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**BUSINESS LIFE IN THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Good afternoon everyone! And thank you, Reverend McNerney for that introduction. We are very happy to be here in Dublin to participate in this beautiful Congress, and to share with you some experiences of what it's like to be part of the Economy of Communion's worldwide network of over 840 businesses. You probably can't imagine what personal havoc is caused when a journalist uses a headline like "Indiana Firm Can Claim a Papal Thumbs-up from New Social Encyclical." In the midst of ordinary business, calls come in from all over the world, and your life in relative obscurity suddenly gets a great deal of attention. Some people who know me quite well even asked: "Did the Pope really mention your business in the encyclical?" (The answer – no!) But, attention can also be a good thing, because it provides an opportunity for a time of reflection and an examination of conscience of how our business life is actually going: have we really been running the company the way it was intended? Is our EoC network a driving force for social justice and the spreading of a culture of giving as it was meant to become?

My wife Julie and I own and operate a small environmental engineering consultancy with about 20 employees in the City of Indianapolis, Indiana in the Midwestern United States, and we joined the Economy of Communion network of companies when we started our business 17 years ago. Little did we know when we first met the Focolare Movement as college students back in the late 1970s, that we would find a life-long style of living our faith that keeps us going despite our own human weaknesses and failures, and would ultimately motivate us to start a business based on its spirituality of communion. Its focus on love of neighbor has given us special meaning and value to our daily contacts with the people we meet, helping us to see every person – family member, business associate, co-worker, as an individual immensely loved by God. In each person, God is present in different ways: as a gift, an enrichment, an encouragement, or sometimes as a purification.

And this is an incredible thing for us lay people because it means that we don't have to withdraw from the world and go into a monastery to find God. We are all in the midst of the world, many of us with families to take care of, working 8 to 12 hours a day. Each person we meet during each moment of the day is an 'open door' to union with God. That is our pathway to holiness: to go to God *through* our neighbor.

**WORKING WITH AN EOC ATTITUDE**

So, how has this EoC attitude affected my behavior at work? At the beginning, the company was really just one person – me. So, I had to start first with *changing myself*, with living this vision out in the activities of the company in each moment of the day, with whomever God placed in my path. Because of this, I found I could no longer pick and choose who I care for and loved – I had to try to love everyone! I had to love the other worker who is quiet, or slow, or a little overbearing, or the difficult and demanding client, or a vendor whose delivery is late. I also could not exclude anyone because of their position in a company, or lack of position, or their ability to make me look good in front of their boss. I had to see each person with these 'new' set of eyes, as someone worthy of a relationship – of equal value. I had to try to become 'difference blind', to see each person with the eyes of God: to build relationships with our FedEx women, our janitor, even our competitors! Then, as now, I failed many times a day trying to do this. But the EoC teaches us that when we fail, as we often do, we can always start again in that next moment we find ourselves in.

This EoC business style encourages us to see each action of the day as a concrete means of caring for the other person, to not wait for others to treat us well first, but to be the one to make the first move. Think of Jesus and it becomes clear what to do. This means taking the initiative in order to break down barriers and reach out to others. It also means seeing the normal tasks at work as opportunities to love our fellow employees: organizing files so that others can find things; answering the phone with complete attention; even filling out our time sheet on time. We always have this fabulous opportunity, and in each moment Jesus can tell us: *“Whatever you do for the least...you do it to me.”*

I remember one time, during a period when we were very busy at work, that the office became, as my mother would say, like a ‘pig-sty’. People were working late hours, and not picking up after themselves. Our little kitchen was piled with dishes and left-over containers, and no one was making a move to do anything about it. I realized that it would really be an act of love for everyone if it was cleaned up, so during lunch one day, when everyone was out, I went into the kitchen and did all the dishes, scrubbed the counters and sinks, swept the floor, emptied the refrigerator of ‘bad containers’, took out the trash. After about one hour, it looked immaculate. Spotless! I went back to my office and began working again.

