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Zygmunt Bauman and Ignatius: Jesuit Values and Higher Education in an Age of Liquid Modernity

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Abstract

Zygmunt Bauman's critical description of liquid modernity provides those of us in Jesuit higher education a fruitful backdrop against which to consider the challenges facing us today. Liquid modernity stands in sharp contrast as a challenge to traditional Jesuit values. It is characterized by a decentering of our world, leaving us without basis for planning and pursuing truth, seeing progress as threat, and resulting in a trivializing of revolutionary movements. According to liquid modern values, money is the exclusive value by which to judge, flexibility trumps commitment, consumerism is the new messianic, and self-protection and self-gratification are the new normal—again, in contrast to Jesuit ideals and pursuits. By drawing from Bauman's critical account of liquid modernity we can understand the essential significance of Jesuit values, as well as their radical contrast with contemporary culture and society.

*"I am in awe at everything Francis is doing; I believe his pontificate gives not just the Catholic Church but the entire humanity a chance."*¹

*Uncertainty is the natural habitat of human life—though the hope of escaping uncertainty is the engine of human life pursuits.*²

*As Ignazio Ramonet has calculated, during the last thirty years more information has been produced in the world than during the previous 5,000 years, while 'a single copy of the Sunday edition of the New York Times contains more information than a cultivated person in the eighteenth century would consume during a lifetime.'*³

In their highly acclaimed book, *Catholic Higher Education* (2010), Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, S.J., begin with a haunting claim:

A Crisis is looming within American Catholic higher education. As Catholic colleges and universities analyze their position and set a course for the future, they are faced with a structural reality which threatens their ability to continue as institutions with vibrant religious cultures. Institutional Catholic culture is changing and adapting at all Catholic colleges and Universities.⁴

The crisis Morey and Piderit refer to is the question of how Catholic schools will retain

their identity as they are increasingly taken over by laypeople. While this is an important challenge, there are many more changes and challenges today that face Jesuit education beyond just the lack of priests to administer their schools. Jesuit colleges and universities are facing innumerable challenges in the fast-changing world of higher education.

This plethora of challenges and multiplicity of changes, coming through the technological and commercial influences in contemporary culture, lead us at times to a quiet despair that Steven B. Bennett wrote about recently in this journal.⁵ Here I will build on these concerns of Bennett, Morey, and Piderit by drawing from the insights of Zygmunt Bauman's views

regarding consumeristic values in what he calls 'Liquid Modernity' to help situate the core values of Jesuit higher education and their challenges (as well as our own personal challenges) in this contemporary situation, by referring primarily to some of Bauman's most recent works: *The Art of Life* (2008), *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008), *Liquid Times* (2007), and *Consuming Life* (2007).

Zygmunt Bauman

Zygmunt Bauman recently said in an interview that "I am in awe at everything Francis is doing: I believe his pontificate gives not just the Catholic Church but the entire humanity a chance."⁶ Bauman, a Jewish ex-communist from Poland who has taught in Britain since 1971 and is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Leeds University, writes books almost faster than reviews and analysis can be produced—he has written 31 books since 2000. In this sense he is an example of the liquid modern world which is primarily characterized by change—and a constant flow of new products and developments for us to choose. Fortunately for us, Bauman's works do have consistent coordinating themes regarding a liquid modern shift in values in the midst of a consumer society, which I believe help us to reflect on both the challenges we face as Jesuit institutions of higher education in a 'liquid modern' world, as well as some of the ways our Jesuit values might respond to those challenges.

There are a number of basic questions to be investigated here: First, What does Zygmunt Bauman mean by liquid modernity? Second, what are the consequences or characteristics of a liquid modern consumer society—particularly-- what transposition of values does Bauman see in liquid modernity? And last, how can Bauman's analysis of our current culture and our place in it provide insight, and help us in Jesuit higher education to think critically about what we are up against, and how we succumb to liquid modernity at times? Of course it is in keeping with a Jesuit model of education that we would pursue seeking truth in all sources—even the thoughts of a nonreligious Polish sociologist.

I believe Jesuit-thinking people should thoroughly agree with Bauman's challenge that we should authentically live our lives and take both personal existential and civic responsibility for the choices we make, as well as his concerns about the gradual erosion of civil society.

By investigating Bauman's description of "liquid modernity" and contemporary consumer culture, we will understand his view that the liquid modern consumer world we live in has transposed values radically so that what were once considered valued characteristics and traits are now considered liabilities, and vice-versa. There are substantial consequences for our lives, our relationships, and our way of being in the world, and in some ways our Jesuit values stand in stark contrast to liquid modernity.

