

Charisms at Work in Economics

We tend to overemphasize the institutional side of economics, underplaying key developments that originated from religious and civil inspirations.

By Luigino Bruni

History, along with civil and economic life, can be interpreted as a dynamic between charisma and institution.

The theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar proposed a vision of the Church as dialogue, a dynamic between different “profiles” or “principles” that are linked to the charisms of certain people at the Church’s beginning. For instance, two basic profiles are the Petrine and Marian.

The Petrine principle highlights above all the institutional, hierarchical, juridical, and objective side of Church life, while the Marian principle reveals its charismatic, horizontal, and fraternal nature (see Living City May 2007).

These principles are not in conflict, but in a vital, complimentary relationship. Von Balthasar says that the history of the Church can be narrated weaving together these two essential dimensions of the Church. It is a history of institutions and of charisms.

I am convinced that this vision of the Church can also be applied to the economic and civil dynamics of humanity. Just as there is (or at least there was) a tendency to emphasize the institutional aspect of the Church, similarly, while interpreting the civil and economic life of humanity, there is often the tendency to see only the institutional aspects and to leave unmentioned the role played by charisms.

We often narrate history in terms of great events, political treatises and wars. In economics we narrate the economy of big business enterprises and bankers, Marco Polo and the maritime republics of Venice and Genoa, the discovery of America and the influx of gold, inflation crises and colonial expansion.

Instead, we overlook other economies and histories, which I refer to in this article as “charismatic” since they arose from religious and civil charisms. If we make this mistake, we are neglecting fundamental elements in understanding the history of societies and economics.

Monasticism

An important example is monasticism. The Benedictine rule of *ora et labora* (pray and work) signified much more than a mere individual spirituality. Through the centuries, the Benedictine culture became a true culture of work and economics.

In the Greek and Roman world, in fact, those who studied did not work, and those who worked were generally uncultured slaves. The charisma of St. Benedict—not by chance the patron saint of Europe—reunited these two dimensions of human life: spirituality and work.

The charisma of Benedict and other founders was decisive for the emergence of a market economy. Because of the monasteries’ work and commercial experience, the ethical legitimization of economic activity was created—a decisive element for the start of modern economics.

The Franciscans

Another example is the Franciscan charisma, which also played a significant role in the modern market economy. This charisma represents a very important moment in the history of economics and Western society. It also represents a paradox: a charisma that is based on “sister poverty,” on

a real detachment from goods and money, became the first economic “school,” giving rise to the spirit of the market economy.

Francis of Assisi was the son of a merchant and a merchant himself. However, he quickly became critical of money and of a world regulated by money. Adamantly espousing free gifting and underlining the immeasurable value of precious resources (what would “brother sun” or “sister water” cost?), his charism was the most radical in history.

This charism gave rise in Italy to the *monti di pietà* (pawnshops) during the second half of the 15th century, initially in Italy, then the rest of Europe. The emergence of these was principally inspired by the idea of fraternity, not by a mere economic motive. It was aimed at liberating people from moneylenders and misery.

They used to say that a whole city was poor if one of its citizens was poor. The first banks came into being as a cure for poverty. To “cure” misery meant to cure the entire city; it meant healing the whole civil body! We cannot be happy when surrounded by unhappy people: real happiness is public good. So the emergence of the first modern banks was inspired by fraternity and love for the needy. Most of the current microfinance—the Yunus model, for instance—is the often-unaware heir of the poor of Assisi’s charism.

In the centuries that followed, charisms gave rise to South American *reducciones* (Jesuit missions), the first hospitals, public schools and charities. The first work contract to protect minors was drawn up by St. John Bosco, whose charism emerged out of love for teenagers and youth.

Not Just Saints

Charismatic history is not limited to the saints. There is also a charismatic principle at work in humanity, in people who are not explicitly religious but who are inspired by their spirituality and the idea of giving freely.

One of these is the European Cooperative Movement, which attempted a non-capitalistic alternative to the market economy in the second half of the nineteenth century, giving rise to cooperatives based on a spirit of brotherhood.

Charismatic economics is not just limited to our Western world. When Gandhi began his Salt March on March 12, 1930, it was a milestone for India, setting in motion a revolution that emerged from the Gandhian charism.

Economic and civil history would not have been the same without these great charisms and economic experiences arising from callings that brought about important effects for civilization, such as economies. They continue to exert their influence to this very day.

Box:

Charismatic Economies are:

1. **Idealistic** The motive behind such experiences is neither primarily nor exclusively the pursuit of individual advantage. The founders or animators of these experiences are motivated by civil zeal that is stronger than the attraction of mere economic pursuits.
2. **Reciprocal** Their founding principle is neither altruism, nor philanthropy, but reciprocity which in practice is often expressed in terms of solidarity, mutuality and even fraternity.
3. **Not just a means** Economic activity that emerges from a charism is never just a means, but an end in itself.
4. **Community Based** Charismatic experiences come into being on the communal level, from people who enter spontaneously into associations. They are experiences of free people.

5. **Concrete** They come into being to answer concrete problems of justice and equity, not from abstract theories. The experience begins in order to meet some kind of need for individuals or the community.

Box:

EoC Is Charismatic

- a. It is based on an ideal.
- b. It is based on reciprocity.
- c. It practices the “culture of giving,” that is, free gifting.
- d. It is the economy of a fraternal people.
- e. It emerged out of love for people in need.

Captions:

The action of charisms, special gifts of the Spirit, marked fundamental moments in the history of humanity’s economic life.

St. Benedict’s mandate to “pray and work” created a culture of work and economics in monasteries across Europe.

Based on detachment from goods and money, Francis of Assisi’s charism gave rise to the *monti di pietà*, or pawnshops, aimed at liberating people from moneylenders and misery.

St. John Bosco, whose charism was to work with youth, drew up the first work contract to protect minors.

For his business in favor of workers and consumers alike, Britain’s Robert Owen is considered the father of the cooperative movement, a non-capitalistic alternative to the market economy.

With his non-violent 1930 march protesting the British salt tax, Mahatma Gandhi gave rise to an economic revolution in India.

In 1991 Chiara Lubich started the Economy of Communion, an economic system based on a culture of giving. More than 750 businesses worldwide adhere to its basic tenets.