



“The new horizons of the Economy of Communion”
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PANEL 1
“GRADUATE THESES ON THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION”

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When Chiara launched the economy of communion project she immediately invited the new generations “to spend their energies for this project”, entrusting especially to them the “in-depth study of its cultural aspect”, that passage from life experiences of the EOC to a “theory” that can be spread in the economic, theological, sociological and philosophical sectors.

Many young people enthusiastically responded, proposing to their professors that they undertake a thesis on the economy of communion. We can hardly imagine the difficulties met by these “pioneers of theses on the economy of communion”, considering the fact that the project was still in its very early stages. To give a hand to those who ventured along this way with great enthusiasm, in a meeting like the one held in 1993, the idea arose to establish a small supporting structure – an information archive of graduate theses. In that meeting there were already some young people who had begun this endeavor or who were intending to do so. The graduates sent disks containing the files of their theses and I looked after including them in the archive and sending copies of them, always on a disk, to whoever asked for them. There was great joy in those who put at everyone’s disposal the fruit of their efforts, not letting them “gather up dust on a shelf”, as there was great joy in those who received these theses.

In the beginning of 1995 a thesis was published by a German scientific publishing house while, for the first time, a thesis on the EOC was written by someone who, although not a member of the Focolare Movement, was fascinated by the EOC project and chose it as the theme of her thesis in theology!

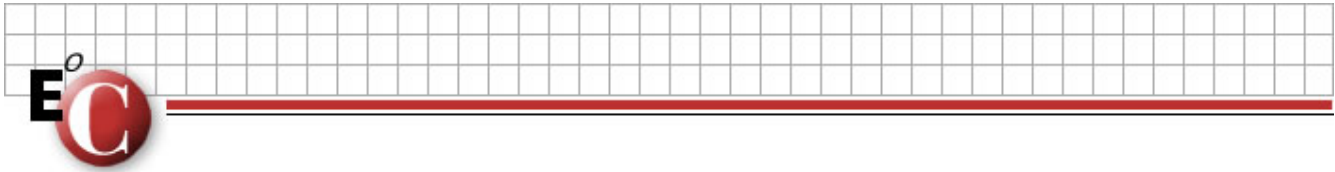
We already sensed the many facets that would be involved in the study of the economy of communion (from business economy to the history of economic doctrines, from theology to the problems faced by developing countries...). At the end of 1995, thirteen



theses had been defended and thirty were in the course of preparation in the main universities of Italy. We eventually decided to put these theses in an archive available on the internet, also because with their increasing number, even with compressed files, they could no longer fit into only one disk. After a year, thanks to the collaboration of two young volunteers, the theses website became a reality: from whatever internet station in the world, it was now possible to download in real time the theses one was interested in.

The thesis becomes more and more an occasion to live an experience “of communion”. In some cases the thesis writers agree with one another and with the professors to write their theses in collaboration, sharing for example the effort of drawing up a questionnaire for entrepreneurs, to be utilized in preparing different theses. I remember the case of two gen who, having concluded their work, put in common a directory of Italian EOC business enterprises, with a lot of effort (at that time the addresses of the business enterprises were not yet being published in the *Città Nuova* magazine). The thesis writers then felt the need to meet among themselves in order to exchange ideas with some EOC experts. In November 1996 the first day gathering was held in Bologna between thesis writers from North Italy and some EOC experts. Fifteen students participated.

At times also the relationship with the professors becomes something special. I remember the case of a gen, Anna Maria, who was invited by her professor to attend an important congress of Christian economic studies with the presence of many outstanding academics. In his address the professor mentioned the Economy of Communion, but since he was not very familiar with the subject, he wasn't able to transmit its novelty and beauty. So the moderator didn't give much importance to the Economy of communion, saying that it could affirm itself only in an economically underdeveloped society, but it could never survive in modern societies which respect the market laws. The discussion became more lively, another professor in favor of the EOC intervened, but he too was unable to explain the project really well. By chance a family of EOC entrepreneurs was present: Anna Maria, strengthened by their unity, asked to intervene, and in a simple and synthetic way explained what the EOC consists of. The applause that followed made Anna Maria understand that she had



succeeded in her intentions. She received many congratulations for the courage of her presentation. The moderator was very pleased.

