



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 22 (2020)

Business, Faith, and the Economy of Communion

Edited by Andrew Gustafson and Celeste Harvey

4. Pope Francis and the Economy of Communion

Jesús Morán, Focolare Movement International Headquarters
Amelia J. Uelmen, Georgetown University

Abstract

As leader of the global Catholic Church, Pope Francis, like his predecessors, has offered critical reflection on what it might take to help move the world toward greater attentiveness to economic justice and sustainable development. One of the obstacles that stands in the way of broader reception of this message is the tendency to interpret his proposals through a divisive ideological lens. This essay considers how Pope Francis's proposals might best be understood through the lens of reconciliation, and most specifically, of the paradigm of the unity of opposites. It then explores how the Economy of Communion project exemplifies promising dimensions of the unity of opposites in action.

Keywords: Pope Francis, Economy of Communion, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, unity of opposites, tension

Introduction

Concerns about severe levels of social inequality and environmentally unsustainable lifestyles have exploded into protest movements throughout the globe. In the words of the teenage activist Greta Thunberg: “Humanity is now standing at a crossroads. We must now decide which path we want to take” (Stubley). What might it take for humanity to decide for the path toward sustainable living? Who might be the leaders and partners who can help the peoples of the world to envision both the necessity and the goodness of this path, and to gather the social and cultural resources they need for the journey?

One person with tremendous global convening power for this venture is Pope Francis. And one reason that Pope Francis holds such convening power is that the institution he leads, the global Catholic Church, has a long history of standing with humanity at the crossroads of crises. The saint whose name he took, Francis of Assisi, also confronted a world marked by severe social inequality, desperately in search of a vision that could help humanity choose a different path. In response, Francis of Assisi put everything on the line. Son of a wealthy merchant, he “stripped himself of all worldliness in order to choose God as the compass of his life, becoming poor with the poor, a brother to all” (Francis 2019).

Saint Francis’s form of protest was not limited to a critique of the inequality and corruption of his day, but also “gave rise to a vision of economics” that still speaks to us today. As the Pope explains, it is a vision “that can give hope to our future and benefit not only the poorest of the poor, but our entire human family. A vision that is also necessary for the fate of the entire planet, our common home . . .” (2019).

Building on the legacy of Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis is using his global convening power to invite the next generation of economists, entrepreneurs, and thought leaders to explore together “a different kind of economy: one that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanizing, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it.” Like Greta Thunberg, the Pope acknowledges that it is not easy to get this message across. “Sadly,” the Pope notes, until now “few have heard the appeal to acknowledge the gravity of the problems and, even more, to set in place a new economic model, the fruit of a culture of communion based on fraternity and equality” (2019). So he too banks on the next generation’s capacity to generate a captivating vision and commitment.

An important step in this journey will be the March 2020 *Economy of Francesco* event in Assisi. As the Pope explains, it will be an occasion to come together to “enter into a ‘covenant’ to change today’s economy and to give a soul to the economy of tomorrow.” The aim of the meeting is, together with the next generation, to “appeal to some of our best economists and entrepreneurs who are already working on the global level to create an economy consistent with these ideals” (Francis 2019).

While it may be true that relatively few have heard the appeal to develop new economic models, there are notable exceptions in the life of the church and civil society. One widely recognized project is the Economy of Communion (EoC), an initiative of the Focolare Movement, and one of the organizing entities for the March 2020 gathering. The project originated in 1991, when Focolare founder Chiara Lubich reflected with the community in São Paulo, Brazil on how to respond to the acute social problems such as poverty and

unemployment. Inspired in part by a reading of Pope John Paul's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, the idea emerged to establish businesses that after an appropriate investment in the sustainability of the business, commit a part of their profits to direct aid for those in need and another part toward nurturing a "culture of giving" (Bruni and Uelmen: 645-51).

As the Economy of Communion has developed over the years, it now includes not only businesses, but also an international incubator network, projects focused specifically on sustainability and social integration, systems to welcome and integrate migrants, and professional training centers. Prophetic Economy dimensions of the work also aim to network various initiatives throughout the globe and to encourage academics in their efforts to develop scholarship and theories to sustain new economic, business and cultural models (EoC 2019, 2018; Sophia University Institute). According to the most recent EoC report, in 2018 more than 1.5 million euros were collected and distributed to fund various developmental and educational projects. A part of the funds were also allocated to respond to the urgent necessities (health, housing, education, and food) of people with material needs throughout the world.

How has this project been received by Catholic leadership? In his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict noted the need for expanded categories to describe the relationship between business and ethics and current modes of production: "it would appear that the traditionally valid distinction between profit-based companies and non-profit organizations can no longer do full justice to reality, or offer practical direction for the future" (§46). Pope Benedict used the term "economy of communion" to describe an aspect of the emerging "intermediate area":

In recent decades a broad intermediate area has emerged between the two types of enterprise. It is made up of traditional companies which nonetheless subscribe to social aid agreements in support of underdeveloped countries, charitable foundations associated with individual companies, groups of companies oriented towards social welfare, and the diversified world of the so-called "civil economy" and the "economy of communion" (§46).

