



“The new horizons of the Economy of Communion”
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PANEL 5
THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION AND JUSTICE:
A SUGGESTION

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Introduction

On the out set may I bring you greetings from the world Council of Churches. May also I express my deep gratitude for being invited to this very important convention.

On 17th September 2003, the World Council of Churches organized a seminar on the Economy of Communion (EoC) as a follow-up to Chiara Lubich's visit to the WCC. Sisters and brothers from the Focolare movement presented this concept. The entrepreneurs shared with us their practical experience of operating with this concept. From their stories we understood clearly its characteristics as outlined by Chiara Lubich.¹

I would like to highlight one characteristic that is close to the ecumenical attempt of developing the Economy of sharing and justice. “ Within the Economy of Communion the emphasis is not on the philanthropy of one or other, but rather on sharing where each one gives and receives with equal dignity”. Konrad Raiser also stated, “ Sharing has to do with sharing in the life of the people, in reciprocal giving and taking and not simply a matter of transferring material goods.”² He added that the church as koinonia is called to be a living

¹ See The Experience of the “Economy of Communion”: A Proposal of Economic Action from the Spirituality of Unity by Chiara Lubich in Luigino Bruni (ed.) Toward a Multi-Dimensional Economic Culture: The Economy of Communion, New City Press 2002, pp.18-19.

² Report on El Escorial Consultation. Sharing Life, WCC ,1997, p.18



example of an effective community of sharing, prefiguring the fellowship in the Kingdom of God. The realization of such koinonia is itself a gift of God through the power of God's Spirit. 'Sharing' according to him is thus a fundamental symbol of life, which points to the manifestation of fully human living, and so has a wider frame of reference than a moral commitment. The test of sharing is the sharing of power and mutual empowerment in a way that will make communities sustainable and determine their own processes of development. Ecumenical efforts to design guidelines for sharing were successful but were not ever fully implemented. This failure is due to what theologians call sinfulness. The economy of sharing and justice was expected to be practiced within the ecumenical movement particularly between the rich churches and poor ones. It is therefore inspiring to learn from the concept of EoC.

The success of businesses operating with this concept is based on the fact that they leave room for God's intervention in their operations. The uniqueness of EoC is therefore spirituality. "The businesses that participate in EoC project operate within the market and to all intents and purposes are commercial firms or societies like any other," says Chiara Lubich but they operate in a manner that those with economic means and those without, meet at a place of communion to help each other, develop open relationships and spread the culture of giving, peace, lawfulness and respect for environment both within and outside the business. Yet Raiser noted that the people's language of sharing is inexorably at odds with the language of established structures, including church structures which follows a different logic, i.e. ultimately the logic the power of the neo-liberal market which encourages competition instead of cooperation. It is, therefore, encouraging to see the way businesses under EoC operate despite this power.

How can the EoC go a step further to differentiate itself from the neo-liberal market paradigm, which is responsible for poverty, inequality and environmental destruction today? Looking at



the EoC figures we note that in Africa has only 1% of EoC in practice³. To what extent does this picture mirror the neo-liberal economic model that excludes Africa? Is it because the culture of companies to which EoC is focused is at embryonic development in Africa? Or has the EoC not fully grasped the nature of community sharing in Africa on which to develop Economy of sharing? Is it possible to create programs in Africa that are based on the spirit of community sharing? These are questions that might be addressed if EoC will venture into addressing global inequality and justice.

The Limits of Economy of Sharing at the Micro-level

We observe that EoC operates basically at the micro level. While it enhances sharing, it is operating within a global economic system that is based on the neo-liberal market system that has resulted into a huge gap between the rich and the poor. This gap is an indication of lack of sharing or what others call an economy of solidarity. How can EoC go beyond the micro level to macro and global levels? The World Bank President said, “ we live in a world scarred by inequality. Something is wrong when the richest 20% of the global population receives more than 80% of the global income. Something is wrong when 1.2 billion people live on less than a dollar a day and 2.8 billion still live on less than 2 dollars a day. With all the forces making the world smaller, it is time to change our way of thinking... Growth is not enough. We must confront deep-seated inequalities.”⁴ The situation described by the World Bank President is caused by the economics of greed that drive global corporations and the belief that the market by itself can resolve poverty and inequality. This is what is wrong. In 1980 a CEO of a company was paid 40 times what an employee gets in the US. Today a CEO earns 500 times. Companies are becoming bigger controlling huge markets but employing very little global labour. Most of the corporations have also not addressed the issue of the environment. Can EoC address as well this global issue by looking critically at the market economy?

³ See Geographical distribution of Economy of Communion businesses in Luigno Bruni (Ed) p.142



“To reflect on the inhumane consequences of a global economy, we must replace the godlike rule of the market with faith from our cultural heritages and replace the profit-oriented sentiment with an integrated world view upon which global ethics can be established through dialogues among all religious traditions in the world.”⁵ This view of how to approach the global economy from an interfaith perspective in order to address poverty and inequality could draw its energy from the experience of EoC at the micro level. Is this possible? In order to combine economy of sharing and justice, it is imperative to draw lessons from EoC and enrich them with the concern of economic justice that includes aspects of distribution and equity. We could call this combination “the Economy of Communion and Justice (EoCJ). EoCJ could then be developed to operate both at the micro and macro levels.

