

Get Into the Reciprocal

The world food crisis is an opportunity to discover the true core of social development: the dynamic interplay between giving and receiving. What's important is to participate.

By Amy Uelmen

What images come to mind when we think about helping others in need—those close to us in our own families or those in distant countries? What runs through our minds when we meet a homeless person asking for money, or see television images of flood and earthquake victims?

We may feel overcome by sadness—it tugs at our hearts to see others suffer. We may feel that it is our duty to help financially, since we have been blessed with more than enough to meet our needs.

On the other hand, we may also be overcome by a sense of paralysis when we see how social structures make it difficult to reach out, whether because of corruption, excessive bureaucracy, or simply because what lies at the root of so many social problems can be so hard to heal, such as with drug addiction.

The Focolare Movement has hundreds of social projects throughout the world—small and not so small efforts to help provide food, clothing, medical care, education and work. The motor for these projects is not so much a philanthropic sense of altruism leading to charitable giving or a sense of duty to help others less fortunate. Rather, it is a conviction that we are all truly members of the same human family, destined to live in unity, “that all may be one” (Jn 17:21). We see each other as an opportunity to enter into a dynamic of reciprocal love, in which everyone has something to share and everyone has something to receive and to learn.

In her conversations with people in developing countries, Chiara Lubich often emphasized how everyone in the community can play an active role in building a “culture of giving.” For example, when a teenager from Congo asked whether those with only just enough to eat could contribute, she responded, “There is always something you can give.”

Consolation for those who suffer, help for those who struggle, forgiveness for those who hurt you—all of these are ways to circulate the love of God, who moves hearts to share material goods as well.

“There is always something you can give” sums up the attitude of elementary school children in the impoverished El Café neighborhood of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, who shined shoes and skipped snacks to help collect the pesos needed to build their own school. Café con Leche now stands not only as a testament to one community's ability, with other communities' help, to break the cycle of poverty and despair but also as a model approach to education based on reciprocal love and unity.

On what might seem the flip side, those who have resources and solutions to share are invited not only to reflect on what they have to give but on what they receive as well.

The opportunity to love is itself a gift. When we give of ourselves, “our neighbor is not only a beneficiary of our love, but also our benefactor, because he or she obtains for us the best that we could hope for: union with God,” Chiara explained.

Similarly, in a 1980 letter on mercy, John Paul II emphasized, “An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us.”

This awareness of being beneficiaries as we give, in turn, generates the kind of humility and gratitude that enables communities to discover paths toward development together.

“Nothing is obvious when cultures meet,” said Lucio dal Soglio, an Italian doctor who moved to Fontem, Cameroon, in the 1960s as part of the Focolare’s effort to reduce infant mortality among the Bangwa people. “We had to be constantly animated by a spirit of adaptability and of acceptance of diversity,” he reflected during a recent gathering of sociologists and anthropologists. “One could not say, ‘We will do this, because this is good!’ We needed to consult the other party, who was different from us. In this way we learned to know diversity, and to love diversity.”

Despite these efforts and good intentions, a crisis emerged in the community when the Bangwa felt the relationship with the Focolare had generated excessive dependence. “We are always the ones, the saying goes, who were holding the knife from the handle’s end,” Dal Soglio explained. The people of the Focolare had procured the tractors and trucks; they had the resources and technical knowledge to carry out various jobs and repair the machines.

This provoked a moment of profound reflection. Dal Soglio remembered how they resolved to change their approach. “We are here to live with the Bangwa, not to make big things,” he said. “We will save lives if the Bangwa ask this from us. We do not want to build a super hospital, set up a university, teach this or that program; we just want to do what we agree to do together.”

As a result, the whole community experienced a deeper understanding of equality that permeated the further development of the town, which now includes 600 homes, a school, a hospital specialized in tropical diseases and AIDs treatment, a hydroelectric plant, a church and several workshops.

“This is where universal brotherhood really begins,” said Dal Soglio. “What you say is as important as what I say. What counts is that we understand together, in a reasonable manner, what should be done.”

For those who live the spirituality of unity, a commitment to social development is certainly not limited to admiring or contributing to projects in faraway countries. It invites us all to be constantly vigilant in assessing our material needs, even daily.

Responding to a U.S. teenager’s question about how to avoid getting caught in the trap of consumerism, Chiara advised: “Look at the plants. They absorb from the earth only the water and minerals that they need, and not more. Likewise, each of us must have what he or she needs. All the rest should be given away and shared with others.”

For youth and adults who take this advice to heart, their acute awareness of others’ needs throughout the world influences their concrete choices about what to spend, what to save and what to share.

In the light of this spirituality, the true core of social development lies neither in shifting material goods nor resolving technical problems. It is a matter of discovering that the heart of human existence is to love and to be loved.

Whether we find ourselves in the position of giving or of receiving, what is important is to participate in the dynamic. To welcome love is itself an act of love, since it provides the possibility of human fulfillment to the giver.

A thank you letter sent by a family of nine living in a two-room apartment in Croatia captured this dynamic well: “The assistance we receive from the Economy of Communion means so much to us, not just because it is helping us survive, but because by sharing our need, we can be part of this ‘sacred’ reality.”

Amy Uelmen is the director of the Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer’s Work at Fordham University School of Law. A more extensive account of development in Fontem (“Social Relationships and Fraternity: Paradox or Sustainable Model?”) is on the SocialOne website

([social-one.org / conventions-2005](http://social-one.org/conventions-2005)). Read Living City's April 2008 issue about the Economy of Communion.