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Editorial

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Today, the concept of social enterprise is the subject of wide and articulate scientific and political discussion. Different from its American meaning, in European tradition "social enterprise" refers to a specific type of enterprise characterized by the pursuit of social objectives and by normative bonds to the distribution of profits.

Looking closely, this concept of social enterprise is not exhaustive of the series of initiatives and business projects that, although not conditioned by legislative limits to profit distribution, voluntarily decide to destine a part of their profits to social activities.

Among the various social enterprise initiatives not bound by law to use their profits for social ends, there is also the Economy of Communion project.

The Economy of Communion is an entrepreneurial project that arose from the stimulus of Chiara Lubich, in 1991, within the Catholic Movement of the Focolare and which currently enjoys growing popularity at both a national and international level.

The businesses which voluntarily adhere to the Economy of Communion project commit themselves to putting their profits in common according to three objectives:

1. providing help to the poor and disadvantaged, creating new jobs and responding to basic needs, giving life to specific development projects;
2. spreading the Gospel-based culture of reciprocity;
3. developing the business, which must remain efficient and competitive while being transformed with the principles of gratuitousness.

Despite the fact that the project is still limited in numbers and earnings, the Economy of Communion relieves deep-rooted questions in the debate over social enterprises, and it is not by chance that in referring to the experience of the Economy of Communion a body of important reflections has taken shape, like those at the base of the debate about civil economy in Italy.

What the entrepreneurial project of the Economy of Communion puts into question is the rooted conviction that the market cannot be the place where altruistic behaviors show themselves, as they are confined to the non-profit world.

The fact is that types of businesses, which freely allocate part of their profits to social aims, are spreading. This shows, then, how ethical behavior based on the principle of reciprocity, in reality, is not the monopoly of who has ended up respecting this particular practice because bound to do so by law.

The Economy of Communion

The Economy of Communion rather puts into evidence how being a social enterprise is and remains a problem and a challenge of joining principles of efficiency and economy with the values of solidarity and reciprocity.

This issue of the Journal, dedicated entirely to the topic of the Economy of Communion, wants to provide important stimulus for reflection, considering within which boundaries can one legitimately speak about social businesses and highlighting, at the same time, how the challenge of doing social business is that of contaminating the non-profit world with that of markets.

Independently from the personal evaluation that each reader may give with respect to the basic values that drive this Movement, the experience of the Economy of Communion strongly repropose the idea of plurality of methods through which the economy can be used for the sharing of wealth and the fight against poverty and social exclusion, indirectly indicating on the most part unedited possibilities for collaboration between the worlds of business and non-profit.

Luigino Bruni and Luca Crivelli, two of the more important theoreticians and scholars of the Economy of Communion on the international level, were the coordinators of such analytical and reflective efforts. Their intellectual and professional commitment have made it possible to gather a number of articles which, for their quality and content, offer an extremely deep and articulate cross-section of the current experience of the Economy of Communion in Italy and in the world.

For all those who believe that in human society "no one should be in need," the hope is that the reading of these articles motivates towards reflection free of ideological prejudices and capable of going to the root of the central question of existence and of the future of social enterprise: the need to contribute to building a world that is less unequal and less conflictive than that which an economy without solidarity is inevitably destined to reproduce.

This issue of the Journal, in a way new to Impresa Sociale's history, is dedicated to Chiara Lubich: a person who dedicated her life to building a more human society. Our wish is that the goal of social enterprises, in the long run, continue to be like this.