Resisting the terminology of a "third way" or a "third sector," he then described these projects in terms of their human and social goals:

This is not merely a matter of a "third sector," but of a broad new composite reality embracing the private and public spheres, one which does not exclude profit, but instead considers it a means for achieving human and social ends. Whether such companies distribute dividends or not, whether their juridical structure corresponds to one or other of the established forms, becomes secondary in relation to their willingness to view profit as a means of achieving the goal of a more humane market and society (§46).

Many scholars opine that that with the term "economy of communion" Pope Benedict was referring at least in part to Focolare-inspired enterprises (Allen; Christiansen: 201; Duncan: 162; McCann: 57; Guitián: 288; Lucas: 126).

Pope Francis has also been explicit in his reflections on the project's meaning and potential. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the project he delivered a lengthy

address to an audience of Economy of Communion business owners, scholars, and other participants in the project (Francis 2017), which will be discussed at length below.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that formidable obstacles stand in the way of broader reception of the challenge launched by Pope Francis to develop new economic models. Perhaps the most difficult lies in currently intense levels of social, political, and ecclesial polarization, which also foster the tendency to interpret his proposals through a divisive ideological lens. To open out the complexity in this challenge, we first consider how the current reflections and proposals of Pope Francis might best be understood through the lens of reconciliation, and most specifically, of the paradigm of the unity of opposites. We then turn to the twenty-five year history of the Economy of Communion to explore how the project exemplifies promising dimensions of the unity of opposites in action.

The Mind of Pope Francis: The Unity of Opposites

In his *Brief Essay on the Time of Pope Francis*, French Benedictine monk Ghislain Lafont highlights how the strong resistance that Pope Francis has encountered over the course of his papacy marks the prophetic character of his pontificate. He writes: “Prophecy, in fact, never seems to be in direct continuity with the past and so initially arouses resistance and misunderstanding” (cover).

Right from the start of his pontificate it was evident that Pope Francis offered a complete novelty, even for those who had hoped for substantial changes. After an initial phase of disorientation, commentators and observers from disparate positions delved into heated debates that were also expressed in the form of publicly visible articles, interviews and essays. What is at times missing in some of these debates is a sincere and serious effort to try to grasp with any depth who Jorge Mario Bergoglio was before becoming pope. As a result, some arguments lack important interpretive keys that could lead to a greater understanding of the ministry of Pope Francis.

We believe that it is impossible to understand with depth the key themes of his papacy and what his words, gestures, speeches, and magisterial documents represent for humanity without some exposure to his intellectual biography. While his personal history and pastoral actions are important, even more crucial are elements of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual formation, including times of difficulty and darkness, that forged his identity and also prepared him for his service as pope.

Into this gap steps the thorough and thoughtful work on Massimo Borghesi, author of Bergoglio’s intellectual biography, *The Mind of Pope Francis*. A core theme of this work is understanding the pivotal conceptual role that the unity of opposites plays in his intellectual framework. He writes:

Bergoglio’s entire system of thought is one of reconciliation—not an irenic, optimistic, naively progressivist thinking, but rather a dramatic thinking, marked by a tension, that, having matured during the course of his Ignatian studies in the 1960s, finds its first formulation in the 1970s in the tragic context of an Argentina divided by a right-wing military and left-wing revolutionaries. It is a contrast that marks both the church and the Society of Jesus (xxiv).

This, according to Borghesi, is the “golden thread of Bergoglio’s thought,” and “his original, conceptual core.” “Bergoglio fought for a synthesis of the oppositions that lacerated the historical reality,” proposing “an antinomian unity, an agonistic solution achieved by way of the contrast” (xxiv). The character and quality of this reconciliation reaches beyond an interior or spiritual act, and the action it calls for extends beyond a personal or even collective level. Instead, it is a form of thought, a paradigm, to aim for synthesis that integrates two poles in tension. For example, Bergoglio finds in the work of Romano Guardini a further confirmation of a synthetic, integral model, “capable of explaining and embracing the principal personal/social/political contrasts that tend to crystalize into dialectical contradictions that fuel dangerous conflicts” (Borghesi: 105).

In an interview with Italian Jesuit journalist, Antonio Spadaro, Pope Francis further explained how Guardini shaped his thought:

Opposition opens a path, a way forward. Speaking generally, I have to say that I love oppositions. Romano Guardini helped me with his book *Der Gegensatz*, which was important to me. He spoke of a polar opposition in which the two opposites are not annulled. One pole does not destroy the other. There is no contradiction and no identity. For him, opposition is resolved at a higher level. In such a solution, however, the polar tension remains. The tension remains, it is not cancelled out. The limits are overcome, not negated. Oppositions are helpful. Human life is structured in an oppositional form. The tensions are not necessarily resolved and ironed out; they are not like contradictions (Borghesi: 105).

How does this form of thought manifest in the work of Pope Francis? Borghesi writes:

The distinction between opposition (*Gegensatz*) and contradiction (*Widerspruch*) is crucial, because it allows us to think of the Catholic *communio* not as a flat, uniform unity, but as a dynamic, polyform reality, which for that reason does not fear to lose its unity. Ecclesial unity isn’t to be understood as a monolithic block in which unity comes down from on high, in a fixed and direct manner. It is not afraid of accommodating different poles and reconciling them in the Spirit who unites everything, as in a musical symphony. This *communio* is realized in a *dialogical* form, in the patient development of interconnections that does not pretend to negate the accents, the variety of approaches that remain (106).

