

Fashion, as a reflection of social changes and trends, has always been a tool for the identification, socialization and communication of individuals, especially in a consumer society (Valentić 2018). The aim of my research is to shed light on fashion consumption and its implications for both society and the environment through the lens of Catholic social teaching.

See: Introduction to the Fashion System

The fashion industry – often referred to as “the most globalized industry in the world” (Biočina 2016, 25) – is strongly defined by the lack of connection between the original producer and end consumer. This lack of connection can be traced back to the widespread outsourcing of production to less developed countries in the Global South, such as Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethiopia, etc. The industry employs approximately 57.8 million garment workers, yet their wages account for only 1.8% of the final retail price paid by consumers (Biočina 2016, 22). This global supply chain involves countries with poorly regulated labor laws, which, as a consequence, results in garment workers facing exposure to harmful and unsafe environments, in what are commonly referred to as *sweatshops* (Brstilo, Krešić, and Vučković 2016, 290). The garment workers are still struggling and fighting for just wages.¹

Judge: The fashion system through the lens of the Catholic Social Teaching

The current fashion industry has to face the global inequalities, the structures of sin, it (re)produces which stem from colonialism and the changes the form that colonialism took in capitalism, where the more developed countries still take advantage of the less developed. These issues are addressed Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (n. 61): “What applies to national economies and to highly developed nations must also apply to trade relations between rich and poor nations”. The global supply chain must be regulated more strictly, protecting the rights of garment

workers and their well-being around the globe: „Human development must foster the development of each man and of the whole man” (PP, n. 14).

Furthermore, the global fashion industry, driven by fast production cycles and consumer demand, has become the second largest polluter of our common home.² The fashion system, thus, directly contributes to the growth of the socio-environmental crisis that Pope Francis addresses in the social encyclical *Laudato Si'*.³

The fashion system illustrates how the environmental (ecology) and social (human ecology) crises are not two separate crises, but a single and complex socio-environmental crisis (integral ecology). In order to transform the fashion industry one must look at it through the lens of integral ecology which would lead to the restoration of the dignity of its workers and everyone else involved, as well as to the care of nature.

Current textile waste mirrors the statement of Pope Francis that the Earth is becoming „an immense garbage dump” (LS, n. 21). This is closely linked to the prevalent throwaway culture which affects excluded people and the transformation of goods into waste (LS, n. 22). The fashion industry, whose production causes significant water pollution, affects the health and well-being of the poor. Due to water shortage or contamination many people are denied access to water which is „a fundamental and universal right” (LS, n. 30). Furthermore, it is time to reject the „superficial or apparent ecology” (LS, n. 59) which can be traced to the greenwashing efforts in the fashion industry.⁴ „Corruption that hides the true environmental impact in exchange for favors leads to ambiguous agreements” (LS, n. 182). In order to transform the fashion system, one must prioritize the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

Act: Stitching together a Sustainable Fashion Future

Embracing sustainability goes beyond just production; it involves shaping a new

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lifestyle. Environmental problems call for an effective change of mindset leading to the adoption of new lifestyles which should be inspired by temperance and self-discipline at both the individual and social levels (Compendium, 2006: 486). Furthermore, there is a growing need to break with the consumerist logic and promote a form of production that considers the order of creation and satisfying the basic human needs of all. The question of ecology must not be addressed only to face the risks of environmental destruction, but can also work as a strong motivation for an authentic worldwide solidarity which is crucial for the principle of the common good to counter ever-growing inequality.

Having all of this in mind, especially within the context of the European Union, the solution to this socio-environmental issue lies in transnational policies. There are already numerous EU policies at hand which are focused more on production, but not on consumption.⁵ „Buying is always a moral as well as an economic act” (LS, n. 206). Having in mind affordability and sustainability, consumers should be strongly encouraged to find alternatives in the ever-growing second-hand fashion market. Some research suggests this is gaining popularity among younger generations. Second-hand purchases could be promoted in the formative years of young people to shape their consumption into a sustainable practice. Another way of promoting sustainable consumption would also be to reduce it: „Less is more” (LS, n. 222). We must promote a new balanced lifestyle, full of gratitude, simplicity and harmony with creation. „The seriousness of today's cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits” (LS, n. 209).

CREATE: experience

It is hard to express my gratitude for the time I have spent in Rome during the CREATE Toolbox experience. My time in Rome has been quite eventful – the Jubilee Year, the Papal Conclave, witnessing

two popes, seeing the vice president of the United States, the Caravaggio exhibition – all of which profoundly deepened my knowledge and devotion, providing a new outlook on life. The presence of the universal Catholic Church in the heart of one of Europe's oldest, most vibrant, and culturally rich cities brings a sense of balance between the bustling energy of the crowds and the timeless serenity it embodies. Thanks to the numerous and various visits to different institutions of the Holy See I had the opportunity to improve my understanding of the Catholic Church and the problems of the world I live in. Despite my exposure to the international environment during my formative years and additionally my Master studies in Sociology, Management and Public Policies, I had not realised before how unique the position of the Church is, as well as the role it plays in modern-day society. It was inspiring to see how faith can inspire social engagement, action and the formulation of policies which contribute to the improvement of the world.

NOTES

1. See more here: <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/whats-happening-in-bangladeshs-garment-industry> (May 10, 2025).
2. The entire article "Can fast fashion become more sustainable", published by the Croatian Chamber of Commerce in 2023, is available here: <https://www.hgk.hr/moze-li-brza-moda-postati-odrziva> (5 November 2024)
3. Francis, Laudato Si'. Encyclical letter, Rome, 24 May 2015. URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#93 (5 November, 2024)
4. According to the Oxford Dictionary, greenwashing can be defined as misleading (the public) or countering (public or media concerns) by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible; misrepresenting (a company, its operations, etc.) as environmentally responsible.
5. There are already numerous EU policies at hand, such as the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles which involves Eco-design Requirements (the products must be durable, repairable, recyclable), the Digital Product Passport (it is supposed to provide

information about the circularity and sustainability of the product in question in order to keep the consumers and businesses informed and avoid greenwashing), Extended Producer Responsibility (the producer takes responsibility for textile waste management), the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (large fashion companies are going to have to disclose non-financial information, such as environmental impact or supply chain practices), Microplastics and Chemicals Management (this strategy aims to reduce the unintentional release of microplastics from synthetic textiles) and so on.

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