

“Why are charisms necessary in order to bring about a fraternal economy?”

In the title, a completely unpredictable logical nexus is established between three words: “economy”, “fraternity”, and “charism”. I will now try to illustrate this connection by dividing my reflections into three parts.

In the first part, I’ll try to explain why fraternity can be considered as the **broken promise** of the French Revolution, which had proposed these three principles, “liberté, égalité e fraternité” (liberty, equality and fraternity), one next to the other.

In the second part, I’ll try to illustrate the contribution offered by the charisms (historical and modern, religious and civic) to the development of the modern economy.

The third brief part will concentrate on the love trilogy: Eros, Philia, and Agape. In lay terms, we could define these as “contract” (eros), reciprocal relationships (philia), and free and unconditional gift (agape). The lack of just one of these fibers in the social fabric could cause pathological derivations and put the very survival of the civil society at risk.

But before I get to the heart of this reflection, please allow me to pay some intellectual dues. Many of the ideas that I will present this morning were taken from two books that have strongly inspired both my reflection and my own life. The author of these two volumes is Prof. Luigino Bruni, of the Bicocca University of Milan. For ten years, I have been closely linked to him by a strong friendship and the shared commitment to serve the economical project called the “Economy of Communion,” which was born by the inspiring spark of a charism – that of Chiara Lubich. Many of the things that I will say were written while looking at the charismatic experience of the Focolare Movement. However, I am convinced that that they deal with thoughts that are of universal value and, therefore, can be a stimulus even in this context.

1. In the organization of modern society, the **market** tries to put the principles of liberty and equality into practice. The markets represent, at least theoretically, a place in which people are free to interact. But in the 7th century, the market also emerged with a second objective: helping modern man free himself from the hierarchical and vertical relationships of the feudal society. That’s why Adam Smith describes it as a place par excellence of relationship among equals. Liberty and equality should similarly be the distinctive characteristics of **political action**: the freedoms to vote and of opinion, on one hand, and the equality of every human being in front of the law, the “one head, one vote” principle in the exercise of civil rights, recognition that it’s necessary to offer every citizen the necessary opportunity for full economic and social development.

And fraternity? It appears that modern society has given up on assigning an equivalent role to the principle of fraternity, and it has truly established itself around the idea that social order is more secure if it’s based on interests rather than on love and fraternity. Today, fraternity seems like a forgotten category, both in economical reflections and political ones...and this omission has ended up disassociating liberty from equality, leading to a notable opposition between the economic moment in which well-being is produced (efficiency) and the political moment of its redistribution (equity).

In a recent book, entitled *The Wound of the Other*¹, Luigino Bruni develops an unedited interpretation of the reasons that have lead, in contemporary society, to the self-assertion of these two often-opposing institutions: Market and State.

Bruni's book arises from an intuition suggested by a biblical text that narrates the fight between Jacob and the angel. *That night he got up and...crossed the ford of the Jabbok...and he was left alone. Then someone wrestled with him until daybreak, who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, "Let me go, for day is breaking." Jacob replied, "I will not let you go until you bless me." The other said, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he replied. He said, "No longer are you to be called Jacob, but Israel since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked, "Please tell me your name." He replied, "Why do you ask my name?" With that, he blessed him.*

The intuition conveyed by the text from Genesis is the indissoluble link, present in every authentic human relationship, between "wound" and "blessing". "Sooner or later," writes Bruni, "every person makes an experience which signals the beginning of full maturity. He understands in his own flesh and intelligence that, if he wants to experience the blessing linked to relationship with the other, he must accept the wound. That is, he understands that there isn't the good life without passing through the dark and dangerous territory of the other, and that whatever escape he finds from this "battle" and this agony inevitably leads towards a human condition without joy."

