

A Way of Communion in Freedom

Focolare's founder retraces the origins of the Economy of Communion in Brazil.

BY CHIARA LUBICH

AS WE ALL KNOW, THE INSPIRING IDEA of the Economy of Communion was to give rise to business enterprises whose profits could be used in favor of those in need. I was prompted to do this on realizing that, despite the sharing of possessions practiced in the Movement, we were unable to cover all the urgent needs of our members.

I was on a plane approaching the city of São Paulo, Brazil, and I was shocked to look down and see an enormous concentration of skyscrapers surrounded by a vast ring of slums, which I learned

later Cardinal Arns had referred to as a "crown of thorns."

I felt that an Economy of Communion would help us achieve, in a different way, the original goal behind putting our possessions in common: that no one among us would be in need.

Now, it was a matter of setting up business enterprises that would continually produce profits to benefit the needy, giving an example of economic activity inspired by Christianity.

From this project's inception, we sensed this was a possible new way, in line with our spirituality of unity, toward which the future could tend—a way of communion in freedom.

Later on, an economist went so far as to tell me that he saw it as the "hope of the future" ...

Human beings reach fulfillment also through their work. Therefore, we should seek to implement the Economy of Communion in the best possible way. Indeed, we should feel called to make every hour devoted to it as a masterpiece of precision, order and harmony. We should be keenly aware of using our talents in order to improve them and to perfect ourselves through studies related to our professions.



