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## COMMENTS - SOCIAL ECONOMY, A WORK OF CHARISMS.

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# MORE RESPECT FOR WHAT'S CIVIL

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Published in [Avvenire](#) on October 20, 2012



It's by now clear that **mainstream logics in Europe** powerfully influence **Italy** and that people, in our country too, **struggle to recognize** the reality that is at the same time richness and source of richness for everyone: **the civil and social economy**. It is affected not only by the critical VAT increase (of 7 percent) on social cooperatives (the major social economic Italian, or probably even continental, innovation over the last twenty years). The recent approval of "betting exchange" and the imminent online slot machines legalization represent an even worse sign, since these radically 'uncivil' regulations end up intensifying the social hardship that affects social cooperatives, which have to face it with always less resources.

**The issue about the IMU [Italian property tax] application on non-profit structures and on religious institutions** should also be looked at considering the overall misunderstanding as far as social and civil economy is concerned. The matter has actually been at stake for a while, but should be given even more attention and looked at with more proposals.

On **Via Tuscolana in Rome** a Salesian community of around 20 nuns for decades keeps a primary school and a kindergarten. Many nuns, some over 80, are volunteers at the school assisting the children during breaks or answering the switchboard. I've witnessed first-hand parents sleeping by the school's gate the day before enrolment begins in order not to miss the few vacancies available. Why does this community carry on this school? For two main reasons: as an answer to the neighbourhood's vital and pressing demands for it, and because for Salesians educational work isn't an accident, but an essential aspect of their vocation and charism. **When these nuns responded to their call as young women, they donated their lives to young people and to their education.**

At least the best part of Italy was partly, and during historical periods mainly, founded by religious charisms and to some extent secular ones as well. During the years when the Italian state still did not exist, or its institutions were too weak or still to be founded, **Cotolengo, Don Bosco, Don Orione, Scalabrini, Francesca Cabrini** cared for and loved the various kinds of poor and outcasts of that time, making Italian society more civil, and the life of many, poor and less poor, possible. **Their structures and houses became public assets** at times even more significant than fountains, parks, theatres and museums. Most of them still exist as such and make up a part of our country's heritage. Nowadays hundreds of thousands of children, teenagers and youngsters are still educated and loved by works born from charisms.

**Only a very absent minded look can define a religious order school or a parish cafeteria as a commercial activity.** These are direct and immediate expressions of the charism itself and the difference from profit activities is not because, or when, they 'do not have profit' (like the newly published standard regulations point out). **The fact of having profit or not cannot be the criteria based on which one sees this reality** and so many religious and non-religious organizations (cultural, entertainment, sport...) that carry out commercially engaged activities.

Like this, projects (and polemics) regarding the property tax increase on noncommercial entities (today IMU is at stake, yesterday ICI [the former IMU]) cover much more than just a 'catholic' issue (we should also consider how much damage Italy undergoes by looking at everything under the ideological frame: in favour/against the church!); this matter refers also, and above all, to the country's civil and economical vocation, to our history and our culture.

It's also true that **many of these charismatic organizations are maintained for years at the threshold of survival**: they receive derisory funds from the government and can only live on the gratuitous offerings they can gather. Collect IMU from their properties and from many other communitarian schools and works means not to understand their value, not to appreciate them and make their lives very difficult, even unbearable. **What are the consequences?**

**These structures will be more and more vulnerable to the market and will be mission deprived, and sold to speculators maybe**, who will double the fees causing families to grow even poorer and will impoverish our lands' culture and history. Is this what we want? Is this what Europe will impose to the national government once instigated by a handful of politicians that appealed against Italy as guilty for helping non-profit activities with public resources?

In the current extraordinary political and governmental phase a tradition decades old unfortunately lives on and actually expands as well: the lack of eyeglasses to 'see' the civil dimension in Italy (which is different from the one in England or in the USA). **It's not a coincidence that the first spending review cut was through shutting down ONLUS Agency [Italian social organization]**, and (we hope) the last one is through undermining the 'civil' works, and therefore the poor. It's not about equity (treating the church and its works like everyone else); it's about having a concept of Italy, an overview of the physiology of the healing patient. Since the greatest injustice is to treat different realities the same way: not to consider the difference between a business school and a Don Orione's school or a kindergarten sustained by a parish.

While the press explores the well-known and very much covered stories about the bed and breakfast pensions owned by religious orders but run as a business often by profit groups (which according to present law pay IMU and all other taxes) people are not aware that due to the amendments on regulations explicitly against non-profit, profit activities themselves will increase. Everyone will pay IMU including those operating without profit objectives, but citizens will pay a much higher price, and our country will lose the contribution of century-old works.

All this is caused by a combination of radical ideological revenge and crave for revenue increase. **Not as in France though, there is no political might to increase 20 percent over the IRPEF [income tax] of the super-rich for such income, thus more is demanded from the poor and the increasingly poorer middle class**. The past days' immorality and corruption scandals should be cured by nourishing the immune system, injecting healthy cells to the badly ill Italian body, also due to the charisms' exclusion from civil life. **Italy won't be saved by the enlargement of the profit market.**

*Translated by Cristian Sebok*