Jesuit values are widely known as historical mores or foundations of Jesuit education and way of life. While dynamic and living, they are a source of consistent stability and focus. At Creighton University, the core Jesuit values are *cura personalis*, faith that does justice, finding God in all things, and women and men for and with others. These are the touchstones for our identity. They are constant, not fluid. They value the poor and pursuit of justice rather than consumerism. Jesuit values are concerned with the dignity of each person and finding God in all things, as opposed to seeing the world as purely for one's own sake. Finally, Jesuit values pursue solidarity with others as opposed to singular self-focus in a world of consumer objects and purely pragmatic concerns. In all these ways, Jesuit values contrast with the tendencies of liquid modernity.

Bauman describes liquid modernity quite articulately, but he is not its proponent. In what Bauman calls our 'liquid modern' age, things change so rapidly that the notion of revolution is redundant and trivialized, as things constantly change. Society's 'virtues' have been radically shifted, so that stability, steadfastness, and institutional memory, which were once considered assets, are now seen as liabilities. Instead, the ability to efface

oneself and recreate, to let go of the past, ignore it and forget it— and instead be flexible always forever towards the future that is effaced as soon as it comes and become ‘history’— this is the new virtue. Analysis is made difficult because of the rapid succession of events and ideas, so that the previous idea has not crystallized to be analyzed before it is pushed aside by the newest one to come. In such a setting, Bauman challenges us to be authentic selves who choose for ourselves how to live rather than adopting this consumer society as our means to happiness.

Liquid Modernity’s Distracting Decentering Effects

Liquid modernity may be best described as having the characteristics of decentered perpetual change. In a globalized world we do not have the clear polarized sides or clustered groups of power by which we once described our world and events in it. Not only in the political world but also societally this is the case. Traditional groups like the Optimists, the Lions Club, or Rotarians are in decline, as are most mainline denominational churches.⁷ A higher percentage of people are independent rather than republican or democrat than ever before.⁸ Even chain stores are losing their hold on consumers as consumers can go online and buy whatever they want without going to stores at all.⁹ Pop culture perhaps shows the decentralization better than anything else: The Beatles were loved by most everyone in a time when ABC, CBS, and NBC ruled as the sources of media and news. Today there is a spasmodic diaspora of sources for news and media, and independent labels and the thousands of bands who sign up with them are as numerous as sands on the seashore, or posts on YouTube, each independently producing music ad nauseam. Anyone can put their song or video up on the web. No need to find a publisher if you have an idea—just start a blog and join the 75 million others. There are more opportunities for communicating with each other than ever, yet ironically, this has led to a certain sort of isolation and social disintegration. In her recent book *Distracted*, Maggie Jackson writes,

Amid the glittering promise of our new technologies and the wondrous potential of our scientific gains, we are nurturing a culture of social diffusion, intellectual fragmentation, sensory detachment... The way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention—the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress. Moreover, this disintegration may come at great cost to ourselves and to society.¹⁰

This social disintegration via technology is part of the problem for Bauman, but not all of it.

Regarding media sources, chances are much higher that more people will read something on the web than if they had to buy the book. Most of our students read more online than in print. More and more academics are spending their time and energy following the blogs of the leaders in their respective fields. By the time a book is published, those following the writer’s blogs have a good idea of what the book will say already.¹¹ Traditional sources of centralized authority for media—the clearinghouses of information and power such as book publishers, major record companies, non-cable TV channels— are no longer so powerful. There is no more clear centralization of power globally, nationally, culturally, or locally:

The centrality of the center has been decomposed, and links between intimately connected spheres of authority have been broken, perhaps irreparably. Local condensations of economic, military, intellectual or artist power and influence no longer coincide (if they ever did).¹²

This decentralization and a loss of a central gatekeeper leading to a spectrum of viewpoints is reflected as well in Jesuit identity, or various perspectives on what constitutes Jesuit and Catholic identity. For example, in economics, we have libertarian Catholics¹³ and the Cato Institute sparring with those like Dan

Finn¹⁴ and Michael Naughton¹⁵ who hold more traditional views regarding Catholic social teachings. One can find some Catholic economists criticizing Pope Francis.¹⁶ Of course, some of this diversity is healthy and fruitful, but problems arise when we want so much diversity that we will stand for so little that Jesuit identity is reduced to innocuous values like environmental concern, service, intellectual inquiry, or diversity and pluralism. These are values that may have support from Jesuit values, but they are hardly distinctive in themselves.

The Perceived Pointlessness of Pursuing ‘Truth’, Planning, and Organization

This decentralization can leave us without moorings, and provides us with a sense of despair regarding any attempt to organize and make sense of our world, and our old ways of attempting to do so seem deficient: "As we try desperately to grasp the dynamics of planetary affairs today, old and hard-dying habit of organizing the balance of power with the help of such conceptual tools as center and periphery, hierarchy, and superiority and inferiority serves more as a handicap than, as before, an asset; more as blinders than as searchlights."¹⁷ Our attempts at discovering an order, a system of values and rules, and structure to the universe are on this liquid modern view, a hindrance rather than a help. It is difficult to see how inquiry into the order of the world or the pursuit of truth have any place in light of such a condition. This certainly sets the established heritage of long-held Jesuit values at odds with this perpetual malleability value.

