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Thoughts on the EoC

The EoC legacy of Chiara Lubich

By John Gallagher

Only a few short years ago, when I met the Focolare and was introduced to the Economy of Communion in Freedom, I was very interested because my own experience had taught me that business is a richer and more complex undertaking than pure economics. And my reflection on the life and legacy of Chiara Lubich is also formed by that experience.

The EoC is an idea that challenges conventional ways of thinking about business and economics, and since I have undertaken to study EoC companies, I often get asked to try to explain just what it is. I usually find myself offering one or two or sometimes all three of the following explanations.

One, I might say that the EoC is different because it views economic activity as a means and not an end unto itself; in other words, we engage in economic activity not to simply enrich ourselves monetarily. Or, two, I might say that EoC business owners make a commitment to distribute a portion of their profits to those in need, which is a rather unconventional idea. Or I might say that EoC businesses place the person, and not profits, at the center of the enterprise.

But none of these is exactly accurate. None of these captures and communicates the real wonder of the EoC and its real impact. It's not that these three things are not true; it's just that they are incomplete. So here's how I might speak more completely about these things.

The idea that economic activity is an end unto itself is a very dominant and popular perception of economics. This is what Chiara calls a culture of having. We exist to consume, to have. The EoC is grounded in a Focolare anthropology that insists that we exist to share, to give.

Chiara perceived of economic activity as a "place of encounter," and we all know this to be true, for in our work we are placed in positions of encounter with many people — with our coworkers, with our customers, with our suppliers, and with our competitors. But we also, in business, encounter people across time and distance. We may produce a product or provide a service to a customer we will never meet, or that will use a product or service at a time and place we know nothing about. So it's important that our products and services contain some quality by which everyone will recognize that they are means of personal encounters.

With regard to providing a portion of the profits to those in need, we must also recognize that EoC businesses provide a portion of profits to reinvest in their business as well. This is important, for it recognizes that the business must be sustained.

But this is also to say that business imposes its own set of challenges on the business owner and demands a certain set of skills. Businesses are themselves unique forms of community, different from other forms with which we might be familiar, such as families, or churches, or social groups. Business activity presents this community with often complex and challenging circumstances. What should we do about a customer who becomes angry? What shall we do about a customer who will not pay us? What should we do when a competitor is unethical? These are challenging circumstances indeed for a community. It may be necessary to "love through gritted teeth" or to resolve conflict "seeing things together." And it may be that the business community is called upon to endure suffering together.

Finally, placing the person at the center of the enterprise is much more than treating people well. It is asking, in each and every situation, what love is, in this moment, for the other. It is asking, continually, why any particular encounter is happening. There is no rulebook, no guidebook, no policy manual. There is only the spirituality.

So I have come to understand EoC businesses as "structures of grace." These businesses create space where grace can enter and be present, where Christ can be made present, where the Spirit can be at work.

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