

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

PANEL 6
“NOT ONLY ECONOMY. FOR A HUMANISM OF COMMUNION”
COMMUNION AND POLITICAL LIFE

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1. I believe that the experience and theory of the *economy of communion* project make some interesting points also for the political sphere.

In particular, I feel that new elements emerge for rethinking what is defined as “public policies”, that is, the action carried out by public authorities to acquire resources and to redistribute them according to social demands and political priorities.

The first point of the *economy of communion* is found in the “rule” to destine a third of the business profits to persons and communities in situations of need.

- In this regard, what comes into evidence, by similarity, is the whole sector of the social or welfare State. It’s a sector and especially a policy which is in crisis not only due to the lack of resources, but also because of an ideological-political orientation contrary to State intervention in economy. It is the claim for liberty, especially individual liberty, and for initiative, which appeared some decades ago on the scene of economic politics.
- The neo-free trade theories like those of Hayek and Nozick are very concerned about the State “interfering” in economic life. They feel that every policy that seeks to promote a greater “substantial” equality would have to “sacrifice”, so to speak, some degree of people’s freedom. So the State is the problem, not the solution.
- They believe that the redistribution of income, for example, effected by the reallocation of taxation sources prevents economic and social forces from expressing their potential to the benefit of everyone. For this line of thought, then, poverty is essentially an



anomaly which the forces of the market will, in the long run, think of correcting more or less automatically.

- Now, what does the *economy of communion* experience tell us in this regard? It gives value first of all to freedom. Transfers made in favor of those in need are carried out as a free choice. But there is another difference: poverty and need do not constitute an anomaly in the sense of being external or contrary to the criteria of economic management; they are “part” of the economic circuit. In fact, one of its fundamental points is based precisely on this attitude of sharing. They do not limit or condition the functioning of the economy; on the contrary, they give it greater depth and meaning.

When I say that poverty is structural and not accidental to the *economy of communion* I do not mean that it does not have other ways out, on the contrary. What I mean to say is that there are always needs, demands, in different moments and phases in the life of people and communities and in relation to different economic phases. Poverty and need is, so to speak, “contained” in the economic theory of the *economy of communion*.

- Fully integrating *need* in economy also responds to the concern of some political theories, like that of Ignatieff, for example, who wonders to what point it is lawful for politics “to experience the needs of others”: “Politics,” writes Ignatieff, “is not only the art of representing the needs of the unknown; it is also the risky undertaking of speaking of the needs that unknown persons have not been able to define on their own.” In the *economy of communion* this margin of “unawareness” tends to be reduced, because the “voice” of the poor is one of the forces that guides the economic choices.
- So a first consideration: in the *economy of communion* the transfer of resources in favor of those in need are carried out in freedom, without the intervention of outside pressures, for example, on the part of public authorities. This is certainly possible on the microeconomic level, but who prevents us from thinking that a new form of “social State”, a “lighter” one (but more effective) could be established by two factors: first, by promoting an understanding of economy which includes need and gratuity as



fundamental elements and not as impediments to development. Second, by “encouraging” behaviors similar to those of the *economy of communion* business enterprises, for example, through incentives (not fiscal) but administrative, juridical, managerial. The resources, in this arrangement, would not be “appropriated” by a central redistributive public authority; rather, they would be “destined” to more far-ranging aims; not to the limited horizon of individual interests, not in virtue of an authoritative process, but of a participated and consensual deliberative process. More than a “transfer” of resources we should speak of a “mobilization” of resources, without the need to affirm a decision-making moment with respect to the philosophy, the intention of political action.

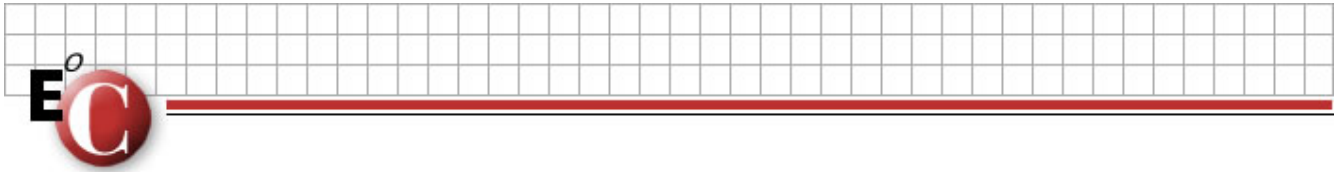
- Moreover, on the level of subjects (citizens, groups, communities) in the experience of the *economy of communion* we encounter three elements: first, whoever is in need receives for a limited period of time, and then, makes room, so to speak for others once his or her problems are resolved (the condition of “assisted” is not a permanent one); second – and this meets the demands of the labor politics, for instance, defined as “welfare to work” – efforts are made so as to actively contribute to the economy through labor; finally, it in turn often gives to others, to third parties, thus breaking the circle of the gift and expanding the culture of giving.
- 2. Certainly, beyond poverty, we need to face the topic of a functional organization of public authorities which ensure essential services, for example, like health and education. In a broader sense, we are speaking of “public goods”, that is, available to the benefit of all citizens.

We come now to the second important implication of the *economy of communion*, that which refers to the “formation” of the community.

- The community is the “hinterland” of the *economy of communion* project; indeed, we could say that this project would not have much sense without it.



- But essentially, what is this community? It seems to me that the central point consists in this: if it is true that there is a need to build up an objective “common good”, that is, for the benefit of all, it is also true that there cannot be, in the strict sense, a totally “extrinsic” common good, that is, separated from the community. The common good is inseparable from the community: indeed, it is the greatest Common Good. Our being together, our forming a society, our producing together is what really has meaning, ultimate and full meaning. The rest, we could say simplifying things, is nothing but a consequence.
- We understand then why the welfare systems and public policies have entered inexorably into crisis with the establishment of a strictly individualistic vision of economic freedom and a technocratic conception of economy. This certainly took place due to ideological and theoretical reasons; but it took place above all because public policies separated from *the* “good” in itself constituted by the community, really appear to be paradoxical, senseless, anti-economical. The *economy of communion* goes back to the source, contributes to rebuilding the prime matter of public policies; in other words, the community, the “common good” which constitutes the indispensable premise if we want to speak of goods that are really held “in common”.
- This responds to another problem of public policies, also singled out by Ignatieff: the language of rights is not able to express immaterial needs, such as solidarity, fraternity, communion. No social State, however perfect, will succeed in giving answers in this direction, unless the community establishes the foundation of public policies. This is why the visions of economic policy marked by neo-contractualism – which did have the very great merit of beginning to introduce in politics the problem of the underprivileged, like that of Rawls (principle of difference) that is, separated, disjoined from a more structured understanding of the community – cannot fully respond to the real needs of an associated life.
- Welfare, aside from the “structural” failures that emerged (statism, public interventionism in the economy, planned economy, welfarism, carelessness in managing public funds) certainly did not resolve the search for greater social cohesion.



“We could have expected,” writes Ignatieff, “that with the sanction of a vision of the common good in the welfare state we would have drawn closer to one another. The welfare state sought to bring about fraternity, giving to each individual the right to draw from the common resources. Nevertheless, even if the basic needs of each person are satisfied, the need for social solidarity is not necessarily satisfied.” And it is to this really basic need that the *economy of communion* gives an initial answer, very promising and also quite advanced politically.