In the vision of Pope Francis, what might it mean for mercy and truth to meet in this historical moment? As Borghesi explains: “Mercy is not being placed ‘against’ the truth, but as a manifestation of the truth” (259). In seeking out a wounded humanity, “[t]he ‘glory’ of God shines in the ‘Samaritan’ church, that is, in the form of *mercy*. In the contemporary world, which no longer knows the gratuitousness of true love, divided as it is between ineffectivity and *eros*, mercy unites beauty and goodness in the communication of truth” (258-59).

Similarly, the work of Austen Ivereigh challenges those who read the work of Pope Francis through the lens of a polarizing “rupture” from his predecessors Popes Benedict and John Paul II. Ivereigh writes:

Francis's radicalism is not to be confused with a progressive teaching or ideology. It is radical because it is missionary, and mystical. Francis is instinctively and viscerally opposed to 'parties' in the Church: he roots the papacy in the traditional Catholicism of God's holy faithful people, above all the poor. He will not compromise on the hot-button issues that divide the church from the secular West – a gap liberals would like to close by modernizing doctrine. Yet he is also, just as obviously, not a pope for the Catholic right: he will not use the papacy to right political and cultural battle he believes should be fought at the diocesan level, but to attract and teach (xxi).

Anyone with their finger on the pulse of current discourse surrounding polarizing political, social, and ecclesial questions knows that the work of generating a synthesis is neither easy nor simple. Even if we aim to see the world and social problems from a perspective of unity, or from a systemic perspective, we are still left with a host of questions regarding how to *interpret* that perspective and *apply* it to concrete situations.

What models of thought might help us to move from polarizing rupture to more multi-faceted modes of interpretation? In *Evangelii*, Pope Francis contrasts a spherical model with a more dynamic polyhedron.

Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone (2013a: 236).

As Borghesi notes, "polyhedral differentiation" captures well the ideas of "*unity in difference*, the single reality with many facets" (118). "Only the polyhedron maintains the supremacy of the whole without eliminating the polarity with the parts that make it up" (118-19).

Similarly, for German theologian Christoph Theobald, the metaphors of the sphere and the polyhedron in *Evangelii* shed light on keys to interpret the Second Vatican Council. As he explains, only an approach "that is sensitive to the confluence of all the partial elements in particular situation, insures that the elements preserve their originality while at the same time they are permeated by the whole, which is the fullness and richness of the gospel." For Theobald, this is "the key to the evangelical hermeneutics of Pope Francis . . . as well as to his conception of the church as God's people" (53).

In this model, guidance does not emanate from the center of a sphere according to equidistant and uniform relationships, because such a model risks losing not only its own uniqueness but also the particular gift or talent that could be put at the service of the whole. The polyhedron preserves the originality of particular gifts and talents because the central

point of reference is not located at a point equidistant from all the others. Instead, the center is present, in a certain sense, everywhere and nowhere. The relationship is less a function of dogmatic direction, and more a service that animates, unifies, and broadens to more universal horizons. As Theobald notes, these are the complex relationships that can make “the entirety of the Gospel visible in its inexhaustible depth thanks to the *multiplicity of its modes of expression*” (74).

The Economy of Communion: the Unity of Opposites in Action

When we consider the origins of the Economy of Communion, it is interesting to note the parallels between Bergoglio’s intellectual formation and one of the insights at the heart of Focolare founder Chiara Lubich’s thought. As the Focolare interdisciplinary study center was developing in the late 1990s, Lubich explained that the doctrine which was emerging would be like a new synthesis: “because the ideal of unity brings about the unity of opposites.” Initial steps within the study center itself included work to reconcile tensions between differing currents and schools within theology. As Lubich challenged, the project is “to bring about a synthesis and not a compromise” (2006: 160; Voce: 21).

Thus is it not surprising that Pope Francis, in his own commentary on the Focolare’s economic project, would highlight the oxymoronic challenge that the project’s name embodies:

Economy and communion. These are two words that contemporary culture keeps separate and often considers opposites. Two words that you have instead joined, accepting the invitation that Chiara Lubich offered you 25 years ago in Brazil, when, in the face of the scandal of inequality in the city of São Paulo, she asked entrepreneurs to become agents of communion. . . . With your life you demonstrate that economy and communion become more beautiful when they are beside each other (2017).

One could explore numerous dimensions of how the *practices* of the Economy of Communion exemplify the unity of opposites in action. Generally, what does it mean to run a business with a responsible attention to profit as a sign of its health and potential for growth, and at the same time remain profoundly attentive to the intervention of God in the material life of the business and all of its various relationships?

In their study of Economy of Communion businesses in North America, Gallagher and Buckeye reflect on the distinctiveness they found in Economy of Communion business practices: “EoC companies are indeed different. And that difference is centered on a conviction of the business as a set of relationships, or more accurately, a *community*, and the conviction that the purpose of economic activity – the production and distribution of goods and services – is to bring people together, to create *community*” (188-89).

