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The Economy of Communion Project: Reciprocity as a Key to Economic Development
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In the coverage of Pope Benedict's recent visit to Cameroon, I was struck by John Allen's interview with his friend Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria. (NCR 3/20/09) Pressing the bishop "to get concrete about what the West ought to do for Africa"—for example, by lowering trade barriers or restructuring the IMF—Allen realized that the bishop was not taking the bait and asked straight-up: "What's the problem?"

"The problem—he answered—is the way you phrased the question. You asked how the West can 'help' Africa. We're not interested in 'help' in that sense [that] we are exclusively the receivers of your generosity. We're interested in a new kind of relationship, in which all of us, as equals, work out the right way forward." We need, he challenged, a "change of mentality"—including a change of mentality within the church. Of course the West should be concerned about the link between Western affluence and poverty. "But—he added—we must do this as brothers and sisters in one church, not as patrons in the West confronting objects of charity."

I believe this captures one of the most important challenges facing our world today. What might this "change of mentality" look like? I'd like to suggest that the Economy of Communion project sheds light on the "new kinds of relationships" that can help us move forward.

The Economy of Communion project emerged from the cultural humus of the Focolare, one of the international ecclesial movements in the Catholic Church, which began in Italy during World War II. "Focolare" ("fireplace" in Italian) was the nickname given because of the warm family-atmosphere that people found at the first informal gatherings. Its specific aim is to work for unity: within the Catholic Church, among Christians of different churches, and for relationships of peace and understanding between people of different religions, cultures, and social backgrounds.

Since its origins, the people of the movement have focused on trying to put the words of the Gospel into practice, particularly the New Commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). Inspired by the example of the first Christian community (Acts 2:44-45) a communion of spiritual and material goods was initially aimed at meeting the basic needs of the poor in their heavily bombed city. "Give and it will be given to you," (Lk 6:38)—food, clothing and medicine arrived in abundance, and were in turn shared with those in need.

What emerged from this lifestyle was not only a more equal distribution of goods, but also a profound cultural intuition—that the essence of human experience is to be "in communion." In the image of God, who is love, and who for Christians is a communion of persons, the Trinity, they saw the map for all human relationships. Our deepest fulfillment is in loving, in giving.

Spreading throughout the globe, they continued their efforts to love one another concretely. But the needs often outweighed the resources. In 1991 when the founder, Chiara Lubich, visited the community in San Paolo, Brazil, she was struck by the marked contrast of skyscrapers surrounded by slums, where Focolare people also lived; and was touched by the ardent desire of many to have a more effective impact in addressing these social problems.

Reflecting together on Pope John Paul II's then-recent encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, they began to see new possibilities. Why not start businesses—normal, for-profit businesses—which could augment the possibilities for employment. The envisioned a three part division of profits: 1) part as direct aid for the poor; 2) part for educational projects which could help further a culture of communion; 3) and part back into the development of the businesses.

There are now 754 businesses throughout the world that follow this model—mostly small and medium size, but some with more than 100 employees—in various sectors of production and service, and in every continent. The 36 in the US include an import-export business, a law office, an environmental consulting firm, a tutoring business, a violin shop, an accounting firm, an apparel labeling shop, a goat farm, several restaurants, and a chocolate factory.

Economy of Communion businesses commit themselves to following management principles that enable them to bring Gospel values to bear on their day-to-day decisions while working within market

structures. Cornerstones include ethical relationships with regulatory agencies and with labor unions; and fostering communion with employees by particular attention to their health, well-being, and development. (For example, a Los Angeles pizzeria was able to include medical insurance in the package of benefits for its waitresses). Communion with consumers and the public is expressed in concern for product safety, and respect for the environment.

Examples from the managers of a Brazilian cleaning products company give an idea how the principles are applied. Here's a description of a meeting with a supplier who had disrupted production by delivering poor quality material: "I was ready to terminate our arrangement, but then I realized that I had to renew my promise to love each neighbor in a real way. With this new frame of mind, I was able to greet him as if the mistake had never happened, and was able to treat his problems as if they were my own. In the course of the conversation, we found a solution, and instead of breaking off the relationship, we were able to deepen it."

In another moment, ready to fire an employee, one of the chemists suggested to the manager that he should first listen to that employee with greater attention. "From that moment on, not only did our relationship improve, but his work did as well. It was a lesson for me not to jump at the obvious decision based on professionalism, or the market, or stress, but to recognize the importance of personal relationships."

