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Business, Faith, and the Economy of Communion

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1. For an Economy Based on Communion¹

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Abstract

Here Chiara Lubich, founder of the EoC movement, provides a brief explanation of the origins and key characteristics of the Economy of Communion. Among those characteristics are 1. That we should practice business with the same personal values that animate the rest of our life, and that the economy can be a place for human and spiritual growth; 2. the EoC proposes that we practice business inspired by gratuitousness, solidarity and care for the poor; 3. the poor have a “gift of need” which can be given to others – they are essential members of the EoC project; and 4. every EoC enterprise is part of a greater reality – the worldwide movement.

¹ This speech was originally given by Chiara Lubich at the ceremony when the honorary degree in Economics was conferred on her by Sacred Heart Catholic University (Milano, Italy). It was first published in *Nuova Umanità* 21 (1999/1), 121, pp. 7-18. Used with permission.

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Typical of our movement is the so-called economy of communion exercised in freedom, which is a particular experience of solidarity in economy. As an authentic expression of the spirituality of unity in the sphere of economy, it can be understood in its entirety and complexity only if considered from the spirituality's viewpoint of the human person and social relationships.

It began in Brazil in 1991. The movement, present in that country since 1958, spread to all its states, attracting people of every social category. However, some years ago – because of the rapid growth of the movement (there are approximately 250,000 of us in Brazil) – I realized that we were unable to cover even the most urgent needs of our members, notwithstanding the intense communion of goods. It seemed to me, then, that God was calling our movement to something new.

Although I am not an expert in economic problems, I thought that our people could set up firms and business enterprises so as to engage the capabilities and resources of all, and to produce together in favor of those in need. They would have to be managed by competent persons who would be capable of making them function efficiently and derive profits from them. These profits would be put in common freely. One part would be used for the same goals of the early Christian communities: to help those in need, to give them something to live on until they find work. Another part, to develop structures to form “new people” (as the apostle Paul calls them), that is, people formed and animated by love, suited to what we call the “culture of giving.” Finally, one part would certainly be used for the growth of the firm.

An entrepreneurial sector would have to spring up in our little towns of witness – we have twenty of them throughout the world. They are modern townships with all the expressions of modern life. Thus the presence of business enterprises is also required alongside schools of formation, houses for families, a church, handicraft industries and other activities that have risen up for the maintenance of its inhabitants, besides all of this a real productive industrial park should have arisen. The idea was welcomed enthusiastically not only in Brazil and in the rest of Latin America, but in Europe and other parts of the world. Many new businesses came to life and many existing ones have adhered to the project by modifying their way of operating a business.

Adhering to this project today are some 654 companies and 91 minor productive activities. It involves enterprises operating in different economic sectors, in more than 30 countries: 164 operate in the commercial sector, 189 are industrial businesses and 301 operate in other services.

The experience of the economy of communion, with the specific characteristics it draws from the spirituality, takes its place alongside the numerous individual and collective initiatives that have sought and seek to “give a human face to economy,” as well as the many entrepreneurs and workers, often unknown, who envision and live this economic activity as something more and different from the pure pursuit of material benefit. In fact, as it is in many other ideally motivated economic realities, the adherents of this project – entrepreneurs, managers, employees and others in the work force – are on the front lines in focusing, in all

aspects of their activity, on the needs and aspirations of the person and on the well-being of the common good.

In particular, they seek: to establish loyal and respectful relations animated by a sincere spirit of service and collaboration with clients, suppliers, public administrators and also with competitors; to show appreciation for employees by involving them, to various degrees, in management; to maintain a way of operating the business which is inspired by a culture of legality; to be very attentive to the workplace and respect for nature, also by meeting the expenses of costly investments; to cooperate with other business and social realities in the area, with a look to solidarity towards the international community.

The economy of communion presents other characteristics, which are very significant for us, because they are directly connected to our spirituality's vision of the world. Here are a few:

1. Those involved in the business enterprises of the economy of communion seek to follow, albeit in the forms required by the context of a productive organization, the same style of behavior that they live out in all ambits of life. We are convinced, in fact, that we must imbue every moment of life in society with the values we believe in, therefore also economy, so that it too may become a place for human and spiritual growth.
2. The economy of communion proposes modes of behavior inspired by gratuitousness, solidarity, and care for those in need – attitudes normally considered typical of non-profit organizations – even in businesses which naturally seek a profit. Therefore, the economy of communion does not present itself so much as a new form of enterprise, alternative to those already existing. Rather, it intends to transform from within the usual business structures (whether they are shareholding corporations, cooperatives, or other) by establishing all relations inside and outside the companies in the light of a lifestyle marked by communion. Everything is done in full respect for the authentic values of the business and of the market (those pointed out by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, and in particular, by John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus*).
3. Those who find themselves in economic straits, the recipients of a part of the profits, are not viewed simply as persons who are “assisted” or as “beneficiaries” of the business. Instead, they are essential members of the project, within which they give their needs as a gift to others. They too live the culture of giving. In fact, many of them renounce the help they receive as soon as they recuperate a minimum of economic independence, and not rarely, they share with others the little they have. All this is an expression of the fact that in the economy of communion, although it underlines the culture of giving, the emphasis is not put on the philanthropy of a few, but rather on sharing, where each one gives and receives with equal dignity, in the ambit of a substantially reciprocal relationship.
4. In addition to the support provided by a profound understanding among the promoters of each business, the economy of communion enterprises feel that they are part of a vaster reality. They put in common the profits because they are already living an experience of communion. This is why the business enterprises – as I already mentioned – develop within small (at least for now) “industrial parks” in the area of

the movement's little towns, or, if geographically distant, they are ideally "linked" to them.

Many people ask how these businesses, so attentive to the needs of all the subjects they deal with and of society as a whole, can survive in a market economy. Certainly, the spirit that animates them helps to overcome many of those internal contrasts, which obstruct and in some cases paralyze all human organizations. In addition, their way of operating attracts the trust and benevolence of clients, suppliers, and financiers.

Nonetheless, we should not forget another essential element – providence – which has constantly accompanied the development of the economy of communion during these years. In the economy of communion, we leave room for the intervention of God, also in concrete economic activities. And we experience that after every choice that goes against the current of usual businesses procedures, he gives that hundredfold which Jesus promised: an unexpected income, an unhoped-for opportunity, the offer of a new collaboration, an idea for a new leading product, etc.

This, in brief, is the economy of communion. In proposing it I certainly did not have a theory in mind. Nonetheless, I see that it is drawing the attention of economists, sociologists, philosophers, and scholars of other disciplines, whose interest in this new experience and in the ideas and categories underlying it, go beyond the movement in which it developed historically.

In particular, in the trinitarian vision of interpersonal and social relationships, which is at the basis of the economy of communion, some people glimpse a new key of interpretation which could also enrich the understanding of economic interactions and therefore contribute towards going beyond the individualistic foundation that prevails today in the science of economics.