Long term planning can appear to be pointless in this situation of rapid fire changes: "A liquid modern setting is inhospitable to long-term planning, investment and storage; indeed, it strips the delay in gratification of its past sense of prudence, circumspection and, above all, reasonability. Most valuables rapidly lost their luster and attraction, and if there is

procrastination they may well become fit solely for the rubbish tip even before they have been enjoyed."¹⁸ The order and reasonability of events seem to be difficult to grasp and find, as we find ourselves facing a constant barrage of new data to consider. As so many Jesuit universities perpetually reconfigure their strategies, management and organizational structures, and adjust to the changes of technology and economic realities, as well as revolving-door administrations, the reality of the difficulty of long-term planning are obvious. This has the potentially destabilizing effect of keeping faculty and staff busy keeping up with new changes while the historic identity and values of the institution are severely eroded. At times these effects seem almost coordinated, when many plans seem to come pre-decided, with focus groups designed to endorse the plans apparently preconceived by the administration in many cases. While such methods are obviously efficient short term, it can undermine a unifying sense of meaning, purpose, and polis at Jesuit schools.

The Threat of Progress

On Bauman's analysis, under such conditions, 'progress' itself is no longer seen as a benefit, but as a threat. 'Progress' is the cause of outsourced jobs, of declining American companies, of our students slipping behind in the sciences, of yet another new software program to be learned, another potential way to become obsolete. In academia we see this as well—as models and expectations of both content and delivery change yearly, it feels hard to keep up and progress can seem to be our enemy, our source of constant threat of obsolescence. "The ground on which our life prospects are presumed to rest is admittedly shaky—as are our jobs and the companies that offer them, our partners and networks of friends, the standing we enjoy in wider society and the self-esteem and self-confidence that come with it."¹⁹ Once, the desired goal was 'progress' but now it has become our enemy: "'Progress,' once the most extreme manifestation of radical optimism and a promise of universally shared and lasting happiness, has moved all the way to the

opposite, dystopian and fatalistic pole of anticipation: it now stands for the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that instead of auguring peace and respite portends nothing but continuous crisis and strain and forbids a moment of rest.”²⁰ The various ‘progressive’ editions of the latest software are not welcomed advances, but rather additional hurdles to us. More information is not a help, but more work—more sifting through academic articles in more journals than one could read in a lifetime, even if they stopped printing any more today. Bauman says, “Progress has turned into a sort of endless and uninterrupted game of musical chairs in which a moment of inattention results in irreversible defeat and irrevocable exclusion.”²¹ In such a situation, we find ourselves focused on trying to maintain what we know, and preserve what we hold dear, and any sense of security is gone. Bauman writes, “Instead of great expectations and sweet dreams, progress evokes an insomnia full of nightmares of 'being left behind'-- of missing the train, or falling out of the window of a fast accelerating vehicle.”²² Constant upgrades and changes, constant volatility in enrollments, financial states of affairs, methods, procedures, and administrative policies leaves us swimming just to keep our head above water:

In this situation without solidity, our values also will change to match our requirements:

Virtues are rewritten as vices, achievements as misdeeds, loyalties as treachery-- and vice versa. The devaluation of the valuations and practices of the past must be all the more decisive and uncompromising because the future, just taking off, is wrapped in mist. Nothing about its shape can be said with any confidence, except that it will be different from the past, and that few familiar landmarks will be on hand to mitigate the uncomfortable premonition of groping in the dark. In the absence of signposts showing the road ahead, perhaps reversing the signposts inherited from the past will do the trick....²³

When Jesuit schools begin to see their Jesuit tradition as baggage instead of as an important asset, they have truly lost their way. As some schools sprint to become less and less strangely Jesuit, they are losing the identity and tradition which provides them their meaning for being, and as Jesuit schools attempt to boil down their identity to innocuous bullet point adjectives, worthy of any secular university, they eventually lose their distinctive flavor.

Liquid as: Perpetual change and the trivialization of ‘upheavals’ and ‘revolution’

...the liquid modern world is in a state of permanent revolution, a state that does not admit of the one-off single event revolutions remembered from the times of solid modernity.²⁴

Bauman describes the viewpoint of today as being expectation of constant change, and inevitable expiration date of whatever we now call knowledge:

We can be certain of one thing only, ... that the next month or year will be unlike the time we are living in now; that, being different, they will invalidate a lot of the knowledge we have now and much of the know-how we are currently using...; that much of what we've learned we'll surely have to forget, while we'll have to get rid of many things of which we are proud and for which we are praised today...; and that the choices most recommended today may be decried tomorrow as shameful blunders.”²⁵

With such a viewpoint, it seems foolish to settle down too firmly with a particular worldview, a traditional set of values such as faithfulness, steadfastness, etc, or even a particular life project. Change becomes the norm, when the changes happen so frequently that it seems that change is the rule, not the exception, and this leads us to adopt new values.

