

1.

Why Declutter?

Let's start our look at the practical side of decluttering by addressing a simple but profound question: Why? What does decluttering get me that I value?

Decluttering Saves Time

Time is my most valuable resource. No matter how hard I try, I can't make more time. I can only change how I use the time I have. As I get older, time seems to move even faster and each minute feels that much more precious. Yet every minute seems to have more claims on it. There are so many things I *have* to do that it seems impossible to find time to do the things I *want* to do, such as read a good book, or even find time for the things I *should* do, such as pray more or volunteer in the community. So how does decluttering save time?

First, a home with less clutter is easier to keep clean. Clutter attracts more clutter, and all clutter attracts dust. Picking up dozens of things to dust them takes forever, so I tend not to do it until it's absolutely necessary—and

then it takes even longer. Moving piles of things so that I can use the dining room table or vacuum the living room floor can more than double the time it takes to complete a simple chore. Even putting away clean laundry in already stuffed drawers and closets takes longer.

Second, decluttering makes it far more likely that I can find things when I need them. If I added up all the minutes I've spent looking for utensils or storage containers in my disorganized kitchen cabinets, I'd have time for a vacation! Let's face it; having to take everything out of the shed to find the hedge clippers is just a waste of time. How many hours have you spent looking for a bill or an invitation that disappeared into a stack of unfiled papers? How often do your kids have to upend their backpacks to find the form that has to be signed and returned tomorrow?

Deciding to declutter can help you use time more efficiently. An organized closet can make getting ready in the morning much faster. If your closet is organized and decluttered, it's easy to see your wardrobe options and less likely that the clothes you choose will come out a crumpled mess, requiring ironing or a trip to the dry cleaner. (I have clothes that I almost never wear not because I don't like them or they don't fit but because they require ironing and I rarely have time in the morning to break out the ironing board.) A decluttered home makes it less likely that you will misplace or forget something important. Imagine—no more lost receipts or last-minute runs to the school to deliver forgotten lunches!

Decluttering Saves Money

Decluttering saves money by reducing purchases. You begin to scrutinize your purchases more carefully, trying to avoid buying anything unnecessary. You avoid new purchases by using up all the things you had forgotten

that you owned but that decluttering unearthed. During a recent decluttering of my bathroom cabinet, I found enough shampoo, soap, dental floss, and toothpaste to meet my needs for almost a year! (To be honest, I found so much dental floss that I gave it to a friend who is a nun. Now all the sisters in her convent have clean teeth!) Cleaning out a closet allowed me to find lovely handmade items purchased on long-ago trips. Many of these items make great gifts, meaning I don't need to buy other gifts. Decluttering my bedroom closet and dresser drawers led to finding great outfits that I'd forgotten I owned. I hadn't worn these clothes in so long it was like I bought a whole new wardrobe without spending a cent.

A decluttered house makes you far less likely to purchase a duplicate of something you already have. You know how the cycle goes. You buy a birthday card for your mom and forget where you put it, so you have to buy another. You end up with a stack of unused (and sometimes crushed and unusable) cards. I could fill this book with examples from my life, and you could probably do the same.

Lack of clutter saves money by making it less likely that you will lose things, incurring late fees and fines. Recent surveys indicate that almost a quarter of adults have paid a bill late not because they didn't have the money but because they couldn't find the bill! Three years ago, I had to go to Rome for a business meeting. As you might imagine, I was really excited—until I couldn't find my passport. I spent weeks in an increasingly frantic search, looking every place I thought it might be. With my trip less than six weeks away, I gave up and decided to declare it lost and get a new one. The trip to my hometown to get a copy of my birth certificate, the extra fee for expedited handling, and the regular renewal fee I was

paying five years early means that little mistake cost me two vacation days and about \$300. I finally found the old passport eighteen months later. It was buried in a bunch of old papers I'd tossed in a box to get them out of the way.

Decluttering Reduces Stress

Scarcity causes a stress response. When you need something that you don't have, your mind and body respond with a more rapid heartbeat, faster and shallower breathing, agitated movements, a quicker temper, less patience, and even mild panic. It's hard to remain calm and kind when you have to get out the door to catch your plane and you can't remember where you put your keys.

Even beyond these crisis situations, a space that is less cluttered and more organized is calming to the eye and the spirit. Decluttered spaces invite you to sit, rest, read, and spend time with the people you love. It's calming to know where things are when you need them. Getting rid of the clutter can remove dozens of little stressors that disrupt your days and disturb your peace.

Decluttering Opens New Possibilities

A surprising number of people never invite friends and neighbors into their homes because of clutter. They are embarrassed that their houses aren't tidy, so they are unwilling to open their doors. There's nowhere to sit. The dining room table is covered with paperwork and half-finished craft projects. Inviting guests into the clutter seems to cause more trouble than it's worth. Furthermore, the "lifestyle" industry has brainwashed us to believe that we shouldn't entertain unless we have a home ready to be photographed for a magazine spread, with perfectly clean spaces accented with perfectly matched, fashionable accessories, and a multi-course gourmet meal served on

heirloom china. In the real world, most people we call friends will happily overlook some clutter and will be more than content with a simple meal and some pleasant conversation. Still, fear and clutter keep us from extending the invitation. Or you may be like me and invite people anyway—and then spend half the evening apologizing for the clutter and mess.