Can these projects even survive in the market? As Gallagher and Buckeye report, the priority placed on creating community takes many forms: “We find EoC companies walking away from business opportunities, scrupulously following regulations, cheerfully (sometimes reluctantly) refunding payments, participating in the civic process while avoiding attempts at undue influence, making restitution where appropriate, and looking to reconcile with detractors” (186). Reflecting on competitive behavior in EoC business, they note:

. . . clearly the guiding principles for these companies is their view of their business as a set of relationships, and this has a significant effect on the approaches to competition. . . . It's fair to describe these companies as more customer focused than competitor focused. This appears to carry over in their approaches to pricing. Most of these companies take a purely "cost-based" approach to pricing that is not in any apparent way geared or pegged to competitors (183).

Over the course of its twenty-five year history, scholars of the Economy of Communion have probed many of these layers (Argiolas; Gallagher and Buckeye; Gallagher; Gomez, Grevin, and Masclef; Frémeaux and Michelson).

What happens when the characteristics of the Economy of Communion are mapped onto the tensions inherent in social and economic development? The next sections explore some of the contrasts that tend to permeate development work, to consider whether the nexus between core insights of Pope Francis and the experience of the Economy of Communion might help to illuminate a path toward reconciliation of opposites.

The Protagonists of Development: El Pueblo Fiel and the Economy of Communion

Who are the protagonists of social and economic development? Whose voices and perspectives should be taken into consideration when working to develop viable models for economic development? Many aspire to foster a broader sense of participation and ownership at all levels of their projects, and even recognize that this is often the key to long term success. But often even those with the best intentions for leveraging the kind of financial resources that seem to promise immediate positive impact for the poor struggle with the unintended consequences of destroying the potential for local markets to thrive. For example, as the documentary *Poverty, Inc.* recounts, projects to distribute free shoes in developing countries can severely damage the business prospects for local shoe manufacturers. Similarly, large scale efforts on the part of non-profit organizations to supply developing countries with free solar panels severely impeded the hopes for a promising local solar panel business that had just been getting traction.

Reflecting on this tension, what comes into relief is the *popular* origins of the Economy of Communion. The idea did not emerge from the mind of an academic, at a conference, or in the office of a Washington think-tank. It emerged in response to a vital community-based contact with the poor, who themselves were an integral part of Focolare communities in Brazil. The first creative sparks for the businesses, and the first shareholders for the businesses emerged from people who were poor, who responded, for example, even by selling chickens and other livestock in order to participate (Masters and Uelmen: 152; Bruni and Uelmen: 656; see Gold: 81-102).

The images that circulate in local EoC conferences often refer to the growth of what is small but vital. For example, the EoC is like a tiny seed that has taken root in a concrete wall: sooner or later it will grow, take over, and bring the wall down, because it is alive. As repeatedly stressed by Giuseppe Maria Zanghì, one of Chiara Lubich's closest collaborators for the elaboration of the Focolare's cultural projects, this incarnational dimension is essential:

Without the incarnation of thought, there is no overcoming of the abyss that separates reality from reality: each remains closed in its solitude. Now, if incarnation of thought means the entry of the spirit of man into the profound being of reality through the often contradictory becoming of them, Incarnation of the Word means the entry of God in the flesh and in the history of man: of the man with his sins, his miseries, his limits, his denials, his unfinished dreams (17).

With these tensions in mind, it is interesting to consider the Economy of Communion in light of Pope Francis's reflections on *el pueblo fiel*, the faithful people. As Borghesi explains: *el pueblo fiel* "is distinctly separate from both the *populist ideologies* and the Marxist system, which is fixed to the 'abstract' categories of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat." Instead, "The concept of the believing people refers for him to the *historical* ways that faith animates life, reality, culture. It points to the *how* of the incarnation. It is not a question of academic sociology but of the historical, lived terrain that nourishes the faith of the church." In sum: "*Popular spirituality is culture, an organic web that links together all aspects of existence*" (53).

The Latin American Bishops Conference reflection following the meeting in Puebla in 1979 affirmed not only the wisdom, but also the *synthesis* that emerges from concrete experience:

The Catholic wisdom of the common people is capable of fashioning a vital synthesis. It creatively combines the divine and the human, Christ and Mary, spirit and body, communion and institution, person and community, faith and homeland, intelligence and emotion. This wisdom is a Christian humanism that radically affirms the dignity of every person as a child of God, establishes a basic fraternity, teaches people how to encounter nature and understand work, and provides reasons for joy and humor even in the midst of a very hard life (Borghesi: 53).

All of these elements come together in the 2007 document which followed the Latin American Bishops Conference meeting in Aparecida, Brazil, and on which Bergoglio had a very strong influence. As Borghesi notes: "The *pueblo fiel*, the poor, the witnesses, the ecclesial communities, become 'theological places,' places where the face of Christ manifests itself today. It is the face of the humiliated Christ, the Samaritan, the crucified one, the one who surprises and attracts by his mercy, his embrace, his singular humanity. Aparecida valued everything" (300).