An important consequence of living in a world changing so fast, is that it seems nearly impossible to be able to analyze what is

happening, because ideas come and go so quickly. We have epochal changes occurring so quickly that the epochs are crowded together and appear to have little significance in a sea of epochs:

The pace of change perhaps tends to be too fast, and the speed with which new phenomena burst into public awareness and disappear from view too vertiginous. It bars the experience from crystallizing, settling and solidifying in attitudes and behavioural patterns, value syndromes and worldviews, fit to be recorded as durable traces of the 'spirit of the time' and recast as unique and lasting characteristics of a generation. In a crowd of scattered and apparently unconnected discontinuities, changes that can acquire the visibility and formative power of an 'upheaval' are few and far between.²⁶

It becomes quite difficult to connect the dots and give form through analysis to this "crowd of unconnected discontinuities." When all we have is upheaval and anomalies, the entire idea of upheaval becomes trivialized, and the idea of rebelling against the established norm becomes impossible, since nothing is established as a norm in a situation of perpetual change. Because change and revolution is so perpetual, the very notion of significant lasting change is redundant, and so, a hopeless cause.

The danger in such a world is that people are not grounded or focused enough to reflect on what they are actually doing. Values seem extravagant in a world in which it is a struggle simply to persist. In such an environment of challenges and difficulties our default reaction can be to try to model ourselves more on non-Jesuit institutional theories of management and direction. Like some churches who pursue corporate style growth models as their game plan for expanding the kingdom, we may at times forgo our own values and models for the sake of being more like our non-Jesuit competitors.

Our professional schools perhaps are most in danger of this, as we educate our educators, businesspeople, engineers, nurses, doctors and lawyers. In our pursuit of top-flight programs, we set aside our Jesuit identities and the practical effects of taking them seriously in our hiring decisions. In our programs, we cut out the historical and focus on the immediate issues. We cut back on philosophical and historical background and focus on problem solving methodologies without context. It is already quite difficult to staff our faculties with members who have a deep understanding of the history and tradition of Jesuit thought and Catholic values and social teaching—if the Jesuit universities themselves stop providing such education, then it is likely that the end of Jesuit education is near.

Pursuit of Happiness through Money, and the Consequent Loss of Happiness

In liquid modern consumer culture, the key to happiness and stability becomes money—capital to spend. As institutions, while we may lose our way in terms of mission, we may at least have bricks and mortar projects and technology advancements that help us feel some sense of meaningful progress. Jesuit and Catholic institutions may still attempt to show a veneer of values as they pursue donor dollars, while simultaneously deemphasizing distinctive values to attract a larger and 'more diverse' student body. We grow our campuses as we lose our values. As institutions we can substitute consumer spending for substantive meaningfulness. Bauman says that the problem with our notion of happiness is that we tend to think happiness is increase in GNP— the wealthier a people become, the more likely they are to be happy, on the whole. But studies seem to have shown clearly that happiness does not rise after you get to a basic level of economic development.²⁷ More economic increase beyond that basic level does not increase happiness, but actually can decrease it. He has a great quote from Robert Kennedy from 1968:

Our GNP...registers the costs of the security systems which we install to protect our homes and the prisons in which we lock up those who manage to break into them...It includes the production of napalm, nuclear arms and armed vehicles...It records...television programmes that glorify violence in order to sell toys to children. On the other hand, GNP does not note the health of our children, quality of our education or gaiety of our games. It does not measure the beauty of our poetry and the strength of our marriages. It does not care to evaluate the quality of our political debates and integrity of our representatives. It leaves out of consideration our courage, wisdom and culture. It says nothing about our compassion and dedication to our country. In a word, the GNP measures everything, except what makes life worth the pain of living it.²⁸

We generally think wealth will bring us possibilities that in turn will make us happy. We give up non-market paths to happiness (having leisure time, close friendships, home cooked meals in common with others, work-life balance) in order to accumulate money, in our pursuit of objects and experiences that will bring us our desired end: happiness. But in this pursuit we give up what actually would make us happy (friendships, leisure, etc). Our consumer culture pushes us towards this frenzy. We can purchase our identity and security through consumer labels and so remake ourselves constantly.