Economy of Communion and Justice (EoCJ)

The economy of communion and justice begins with the understanding of the Ministry of Christ. He came “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He shared in the afflictions of the weak, the suffering and the oppressed of his day. So sharing life, which is the basis of EoCJ, is giving ourselves in compassion for those who suffer today in our world and whom we meet on our road. It means we must learn about God’s power which is shown in love and justice, the self emptying love of Christ (Kenosis). Christ affirms the real power which the poor and the oppressed can exert when they find the truth of God’s good news. This means we must listen to the poor and the marginalized and allow their voices to penetrate and change economic institutions.

The unemployed, people who have been deprived of their livelihoods, landless, people with disabilities, youth, women, the homeless, migrants should have the power to take their own

⁴ See James D. Wolfensohn, Building and Equitable World, Address to the Board of Governors, Prague, Czech Republic, September 26, 2000 p.9

⁵ See Zhou Qin a Confucian View of the Global Economy in Paul F. Knitter & Chandra Muzaffar (Eds) Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy , Orbis Books , New York, 2002



decisions in situations affecting their life and future. The Economy of Communion and Justice begins, therefore, with the extreme poor and works upwards. The world has about 300 million chronically poor people, the majority are in Asia, Latin America and Africa and some in North America and Europe. But experience has shown that poverty reduction programs begin to only address those who are at least living above poverty line. The people in poverty have no voice, as was said by a man in a working class community in Birmingham England, “ Our opinions do not count for much”⁶ Chronically poor people will never move up from their situation. This is the challenge of EoCJ. It starts with dealing with poverty as caused by lack of justice and spirituality rather than lack of material needs. Then it proceeds in a method of transformative justice. “ Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:20).

Transformative justice

Using transformative justice as a tool and a fruit of overcoming poverty and inequality will enhance the strength of EoCJ. It deals with the past and the present. Its goal is to achieve justice, healing, reconciliation and the re-establishment of people’s relationships of which restitution and reparation are also a part. It affirms people’s dignity, self-respect and worth, it upholds justice, peace and the integrity of creation together⁷. This definition is drawn from a text regarding the challenge of overcoming racism but there are parallels for our topic here. Today we are facing a global economic apartheid where 3 billion people live on US 2 dollars a day and are excluded from the resources that God has given humanity free to enjoy. International systems and institutions have been put in place where only a few enjoy excessive riches while the majority have to do away with crumbs. Dealing with this injustice requires transformation. The World Council of Churches’ General Assembly that will take place in Porto Alegre in 2006 has this as a theme, “ God in your Grace Transform the World.”

⁶ Coenrad Boerma, *The Poor Side of Europe: The Church and the New Poor of Western Europe*, WCC publications, Geneva, 1989 preface.



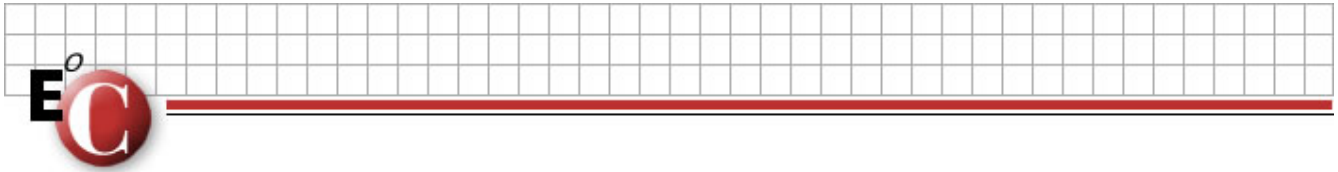
How then do we work for EoCJ at the Assembly will also be the question at the plenary on Economic Justice. At the plenary a process of Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) will be presented. This will be a response to the question raised at the WCC's last Assembly in Harare WCC Assembly "How do we live our Faith in the Context of Globalization?" Churches will be encouraged to look for alternatives to the current neo-liberal economic paradigm, which creates more poverty and inequality. Some churches might consider the Economy of Communion and Justice.

The Characteristics of EoCJ

First and foremost, sharing life in a world community is to hear the cries of those that are exploited and are denied life because of unjust economic structures, to identify with their suffering and to support them. Secondly, it is to develop alternatives like the initiatives of EoC that begins with the cultural contexts of the people. Thirdly, to advocate against unjust trade and finance systems in place today. These three prerequisites are necessary conditions for the development of EoCJ.