When applied to the work of social and economic development, the concept and reality of *el pueblo fiel* helps us to appreciate with depth the insights that emerge from popular and grassroots origins. It also illuminates the *value* of the fact that many of the people who are involved with the project are unsophisticated little people. Just as Jesus received from the little boy five small barley loaves and two small fish as raw material for a miracle (John 6:9), the message of Aparecida helps us to value everyone's contribution to development work.

There would be numerous ways to illustrate how the Economy of Communion project emerged and continues to develop within the dynamic creativity of *el pueblo fiel*. As noted above,

the initial businesses emerged from the active contribution of people with few material resources making small contributions to purchase shares for initial capital for the start-ups.

The life of *el pueblo fiel* is also evident in the stories that the entrepreneurs share about how they see the providential intervention of God in the midst of their effort to run their businesses according to Economy of Communion principles. As Gallagher and Buckeye recount, the owner of a violin craft shop had set aside time to call a list of customers who were behind in their payments, but got sidetracked because of his effort to help an immigrant employee with the application process to buy a house, which ended up taking the whole day. “Unnoticed at first, but confirmed later, was the fact that while everyone’s attention was focused on helping the employee, a full payment from every delinquent customer arrived in that day’s mail” (143).

Another business recounted the unexpectedly positive results of how it handled employee terminations in the wake of the 2008 economic downturn. “The terminated employees did recognize the significant effort that the company made with the severances . . . and there were many scenes where they were consoling the remaining employees who were in tears” (Gallagher and Buckeye: 170). Happily, with a month, every employee had found a new job, even in the midst of the economic crisis. As economic conditions improved, the company also realized that even the terminated employees were providing positive references for the company with customers and with new prospective employees. The owner explained:

This crisis ended up being a moment of truth. It truly cemented our team and its belief in our corporate values. In times of hardship, we were able to stick to our core principles and not throw them away in the name of economic imperatives. . . . Our employees have seen firsthand that doing the right thing not only makes one a better person and brings a lot of serenity and peace but can also pay off in the long term too. They experience some of the fruits of providence in their lives (Gallagher and Buckeye: 170-71).

In answering the question of who is, or who should be the protagonist of development projects, the experience of EoC entrepreneurs points in an interesting direction. As Gallagher and Buckeye summarize:

EoC leadership reflects a *pragmatic generosity* fueled by a dependence on providence. There is an acute awareness that they shouldn’t give away so much that they ruin the business, become the needy, or are forced into borrowing money, yet there are several owners who gladly give away everything they can over and above identified, concrete needs. This conviction about providence, in fact, might be the bedrock of their culture (153).

According to Gallagher and Buckeye, for the EoC businesses that they studied, the protagonist of development is the loving intervention of the divine.

The EoC explicitly, consciously, intentionally, and deliberately acts in a way that suggests that providential intervention is imminent. This is really an active expression of a profound sense of hope. It is not a distancing of self from a thorny or an apparently insoluble matter and just tossing it into God’s hands. It is a recognition that divine intervention is possible everywhere and anywhere, every time and any time, with everyone and anyone. Further, EoC

companies tell stories all the time because they believe it's quite likely that there will be some future connected event to the story (153).

Who are the protagonists of development? Does guidance for the direction of a business or development project flow from top-down experts, or does it emerge from grassroots insights? Within the varieties of EoC experience, the answer is not only both, and not just a synthesis. By placing a priority on relationships of communion, and by opening themselves to divine intervention, the protagonist becomes, in a certain sense, the life of communion itself.

Interests in Tension: Beyond Altruism

A second tension in development work is the struggle to articulate shared *interests*. Stated in the broadest terms, it is difficult to imagine and articulate how the interests of people with social and legal control over material resources might fully align with the interests of those who lack the material resources needed for social and economic development. It is not that people with resources are not engaged in shifting the balance, but that this shift is perceived as requiring them to pull against their own interests and to sacrifice something valuable.

Karol Wojtyła captured well the core conundrum at the heart of economic theories in which a good exists “in isolation from the good of the others and from the common good.”

In this system, the good of the individual has the quality of being opposed to every other individual and his good. This kind of individualism is based on self-preservation and is always on the defensive . . . “The others’ are for the individual only a source of limitations and may even be opponents and create polarizations (Clark: xi-xii).

Echoing Paul VI and John Paul II, in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict also issued a strong critique of *homo economicus* as an incomplete anthropology. As Kenneth Himes summarizes:

To reduce human motivation and thought to that of a rational maximizer of self-interest is to truncate the nature of the human and to misread the aim of authentic human development. Human beings, of course, do demonstrate self-interest in their attitudes and behaviors. Yet humans are complex beings who act for a variety of reasons, and a more adequate market economy will make room for a wider range of human motivations to be considered (32).

In order to address a challenge of this magnitude, it is not enough simply to recover a framework of commitment to the whole. The work, according to Charles Taylor, is to find sources of meaning outside of the self, but that also resonate with the self. We need categories that can help us, again in Taylor’s terms, to grasp “an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision” (Uelmen 2012: 66-67).