After the first few years of “proclamation”, it became clear to everyone that if a thesis on the EOC is limited to simply stating the project, it will not likely lead to an authentic and in-depth theoretical examination of the EOC. This is why it becomes ever more important to conduct “on location” studies of the EOC enterprises. After all, this is what Chiara underlined in May 1995 when she told the thesis writers to have a direct knowledge of the EOC reality by personally visiting the business enterprises”. Thus it becomes fundamental to consult the work of those who have already concluded their theses so as to gather their conclusions and use them as departure points for one’s research work.

Quite significant is the relationship that is created with the entrepreneurs. In spite of their demanding commitments at work, they are able to find time to dedicate to the students through questionnaires, interviews and in some cases real and true apprenticeships. At times, even after years, the bond of friendship created between these young people and entrepreneurs continues and becomes even more important when, as part of the working world and perhaps not belonging to the Movement, they continue to be linked to it through the EOC.

Among the doctorate theses conducted throughout these years at least two far-reaching ones can be pointed out: that of Lorna Gold, at that time researcher of the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Her three-year endeavor proved to be a very useful tool for reflection in evaluating the *economy of communion* project ten years from its beginning. The second is the doctorate thesis of Markus Ressler of the University of Economics and Business Administration in Vienna. It offers an in-depth study, amply documented, of more than 100 European, Latin American and Asian EOC enterprises.

If we analyze the trend of these theses throughout the years (slides 1 & 2), we note that during the first few years ('93-'95), the number of theses defended abroad was the same



as that of Italy. In 1997 we see a big leap: as many as 17 theses were defended, 13 in Italy. During this period the use of the internet became increasingly important for downloading theses according to one's interest, and fewer students asked me for information on the theses. It's the other side of the coin: on one hand we have the theses at everyone's disposal everywhere; on the other hand it is much easier that we miss some of the theses, especially those written by young people who do not belong to the Movement, as happens more and more often.

In the following years there seemed to be a decrease and later on another increase in the number of theses; always and in any case most of them were written in Italy. This could be true, but it is still my opinion that many theses have not been sent to us and so we are not aware of their existence. This could also explain why, with respect to the first few years, there seems to be a decrease in the number of theses written in countries outside of Italy, particularly in Europe and North America, from whom we never received any theses. Instead Africa merits particular mention, with two theses in 2002!

Currently, we know of 122 defended theses (slide 3), 102 in Europe, 16 in South America, 2 in Africa and 2 in Asia. (Slide 4 with detail of Europe) Naturally if you are aware of a thesis that has not been sent to me, please let me know! (Slide 5) These theses were written in 10 languages. (Slide 6) A large number of them were written by women (63%) (Slide 7) And if we pass on from numbers to "content" it seems almost impossible to point out all the aspects of the EOC which have been the subject of study during these years. There are very many of them. The subjects dealt with demonstrate the progressive expansion of such research on the EOC project, giving particular attention to the various economic and organizational aspects which arise from putting the person "at the center".

After a very initial phase in which the majority of the theses aimed at describing and promoting the project, today these works are more and more a technical study of the fruits which the EOC brings within the business enterprise: the social responsibility of the



enterprises, the presence of “intangible capital”, the entirely new valence of “human resources”, the category of “relational goods”, which is the only one capable of explaining some economic behaviors, etc. From this slide (slide 8) we see the leading ambits of study. Finally we will mention two theses which are the fruit of lengthy and demanding research work, carried out by going directly to the origins of the EOC, the *Araceli* little town and the *Spartaco* Industrial zone. Maria Stella Golinelli and Danilo Cerrelli gathered a lot of information in Brazil, which they then put at everyone’s disposal.

Giving these examples, it is not necessary to say that every thesis which does not reach us is equivalent to a real loss! This is why I regularly write to all those who have contacted me for information on the theses. Very often they write back, with a copy of their thesis, and at times they do so after several letters from me. Sometimes I am afraid of being too insistent, although I try to do everything with love. But very often those who send me a reply thank me for having “contacted them again”, perhaps two years after they had defended their thesis, because they feel “appreciated” and they are happy to come in contact once again with the reality of the EOC which – after having entered the working world in situations which are very different from ours – it remains like a dream to which one always hopes to return, in one way or another.