

EoC 3 overview from Living City July 2009

What is the Economy of Communion in Freedom?

People-oriented businesses offer opportunities for new kinds of relationships

By Amy Uelmen

In the coverage of Pope Benedict's recent visit to Cameroon, I was struck by John Allen's interview with Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria. Pressing the bishop "to get concrete about what the West ought to do for Africa" — i.e., by lowering trade barriers or restructuring the International Monetary Fund — Allen realized that the bishop was not taking the bait and asked directly, "What's the problem?"

"The problem," the bishop 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? The Economy of Communion in Freedom sheds light on new kinds of relationships that can help us move forward.

The EoC emerged from the cultural humus of the Focolare Movement. Since its origins, the people of the movement have focused on trying to put the words of the Gospel into practice, particularly Jesus' 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 gifts will be given to you" (Lk 6:38) — food, clothing and medicine arrived in abundance, and were in turn shared with those in need.

The result of this lifestyle was not only a more equal distribution of goods, but also a profound cultural intuition — the essence of human experience is to be "in communion." In 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, members of the Focolare continued their efforts to love one another concretely, but the needs often outweighed the resources. During her visit to Brazil in 1991, Focolare founder Chiara Lubich launched the EoC through which for-profit businesses generate additional jobs and commit to a three-part division of the profits: 1) for direct aid to people in need; 2) for educational projects to help foster a culture of giving; and 3) for the continued growth and development of the business. Presently 754 businesses follow this model — most of them small and medium sized, but some with more than 100 employees — in various sectors of production and service, and on every continent.

EoC businesses commit themselves to building "new kinds of relationships" with employees, customers, regulatory agencies and the general public. The manager of a Brazilian cleaning products company described the dynamic well. Ready to terminate a contract with a supplier who had delivered poor quality material, he remembered his commitment to love each neighbor. "I was able to treat his problems as if they were my own. We found a solution and, instead of breaking off the relationship, we were able to deepen it." Ready to fire an employee, he followed the advice of one of the chemists to first listen to that employee with greater attention. "From that moment on, not only did our relationship improve, but his work did as well."

New kinds of relationships are especially evident in the fact that those who receive help are truly active participants in the project. The culture of communion rests on the premise that everyone has something to give — understanding, attention, forgiveness, a smile, time, talents, ideas and help. In fact, the initial Economy of Communion businesses began with the active participation of those in need — hundreds put their resources together, often selling chickens or other livestock

to purchase “shares” for the initial capital. Sharing one’s needs, with dignity and sincerity, is also appreciated as a contribution to increase the life of communion.

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 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.”

Perhaps it is this prayer for “a heart as big as God’s” which best expresses the hope for the “new kinds of relationships” that can help us to live as true brothers and sisters and discover new paths to economic development.

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For more on the Economy of Communion in Freedom, visit: www.edc-online.org

North American EoC businesses continue to share their profits, experience and core values. Here are just a few:

Environmental consultants

An Indiana-based environmental consultant service, Mundell & Associates, has opened its doors to an internship program for youth who hope to start EoC businesses. The company’s new building has become the focal point for a number of the local community’s activities. The company’s relationship capital has brought unexpected additional business: a contract with the largest pipeline in the U.S. and a geothermal project developed by a university that is of interest to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Tour agency

Spiritours, a tour agency based in Montreal, has celebrated its fifth anniversary. Six tours of the Holy Land are currently scheduled. Lasting relationships are established on these excursions, and recently a reunion was held for participants who had traveled together to Morocco.

Language school

La Parola, an Italian language school in Denver, had been experiencing a drop in enrollment until its owner Miriam Turri decided to branch out and offer cooking lessons as well. A whole new clientele has arrived.

Agricultural products

First Fruits Farm, a California business raising goats, lambs, cats and chicks is expanding and, through God’s providence, is in the process of getting county approval to build new animal stalls in anticipation of opening a dairy.

Courses in the EoC

Linda Specht, a business professor at Trinity University in Texas, offers online courses in EoC business principles. Last month she co-authored a paper for a management conference in Liverpool, England.

Caption

The Lionello EoC business park in Incisa Valdarno, Italy, near Florence. Industrial parks for EoC businesses are located near Focolare little cities. Their aim is to present a complete model of a renewed society based on fraternity.