Pope John Paul II Addresses
Overconsumption & Effects of Consumerism

"Side by side with the miseries of underdevelopment, we find ourselves up against a form of superdevelopment, equally inadmissible. This superdevelopment consists in an excessive availability of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups and makes people slaves of "possession" and immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things owned with others still better. This is the civilization of consumption, or "consumerism," which involves so much throwing away and waste.

All of us experience the sad effects of blind submission to consumerism. In the first place it represents crass materialism. At the same time it represents a radical dissatisfaction because one quickly learns that the more one possesses, the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.

One cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings - animals, plants, the natural elements - simply as one wishes, according to economic needs. One must take into account the nature of each being and its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is the cosmos.

A second consideration is that natural resources are limited; some are not renewable. Using them as if they are inexhaustible endangers their availability not only for the present generation but for generations to come. When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: that there is an order in the universe which must be respected. The human person has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations.

In light of these moral criteria we would see that hidden behind certain decisions, inspired only by economics and politics, are real forms of idolatry: to money, ideology, class, technology.

I have introduced this analysis in order to point out the true nature of the evil which faces us: It is a question of a moral evil, the fruit of many sins which lead to "structures of sin". To diagnose the evil in this way is to identify the path to be followed in order to overcome it.

"Sin" and "structures of sin" are categories seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of evils which afflict us.

For Christians and all who recognize the theological meaning of the word sin, a change of behavior or mentality is conversion (cf. Mark 13:3, Isaiah 30:15). On the path toward the
desired conversion, it is already possible to point to the growing awareness of interdependence among individuals and nations.

When interdependence is recognized, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity. This is not a feeling of vague compassion at the misfortunes of so many people. On the contrary, it is a persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is, to the good of all and each individual because we are all responsible for all.

Those who are more influential because they have a greater share of goods and services should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess.

The goal of peace, so desired by everyone, will be achieved through putting into effect social and international justice, but also through the practice of the virtues which favor togetherness and which teach us to live in unity so as to build in unity. The "evil mechanisms" and the "structures of sin" can be overcome only through the exercise of the human and Christian solidarity to which the Church calls us and which she tirelessly promotes. Only in this way can such positive energies be fully released for the benefit of development and peace.

No plan or organization, however, will affect the necessary changes unless governmental leaders are convinced of the need for this new solidarity, which is demanded of them by the ecological crisis.

It must be said that the proper ecological balance will not be found without directly addressing the structural causes of poverty that exist throughout the world.

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these attitudes cause. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.

There is no justification for despair, pessimism or inertia. We are all called, indeed obliged, to face the tremendous challenge of the last decade of the second millennium because the present dangers threaten everyone. At stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator. Every individual is called upon to play his or her part in this peaceful campaign, a campaign conducted by peaceful means to secure peace, to safeguard nature and the world about us.

I wish to appeal with simplicity and humility to all men and women without exception. I wish to ask them to be convinced of the seriousness of the present moment and of each person's responsibility, and to implement - by the way they live as individuals and families, by the use of their resources, by contributing to economic and political decisions, and by personal commitment to national and international undertakings.
In this commitment, the sons and daughters of the Church must serve as examples and guides. They are called upon, in conformity with the program announced by Jesus himself, to "preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19)."