As people came back from lunch, I could tell there was some murmuring going on. *“Who had cleaned the kitchen?”* After a while, it became apparent that I had done it. Later that same day, someone cleaned up the report production room, and did the same thing. Some began to clean their own work areas. Everyone noticed that the atmosphere of the office had changed. Stress levels seemed to be lower, people seemed to be getting along better, and a certain ‘peace’ was present among everyone. Someone even brought in cookies a few days later. When this type of atmosphere is reached in an office – mutual sharing and love among employees, it opens up the possibility for God to work. *“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* Living this aspect, even in a small way, can really change things!

And so, we discover that every job and work task in our businesses has value and purpose, even if it does not have a significant or immediate effect on our work. This is why we say that an EoC company is a person-centered business, because everything, everything, everything begins with our relationships with others. We might say that this is ‘the defining characteristic’ of our businesses.

### **AN EARLY LESSON IN PROVIDENCE**

For some business people, this all may at first appear to be a bit naïve. How does a for-profit business survive financially with this mentality? I remember one of my first EoC experiences when we decided to move the company from our home where it started to a building downtown. I had to negotiate the rental lease with the new landlord. As the negotiations were going on, it was easy to fall back into the ‘old way’ business had always been done – to try to gain the most advantage and get the best deal for ourselves. But I realized that to be a true EoC business owner, I had to also be concerned about the other person. At that point, I decided to agree to a condition in the lease that was favorable to the landlord and not to us. Immediately afterward, the landlord recognized what I had done. In the end, our company still got a ‘good enough’ deal, but he was also happy. That first negotiation ‘lesson’, of living *the Golden Rule* and ‘leaving something on the table for the other guy’ was the start of a 12-year relationship which went beyond a typical tenant-landlord association. Over the years, there were many times we concretely demonstrated our commitment to be an ‘extraordinary’ tenant: paying the rent promptly, finding other tenants for the building, adding permanent structural improvements in the building that went far above expectations, hosting gatherings to build relationships among tenants. What happened as a result? The landlord responded by continuously improving the building for us and making our business environment more enjoyable. And, four years ago, when we needed to break the lease to move out of the building and into our own building, the landlord could have legally made us pay a \$75,000 penalty. Instead, he let us leave on our own terms with no financial impact. Without the trust and relationship we had developed with him, this never would have happened.

This experience of recognizing God’s constant and timely, but sometimes unexpected, Providence when we choose to live this lifestyle has repeated itself thousands of times over during the life of our company, and helps us to realize the practical importance of cultivating relationships based on the mutual love described in the Gospel:

*"Love one another as I have loved you."* With a regularity and consistency that brings an increase in faith when practiced, we often repeat one of our favorite sayings in the company when it occurs: Providence strikes again!

### **CREATING A CULTURE OF GIVING**

For an EoC business owner, one important aspect of running the business is trying to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual respect and relationship-building within the company. What does that often look like? It may take many forms including providing a very nice work environment for the employees, treating everyone fairly, allowing for periodic breaks in the work schedule, or watching the amount of overtime someone has to work. It may also mean holding office activities that everyone participates in – from birthday celebrations, to picnics to after-work entertainment events. These are all things that focus on creating the 'internal' office atmosphere.

But then, we also focus on developing strong relationships with those near our company – other businesses and neighbors. Three years ago, we started a new period in the history of the company: we moved the company because we had outgrown our old office space. We decided to buy a building in a part of town that was not considered as nice as other parts. There is some real poverty and poor people there, and we thought that the presence of the company could provide just enough of a strong presence to help improve the neighborhood and surrounding area. It is also part of the EoC vision – that the company truly develops strong relationships with its local community: not only its clients and suppliers, but also its neighbors, young people, other businesses, and especially those-in-need. Over time, these relationships can become mutual, and actually begin to encourage a network of interconnected relationships, a true Economy of Communion.