Let me exemplify why these conditions are essential. My brother is a very small peasant with a two acres of land. He planted sugar cane in order to sell it for money as a means for raising school fees and other basic needs. In 2002 he harvested 58 tons of sugar cane and sold it to the village factory. He was paid only US \$ 80. The reason is that the sugar market in Tanzania was dumped with subsidized sugar from the European Union. Though, my brother was part of a sugar cane growers union which worked in solidarity sharing tools etc. this Economy of Communion was not enough to stop the EU injustice done to them. My brother who worked very hard was back to poverty. Stories like this are numerous, where women for instance lose their small scale clothes industries because of liberalization policies that favour

⁷ Transformative Justice: Being Church and Overcoming Racism: Resource Guide, WCC 2004 p.17



huge transnational corporations. These corporations in some places start Export Processing Zones(EPZs) that exploit women's labour. EoCJ can address this injustice.

The World Council of Churches and the ecumenical family is searching for an approach which allows it to express development and economy in relation to our common vocation to live in right relationship with our neighbors, with the earth and with our creator. Such an approach needs to include these key affirmations:⁸

- A recognition that real value cannot be expressed in monetary terms and that life-and that which is essential to sustain it-cannot be commodified.
- A belief in the inherent dignity of every person and a priority on creating the conditions for a dignified life.
- A commitment to an economy whose role is to serve the well being of the people and the health of the earth.
- A focus on the ultimate aim of economic life to nurture sustainable, just and participatory communities.
- A vision of global community whose interdependence is not reduced to trade and markets.
- An acknowledgement of a common destiny as co-inhabitants of the one earth for which we all share responsibility and from which we should all equally benefit.
- A responsibility to uphold the right of all people particularly the diverse communities of the poor and excluded to participate in the economic, social and political decisions which affect them. The EoCJ could embrace this affirmation.

Poverty and Wealth

Another issue that needs to be addressed under EoCJ is to study the relationship between poverty and wealth. In the WCC and APRODEV-WCC related agencies in Europe study on "Poverty and Wealth" it was noted that, " Poverty is still a major global reality. It has many



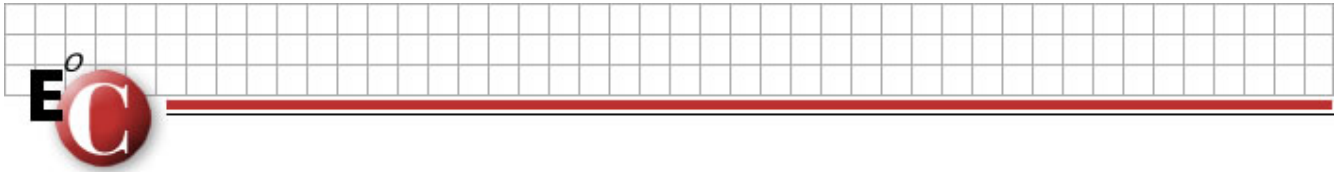
dimensions - material, social and psychological - and many side effects. It is characterized above all by a lack of income and power. Wealth is the reverse of poverty and is just a great a problem unless and until it is shared by everyone and grows rich in moral, social and spiritual values.⁹ On this study it is noted that excessive wealth is contrary to gospel teaching. It is not separate a issue from poverty but in many aspects the same issue. They have common causes and integral related characteristics: the ability of the rich to earn a living for example is the inability of the poor, the strength of the rich is the weakness of the poor. Worse still, excessive wealth is itself cause of poverty. The drive to create a rising tide of wealth and become rich does not benefit the poor and the rich alike so that 'all the boat rise'. It does not bring an end to poverty but often exacerbates it. And by concentrating only on poverty, attention is deflected from the rich. At most they are seen as possible source of a solution to poverty. They are not seen as a major part of the problem.

A culture in which greed and endless accumulation of material possessions are regarded as normal and legitimate has to be eroded by alternative values such as self-restraint, simplicity, a sense of proportion, justice, generosity, volunteerism (A 'giving culture'), holism and greater discernment as to 'means' and 'ends'. Under EoCJ the following questions need to be raised:

- Can excessive wealth be defined as concretely as we sometimes define poverty?
- Is there a wealth line above which no one should rise just as there is a poverty line below which no one should be allowed to fall?
- Can we speak of 'relative wealth' in a way we speak of 'relative' poverty so focussing once again on unacceptable disparities within countries and communities, rich or poor, as well as between them?
- What might be the indicators of excessive wealth to stand alongside poverty indicators like income per capita for example or infant mortality rates when governments and international institutions are encouraged to monitor and report both?

⁸ See Economic Globalization: A Critical View and an Alternative Vision: Program implementation, WCC , 2002 p.10

⁹ Michael Taylor, Christianity, Poverty and Wealth: The Findings 'Project 21 WCC Publications, Geneva 2003, p.1



Conclusion

The EoC project is inspiring and a step in the right direction. It can complete the journey of communion if it embraces the component of justice and become the Economy of Communion and Justice. The road to the fullness of life will include moving from the micro-level to the global to address as well global systems of injustice that work against the poor and destroys the environment. It is also a road that will first be constructed by leveling the hills of greed and excessive wealth. The spirit of the journey will be Christ who loved us so much that he died for us and who came so that all humanity may have life and have it abundantly.