Bauman points out that much of what is crucial to human happiness is not something you can buy:

Whatever your cash and credit standing, you won't find in a shopping mall love and friendship, the pleasures of domesticity, the satisfaction that comes from caring for loved ones or helping a neighbour in distress, the self-esteem to be drawn from work well done, gratifying the 'workmanship instinct' common to us all, the appreciation, sympathy and respect of

workmates and other people with whom one associates; you won't find there freedom from the threats of disregard, contempt, snubs and humiliation."²⁹

The ironic fact is that as people attempt to buy consumer goods in order to be happy, their pursuit of that often leads them to give up these non-market avenues to happiness. In fact often, "the capacity of increased income to generate happiness is overtaken by the unhappiness caused by a shrinking access to the goods which 'money can't buy'."³⁰ Consumption takes time, including time to make the money to consume, and so we are left with less time for those things that bring happiness that cannot be purchased. In pursuit of wealth, to purchase commodities and experiences, people often neglect and so lose really meaningful avenues to authentic happiness:

Even the agreeable taste of the restaurant food or the high price tags and highly prestigious labels attached to the gifts sold in the shops will, however, *hardly match up to the value in added happiness of the goods for whose absence or rarity they are meant to compensate: such goods as gathering around a table laid with food that has been jointly cooked with its sharing in mind, or lengthy, attentive listening by a person-who-counts to one's intimate thoughts, hopes and apprehensions, and similar proofs of loving attention, engagement and care.*³¹

The friendships and deep relational experiences that make life meaningful and bring happiness to us do not require money. But those relationships are exactly what suffer when we spend our time trying frantically to make enough money to buy happiness, which is a failed project anyway.

Institutional advancement at our schools can at times undermine long standing cultures of fidelity rooted in long commitments and historical ties that are more like family than an institution. But at times our pursuit of corporate styles of governance in pursuit of fiduciary responsibility with an eye on the bottom line have damaged those relationships, torn at our cultures, and for the sake of

institutional streamlining and efficiencies, tossed aside deep relational ties.

Value: Flexibility instead of Commitment

Liquid modern consumerism values flexibility over commitment, since flexibility helps more to cope in the rapidly changing environment. Commitment seems outmoded, quaint, and not relevant to the current situation: "Any indefinite, interminable commitment would severely limit the range of plots available for the succeeding episodes. An indefinite commitment and the pursuit of happiness seem to be at cross-purposes."³² Rather than needing to learn from and remember the past, in liquid modern flux the ability to adjust and forget the ways we used to do things may seem more helpful than remembering: "A swift and thorough forgetting of outdated information and fast ageing habits can be more important for the next success than the memorization of past moves and the building of strategies on a foundation laid by previous learning."³³ In this situation, we need to learn to forget quickly, and this Bauman calls 'flexibility':

What follows...is that the skill we really need to acquire first and foremost is flexibility (a neutered and so currently politically correct, name for spinelessness)-the capacity to forget fast and promptly dispose of past assets that have turned into liabilities, as well as the ability to change tacks and tracks at short notice and without regret; and that what we really need to remember forever is the need to avoid swearing lifelong loyalty to anything and anybody.³⁴

Relationships themselves are not meant to last for those who are liquid modern:

"Relationships of the consumerist type are, from the start, 'until further notice.'"³⁵ Because relationships hold a lot of unknowns, they are especially risky. The commitment involved requires that one cut oneself off from the future possibilities of other potential opportunities. "Entering into relationships accompanied by a commitment to maintain them through thick and thin, whatever

happens, is akin to signing a blank check. It portends the likelihood of confronting some as yet unknown and unimaginable discomforts and miseries with no escape clause to be invoked."³⁶

Even ownership itself is a problem in a liquid modern consumer society, because ownership equates to lasting responsibility, and so, a loss of flexibility. Bauman highlights common fear of the responsibility of ownership by way of example of Flexpetz, a firm that rents pets to people so they don't have to deal with the 'pain of ownership'.³⁷ We fear getting locked in— because such duration, such ongoing stability, is likely to be a liability not an asset in a value system that prioritizes the potential to ebb and flow with the constantly changing environment in which we find ourselves in liquid modernity. We must continually create and recreate ourselves, and long term commitment to particular relationships or ownerships does not help us maintain the flexibility necessary to quickly change our direction.

Sometimes our institutions have, in their attempts to become efficient, given up some of the traditional notions of Jesuit family. I know of multiple instances where long-serving staff have been relieved of duties as part of cost saving measures at various Jesuit schools, and the ways in which those dismissals have been handled would not be considered even by secular business ethics standards to be kind or considerate, much less reflections of *cura personalis*. In our sudden and sometimes awkward attempts to become nimble and efficient, we have at times sacrificed our Jesuit values. Rather than fidelity to be with and for others, we have felt compelled to turn away for the sake of efficiency.

