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The modern dilemma -- paper or plastic?

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Eco Catholic

I'm wondering what our forebears did long before plastic and paper bags were created. My educated guess is that they only bought a tenth as many things. And when they did, baskets, buckets, grain sacks, and aprons all made good totes with minimal environmental impact. Creative use of what was at hand seemed to be the order of the day. I have a feeling that determined shoppers have always found a way to get their purchases home!

So what are we moderns who care about the health of the Earth supposed to do? Here are my solutions in order of preference: 1) Take neither paper nor plastic bag if possible and put your hands and arms to good use 2) Use a durable cloth bag 3) Drop those purchases into a second-hand paper or plastic bag and 4) Ask for plastic. Let me comment on each choice.

Most people have never considered that they don't need a bag for most purchases. Store clerks routinely chuck even the smallest or largest of items into an unnecessary plastic bag, but you can simply tell them you don't need one. I've been doing this for several years and so far no one has forced a bag on me, nor has any over-zealous guard tackled me on suspicion of shop-lifting.

A sturdy cloth bag is my next choice if I really need a bag. I have several canvas bags that I've used a couple of times a week for four years and they look no worse for the wear and will probably outlive me. If you use the bags hundreds of times, their environmental impact is minimal. If you do choose to accept paper and plastic bags, then at least save them and re-use them as long as they will hold out.

The big issue in using reusable bags of any kind is remembering them, but if you are determined to do so, you will eventually get into the habit and it will be easy. I keep a stash of cloth bags in the back seat of my car so they are handy and visible. After using the bags and unloading items from them, I hang them on

my front door, and out they go to the car once more.

Now we get down to our burning question. In a situation where you have to choose between paper or plastic, which should it be? In our complex world, nothing is quite a 100% clear choice, but the evidence seems to weigh in favor of plastic. Here are a few facts from an article in the Washington Post a few years ago:

? Americans use 100 billion plastic bags a year and 10 billion paper bags. It takes 10 million barrels of oil to make the plastic bags and 14 million trees for the paper bags.

? It takes four times as much energy to produce a paper bag as a plastic one

? The production of paper bags generates 70% more air pollution and 50 times more water pollution than plastic bags

? It takes 98% less energy to recycle plastic bags than paper ones, although the rate of recycling for both is low (1-3% for plastic, 10-15% for paper)

? Plastic bags take up about a tenth of the landfill space as paper ones. They will never biodegrade. However, neither will paper ones in current landfill conditions.

Just because plastic bags are better than paper in some respects doesn't mean we should use them with abandon. On huge negative effect is that stray ones often end up in the oceans wreaking suffering and death for the fish and other sea life that unknowingly ingests them. The extent and long-range ramifications of this are still unknown.

In summary, let's make every effort to abandon the use of both paper and plastic bags as much as possible. It's the least we can do for the health of God's world and its life, which includes us.

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