



“The new horizons of the Economy of Communion”  
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## **PANEL 5**

### **NEW HORIZONS FOR ECONOMIC REFLECTION**

Summary of the contribution of *Bob Goudzwaard*, Netherlands

1. In an interview given in 1991 Clara Lubich made the following remark: “In contrast to the consumerist society, which based on a culture of having, the Economy of Communion is an economy of giving”. This is an important remark because it reveals that at the root of the Economy of Communion another view on the human being is present than in mainstream economics and in western society; not the reduced image of a homo consumens or a homo economicus but the view of a personhood in community, with traits of what Vera Araujo once called “a homo donator” (The EoC p 22). It becomes indeed increasingly clear in the recent development of economic thought, not at least by the work of Amartya Sen, that the concept of economic man as a selfish, utility-seeking individual is far too narrow to understand the present economic reality; a reality so well described by Tibor Scitovsky as a ‘joyless economy’. The link between growing consumption and growing happiness is especially in richer countries extremely weak and sometimes even negative. Millions of people are looking for a deeper level of meaning than the most luxurious consumption goods can offer them; they even become aware in their richness of a deep sense of unhappiness and alienation. Which implies in my view, that next to a ‘productive communion’ as Clara Lubich called it (The EoC p 35) something like a “consumptive communion” is needed in our time. It exists already at several places in the world; is in full accordance with the traditions of the origins of the Focolare movement; but at the same time is now in need of a new articulation.

2. The reasons to make this statement are several, but they are all tied to the lack of horizon or perspective in the dominant consumption styles in especially the richer countries. I mention four of them:



- a) the systematic shortening of the time which exists between a consumptive impulse and the moment in which people react to it. Anna Terruwe has shown that if a desire has no chance to ripen it can never lead to real satisfaction; the desire itself comes back almost immediately;
- b) the fact that increasingly consumptive desires are 'produced' by commercial pressures, just to be more sure of market-demand in the future; the human subject is so to say manipulated to be never satisfied ('it is a duty of every American to consume'. a saying of Eisenhower);
- c) the fact that the growing consumption of the north increasingly shows signs of what Pope John Paul II once formulated as 'overdevelopment'(Sollicitudo Rei Socialis), visible in for instance the rising concerns complaints and even neuroses about personal overweight;
- d) the growing evidence that the world 's ecosystem and energy resources can simply not carry the weight of the combination of a growing world population and endless growing material consumption levels . Already now more animal species get extinct per hour as they did forty years ago per day.

This list makes not only clear that there is no future for always rising material consumption standards. It also learns us that in our time the link between growing consumption and human wellbeing is radically lost. Abundance means literally 'flowing over' and is in the Gospels a positive word; Jesus said after telling the parable of the good Shepherd: " I have come to give life and abundancy". But you cannot see and enjoy abundancy - which stands for more than enough - if you have no place for or awareness of what enough is or could mean. Our society has lost its horizon of abundance just because it has lost any notion of enough, and has become now a society of endless growing scarcities. This has to end , because it implies that also the Omega is missing, there is no horizon which brings us nearer to God's plan for this world .

3. Thoughts about the necessary end of overconsumption have already been developed for years in the context of the concept of a so-called economy of enough, among others by my late friend Harry de Lange, an economist who was the personal secretary of Jan Tinbergen, the first Noble price winner in Economics. In Canada it is called an 'economy of care' , in Indonesia an 'economy of caring an sharing', and already those words indicate a deep



similarity of an economy of enough with the principles of an economy of communion which has a culture of giving in its heart. For the central plea in the Economy of Enough is that the desire for an ever growing material consumption level has to stop, especially in the richest countries for at least two purposes: firstly to make more economic room ,to create a better living space for the poorer nations of this world in their need for resources and energy, and secondly to contribute to the return of happiness in our own rich societies. For these societies now live and work under a continuous pressure to produce and consume always more, and well in the context of – as JM Keynes coined the word – hard ‘ tunnel-economies’, in which every one and everything is viewed from the perspective of the need for a maximum growth of output and productivity, because it is believed that can lead us to the daylight of a maximum satisfaction. Which belief is again and again falsified by the growing social, environmental and cultural problems of today.

4. This diagnosis leads me to say that looking for new business styles and new forms of business organisation like the Economy of Communion does is at the same time extremely useful and important, as not sufficient in itself to solve the problems of our present society. It is in fact only half of the solution for which we are looking, because something similar is needed at the consumption-side of society. New community-styles of consumption should become visible in our time which are based on sharing caring and restraint, and well in such a way, that also existing communions of production can orient themselves to that style of consumption-development. The two projects should so to say complement each other to be able to lead to a real break-through of a new horizon of living and giving in our joyless consumerist societies.