

Economy of Communion experience for IEC, RDS, June 2012

Paul Connolly

I am Paul Connolly, an Optometrist, working in a Main St. Practice in a county town. We have a reception area, two testing rooms and a glazing and repairs workshop. There are four employees, three part-time and one full time. We have, over the last 28 years, regularly taken on student optometrists to complete their supervised practice as part of their degree qualification. We have, generally been a very busy practice and are very conscious of catering for the needs of all our patients at a reasonable cost to them. The ongoing recession and increased competition has bitten deep however, so we are working longer hours and engaged in group marketing and other businesses strategies to improve our market share.

When I first heard of Chiara Lubich's inspiration for an Economy of Communion (EOC) I was already trying to live the spirituality of the Focolare with its emphasis on the practical living out of the sentences of the Gospel, sharing of goods and its aim of a more united world. The EOC immediately grabbed me as moving this sharing to a global level, where so much calls out to be done. The potential for many businesses to contribute consistently to peoples needs both near and far- away energised me and I immediately made a decision to get involved.

Initially I invested in a company which marketed Ireland as a holiday destination with an emphasis on teaching English. This company, after many and sometimes difficult years is still an EOC business. Eventually, the penny dropped, that my own business, though smaller, could also be in the EOC. I consulted with my wife, who owns half of everything after all, and she was, let's say, critically supportive of this decision and continues to be supportive after more than ten years.

There was a spiritual experience to this too that surprised me. I always felt I was someone who went into work and tried to be Christian in that external environment. But after that decision it seemed as if the workplace itself became part of my own spiritual identity and that there was a deeper significance to what we were trying to do. I was fortunate too, that when a friend who shared in the spirituality of unity lost his job, I could employ him. Now we can share in trying to have love of neighbour as the basis of our work and encourage each other to keep trying even when faced with the many difficulties of running a business. There is also a great deal of support from the other Irish businesses involved in the EOC and we meet a few times a year to share our experiences. International conferences every few years give us a world view on how the EOC is developing and help to reignite our enthusiasm.

Sometimes it can be difficult, for example when someone came in recently wanting to reclaim for a pair of glasses

through their health card. This is contrary to the contract we have with the health board where approvals must be obtained in advance. The health board regularly send us letters to remind us of this even though in the recession they themselves are not fulfilling some of their commitments to us. Trying to explain this patiently to someone, while hoping not to be losing them as a patient, is not always easy.

The positive side to this is when the good relationship with the health board and the local community care office benefits a patient. Someone came in one Friday whose symptoms indicated a potentially serious medical problem. She unwillingly agreed to a private appointment with a specialist rather than having to wait three months via her medical card. Later that day she rang to say she could not afford the private fee and would go the medical card route. I did not want to alarm her too much but instead rang the local community care office and explained her situation. They slotted her in for an early public appointment the following Monday, which was great, and she went on to receive the necessary treatment. I think, in the recession, there are any people like this young woman who are to the pin of their collar and in this case it was good to be able to help.

How the actual profit sharing works is as follows; we are not a company so don't have a defined profit. When the previous year's accounts come out my wife and I add up our expenses

for the previous year plus any savings we need to make and subtract that from the profit figure. With the surplus that remains we try to be as faithful as possible to Chiara's initial inspiration to divide this in three, two parts of which goes to the EOC. There is a standing order every month which builds to 1800 euro a year and up to recently we were able to add much more to that. Unfortunately the recession and all its attendant woes have brought us right back to the standing order with perhaps a small top-up. Hopefully some of our new strategies to improve our business will allow us to add to that in the future. I firmly believe this is something God wants and I am very hopeful that things will improve.

I am currently also involved with many local businesses in promoting the town centre as a great shopping area. There are some planning issues which are a cause for concern and a group of us have taken a lead in developing a dialogue with the parties involved to see if we can agree a way forward satisfactory to all. A principle of the EOC, proposing good relations even with competitors, was the main motivator in moving the campaign in this direction.

Recently, at the end of a busy week, having tried to love my neighbour at work, I went to a bar for a read of the paper and a drink. There was a man I knew, on his own at the counter. It was tempting to just wave a greeting and get stuck into the paper but the call to love my neighbour changed my plans and we ended up having a great

conversation and got to know each other better. A perfect end to the week!