Italian economist Luigino Bruni, whose groundbreaking work has provided theoretical foundations for the Economy of Communion project, highlights the historical contribution of economic theorists less tainted by the polarities of individualism. As Bruni summarizes, in the work of Antonio Genovesi, “love of self and love of others are two dimensions that are both present in the person, and the dynamics of human action are explainable on the basis of the interplay between these two basic forces.” For Genovesi the “diffusive force” of love for

others “was not simple benevolence or, as we would say today, altruism; it has more to do with interpersonal relationships, and its basic element is the capacity for friendliness . . . an indelible characteristic of our nature – which explains that great majority of human actions in both small and large societies” (65). This in turn provides a foundation for interests to align.

Profound theological support for alignment of interests is also evident in Pope Benedict’s reflections on the relational dynamic at the heart of the Trinity in *Caritas in veritate*: “God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: ‘that they may be one even as we are one’” (John 17:22). In this light, we understand that “true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration” (§54).

With a strong conceptual grounding in this anthropological vision, the Economy of Communion project offers a laboratory for reconceptualizing shared interests. For Focolare founder Chiara Lubich, the hermeneutical key to what she termed the “culture of giving” was to discover all the ways in which these everyday acts of openness to others were *not* in the order of a heroic pull against one’s own interests.

Unlike the consumer economy based on a culture of having, the Economy of Communion is the economy of giving. This could seem difficult, arduous, heroic. But it is not, because the human person, made in the image of God who is love, finds fulfillment precisely in loving, in giving. This need to love lies in the deepest core of our being, whether we are believers or not (Lubich 2007: 25; see Uelmen 2010: 38).

When the culture of giving or of communion is lived in all of its power and depth, participants in these projects break through the tension at the heart of zero-sum game theories of altruism in which service to others is pitted against one’s own interests. Instead, through a Trinitarian lens, calls for sacrifice or generosity make little sense if a sharing of material goods is simply an expression of one’s own identity, as a member of the universal human family (Uelmen 2010: 38). To paraphrase Lubich, service to others may *seem* arduous and heroic, but *it is not* because such a stance is precisely what leads to personal fulfillment as well.

Some interpretations of the story of the Good Samaritan emphasize the Samaritan’s selfless capacity to set aside his own interests and fears in order to help a stranger in need. Through the anthropological lens of communion, the very concept of interests is expanded to embrace the personal fulfillment that emerges from a lifestyle based on loving others. In other words, if I fail to recognize the humanity and the needs of others, the question becomes not only what will happen to marginalized and discarded people, but also what will happen to me – to my own identity, to my own humanity? (Uelmen 2017: 1410-14).

In his own reflections on what the charism of unity has to offer the church and the world, Pope Francis summarized the dynamic with the catch-phrase, “the spirituality of the we.”

The charism of unity is a providential stimulus and a powerful support for experiencing this evangelical [mysticism] of “the we,” that is, walking together in the history of the men and women of our time as “of one heart and soul” (cf. Acts 4:32), discovering and loving concretely those “members of one another” (cf. Rom 12:5). Jesus prayed to the Father for this: “that they may all be one as you and I are one” (cf. Jn 17:21), and in himself he showed us the

way, up to the complete gift of all in the abyssal emptying of the cross (cf. Mk 15:34; Phil 2:6-8). It is the spirituality of “the we” (2018).

It is very important to note that this “we” is not a uniform agglomeration without identity or a flattening collective of a merely sociological nature. Instead, it is better understood as the result of the concrete practice of the Pauline motto “you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), perhaps best expressed with the more literal translation from Greek: “you are one person in Christ Jesus.” The “we” in this sense ultimately points to the experience of the Trinitarian God in human flesh (see John Paul II 2001: §§16-28).

As Pope Francis explained, this is what saves us from every form of egoism or egotistical self-interest. “It is not only a spiritual fact, but a concrete reality with formidable results – if we live it and if we authentically and courageously affirm its various dimensions – at the social, cultural, political, economic levels . . . Jesus redeemed not only the individual person, but also social relations” (2013a: §178). Taking this fact seriously means “molding a new face of the city of men according to God’s loving plan.” (2018)

It is also helpful to read this against the backdrop of *The Joy of the Gospel*:

Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand. . . . The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways. This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us (2013a: §12).

In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis further opens out how the capacity to give of oneself with a dynamic life of communion is a hallmark of human maturity:

The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity (2015: §240).

This is the dynamic cultural anthropology at the heart of the Economy of Communion, and also at the heart of the pope’s call to reimagine our participation in “the Lord’s work,” including in the various aspects of social, cultural, political and economic development (2013a: §178). To recognize and work to creatively address the needs of others is not so much a matter of reaching beyond my own interests, but the logical consequences of an *ontological claim* about what it means to be human – that is, to acknowledge how my own identity is grounded in my fundamental connection to other human beings and their needs (Uelmen 2017: 1410-11).

Prophetic Economy: Reconciling (Personal) Charity and (Structural) Justice

The cries of the poor and the cries of the earth also urgently call for reflection on large scale projects to address the structures of systemic injustice. In a true reconciliation of opposites, a grounding in and appreciation of *el pueblo fiel* and work to overcome the zero-sum game frameworks for personal commitment and action, in no way devalues thoughtful and critical engagement with economic, financial, legal, and policy *systems*.

