

“The new horizons of the Economy of Communion”  
International Convention – september 10 -12, 2004

## PANEL 1

### “THE PRESENT-DAY SITUATION OF THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION”

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Lorna and Luca introduced into the history and logic of the *economy of communion*. My talk would like to say something more about the three dimensions of the project, represented also by the destination of the profits: the business itself, the culture of giving, and the needy, so as to outline some of the features of the *economy of communion* as we see them after thirteen years of life.

#### a) “Business enterprises will need to begin”

When Chiara had the inspiration of the *economy of communion* in May, 1991, she indicated the business enterprises as the main instrument of this new *economy of communion*. Choosing businesses as the instrument of communion is not something predictable: it tells us that the vocation of the *economy of communion* is not only or mainly to gather resources aimed at humanitarian aid (“helping the poor”), because if this were the goal, we all know that business enterprises would not be the most suitable instrument. Certainly, the *economy of communion* businesses give profits to thousands of families who find themselves in financial need, and Chiara always reminds us of the centrality of this help and the importance of giving. But it should be remembered that the profits given when the balance sheet is closed is the tip of the iceberg: the company puts its profits in communion as one expression of a business life entirely marked by communion. This is why the entrepreneur feels called interiorly to give, to put the profits in communion when the business produces them – a business doesn’t always produce profits – and when it *can* do so.

Furthermore, the profits are put in communion according to a **logic** indicated by Chiara in her very first intuition. They are shared, we know, according to three goals: 1) to make the



business grow by recapitalizing, 2) to contribute to the development of a culture of communion and giving, 3) to directly help whoever is in need. It may be helpful to underline that this tripartition is to be carried out on the basis of *profits*, an economic category which lends itself to a number of interpretations, subject to the fiscal legislation of each country. This explains why a rigid rule, a mathematical formula has never been indicated, and the way to calculate the profits to put in communion has always been the responsibility of the entrepreneur and business. In any case, we should note that *all* the profits are put in communion: so not only the parts for the “culture” and for the “poor”, but also the profits recapitalized in the company can be seen as an act of communion. Those reinvested profits are riches which instead of going out of the company and ending up in the private finances of the associates, are brought into play again and invested in the good of the shared business, with the risk that this implies, in order to create new resources, new jobs.

A final consideration concerning the business. An *entrepreneur* of communion does not feel satisfied until he sees his business on its way to becoming a *place* of communion. The *economy of communion*, I believe, is not only a code of ethics for the entrepreneur. First and foremost it is a proposal for communally setting up the organizational and structural dynamics of the various companies where the *economy of communion* is accepted – always remembering that there are many different forms of business enterprises, from stock companies to cooperatives. This is the reason why a central element of the mode of production of the *economy of communion* are the productive or industrial parks which we will speak of during these days, indicated by Chiara in May of 1991 as the *normal* way to give life to the *economy of communion*: the *economy of communion* does not exist without the industrial parks. The parks, these original industrial areas, already are and can increasingly become new productive forms which show, also objectively (in working relationships, in the dynamics of governance, and not only in the management style of owners or managers), the primacy of the principle of communion, of fraternity. We will reflect on this too during these days.



**b) What do we mean by “poverty”?**

With regard to the second point, the *economy of communion* is maturing its own vision of wealth and of the so-called poverty, thanks to the experience that the Focolare Movement has been living with regard to this aspect for more than sixty years through its characteristic spirituality of communion.

First of all, I must confess a personal experience of mine: there is a certain resistance on my part when I hear people speaking of poverty solely from its negative aspect. In the terminology of development policies today it has become normal to speak of the “struggle against poverty”, of “uprooting poverty”.... Without wanting to negate the great value of these human development policies, which, thanks also to the contribution of humanist economists like the Indian Sen, are evermore attentive to the immaterial and qualitative dimensions of development, and without succumbing to the pitfalls of “questions of words” in such vital and serious matters, we cannot deny, however, that the word “poverty” is much more than a problem we need to struggle against and uproot.

We find this word in the Gospels, for example, and throughout the Scriptures: the good news is preached to the poor (Mt 11:5); the poor are called blessed (Lk 6); and in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we find a very beautiful expression in reference to Jesus: “He became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2: 8-9).

So there are different kinds of poverty. There is a poverty which people suffer, almost always brought about and fomented by the injustices of human beings and by the “sinful structures”: this is indigence, misery, the lack of the most basic needs so as to live a life worthy of human beings; it is poverty which must be opposed with great commitment and on all levels (personal and institutional), because it attacks the dignity of the human person and cannot make anyone happy and fully human. In this regard, a phrase of Gandhi is eternally relevant: “To a man with an empty stomach food is God”; for this man it is easy to become a slave to anyone who can offer or promise him that food.

But there is another kind of poverty, one that is freely chosen and which truly renders a person blessed. It is also the precondition for defeating that first form of unjust and inhuman



poverty; a poverty which represents an ideal for every person who lives and believes in an economy of communion.

This is the poverty which is born from the awareness that all that I am has been given to me; likewise, all that I have must, in turn, be given. This is the foundation of the dynamics of reciprocity. This poverty prompts us to free ourselves of goods as absolute possessions in order to make them *gifts*, and thus to be free to love, the only thing that is truly important. In this way the goods themselves become bridges, occasions of community, paths of reciprocity. Consequently, while the first indigent poverty is suffered (by persons or events), this second poverty can only be chosen. Therefore, it needs a *culture* because the greater freedom and profound happiness that are born from communion cannot be understood unless they become experience, lifestyle, and therefore, *culture* of giving and communion.

