway or Tickle Me Elmo holiday scuffles) and when eBay is the worship space for out-of-control consumers praising the gods of supply and demand, a life based upon simplicity, moderation, discipline and sacrifice may appear countercultural. But it's a good life — a clutter-free life!

It is ironic to suggest that such a life is attainable when "attain" is an important part of consumerism's vernacular, but this attainment is a Gospel-based life in which we focus upon what we really need, what we can share, what we can do to help others and what we can do to protect the environment by consuming less of its goods.

Start with one word: "Simplify."

Olszewski is editor of the *Northwest Indiana Catholic*, newspaper of the Diocese of Gary.