In fact, a discussion that limits itself to personal incentives and individual action would still beg the important question of at which level to address economic and social inequality. Do the deepest solutions emerge through an emphasis on freely chosen personal commitments to economic justice; or through adjustments to regulatory schemes that mandate structural change and re-distribution of economic costs and benefits?

Here too, the answer of course is “both.” But in his February 2017 discourse, Pope Francis also warned: the Good Samaritan is “not enough.” Particularly when engaging interdisciplinary projects at the nexus between theological reflection and business models, the Pope encourages EoC participants to pay close attention to the deeper and more structural questions that may permeate the incidents and contexts that lead to accidents, violence, or other forms of injury. The problem with a myopic focus on individual action is that it may obfuscate the occasions when the root of our most difficult problems should also be attributed to structures and systems that foster injustice (see John Paul II 1987: §§36-39).

Further, we also need to pay close attention to how our work is embedded in *social and legal systems* that tend to produce marginalized and discarded people. As Pope Francis explained:

. . . capitalism *continues to produce discarded people* whom it would then like to care for. The principal ethical dilemma of this capitalism is the creation of discarded people, then trying to hide them or make sure they are no longer seen. A serious form of poverty in a civilization is when *it is no longer able to see its poor*, who are first discarded and then hidden (2017).

What might it mean to explore a vision of justice that pushes beyond *individual* attention to those who are discarded? Pope Francis exhorts:

[W]e must work toward changing the rules of the game of the socio-economic system. Imitating the Good Samaritan of the Gospel is not enough. Of course, when an entrepreneur or any person happens upon a victim, he or she is called to take care of the victim and, perhaps like the Good Samaritan, also to enlist the fraternal action of the market (the innkeeper). . . . But it is important to act above all *before* the man comes across the robbers, by battling the frameworks of sin that produce robbers and victims. An entrepreneur who is only a Good Samaritan does half of his duty: he takes care of today’s victims, but does not curtail those of tomorrow (2017).

What kinds of frameworks, or better *paradigms*, could change the rules of the game so that the socioeconomic system no longer produces discarded people? What kind of corrective might help to remedy the problem of no longer being able to even *see* the poor?

Reflections on this topic could of course be encyclopedic. Here we note just three ways in which the Economy of Communion project is poised to contribute to reflection at this level. First, it has helped to spearhead a project entitled “Prophetic Economy.” As Jeffrey Sachs reflected at the first Prophetic Economy gathering in 2018:

We need a worldwide effort to face the ecological and the social exclusion. We are a rich, technologically advanced and scientifically sophisticated world; but the world economy does not produce justice. It does not ensure social inclusion, and it certainly does not protect creation. Therefore we can’t depend on market forces or what economists call the “invisible hand” to protect us, to save us from ourselves. For that, we need a moral commitment; we need a diplomatic framework; we need a common plan for the world.

Recognizing the enormity of the challenges posed by structural injustice and outdated aid policies, the Prophetic Economy project aims to connect and network the people and communities around the world who “believe passionately in human development and sustainability” and who are “working tirelessly to change the rules and demand justice” (EoC 2019: “Prophetic Economy”).

Second, since its inception the Economy of Communion project has valued academic work in all of the disciplines that engage social and economic life, probes the roots of systemic injustice, explores the potential for a paradigm shift, and proposes creative alternatives (EoC 2019: “Study and Research,” “Publications”).

But perhaps one of the greatest challenges in our current climate is generating an imaginative vision of how our work for social and economic justice is connected in a vital way. Activists and academics may have different roles and tasks, but they need each other if we are to address complex systemic problems with both vigor and depth. Similarly, children, teenagers, young adults, and those who have been already engaged in their professions for many years, may have different perspectives on how to solve current problems. But we need this variety of perspectives to generate a fully engaged vision for the future. And so for every form of difference: ethnic, geographic, religious, and so on.

For this work, the charisma of unity can illuminate how every relationship, every human connection, and every form of commitment to the good can be charged with meaning. As Chiara Lubich reflected in 1959:

In this world we are all brothers and sisters and yet we pass each other as if we were strangers. And this happens even among baptized Christians. The Communion of Saints, the Mystical Body exists. But this Body is like a network of darkened tunnels. The power to illuminate them exists; in many individuals there is the light of grace, but Jesus did not want only this when he turned to the Father, calling upon him. He wanted a heaven on earth: the unity of all with God and with one another; the network of tunnels to be illuminated; the presence of Jesus to be in every relationship with others, as well as in the soul of each. This is his final testament, the most precious desire of a God who gave his life for us (2007: 99).

When the darkened tunnels that connect the human family are illuminated, we not only see each other, but also respond to each other's needs as members of a body.

The various dimensions of the Economy of Communion project are one way to cultivate these ways of seeing and being, which in turn can inform in depth reflection on systems and methods to embody structural change.