Ancient tradition intuited the ambivalent nature of the good life: you cannot be happy without *communitas*; but precisely for the essential need of relationship with others, the good life is fragile and, in various ways, is entwined with death. To this regard, the founding myths of a few ancient cities are very emblematic. The first city in the Bible (Enoch) is founded upon the homicide by Cain, while the founding of Rome is associated with the assassination of Remus by Romulus. Historically, fraternity often reveals itself as an experience of suffering and death. That is why modernity, rather than facing the risks inherent in communal life, of *communitas*, has preferred another way out. It chooses *immunitas*, or the search of a free land in which human beings can meet one another without wounding each other. It's within this context that one can understand the role of the mediation carried out both by the market and by the State.

We can't get into this argument right now, but it's certain that at the heart of political thought on which the modern age is built (Machiavelli and Hobbes), you find a radical anthropological pessimism. The individual is a wicked being, uncivil and shrewd. That's why, in order to overcome human nature, a mediator is needed. Machiavelli identifies this need in *The Prince* and Hobbes in *The Leviathan*. Modern society is built upon a social contract that requires people who are free, independent and characterized by "mutual disinterest". Sentiments, feelings of belonging, friendship and strong bonds are all dangerous undertakings, considering their tendency to be partial and exclusive. The great pluralistic and free society needs, in order to be "just", individuals without ties and passions.

Differently, but in some ways similar, is the escape hatch represented by the market. Economics, from Adam Smith onward, promises a communal life without sacrifice. The search for personal interests, first of all material interests, is considered an important requirement to dilute and channel much more serious and harmful human passions, such as envy, revenge, and the thirst for power.

¹ Bruni, L., *La ferita dell'altro*. Trent: Il Margine, 2007.

Benevolence is no longer necessary in the market...it's enough to follow one's personal material interests...it's enough to behave with disinterest towards the others, to not intentionally cause them harm. This is enough, until that invisible hand can orient individual actions towards the promotion of the common good, understood as the sum of individual interests. The market, in which the *homo oeconomicus* operates, also represents an escape from the contagious personal relationship with the other. The philosopher Roberto Esposito sustains that the contract, on which mercantile relationships are based, contains that pinch of relationality necessary to annihilate potentially dangerous human relations, just as a vaccination contains the DNA of a virus. Receiving a vaccine allows the organism to produce the anti-bodies necessary to defeat infection.

Every face-to-face meeting, every horizontal rapport, every relationship that involves us first-hand...is a reflection of the battle between Jacob and the angel. The inter-human relations that give flavor and perfume to our lives (the blessing) also bring with them the possibility that the other, in the end, betrays us (the wound). Out of fear of this negativity and suffering, modernity prefers to entrust itself to the mediated and anonymous relations of the State and of the market.

That's why economic and political institutions are designed to economize on love and to efficiently protect the individual from swaying towards ever-possible fraternal tendencies.

In recent years, social capital is unanimously recognized for the role it plays, both on the level of economic development as with the political and civil progress of society. Social capital includes dimensions that are sometimes difficult to quantify, like "morality, civic sense, loyalty, trust and respect of social norms." The recent crisis of the international financial system has reminded us that trust and loyalty are essential resources both for the market and the political system. If these are to work, you need social capital, just like a machine made of gears needs lubricant and a living being needs oxygen. Social capital, like environmental capital, is a resource that society must be able to conserve and regenerate. Unfortunately, the market economy consumes social capital without knowing how to reproduce it. The motive of this sterility in the capitalistic economy is explained in an extraordinary article by the political economist Albert Hirschman, published more than 20 years ago. The article is entitled "Against Parsimony. Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse."² In it, Hirschman tells us that the idea that we need to economize on morality, civic spirit and trust is completely absurd. The quantity of civic sense is not destined to diminish through its use, as happens with petroleum or other natural resources. Rather, the opposite is true. Civic spirit resembles that capacity to speak a foreign language or play the piano.

It is an ability that atrophies when one doesn't use it. Rather than discouraging an appeal to civic spirit, substituting it with the logic of interests, modern society should try to favor its use. This would show its awareness that the best way to conserve the stock of social capital consists exactly in promoting its use.