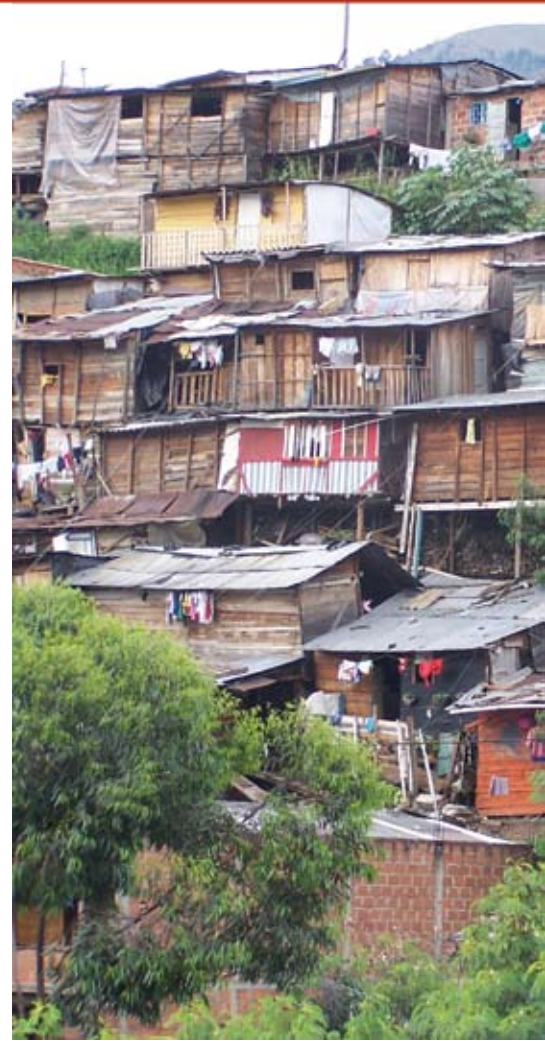
Chiara Lubich

TARCISIO ARZUFFI

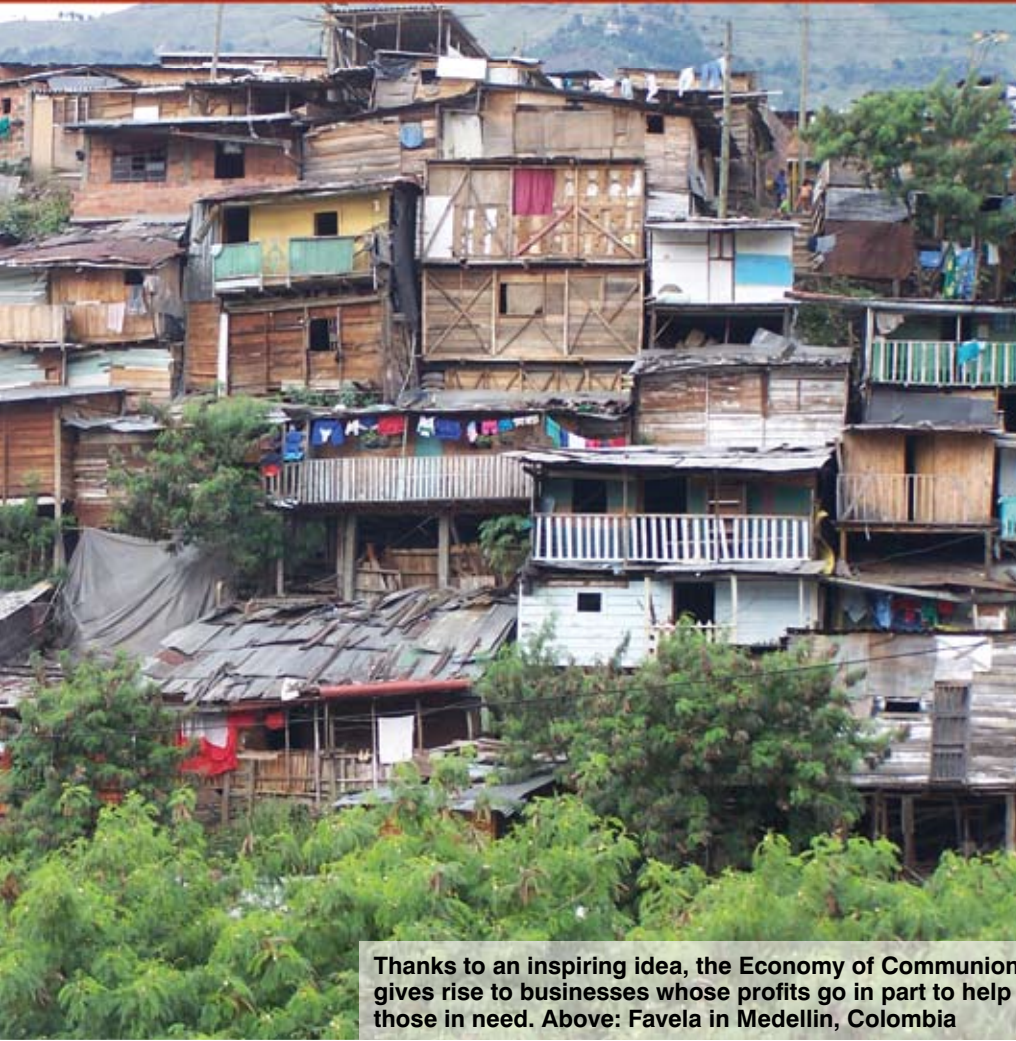
BY LUIGINO BRUNI AND AMY UELMEN

AS THE FOCOLARE SPREAD throughout the globe, the community tried to meet the needs of its poor. But the needs often outweighed the resources.

In 1991 when Focolare's founder, Chiara Lubich, visited the community in São Paulo, Brazil, she was touched by



What is the Economy of Communion



Thanks to an inspiring idea, the Economy of Communion gives rise to businesses whose profits go in part to help those in need. Above: Favela in Medellín, Colombia

DREAMSTIME/GREGORY KUBATYAN

principles can be drawn. They 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 of business operations include ethical relationships with the government and with labor unions.

The businesses foster communion with employees by particular attention to their health, well-being and development. Constructive exchange with consumers and the public is achieved through concern for product safety and respect for the environment.

Following these guidelines, many of the business have not only survived, but have thrived.

EoC businesses also factor a new element in their calculations—God’s loving intervention, which often arrives in the form of unexpected clients, revenue or ideas for new products.

Another striking aspect of the EoC is the way everyone involved is given equal consideration. Those who receive help are not considered “assisted” or “beneficiaries.” Rather they are regarded as active participants in the project, all part of the same community, who also live the culture of giving.

The emphasis is not on philanthropy, but on communion.

It is ironic that right at the time when economic theorists are describing market relationships as horizontal and symmetrical rather than hierarchical, the modern business persists in its hierarchical model. In their governing structures and principles, many modern businesses are a remnant of a feudal society, certainly not in accord with the equality that the market

the ardent desire of many to have a more effective impact in addressing the social problems of their country.

As Lubich reflected with them, they began to see new possibilities. Why not start businesses—normal, for-profit businesses—which could augment employment possibilities and create profits? The profits could be divided in three equal parts: for direct aid for the poor, educational support and formation that could help foster

a culture of giving, and the development of the businesses themselves.

Sixteen years later, 750 businesses follow the Economy of Communion model. Most are small and medium size, but some have more than 100 employees. They function in various sectors of production and service, and are located all over the world.

EoC businesses are authentic “laboratories” that can be studied and from which

my mmunion?