So the *economy of communion* fights against misery and indigence, but it fights it by proposing to all a “chosen poverty” in accordance with the evangelical meaning of poverty. A chosen poverty which is the precondition for understanding the logic of communion and for experiencing that “hundredfold” which communion brings and which constitutes its typical characteristic.

Therefore, the proposal, the humanism of the *economy of communion*, aims at defeating indigence (the poverty that is not chosen but suffered), by inviting everyone to freely choose a moderate and poor style of life.

Although we speak in the *economy of communion* above all of divine Providence, of celebration, of hundredfold, of riches, we must keep in mind that Providence and its typical joy arrive when we live the experience of this poverty: for example, there are many experiences of entrepreneurs who after having experienced this poverty because they were consistent with the values and logic of the *economy of communion*, sensed something divine entering the gates of the factory and they witness the intervention of the One whom many call the “invisible associate”.

Only if we live in this way is it possible to say, seriously, that in the *economy of communion* also the entrepreneur himself must be poor: not indigent, but the one who out of love uses his talents in order to generate riches to be put in communion, even by taking



economic risks. If this is the case, then the *economy of communion* is not one of the many humanitarian projects in which rich entrepreneurs do something *for* the poor, but it is a new humanism of communion, of sobriety and of celebration.

This is why we wished to allow ample space in this meeting to the vision of poverty and to the human development that arises from the *economy of communion*. We will do so in dialogue also with other experiences which we feel are close to our own.

**c) “Without a new culture there cannot be a new economy”**

Some days ago a friend said to me: “But aren’t you asking a little too much of the *economy of communion* businesses? Besides asking them to be efficient, correct and honest, you also consider them as laboratories where a new economic paradigm is experimented.” Actually, the *economy of communion* is a complex reality: on the one hand it is a project which involves a few hundred businesses, therefore, something that would seem to exclusively concern the business world, production. On the other hand, the entrepreneurs, workers, experts and those who are closely following the *economy of communion*, glimpse in it the seed of a new paradigm of economic behaviour which goes beyond (while including it) that specific organization which is called “enterprise”. When we speak of the *economy of communion*, we all think not only of the enterprise, but of a new, revolutionary vision which involves our entire relationship with goods, from consumption to savings, from the macro-economic dimension to the economy of the family or of a civil community.

In fact, from the beginning, the various theses written by young people – who immediately answered Chiara’s invitation – instinctively dealt with these two meanings of the *economy of communion* project: new *enterprises* but also a new *paradigm* of economic activity, and therefore, economic theory, culture. And it is for this reason that Chiara wished the *economy of communion* to be closely connected to the Interdisciplinary Study Center, the so-called *Abba School*, in which the culture and doctrine of the spirituality of unity is elaborated: *the cultural innovation of the economy of communion cannot help but be an expression of the cultural innovation of the charism of unity.*



All the studies that have developed through the years have spoken of the enterprises, but also... of relational goods, trust, international politics, finances, of the social responsibility of the company, of happiness, and so forth. This too is the characteristic beauty of the *economy of communion*: a *multidimensional* project and for this reason filled with riches and at times perhaps difficult to set into a specific framework.

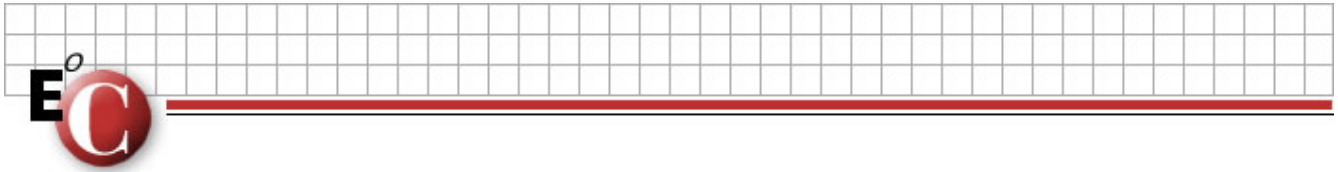
The *economy of communion* continues to impassion us and others because in it we glimpse the concrete possibility of a new humanism, we discern a path towards an economic order marked by more justice and solidarity. We see it as a seed of an economic practice which is finally made for people, a path of fraternity.

If we are here it is because we believe that in the midst of thousands of contradictions and hopes, an *economy of communion* is what the world urgently needs. Therefore, to experiment it in order to give it to others is an act of love for the people of our times: I believe that without this perspective, we wouldn't have the strength to go ahead in the more difficult moments.

This then is the meaning of the unusual composition of this congress: entrepreneurs, workers, students, scholars and not only economy.

"Without a new culture there cannot be a new economy": Chiara reminded us of this more than once, and in 1998 she invited us, again from Brazil, to give "scientific dignity" to the practice of the *economy of communion*. The theoretical or scientific dimension is necessary in order to make the *economy of communion* comprehensible when we try to communicate it to others. But it is essential also for the *economy of communion* itself, so that it may become aware of its specific characteristic, single out the points of comparison with the experiences of today and yesterday, identify the critical points we need to work on.

We've already begun to work in this theoretical direction, we will do so during these days, and we will continue to do so in the coming decades because culture, "cultivation", as farming wisdom knows very well, requires patience, constancy and much fatigue for the fruit to be good and to satisfy the real needs of people.



At the same time, it is also true that without a new economic practice, *culture alone is not enough* for the *economy of communion* to affirm itself: thus the great importance of the “facts”, the daily experience and fatigue of the *economy of communion*. Today the culture, the theoretical reflection exists and serves life too. The *economy of communion* has not remained only an announcement or prophecy because Chiara’s invitation has been accepted by many and has become the daily life and culture of hundreds of business enterprises and thousands of people around the world.

But let’s prepare ourselves now to welcome Chiara, to contemplate with her the *new horizons of the economy of communion*.