During this time, we have done many things to take concrete steps in this direction:

- Encouraging our employees to shop at the local stores, eat at the restaurants, and become a visible part of the community. This last year, several small eating places opened up, and we made 'coupons' for 'free lunches' for our employees. The new owners were really amazed and very happy to have so many people into their place.
- Hiring people from the area to perform work on our building, landscaping and cutting the grass.
- Using the local stores for all purchases even though sometimes they are more expensive; fixing our company vehicles at nearby car maintenance shops.
- Collecting food and working at a food pantry run by a church located across the street where the poor gather every Thursday for assistance.
- Donating items to raise funds for a poor, all-African American public high school.
- Developing relationships with some of the young kids who play in our neighborhood.

With each action as a company, we tried to focus on one goal – to build a more united and loving community. As we have done this, we see this 'network' beginning to build in our neighborhood.

This recent period was also a time when the economic crisis in the U.S. was the most difficult, and many people were out of work and needed help. For us, it was a time to see if we could contribute something more to helping locally with these difficulties:

- 1) The neighborhood schools near our company could not afford any extra educational programs for their students. A young couple who run a wildlife education business across the street from our building were out of work. Our company decided to sponsor them and pay for them to visit our local schools. It was a win-win-win situation: the schools benefited from their program, the young couple was paid for their presentations, and our company's core mission of helping the environment was reinforced.

- 2) An electrician with whom we had developed a close relationship with during the renovation of our building was laid off from the electrical company that we had hired. Concern for him led us to track him down to his home in another city, and offer him enough work in our building for him to be able to start his own business.
- 3) When the local restaurants near us began to suffer for lack of business, we had them bring in lunches for employees during special training programs. We asked one local eatery to help cater our company Christmas party even though many other businesses cancelled their parties because they couldn't afford them.
- 4) This last year, one of our good clients was not able to pay a \$50,000 bill he owed us because of financial problems, but still needed our help on other projects. Instead of starting legal proceedings to get the money from him, we agreed to put a temporary hold on his debt to us, while requiring that he pay us upfront for all new projects. Our generosity surprised him, and, as a result, we continued to receive payments from him for the new work he asked us to do. Recently, as the economy has shown improvement, he has also set up a schedule for the payment of his past debt.

### **RECEIVING FROM THE EOC**

I often get asked the question: What contribution can the EoC give to the business community in the United States. I think the EoC's real contribution everywhere lies in its ability to give real meaning and joy to the lives of entrepreneurs by allowing people of faith and goodwill to live integrated lives in which faith and work are not separated into compartments, but are joined hand-in-hand in a seamless experience. Running a business is often one of the most challenging things that a person can do. Sometimes it requires extremely hard work, long hours, and one can feel lonely and isolated. Even successful business people can ask: "What does it all mean?" The EoC looks at everyone and everything through the 'filter' of 'communion' and 'unity'. Every act we do during the day, every decision we make, every person we encounter, every suffering we embrace, has meaning for our lives. They all contribute to transforming the world to one in which we act more and more like one human family and work toward the goal: "No one in need." And that means, also, no entrepreneur in need of understanding what his or her own life means. Communion has a way of solving all kinds of social issues: poverty of lack of resources (food, clothing, shelter, medical care), but also a poverty of spirit and hope. In the U.S., we have some of the most successful entrepreneurs in the world, but many are not happy and fulfilled. We know that the EoC can make a significant contribution to this as well.

### **CONCLUSION**

And so, in concluding, after 17 years, we are still in business, even during this recent economic crisis in the most competitive economic environment in the world, not despite being a part of the EoC, but because of it! When we started our business, Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement and the EoC, gave our company an operating motto based on a Gospel passage from the Acts of the Apostles (20:35): "There is more joy in giving than receiving." We can honestly say after all these years in the EoC, that we have lived and experienced this to be absolutely true.

Becoming part of this worldwide business network and trying to live out its principles has been one of the most significant and satisfying experiences of our lives. Yes, there have been the typical and non-to-typical difficulties along the way, and many personal and sometimes financial sacrifices. But we have received so much more than we have given: real and lasting joy from being a part of one big family – the human family; a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives; and the feeling that we can make a difference and that there is more to life than what appears on the surface of a coin or a dollar bill.

We want to thank you so much for listening to our experience this afternoon, and hope that you too have a chance to become part of this 'new' Economy of Communion. Thank you!