

Economy of Communion – from Living City May 2005 – translated from Citta Nuova

Growing Recognition for an Innovative Economic System

The Economy of Communion is raising much interest in the international arena. Participants recount their real-life experiences at the United Nations.

BY ALBERTO FERRUCCI

EVERY YEAR THE UNITED NATIONS Headquarters in Geneva celebrates the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. On just such a day New Humanity, the non-governmental organization (NGO) of the Focolare Movement with special consultative status at the U.N., in partnership with the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR), presented the Economy of Communion in Freedom (EOC).

In the afternoon of October 18, 2004, in a large room of the Wilson Palace in Geneva, seat of HCHR and other U.N. bodies, a round table was held on the theme of “Poverty and Development within the Framework of Reciprocity—the Proposal of the Economy of Communion.”

The discussion was opened by Mexican-born Maria Francisca Ize-Charrin, assistant to the HCHR and was moderated by Ricardo Espinosa from Colombia who is responsible for relations between the U.N. and U.N.-recognized NGOs. Alberto Ferrucci of the EOC central committee presented the history of the EOC and Luca Crivelli, an economist, offered an insightful reflection on poverty and the human face of economics.

The real novelty that occurred in that hall, however, normally the forum for lengthy discourses and sophisticated debates, was the personal witness given by Jose Luis Berriel from Uruguay. A father of six, he made tangible the deep suffering of a people afflicted by the side-effects of globalization. Berriel demonstrated, through numerous real-life examples, the potential we have to address our problems and circumstances in innovative ways once we have fully integrated and put into action the culture and spirit of communion.

Considerable astonishment was visible on the face of the moderator, Ricardo Espinosa, who, although accustomed to the significant contributions made by NGOs throughout the world, emphasized in his own intelligent and concise manner the incredible novelty of the proposal made in the room that day—namely, the application of the concept of brotherhood in economic-interest issues and on an international level.

“In our neighborhood,” Jose Luis Berriel said, “the number of needy women and children forced to live in harsh conditions was increasing on a daily basis. Our neighbors began erecting high walls and fences around their houses as a means of protection from theft. Convinced that everything we had received was a gift from God, our concern became rather to ensure that anyone who knocked on our door would not go away empty-handed—but with food, clothes, a smile or a moment of companionship. Over time, some of our neighbors seeing our actions began bringing us clothes and other goods saying to us, ‘If you yourselves can’t use these at least you know who can.’ So, we set aside a corner of our house where we would place donated items.”

Nonchalantly, Berriel then proceeded, “In the early 1990s, I was working for a multinational firm as an electrical engineer. One day my boss confided to me that management had decided to close down production facilities in Uruguay. As a result, only one of the five jobs in our department would be saved. Since I was the only one capable of performing certain job tasks, I could keep my job. Knowing my colleagues, however, I realized that one of them would be impacted horribly by losing his job as his wife had just lost hers. What to do? Feeling my co-worker’s suffering, I knew deep down that if my inner values were to be coherent with my outward choices, this was the time to prove it. Sharing these ideas with my wife, it suddenly became clear to me that prosperity is not a matter of holding on tightly to one’s possessions but of freely giving them away.

Back in the office, I suggested to my co-worker that we spend our remaining time together transferring all the skills I had to him so that he could take over my position. He was surprised by my offer, but accepted and eventually also my boss agreed. Shortly after, I was able to find another job which was not only better than my previous one but due to the financial liquidation of the firm I had left, I was able to obtain a loan to buy a house for my family.”

The micro-credit experiment at the *Kabayan Bank* in the Philippines, the presentation given by the owner of the *Sprimoglass* glass factory in Belgium, stories told by Klemens Fritschi and Michele Michelotti from the *Ridix Company* in Turin and by Jean-Michel and Patricia Besson from Switzerland, completed the EOC presentation.

In the debate that followed, Cornelio Sommaruga, former President of the International Red Cross, stressed “the globalization of responsibility” and how crucial it is that the principles freely applied by Economy of Communion businesses lead to “solidarity with the poor.” He was deeply struck by “the honesty demanded of the individual EOC business owners” who shared their real-life experiences of economy in communion, clearly defining the EOC as “portraying the concepts of love and universal brotherhood in economics.” He concluded his comments saying, “Today we witnessed the power and strength of individuals acting in society. By looking at how the EOC operates, we can move from the micro to the macro-economic level and to the notion of political power.”

Fr. Dominique Peccoud, ethics expert at the International Labor Office, explained how “a spirituality—something that promotes values—can engender efficient economic systems,” adding, “The United Nations global system is founded almost exclusively on rights and much less on the values accompanying these rights. Today we have seen how spirituality—or rather a purely spiritual incentive—can produce the same results that somewhere else we try to achieve through rights and law.”

In his address, the Vatican representative, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, highlighted how “the Economy of Communion initiative transforms work environments creating an atmosphere of communion. It results in the sharing of profits with those in need.” He added, “This same mechanism can enter into the world economic context creating communion there also.”

“I think that the Economy of Communion will bear great fruit,” Teny Pirri-Simonian from the Ecumenical Council of Churches concluded. “It will make history because it isn’t a merely human endeavor. And to think that all this began with one woman, Chiara Lubich!”

The Economy of Communion system aroused great interest as it brought together for over three hours 80 highly qualified people, among them diplomats, United Nations officials, experts from a variety of research centers (including the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the Orthodox Church, and the Japanese movement Rissho Kosei-kai), NGO representatives and business owners.

The following day the headline of the largest daily newspaper in French-speaking Switzerland, the *Tribune de Geneve*, read, “The Economy of Communion made its entrance at the U.N.”

Alberto Ferrucci is editor of the quarterly “Economy of Communion” and member of the international EOC commission. For more on the Economy of Communion in Freedom, visit www.eoc-online.com