

# "PURCHASING IS A MORAL ACT"

A CONSUMER EXAMINATION FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH





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## *A consumer examination for people of faith*

*"They hand over the just for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals; they trample the destitute into the dust, and force the lowly out of the way."  
-adapted from Amos 2: 6-7*

*"It is good for people to realize that purchasing is always a moral - and not simply economic - act. Hence the consumer has a specific social responsibility, which goes hand-in-hand with the social responsibility of [business]."*

*-Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate (66)*

## Introduction

The stuff we buy goes on a long journey before it ends up in our hands. This process starts with the extraction of raw materials and then advances through production, distribution, consumption, and finally disposal. This process is called a "supply chain."

Unfortunately, the steps of this process often exploit and harm local workers, nearby communities, and the natural environment.

This consumer examination focuses on the first step in this process: extraction.

"Extraction is a short-sighted model of development seen around the world that exploits natural resources on a massive scale, creating significant economic profits for the powerful few in the short term, but too often resulting in minimal benefits for the communities where these resources are found" ([www.justresponse.faith](http://www.justresponse.faith)).

Extraction can look like many things: coal and oil drilling; mineral mining, like gold, copper, or [coltan](#) (used in many electronic devices); large-scale cash crops, like soybeans or palm oil; commercial water bottling; and corporate-and-profit driven renewable energy projects.

The consequences of extraction can range from infringements on human rights, the displacement of people, and irreparable harm to ecosystems.

This examination will help you identify how the extraction of the raw materials needed to manufacture your purchases impacted workers, nearby communities, and the earth. It will help you imagine new ways to purchase responsibly.

Every act, including our purchases, is a moral one, as Pope Benedict XVI reminded us.

Go to the next page to start the worksheet. You do not need to complete this worksheet in one sitting.

# Step 1: Purchase Inventory

We need to know what we buy before we can determine how that product's raw materials were extracted.

Using the space provided, jot down the last three purchases you've made, plus where and when you bought them.

## **Example**

- **What:** *Iced Coffee*
- **Where:** *Starbucks*
- **When:** *02/04/2019*

- **What:**
- **Where:**
- **When:**

- **What:**
- **Where:**
- **When:**

- **What:**
- **Where:**
- **When:**

Now, select one purchase to focus on for the rest of this worksheet.

## **NOTE: Finding Information**

The next few sections of this worksheet will ask you to compile information about the product you circled, to the extent possible. You will have to search online for much of this information. Here are some places to begin your search.

- The company's website
- The manufacturer's website
- Wikipedia
- Google keywords like "[company] + supply chain ethics" or "[company] + [product] manufacturer"

If you can't find the information to answer some of the questions below, then ask "why not?"

What does that say about the corporations' transparency about their supply chains? Might you be able to guess at some of the answers given the type of product purchased?

## Step 2: Examining Business

Businesses have a duty to make sure that the products they sell are manufactured responsibly and morally. Likewise, conscious consumers have a duty to buy from companies that take this responsibility seriously.

Answer the following questions about the product you selected in "Step 1."

Brief, example answers have been given for the iced coffee from "Step 1" to give you a sense of what to look for. Your own answer should have more detail.

### **What are the component parts of your product?**

*example: plastic/paper cup, plastic lid, plastic straw, coffee beans, water*

### **Does the company that sold this product monitor its supply chain for moral or ethical concerns? If so, are they compliant with their own standards?**

*example: Starbucks has an "ethical sourcing" page on its website.*

### **Sometimes the company that sold the product is not the same as the company that manufactured the component parts. What company makes your product's component parts? What are these parts made of?**

*example: It is difficult to find where Starbucks sources the plastic/paper for its cups. Why is that? International Paper has manufactured Starbucks cups in the past, but it is unclear if they still do so.*

### **How did the manufacturing company obtain the raw material to make the product?**

*Example: International Paper sources raw material from around the world from numerous suppliers. It does not list its suppliers. Paper is often extracted through deforestation.*

## Step 3: Examining Impacts

Now that you have an understanding of which companies made your product, and where they source their raw materials, it's time to figure out how the extraction of those raw materials impacted workers, local communities, and the environment.

In addition to the sources we mentioned above, for this section it may be helpful to search for news stories on sites like Google News. In the search bar, use terms like "[Manufacturer name] + worker/environmental impacts." Sometimes you can also find video testimony on sites like YouTube or Vimeo.

**What parts of the world does the raw material for your product come from?**

**How does the extraction of this raw material impact...**

**workers**

**the communities the raw material came from**

**the environment**

Now that you've finished the "gathering information" steps of this worksheet, reflect on how the process has been for you. What did you find frustrating about this process? What surprised you? What did you learn?

## Step 4: The Faith Perspective

Pope Francis has reaffirmed his predecessors by noting that “technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress” (LS, #194).

**What kind of wake did your purchase leave behind? Write some thoughts in the space below.**

Our faith calls on us to respect the common good and stand in solidarity with God’s exploited children, including the earth. This fundamental value informs how we make purchasing decisions, and how we participate in the economy.

Does your product, as Pope Francis said, leave behind a better world at every stage of production? If not, are there alternatives? Take a few minutes to jot down some thoughts in answer to the following questions.

**Did you really need to purchase this product? Could you have gone without it?**

**Is there a product you can buy to replace the old one, one whose production treats workers with dignity, benefits the local community, and cares for the environment? If so, where can you get it?**

**If an alternative product does not exist (or even if it does), think creatively about non-commercial alternatives.**

## Closing Thoughts

We encourage you to use this method of examination for all the products you buy. This includes everyday purchases like food and beverages, household items, cleaning and personal hygiene products, and clothes. It also includes bigger purchase items like electronics, jewelry, and automobiles.

This process can also be applied to the other steps of the supply chain process.

As Pope Francis teaches us, each individual can take from the bounty of the earth whatever she or he needs for subsistence, but each of us also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.

"The earth is the Lord's," says the Psalmist. This reminds us that God is the ultimate "owner" of the earth and everything within it (Dt 10:14). Our faith calls on us to respect this fundamental truth. (Learn more about this teaching of our faith [here](#).)

We do not own anything, we don't have a right to mistreat the earth or its bounty. Creation is a gift from God, which we must be grateful for and respect.

## Read More

To dive deeper into the extractive process and what our faith has to say about the exploitation embedded in our economy's supply chain, please explore the following resources.

- [The Story of Stuff](#), a free documentary about how supply chains work
- [Columban Statement on Extractive Industries](#), a reflection from the Missionary Society of St. Columban
- [A Just Response to Extractivism](#), an introduction to what extractivism is, why it's a concern for people of faith, and how you can respond
- [Universal Destination of Goods](#), a summary of the Catholic Church's teaching on how the goods of the earth should be distributed fairly
- "[Why Shop Ethically](#)," a resource article for faithful consumer from CRS Ethical Trade



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