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More Than Mere Material Gain

The Economy of Communion, a Focolare-inspired consortium of businesses, offers a unique demonstration of a free economy based on solidarity.

By Emilie Christy

We are becoming ever more aware of the fact that our economy is in need of a correction, that our environment is in need of safekeeping, and that basic needs, such as adequate housing, healthcare and education, are not being met equitably. Structures that exist today seem only to separate and pit one people against another, be it through nationality, race, gender, age, class or disability. Many solutions have been offered through the ages, with limited success.

A novel experience that is enjoying success has caught the attention of economists, sociologists, politicians and educators. It deserves particular consideration at this moment in time when a level of happiness and self-fulfillment among younger and older generations is being sought with ever-greater urgency.

The Economy of Communion in Freedom offers a unique demonstration of a free economy based on solidarity. It is an expression of the Focolare Movement's spirituality of unity in economic life, which comes from its vision of the human person and social relationships. It seeks to give a human face to an economic system, where business dealings are seen as something more than the pursuit of mere material gain.

EoC Origins

It was in 1991 that Chiara Lubich, Focolare's founder, visited the rapidly growing community in Brazil and was struck by the "crown of thorns" surrounding the city of São Paulo—the severe poverty of the favelas (shantytowns) contrasting the lavish wealth of the city. Despite the communion of goods within the global Focolare community at the time, the funds collected were insufficient to meet even the most essential needs of some of the members there.

What emerged was the concept that businesses could be created to produce resources that could benefit those in need until they found work, became self-sufficient, and could contribute to the fund themselves. The profits from a given business would be used partly to aid those in need, partly to develop structures to train people capable of living and promoting a "culture of giving," and partly to invest in the continuing growth of the company. Today there are more than 750 businesses that have been created throughout Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. and Canada.

EoC businesses strive to establish relationships based on a spirit of service and collaboration among clients, workers, suppliers, government regulators and even competitors. They conduct activities that respect the dignity of the person and protect the environment, and work together with other local business and social entities while being mindful of the needs of the international community, with which they feel a sense of solidarity.

They see that even economic life can become a field of human and social development. One unique feature of this new kind of economic lifestyle is how the recipients of one part of the profits, those who are in financial difficulty, are seen. They are not dependent on beneficiaries, but essential members of the endeavor in which they offer to others their needs as a gift. They, too, live the culture of giving. The EoC is not a philanthropic endeavor, rather an exchange in which each one gives and receives with equal dignity in the context of a relationship of genuine reciprocity.

Business and Spirituality

The question can be asked, “How do these enterprises survive in the marketplace, since they are primarily concerned with the needs of the people they serve and the good of the whole society?”

The entrepreneurs involved answer that they live a spirituality that helps them overcome the difficulties and conflicts that can hinder the health of a company. In addition, their way of doing business inspires the trust and goodwill of others, such as clients, suppliers and investors.

But there is another essential element: Providence, God’s intervention. In the many times these entrepreneurs choose to go against commonly accepted business practices, they experience how God never fails to supply the hundredfold that Jesus promised (see Mt 19:29): some unexpected revenue, an unforeseen opportunity, an offer of a new joint venture, an idea for a successful new product. One could almost describe it as a supernatural return on their “investment.”

“One of the opportunities of the businesses of the Economy of Communion is that they are able to draw upon the Catholic social tradition,” said Professor Michael Naughton, director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought, addressing an EoC conference in 2004. “They open their ideas and practices of business to the deep structures of what a community of work entails.

“However, to do this, a community of work cannot simply be reduced to charitable giving or good works in the community. What is also needed is a deep understanding of how organizational policies and practices contribute to a community of work that creates conditions within the organization for people to develop both morally and spiritually.”

He continued: “Documents such as Encyclicals *Centesimus Annus* and *Laborem Exercens* help us to discern what structures of communion can look like. For what unites people in their work is not only a vision, but also particular organizational practices, policies and structures that embody this communion.”

EoC businesses hope to do just that: establish all relationships in the light of a lifestyle based on a reciprocal gift—communion, as the name implies.