CITTA NUOVA (7)

The Lionello Bonfanti industrial park near Florence is one of seven such parks around the world. Among the EoC businesses operating in the park are craft shops, a bookstore, an insurance company, a children's furniture concession, a heating company, an art studio, a consulting firm, a toy factory and an ice cream parlor.

Under the Tuscan Sun

brought and demanded.

The EoC system proposes that business place, as an organizing principle, reciprocity over hierarchy. To pose communion at the heart of the economic life of a business is to affirm a principle of "brotherhood" or of reciprocity as the foundation of the business management structure. First we are equal, and then we have different functions within the organization.

This does not negate the importance of the principle of hierarchy, especially in moments in which there are conflicts of interest. It does mean, however, recognizing that first we are equal in dignity, and then, at a second level, we have different functions and tasks, and therefore different responsibilities. 

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The above article is comprised of excerpts taken from "Religious Values and Corporate Decision Making: The Economy of Communion Project," in Fordham Journal of Corporate & Financial Law, n.3, 2006.

Near the Focolare's little city of Loppiano, in Tuscany, is a new industrial park for Economy of Communion businesses. Italy's prime minister was on hand for the grand opening.

BY FRANK JOHNSON

ROMANO PRODI, PRIME MINISTER of Italy and former president of the European Commission, and Florence's Cardinal Ennio Antonelli were among the high-profile invitees at the new Lionello Bonfanti Industrial Park in October.

The business park, situated near the Focolare's little city of Loppiano in Tuscany, was several years in the making, the seventh such park around the world. Founded on the tenets of the Economy of Communion, the facility is for firms that

wish to put a percentage of their profits at the service of the poor and in works that promote spiritual development for the betterment of humanity.

The cardinal expressed his personal enthusiasm and support for the initiative. "Benedict XVI has said on various occasions that history is guided by creative minorities," Antonelli said. "I think that this evening we are gaining a better understanding of what all this means."

"In every society we need models that help us keep developing," said Prodi. He said he was grateful for such a project, for the commitment taken to achieve "trans-

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parency in accounting, respect for the law and for freely sharing profits to create a network of solidarity.”

Initially the new business park will host 15 companies, producing goods as varied as textiles, crafts and foodstuffs. There are also companies offering financial, insurance and information services.

The park will also be a place for sharing ideas and projects and will offer services to more than 200 Italian companies that belong to the EoC.

At the new site, its originality in design is readily apparent. Standing on 2.4 acres, the building avoids a typically industrial look.

There are 5,621 shareholders of the firms involved, including many pensioners, housewives and students, as well as more professional investors.

From experiences shared by business owners, it became obvious that it has not been easy to transfer their businesses or to set up new branches there. But as they said, they were fascinated by the idea of coming here to be a community of business people that openly displays its desire to improve business ethics and help bridge

the gap between rich and poor.

Cecilia Manzo, president of the EoC company that runs and promotes the industrial park, said that “the aim of these businesses is to involve employees in running the business.”

Professor Stefano Zamagni, a lecturer in political economics at the University of Bologna, also emphasized employee involvement. He said, “Today, in this post-industrial era, the key factor is no longer machinery or capital, but the human person. If we want our businesses to flourish, we have to place the human person at the center of everything.” And this is what happens in EoC businesses: employees know why the business has been established, and they do their part to realize its goals.

A message from Chiara Lubich, who launched the Economy of Commu-

nion 16 years ago, expressed her hope that the new industrial park would be “an answer to today’s economic problems.”

She gave it a motto, “God is always at work.” A ceramic plaque with this phrase was unveiled during the opening ceremony. “This is to remind us,” explained Chiara, “of the value that God gives to work, of the creative ability of humankind.”

She also spoke of how these industrial parks are linked to the little cities of the movement, which are called to be “models of a new society founded on the Gospel.”

The first industrial park of this kind, and the most developed, is one in Brazil, close to the Focolare’s little city near São Paulo.

All seven industrial parks around the globe are situated close to one of the Focolare’s little cities. The aim is to present a complete model of a renewed society that is based on fraternity.

Lionello Bonfanti, from whom this latest industrial park takes its name, was a judge, a *focolarino* and one of the first group to settle in Loppiano. 

THE INAUGURATION

Clockwise from left: Romano Prodi, Italy’s Prime Minister; Bishop Paolo Tarchi, director of Italy’s Catholic Bishops Conference’s office for social affairs, with Flavia Prodi and Lucia Fronza, president of the Movement for Unity in Politics; Lionello Bonfanti, after whom the industrial park is named; a panel presentation; visitors crowd the industrial park entrance