Viewing Projects to Humanize the Economy through a Non-Ideological Lens

We save the most difficult question for last. As we noted at the outset, we believe that one of the most formidable obstacles to the broader reception of the challenge launched by Pope Francis to develop new economic models lies in currently intense levels of social, political, and ecclesial polarization, including the tendency to interpret his proposals through an ideological lens. As Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, explained, Pope Francis's reference to a social economy "is not to be confused with the socialist economy." He noted: "this is a problem we often find in the United States when we go to present the message of the Holy Father. Many accuse him of being socialist or communist" (Harris). The interpretive debate undoubtedly precedes the pontificate of Pope Francis (Finn: 105-13; Lucas: 124-25; Zamagni). Nonetheless, one might argue that the debates have become especially heated, perhaps also exacerbated by increasingly levels of political and cultural polarization. Thoughtful scholars have been probing the potential for the reception of Pope Francis's challenge to both the right and the left (Cloutier).

Might the Economy of Communion project offer any insight into this challenge, or solace regarding steps toward healing? An analogy to a recent television commercial helps to illustrate the potential. In April 2017, the Heineken beer company launched its "Worlds Apart" advertising campaign. Footage of its social experiment involved ordinary people (not actors) who when they met for the first time were asked to assemble together a piece of furniture and to complete a questionnaire. The assembled result was, of course, a bar, and once they were seated together at the bar they viewed a short film that captured their partner exposing in no uncertain terms a political view that ran counter to their own. At this point they are given a choice: to leave, or to "stay and discuss your differences over a beer." All six choose to stay and converse respectfully about their views (Hunt, Segarra).

We will not venture to guess whether there is no political gap that cannot be bridged over a beer. And as discussed above, the relationships in many Economy of Communion settings is *much* thicker than anonymous strangers coming together for a one-time random and somewhat banal cooperative effort. Nonetheless, just as the shared project of constructing a piece of furniture generates a much greater possibility that otherwise polarized citizens might sit together at the same table, the concrete *project* of the Economy of Communion offers a potential platform for people to come together to build something constructive, notwithstanding their strong ideological differences.

To illustrate: within the Focolare communities in the United States and Canada, some people have been involved with the Economy of Communion project since its inception, in 1991. If one were to attempt a survey of the political leanings of those present at the annual North American EOC conference, even in 2019 it might be difficult to discern who in the group was a Republican and who was a Democrat. Certainly, contrasting ideas about the role

of the state, the role of religion in the public square, and preferred political models for social action and change would come up in conversations. But for the most part, the common commitment to a concrete project in service to the poor and the unemployed or underemployed, together with a shared conviction that gospel values could inform an approach to business life, helped to forge the kinds of deep non-ideological bonds that greatly relativized political affiliations.

To be clear, Focolare communities in the United States and elsewhere have *not* been immune to the political polarization that is currently so intense. And more broadly, those who dedicate themselves to living a spirituality of unity, whether in business projects or other settings, are certainly not immune from the conflicts that emerge from differences of opinion or in perspectives on how proceed with the concrete dimensions of their work together.

In fact, when gathered with the Focolare's Loppiano community near Florence in May 2018, Pope Francis went out of his way to explicitly encouraged community members not to shy away from the hard work involved in facing and working through conflict. Commenting on the account of the Wedding Feast at Cana, he noted the creative tension between Jesus and Mary regarding the appropriate timing to initiate his public ministry. Notwithstanding what could be interpreted as a kind of rebuff or correction ("Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come"), Mary nonetheless acts to prepare the way for the miracle: "His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you'" (John 2:4-5). Pope Francis challenged the community to draw on Mary's example: "Mary speaks and intervenes. . . . Always look to this, this lay woman, Jesus' first disciple, how she reacted in all the conflicting episodes of her son's life. It will really help you" (Francis 2018).

The daily life of any business venture, or any community-based project offers numerous occasions for the reconciliation of opposites. In our current political climate, it can be difficult for everyone, even those who try to live a spirituality of unity, to get traction for a system based on the unity of opposites: energy and commitments seem to gravitate toward the poles. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to reflect further on how the *witness* of a *shared project* might light a candle in the dark.

It is through concrete projects, through the incarnation that we can receive the invitation to be protagonists, and also to appreciate the precious contribution of others, even in the midst of contrasting ideas and conflicts. For this process, the perspective of Pope Francis is especially helpful and encouraging:

Community conflicts are inevitable: in a certain sense they need to happen, if the community is truly living sincere and honest relationships. That's life. It does not make sense to think of living in a community in which there are brothers who are not experiencing difficulties in their lives. Something is missing from communities where there is no conflict. Reality dictates that there are conflicts in all families and all groups of people. And conflict must be faced head on: it should not be ignored. . . . Covering it over just creates a pressure cooker that will eventually explode. A life without conflicts is not life (2013b).

Conclusion

Humanity is at a crossroads, and it is no small feat to discern the path forward. Pope Francis invites us to move into spaces fraught with tension and conflict in order to discover together the new paradigms and paths that could lead to greater justice and a sustainable future for our planet. As the pope himself noted, economy and communion are “two words that contemporary culture keeps separate and often considers opposites.” The Economy of Communion’s efforts to unite these realms over the course of more than twenty-five years now offers to the church and civil society a locus for deeper reflection on the path forward. And while the project may demand, in the words of Pope Francis, “great generosity on our part,” its greatest strength is in the realization that it is not “a heroic individual undertaking” (2013a: §12). Communion – itself a sign of the unity of opposites – is also the life-giving protagonist and source of insight and strength for the journey ahead.

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