Training Young Consumers: i.e., Helping the Young Forget Traditional Values in Lieu of Being Savvy Shoppers

Reaching happiness means the acquisition of things other people have no chance or prospect of acquiring. Happiness needs one-upmanship...³⁸

Twenty four hours a day and seven days a week humans tend to be drilled, groomed, exhorted, cajoled and tempted to abandon the ways they have considered right and proper, to turn their backs on what they have held dear and what they thought had been making them happy, and to become different from what they are. They are pressed to turn into ... consumers moved by infinitely expandable desires and wants, ... to be closed and blind to disinterested generosity and indifferent to the common weal in case it can't be deployed to enhance their egos...³⁹

Our lives are filled with uncertainty. They are frail, fragile, changing, and little is secure. In the face of this, we attempt to build identity through consumption, in a fruitless hope of gaining some sort of stabilization through objects and experiences outside ourselves. Ironically, as Bauman sees it, in this liquid setting we find ourselves in—lacking stability and solidity—we find a possible avenue of hope through a value system of ongoing never ending consumption: “An instability of desires and insatiability of needs, and the resulting proclivity for instant consumption and the instant disposal of its objects, chimes well with the new liquidity of the setting in which life pursuits have been inscribed and are bound to be conducted in the foreseeable future.”⁴⁰ Consumerism is for Bauman “a type of social arrangement” when mundane human desires and wants are made into “the principal propelling and operating force of society, a force that coordinates systemic reproduction, social integration, social stratification and the formation of human individuals, as well as playing a major role in the processes of individual and group self-identification and in the selection and pursuit of individual life policies.”⁴¹ In short, consumerism is a situation where our identity and place in society is determined by our consumption, and that consumption facilitates the purposes and goals of human life, and provides the basis for our values and pursuits. Because it can always offer the next new thing to bring us happiness, it can perpetually promise hope—the hope of what has not come yet. This eternal hope of the consumer society

that is never fulfilled is the basis of the new utopian vision and the basis of the new values that displace traditional values.

We can find this consumerism in our Catholic and Jesuit institutions of higher education first in the never ending amenities-arms-race to try to keep up and outdo other schools of higher education. Whether it be with iPads or notebooks for every incoming first-year student, private baths, gourmet cuisine, or better workout facilities, there is always a means to provide better facilities and it always involves buying better newer consumer goods for the students. But the growth model itself is a means of trying to gain stability through economic focus—a focus that is essential in the competitive environment, but that also at times distracts us from the fundamental values of our vision as Jesuit institutions.

This frenzied pursuit of goods— particularly of ostentatious consumption of exclusive products and high end commodities— actually shows how desperate and fragile people's lives are: “The struggle for legitimacy through magnificence and excess implies instability and vulnerability” If I think my identity is made stable by purchasing a particular car or an expensive bottle of champagne, I definitely have an instable identity, shown to be vapid as soon as the champagne is gone. This one-upmanship consumerism is a failed project, and it ultimately leads to resentment when I cannot get what others get before I do.

In consumer culture one buys one's identity. We are in some sense considered by others (and then because of that by oneself) to be what we own— what we wear, drive, where we eat, where we live, what we live in. In this society of self-creation through consumption, “Labels, logos and brands are the terms of the language of recognition. What is hoped to be and as a rule is to be ‘recognized’ with the help of brands and logs is...identity...”⁴² “Once a ‘whole life’ project, identity has now turned into an attribute of the moment. Once designed, it is no longer ‘built to last forever’, but needs to be continuously assembled and disassembled.”⁴³ And we *must* do this in consumer *culture*. The ironic twist to this is

that this necessity— this requirement and responsibility to consume does not seem a burden because it is packaged and sold to us as “freedom”— freedom to choose who I am and what I will become. But that it will be done through consumption is necessary— to be a good citizen of consumer culture. Unfortunately, in our pursuit of identification through consumption, as we continually re-create ourselves, we are also inevitably practicing self-erasure: “When engaged in ‘self-defining’ and ‘self-asserting’, we practice creative destruction. Daily.”⁴⁴

The society of shoppers is aimed towards a target that is always ahead, but never attained, and since our happiness is founded on that hope of what we haven’t got yet, it is a perpetual hope, and so, a perpetual basis for happiness:

In a society of shoppers and a life of shopping we are happy as long as we haven’t lost the hope of becoming happy; we are secure from unhappiness as long as some of that hope is still ticking. And so the key to happiness and the antidote to misery is to keep the hope of becoming happy alive. But it can stay alive only on the condition of a rapid succession of ‘new chances’ and ‘new beginnings’, and of the prospect of an infinitely long chain of new starts ahead. That condition is brought about by slicing life into episodes...⁴⁵

We are usually unreflective about our consumerism, and the way it provides goals, meanings, and basic framework and directives for life. People get the magazines that show them how to dress, they get their ideas of normal and new style from movies, television, media and the consumer culture experts. Bauman points out that our culture trains the young in consumer savvy before we teach them about wisdom: “Thanks to the diligence and expertise of the advertising copywriters, such life-and-(high) street wisdom tends nowadays to be acquired at a tender age, well before there is a first chance to hear subtle philosophical meditations on the nature of happiness and the ways to a happy life, let alone a chance to study them and reflect on

their message.”⁴⁶ So the young consumer-girl who knows already “how to make her wardrobe work well” makes regular and frequent trips to the best department store where she can be assured she will be ‘in fashion.’ “What the frequent visits to Topshop means for her is first and foremost a comforting feeling of safety: Topshop’s buyers confront the risks of failure on her behalf and take the responsibility for the choice on themselves... things she bought in that shop she can parade in public with confidence— confident of recognition, approval and, in the end, of the admiration and high status that closely follow it...”⁴⁷ If one’s security comes through fashion, then safety comes through knowledgeable fashion purchases, which can be assured by utilizing the appropriate experts in the field. This safety is purchased, for a price, and that price gets you the security of fashion.