Following these guidelines, many of the business have not only survived in the market, but also thrived. A Philippine rural bank, moved from the 123rd to the 3rd largest rural bank in terms of deposits, and because of the trust created within and around the business, was one of the few to survive the 1998 Asian financial crisis.

A "new mentality" is especially evident in the fact that those who receive help are not considered as "assisted" or as "beneficiaries" but as active participants in the project, all part of the same community, who also live the culture of giving. The emphasis is on reciprocity: each gives and receives with equal dignity.

What do the poor have to give? First, they bring to the whole project a profound awareness that the gift of self is the most precious of all. Understanding, attention, forgiveness, a smile, time, talents, ideas, and help. . . the culture of communion rests on the premise that everyone has something to give. Sharing one's needs, with dignity and sincerity, is also appreciated as a gift, as a contribution to increase the life of communion. As expressed by a Croatian family of nine living in a two room apartment: "The assistance we receive means so much to us, not just because it is helping us to survive, but because by sharing our need, we can be part of this 'sacred' reality."

The poor also share their experience of how God's love reaches them through the help they receive. A letter from Uruguay: "I have experienced the love of our heavenly Father on many occasions, but I never thought he would even help me with my teeth. Through the help I received I was able to take care of an infection I had. I felt so happy—as if I were the Father's favorite child . . ."

Many share the help they receive with others whose need is greater. A Brazilian woman who had just received an unexpected gift of vegetables, shared them with her neighbor, who in turned shared them with others. And many renounce the help just as soon as they have the bare minimum of economic independence. A young man from Nigeria who was able to finish high school and find a better job, wrote: "Now it is time for me to help someone else in need, someone whom I do not know but who needs my small contribution, as I was helped. I ask God that he may always give me a heart as big as his, in order to see others' needs."

And for some the assistance helps to sustain economic endeavors: a woman from Kenya was trying to start a small vegetable business, but because she was unable to pay for the proper permit, she often spent the night in jail. With the help she received, she was able to obtain the necessary permit, and bring the business ahead. A Brazilian young man, after going through drug rehabilitation, was able to use the assistance to open a small shop, wrote: "Our economic problems have not been totally solved, but now we want to give our small contribution to help someone else."

In fact, the initial Economy of Communion businesses began with the active participation of the poor—hundreds put their resources together, often selling chickens or other livestock to purchase

“shares” for the initial capital. In 1998, a Cameroon woman named Patience didn’t let an initial lack of resources stop her from beginning a small chicken farm, which has now grown to include two large coops, a warehouse, an employees’ lounge, and a car for deliveries. Their choice to avoid excessive use of chemicals has somewhat reduced the profit margin, but so far they are able to cover expenses and the salaries of three employees—they are looking forward to generating a profit to share. You can imagine how these examples, and this life of communion, in turn inspires the other Economy of Communion business owners and employees to persevere in their efforts.

The fact that these businesses not only survive, but thrive in the free market; and unleash previously untapped initiative and resources in both businesses owners and the poor alike lead me, as a lawyer, to ask whether these “new mentality” has something to say to legal theory. In this model of communion, the step to open myself to the needs of the other hinges not so much on the arduous, difficult, heroic act of detaching myself from material goods, but rather on the premise that loving, giving, is the key to human happiness. My fulfillment as a person is intrinsically tied to my openness to the other, to my capacity to appreciate the gift that the other is, and the gift that I can be for them.

I see enormous implications for areas of legal theory that have been bound by more individualistic concepts of the human person and by interpretations of economic activity as a clash between apparently irreconcilable individual interests. For example, in the debate over the standards for negligence in product design, I think this suggests there is something more to “reasonableness” than what seemed to be captured in risk-utility or cost-benefit analysis.

In the Economy of Communion model, the effort to keep the human person at the center of product development is neither a concession to clashing interests, nor an inconvenient but sadly necessary restriction on freedom. Rather, it is an expression of the heart and soul of the life of the business itself, intrinsic to its deepest purpose, and to the participants’ fulfillment as human beings. This “other” whose needs, perspective, preferences, and safety I must take into consideration, is not an obstacle to other goals, such as increased production, but rather the very reason why I am in business. It is precisely in making space for the “other” that I find fulfillment as a person, and in my business endeavors. Production levels and costs would be a reflection of that understanding and level of care. A definition of “reasonableness” which captures something of these dimensions might look very different than what we have today. If we can see how this “change of mentality” can work its way even into legal structures, then I do think there’s tremendous hope for a way forward.

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www.edc-online.org

For more information about the Focolare Movement
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US: www.focolare.us