How often have you begun a sentence with some form of the phrase, “Once I get the house in order / the filing done / this project finished, I can . . .”? Whatever finishes that sentence is an opportunity that clutter has stolen from you. When anything keeps you from embracing opportunities filled with meaning and joy, that thing becomes a prison. I often feel that clutter has become a prison of my own making. I have the keys. It’s time to open the door and step out into new freedom.

Thoughts for the Journey

- How does clutter affect my daily life and my relationships? Are these effects positive or negative?
- Why do I want to declutter? What do I hope to get from my efforts?

2.

Memories and Materialism

I start with the best of intentions. Really, I do. I decide that it's time to do some serious tidying—maybe clear off the top of the dresser so that I can actually use the mirror. I start going through the stuff I've just tossed there, throwing some things away and sorting other items so I can put them where they belong. And that's where the trouble starts. Putting toiletries away in the bathroom cabinet is impossible because it's too crowded. The papers I discover don't fit in the files. And there's no room in the desk for the office supplies. (And why were there paper clips on my dresser anyway?) Starting to declutter just shows me how much I really need to do to make my house tidy. Every time I look at the seemingly unending mountain of things to sort and organize, the word "blowtorch" comes to mind. It has to be easier to just toss everything and start over again with as little as possible.

God's Path

God Saw That It Was Good

Even beginning to think about decluttering can be overwhelming. During particularly stressful times, I'll binge on those blogs about minimalism and stare for hours at photos of cleverly designed "tiny houses." Even though these houses usually have fewer than five hundred square feet, everything has its place, the space is open and tidy, and it's always ready for guests to drop in. Then I think about how much I'd have to clear out of the living room to find a place for a friend to sit if she stopped by. Having someone stay overnight can require weeks of planning to unearth the bed in the guest room. It's got to be under the stacks of filing and craft supplies, right? I see articles about people who carry all of their worldly possessions in a single suitcase and I realize that I carry more than that to work each day.

There's certainly nothing wrong with making a conscious decision to limit our possessions. Religious women and men, and all who follow the evangelical counsel of poverty, choose to refrain from ownership of goods. Even their personal items, such as clothes and shoes, are owned by the community and only loaned to the members. People embrace evangelical poverty to avoid every tie that might limit their ability to love God and others freely and wholeheartedly.

But the spiritual value of poverty doesn't mean that material things are bad. In fact, if material things are bad, there's no great merit in avoiding them. If we seek to live holy and virtuous lives, avoiding bad things is the basic first step.

The book of Genesis, the very first pages of the Bible, reminds us time and again of the goodness of creation. As

God creates each element of the material world, scripture records the same refrain: "God saw that it was good."

But you don't have to take my word for it. From the earliest days of the Church, Christians maintained that people who held to the belief that the created world was bad and that only things of the spirit could be good were not speaking the truth. Some of these people even went so far as to claim that the God who created the world was not the same God revealed by Jesus Christ as his Father. The Church rejected this dualist understanding (things are bad; spirit is good) and consistently professed its belief in the goodness of the created world. Even more, the Church has maintained that creation itself bears witness to God (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 32). This belief echoes the words of the psalmist: "The heavens declare the glory of God; / the firmament proclaims the works of his hands" (Ps 19:2).

St. Augustine, one of the great thinkers of the early Church, wrote a beautiful poem maintaining that creation itself reveals God's truth. We find it in volume 3 of the *Liturgy of the Hours*:

"The Beauty of Creation Bears Witness to God"

Question the beauty of the earth,
the beauty of the sea,
the beauty of the wide air around you,
the beauty of the sky;
question the order of the stars,
the sun whose brightness lights the day,
the moon whose splendor softens the gloom of night;
question the living creatures that move in the waters,
that roam upon the earth,
that fly through the air;

the spirit that lies hidden,
 the matter that is manifest;
 the visible things that are ruled,
 the invisible that rule them;
 question all these.
 They will answer you:
 "Behold and see, we are beautiful."
 Their beauty is their confession of God.
 Who made these beautiful changing things,
 if not one who is beautiful and changeth not.

In the late nineteenth century, Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins used his art to express the relationship between God and his creation, saying, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Fighting Forgetfulness

So do the things I own bring me closer to God or push me further away? Can the things surrounding me help me see the hand of God in my life?

I've been involved in "church things" since I was a little girl. I remember paging through a picture Bible before I could read, either making up stories to go along with the pictures or retelling myself stories that grown-ups had told me. I loved going to church. When I was in grade school, Benediction was one of my favorite things. I loved it, mostly because of the beautiful gold monstrance used to expose the Blessed Sacrament and the abundant use of fancy incense (which always made me cough). By the time I got to high school, I was volunteering as a sacristan in the high school chapel, learning how to iron purificators and corporals (cloths used at the altar) and keeping the