Our institutions are simultaneously consumers and servants of producers. We want to expand our reach, our campuses, our facilities and capacities, and our enrollment revenues. At the same time we are servants to attract 18-year-old consumers to ourselves, and we often seek to meet them right wherever their consumeristic concerns find them. Our institutions have at times fallen into the surge of consumer spending to upgrade our dormitories, upgrade technology and upgrade all the various auxiliary facilities and services (athletic and otherwise) that help us lure young consumers of higher education to our institutions. We can at times pursue the pleasurable and the beautiful at the expense of the right. Rather than attempt to temper our students’ consumerism, and provide an alternate worldview, we sell to it, woo it, and attempt to market towards it.

Self Protection and Self-Gratification as the Primary Values in Liquid Modern Consumer Society: Doing Good for Egoistical Reasons

The liquid modern situation makes us feel very nervous. When we feel that everything is unstable, our primary goal is self-stabilization, and this comes about first through basic

safety, and second, through self-gratification. First is safety. While we can't stop the mind-boggling pace of change or control it, we can try to calculate and minimize risk for myself and for mine:

Those of us who can afford it fortify ourselves against all visible and invisible, present or anticipated, known or as yet unfamiliar, diffuse but ubiquitous dangers through locking ourselves behind walls, stuffing the approaches to our living quarters with TV cameras, hiring armed guards, driving around armoured vehicles...wearing armoured clothing...or taking martial arts classes.⁴⁸

SUVs and security systems are justifiable because of the inherent dangers in liquid modernity. Our Jesuit institutions are ever seeking to fortify themselves against the many dangers of liability, and these concerns are always pursued with a justification based on wise stewardship. Our pursuit of attractive facilities and the latest technology and most cutting-edge educational innovations are all part of our attempt to protect ourselves against the upcoming unknown—and these pursuits, again, are always justified on the basis of prudence.

Self-gratification is also essential in the self-stabilization project, and our ethical causes are even a part of this. It's not that we don't support moral ethical 'causes' but we support them for no greater purpose than our own self-stabilization project in the face of liquid fear.

The spectacular rise of egotistic self-referentiality runs paradoxically shoulder to shoulder with a rising sensitivity to human misery, an abhorrence of violence, pain and suffering visited on even the most distant strangers, and regular explosions of focused (remedial) charity. But, as Lipovetsky rightly observes, such moral impulses and outbursts of magnanimity are instances of 'painless morality', morality stripped of obligations and executive sanctions, 'adopted to the Ego-priority'. When it comes to acting 'for the sake of

something other than oneself', the passions, well-being and physical health of the Ego tend to be both the preliminary and the ultimate considerations; they also tend to set the limits to which we are prepared to go in our readiness to help.⁴⁹

We can see this in many 'causes' that people support 'ethically'. Jesuit schools certainly have publicized their concerns for the environment, for diversity, and even for the poor—at times with an eye for capitalizing on the public relations dividends. Bauman points out that in life, very seldom are people willing to make serious sacrifices for such causes:

For instance, the dedication to green causes seldom if ever goes as far as adopting an ascetic lifestyle or even a partial self-denial. Indeed, far from being ready to renounce a lifestyle of consumeristic indulgence, we will often be reluctant to accept even a minor personal inconvenience; the driving force of our indignation tends to be the desire for a superior, safer and more secure consumption...We don't seem to feel any longer that we have a task or a mission to perform on the planet and there is apparently no legacy left which we feel obliged to preserve, having been appointed its wardens.⁵⁰

It is all well and good to give lip service to these causes, but we can be easily satisfied with our efforts that are often quite limited. Liquid modern society is a society of exception—because it is in a perpetual state of high alert and uncertainty. Under such conditions, the priority is self preservation, particularly when the future is so very uncertain: "Since it is impossible to calculate what sort of future profits, if any, a present sacrifice may bring, why should one surrender the instant pleasures one can squeeze out from the 'here and now'?"⁵¹

At times our institutions have adopted hot button concerns, such as environmental resource management, anti-sweatshop apparel, solar panel and wind power conscientiousness, recycling, and many

popular earth-friendly policies. We have adopted these policies insofar as it makes good public relations sense. Few of us have made sacrificial commitments to these types of policies. In essence, we have adopted these good deeds insofar as they have appealed to our student-consumers, and insofar as it can enable us to speak self-righteously about the sins and blindness of others.