2. Therefore, it is not true that love – which we utilize here as a symptom of fraternity or civic spirit – and social capital have nothing to offer the market and the political organization of modern society. A less distracted and ideological reading of the role played by charisms in the history of humanity will recall this affirmation. But what exactly is intended by the word charism? The word "charism" summarizes a few ideas like "gratuitousness", "vocation", and "intrinsic motivation". In Bruni's

² Hirschman, A. (1985), Against parsimony. Three easy ways of complicating some categories of economic discourse, *Economics and Philosophy*, 1: 7-21.

latest book, co-authored with a young Salesian economist named Alessandra Smerilli, and titled *Blessed Economy*, charisma is defined as follows:

*“When charisms are at work in civil dynamics, a new dimension of action enters into the scene: one characterized by an extraordinary and rare strength, which Christian thought decided to call “agape”, or gratuitous love. (...) The charism is a gift of the Spirit for the edification of the common good. It is a gift which acts on all levels and in all areas of communities and human societies (...) [In a word] charismatic experiences are the gift of “different eyes” that give a glimpse inside those problems which are, at the same time, blessings.”*³

The book’s fundamental theses are simple: the history of humanity, including the economical aspect, can be read as the result of the action and dialogue of two principles: the charismatic principle on one hand, and the institutional principle on the other.

This certainly gives reason to the fact that economic life is a place of material interest, jealousy, avarice, speculation and search for profit. But at the same time, it is also a place of passions, ideals, suffering, and (why not) of love (Zamagni, 2007). The viewpoint of charisms helps transform the problems into resources and opportunities, thanks to the “different eyes” with which they look at the world. From this perspective, how can we not recognize the very important role that they have had in the development of the modern market economy.

Since the Middle Ages, Christianity has given life to a humanism that has known how to profoundly make its mark in the institutions and even in modern economic thought. Think of the monastic experience, which was the birthplace in which the first economic and commercial vocabulary was formed during the early Middle Ages. The Benedictine rule of “*Ora et labora*” (Pray and Work) represented much more than a way towards mere individual sanctity: over the centuries, the Benedictine culture became a true and proper culture of work and of economy. The traditional historical reading, which still dominates historiography, described the birth of the market economy as a break from the Christianity built upon charity, gift and community life. The contract culture – as its often called – affirmed itself by “wrong-footing” that of gift, and the economical rationality emerged from the ashes of reciprocity. In reality, the genesis of the market economy happened in a profoundly different way than the reciprocal contamination between gift and contract, between fraternity and interests.

In the Greco-Romano world, work was not part of the good life. Rather, it was seen as a prerogative of political life, and there was no place in politics for who worked. The free man did not work.

At the peak of the social pyramid, there were the “non-workers”, in other words, heirs, churchmen or aristocrats, who could not and should not work – nothing like the Benedictine Rule. “*To contemplate*” and “*to work*” are no longer two options of alternative living, but “*two inseparable aspects, each of which ends up giving true meaning to the other*”. Without the charisma of Saint Benedict, work would not have the space and importance that it holds in contemporary society.

A decisive role in the birth of the modern market economy was then carried out by the Franciscan charisma. In the history of economy and of Western society, Franciscanism represents a moment of great importance, and at the same time, a paradox: a charisma which had put “sister poverty” at its center, to the point of material detachment from goods as a sign of perfection in life. This became the first economic “school” from which the modern spirit of capitalism emerged. In fact, from this great cultural movement emerged the Monti di Pietà (Mounts of Piety) in the second half of the 4th century. They began first in Umbria and Marche, spreading through all of Italy, and then in the rest

³ Bruni, L. e Smerilli, A. (2008), *Benedetta economia. San Benedetto e san Francesco nella storia economica europea*. Roma: Città Nuova.

of Europe. The Monti di Pietá’s main founding principle was “fraternity”, not a decidedly economical-financial scope. The Franciscans of the reform promoted these institutions as a type of “cure” for the misery precipitated by the fact that less well-to-do families found it impossible to find credit at fair interest rates. As they were forced to turn to loan-sharks, they often fell into misery. Instead, the Monti di Pietá helped in the fight against the loan-sharks. The various forms of ethical finance, of rural banks, and of micro-credit in the contemporary world can be read as natural developments of that antique intuition originating from a spiritual movement.