Conclusion: What Bauman Teaches Us

Bauman sees liquid modernity to be a situation of apparent constant flux that leaves us in fear as we feel that any prolonged project is doomed to irrelevance before it gets any footing. In such a world, there is little to hope for, but consumerism establishes a possible, if flimsy, avenue for perpetual hope in this situation: the eternal hope of consumption, which is ongoing and never ending.

But what is Bauman's assessment? Bauman is a sociologist—his goal is generally to tell us how things are, not how things should be. But at times he cannot but help himself—when he calls flexibility “spineless” or when he encourages us to eschew the consumer culture values and struggle valiantly with dedication and perseverance towards goals and ends beyond the hope of the consuming life:

Our lives, whether we know it or not and whether we relish the news or bewail it, are works of art. To live our lives as the art of life demands, we must, just like the artists of any art, set ourselves challenges which are difficult to confront point-blank; we must choose targets that are well beyond our reach, and standards of excellence that vexingly seem to stay stubbornly far above our ability to match whatever we do or may be doing. We need to attempt the impossible. And we can only hope, with no support from a trustworthy favourable prognosis (let alone from certainty), that with a long and grinding effort we may sometime manage to match those standards and reach those targets and so rise to the challenge.⁵²

This description of life as a work of art is not so liquid— it is quite traditional, in that Bauman talks about trustworthiness, long and grinding effort, stubbornly setting goals far beyond what we can accomplish at present. So we see that Bauman's description of liquid life in the liquid modern world of change and lack of commitments is really a critique of this consumer culture.

We who hold Jesuit values can feel a strong kinship to Bauman's critique of liquid modernity. Although his description of liquid modernity may at times strike a bit too close to home-- as we see it in our own insecurities and institutional practices-- hopefully seeing that can help us to reflect and become more aware of how our Jesuit values should contrast with the liquid modern tendencies, particularly as we determine the futures of our institutions.

Cura personalis, faith that does justice, finding God in all things, and women and men for and with others—to maintain these traditional values in the midst of this liquid modern situation is more difficult than ever, because they seem so radically different than our daily experiences of liquid reality. But we believe, and at times feel certain, that they are in fact the basis of a life worth living, and our determination to stubbornly maintain them in the face of the flux is exactly what is more critical than ever if we are to keep ourselves and our students from the slide into mindless generic consumerism. HJE

Notes

- ¹ L'Osservatore Romano, "L'illusione di una felicità solubile: A colloquio con il sociologo Zygmunt Baumann" (Italian), accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/lillusione-di-una-felicita-solubile#sthash.dl1D5ZKW.dpuf>.
- ² Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 20.
- ³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 10.
- ⁴ Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, S.J., *Catholic Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.
- ⁵ Steven B. Bennett, "Disillusionment and the Hardening of the Sacred Heart," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 1, no. 2 (2012): 65-71.
- ⁶ L'Osservatore Romano, "L'illusione."
- ⁷ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
- ⁸ Gallup Poll, "Record-High 42% of Americans Identify as Independents," accessed March 2, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>.
- ⁹ Brian Walker, "Retail In Crisis: These Are The Changes Brick-And-Mortar Stores Must Make," guest-blog on *Forbes* online, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeremybogaisky/2014/02/12/retail-in-crisis-these-are-the-changes-brick-and-mortar-stores-must-make/>.
- ¹⁰ Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention, and the Coming Dark Age* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), 13.
- ¹¹ David Glen, "Scholars Who Blog," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 6, 2003.
- ¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- ¹³ John Mueller, "Nine Libertarian Heresies'—A Final Response," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, no.2 (Fall 2011): 551–559.
- ¹⁴ See Daniel Finn, *Christian Economic Ethics: History and Implications* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); and Daniel Finn, "Locating Business Ethics within Catholic Social Thought," *Cultura Económica*, 30, no.84, (December 2012); and Daniel Finn, "Nine Libertarian Heresies Tempting Neoconservative Catholics to Stray

from Catholic Social Thought" *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 487–503.

¹⁵ See Michael Naughton's Pere Marquette Lecture, *The Logic of Gift: Rethinking Business as a Community of Persons* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Marian Tupy, "Is the Pope Right About the World?," *The Atlantic* December 11, 2013.

¹⁷ Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance*, 12.

¹⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 31.

¹⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²³ Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁷ Bauman writes, "All the available empirical data suggest that among the populations of affluent societies there may be no connection at all between rising affluence, believed to be the principal vehicle of a happy life, and greater happiness...on the other hand, one social index that seems to be growing most spectacularly in line with the level of affluence...has so far been the incidence of criminality: of burglary and car theft, drug trafficking, economic graft and business corruption. And of an uncomfortable and uneasy sensation of uncertainty, hard to bear, let alone to live with permanently." Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 1-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

³³ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 3.

³⁴ Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁰ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 31.

⁴¹ Bauman, *Liquid Times*.

⁴² Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 11.

⁴⁹ Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

⁵² Ibid., 20.