The action of the religious and civic charisms in the history of the last four centuries was vast and powerful, and placed the premise for the birth of the present welfare systems.

Vincent de Paul, Don Bosco, Mother Teresa...but even Yunus, Henri Dunant, and pastor Sieber, all “received eyes to see in the poor, in the shameful, in the derelict, in the youth on the streets, in the immigrants, in the sick, even the deformed, something great and beautiful for which is worth spending one’s life and those of the hundreds of thousands who followed them, attracted and inspired by those charisms. Still today, we can find a myriad of persons who carry a charism, who are still founding social cooperatives, NGOs, schools, hospitals, banks, unions, fighting for rights denied to others, to the environment, to children, because they see ‘something more and something different’ than everyone else” (pg. 37).

Urged by these reflections, I would like to recount something of the charismatic experience in which, since a young boy, I have had the fortune to be participant and witness: the Focolare of Chiara Lubich. It’s spontaneous to pose myself this question: in order to respond to which urgencies, which yearnings of modern man was there the need for that particular “gift of new eyes” that God gave to Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement? Without claiming to give an exhaustive answer, I noticed in my heart the certainty that words like “unity”, “fraternity”, “communion”, and “reciprocal love” belonging to the charism of Chiara, as much as the thirst of all these realities, characterize the modern human condition. Recently, a friend pointed me to a book by Igino Giordani, an Italian politician which Chiara Lubich often defined as “cofounder of the movement”. The title of the book is “The Neighbor”, in which we find written this phrase:

“For the miracle of divine love, I, my neighbor, God, we enter into a relationship of equality. The neighbor becomes a channel, through which the divine flows into humanity: one of the uncountable ways in which Christ continues His incarnation for communal redemption.”⁴

By means of the particular gift of new eyes received by Chiara, I want to say that the economic experiences born from her charism in these years (among which the economy of communion is probably the most notable) all have a common characteristic: they are fraternal experiences, simple, of a people. “We’re poor but many” was the slogan that Chiara launched in Brazil in 1991 when the project began. The economy of communion, therefore, cannot be an experience that revolves around a philanthropic figure or a great entrepreneur who gives his own surplus to “the poor”, without putting his own life up for discussion and becoming himself brother and equal to those “poor” whom he helps. Equality and fraternity are, in other words, the quintessence of the life of the businesses of the economy of communion.

Secondly, in the DNA of the EOC, there is both the Benedictine monasticism and the Franciscan charism. Chiara Lubich had the first intuition of that which would become the Economy of Communion when looking from above at the Benedictine monastery of Einsiedeln, in the early 1960s. She said that something similar to the Benedictine abbeys will also arise from the Focolare

⁴ Giordani, I. (1954), *Il fratello*, 3ed, Roma: Figlie della Chiesa.

Movement – something which will show a modern “pray and work”, with actual industries and chimneys. The EOC’s “Industrial Parks” (*poli industriali*), which are emerging in different countries in the world, are the realization of that intuition. Moreover, Chiara was a young Third Order Franciscan herself... All of this justifies us seeing the EOC as a flowering of the millennium tree of “charisms” at the service of culture and civil life.

In order to sustain the project, it is necessary to have people whose living is not dissociated from their Christian being. It needs people who realize the necessity to base their economic behavior on several dimensions. That way, in the market and in businesses, where these people pass a significant part of their existence, they find room next to freedom of expression and pursuit of economic interests, also for fairness and justice, the sense of responsibility and reciprocity, gift, beauty.

This would be why EOC businesses are much more than an instrument for creating riches to distribute. The earning power of the future enterprise is not the main criteria for which one will commit himself. It will be more important for him to be able to experience an economic life coherent to one’s ideals, and participate in the creation of a human society inspired by communion and fraternity.

The Economy of Communion is a long shot from the vision of the market expressed by the theologian Michael Novak, opinion leader of the North American neoconservatives. For Novak, the undisputed protagonist of the capitalist economy is the individual. who, on the market, fully fulfills his vocation to freedom. However, until this system is sustainable over time, it is necessary that the entrepreneur takes on a code of moral behavior. The entrepreneur would need a spirituality that encourages and concretizes humanitarian works and benevolence in the private sphere. It’s like say that by appealing to a spirituality, the entrepreneur is able to become a saint, despite economic success, despite the fact that his is in the first place a successful businessman.

Even Chiara Lubich always indicated the economy of communion as a way for the entrepreneur to reach sanctity...but she did this by underlining that becoming a saint means living life’s economic events just like every other aspect. It means recognizing that these events give us the possibility, through the choices we make, to fulfill God’s will.

With this in mind, the sounding of factory sirens recalls one to sanctity...they are sacred just like the cloister bells are for the monk...they are the tangible sign that it is possible to seek “civil sanctity”, because the values and the principles to which we give attention in the private sphere should also orient our behavior in world of business affairs. This is the challenge that needs to continually be re-launched to those who commit themselves in the economy of communion project...since, if the principle of fraternity and the communitarian dimension cannot be fully applied in the internal dynamics of an EOC business, if the inspiring spark of the charisma which generated this experience dwindles, everything will sooner or later end or lose its identity.

3. I would like to conclude by referring back to the Hirshman article previously cited. Civic spirit and benevolence are not only abilities, which infinitely grow with their exercise. There is a point beyond which too much civic sense threatens the survival of people and communities. The mistake can be one of lacking, and this is the error committed by modern society, or it can also be one of excess. The good society needs rules and contracts that function as props, as backdrops on which civil life can flourish, toning down that natural tension imbedded in the very fact of living in society, between us and them, between self-love and public happiness. That is why, even in experiences of charismatic economy, it’s important to not dissociate (but live with the same spirit, in a unitary way) the three forms of love: Eros, Philia and Agape, that is, the logic of contract and mutual interest, friendship and collegiality and universal brotherhood (the unconditional love which makes us feel like brothers and sisters even towards the lowly, the needy, every neighbor who passes by; and the reciprocity that presupposes gratuitousness and agape).

The charismatic economical experience is not mature, balanced and cannot develop itself harmoniously through time if it doesn't simultaneously live all three forms of love. This is the intuition hinted at in the last chapter of Bruni and Smerilli's book. The solidity and identity of a charismatic organization (which we define as fraternal stock) doesn't depend on the sum of the three forms of love, as much as on their product:

$$R = C (\text{eros, contract}) \times A (\text{philia, friendship}) \times G (\text{agape, gratuitousness}).$$

The consequences of this illustrative function are obvious: if one of the three types of love falls to zero, the entire stock will be cancelled out. Therefore, the relationship between Eros, Philia, and Agape is not opposing but complementary...as are the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity and, returning to the title of this report, fraternal economy and politics.

Unfortunately, there isn't time to develop the last part of this reflection. Blessed economy, one may conclude, exemplifying the pathologies that charismatic organizations – and all of society, I would say – can fall into if the bow lacks just one of these three arrows, one of the three forms of love. If one thinks that rules and contracts (eros) aren't necessary or are dangerous, he can fall into the "*utopic model*". The absence of *philia* makes as if to degenerate the society towards the "*paternalistic model*". And finally, among all pathologies, the disappearance of agape and of gratuitousness is certainly the most subtle for its long incubation period, and leads to the "*disenchanted model*". To not lose openness to agape, to gratuitousness; to remain attentive towards the lowly of the lowly; to not close oneself into a communitarianism or fraternity limited to our equals...this is the most difficult challenge, both for the political world and that of economics. The strength of charisms is necessary in order to keep this challenge alive...that they may keep the goal, rich with blessings but not deprived of wounds, in front of our eyes and heart, always and everywhere – the goal of universal fraternity.