

THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION

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‘Without recognition,
without inter-subjectivity,
without society there is no humanity.
And without love?’ (T. Todorov)

1. INTRODUCTION

Those who read economic and civil history without seeing the role that charisms play, are telling a partial, and hence, an incorrect history. When charisms are at work within civil dynamics, they bring into play a dimension of action characterised by an extraordinary and rare force. It is a force that theology and Christian thought have called ‘agape’, coining a new word, because the experience of Christians past and present is a new one. Through a charism, agape breaks through into history both within and out of the institutional confines of the church, given the universal nature of Christianity, whose breeze touches and moves peoples of all times and places. To the extent to which persons are bearers of an authentic charism, they are bearers of agape, even if they are unaware of it.¹

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¹ There is a very close relationship between charisms and agape. A charism is a gift of the Spirit for the edification of the common good. It is a term that comes from *charis*, the Greek word for grace, which is also the source of agape.

A few great charisms have had an effect on the economic sphere. St. Benedict and St. Francis are always quoted in this regard; but there have been many hundreds, if not thousands of people, the bearers of charisms, and hence moved by agape, who have given rise to works of charity, assistance, mercy also in the economic sphere. Their contribution to civil and economic history is absolutely undervalued.

Few charisms, on the other hand, have also had an impact on economic thought of their own time. Monasticism, we know, gave rise to the economic lexicon of the commercial revolution in Europe around the first millennium. The Franciscans, in their own way, gave rise to the first real school of economic thought (Ockam, Duns Scoto, Olivi...), which gave rise to the categories to interpret the city state society, and subsequently, renaissance society. Also the charism of unity is not only a product of economic works (amongst which the Economy of Communion), but has also inspired theoretical reflection within economics, in the same way as St. Benedict and St. Francis did in their day.

In these pages I will try to demonstrate that the novelty of the experience of the Economy of Communion (EoC) is essentially a cultural and theoretical novelty; in other words, the novelty of the EoC can be understood on a wider cultural horizon than the dimension of the praxis (businesses, projects to help the poor etc...).

2. AN ECONOMIC PROPOSAL STARTING WITH THE POOR

The EoC is a project that currently involves hundreds (754) of businesses in five continents and has attracted the interest of scholars and economists alike. The project started in 1991 when Chiara Lubich visited the city of Sao Paulo in Brazil. Whoever arrives in that metropolis is confronted with a scenario that powerfully symbolises the potential contradictions within capitalism: a forest of skyscrapers surrounded by a savannah of slums. Chiara was deeply moved by this sight and felt the great suffering of humanity: a humanity that is increasingly able to conquer technology and produce wealth, but has not yet been able to overcome misery. What she saw in Sao Paulo, instead, showed her that the gulf between the rich and poor was growing. Within a few days of that trip to Sao Paulo at the end of May 1991, what has come to be known as the *Economy of Communion* was born: businesses which are managed with a new culture (the 'culture of giving') and put their profits into communion, with the aim of demonstrating a part of humanity 'with no-one in need', and becoming a model for many.

The sharing of profits in *three parts* was the first way in which the EoC became a practical proposal: (1) one part of the profits would be re-invested in the business in order to develop and create new jobs; (2) the second part would be used to create a new culture which would inspire women and men capable of living communion in their lives; (3) and the third part would go directly to the poor so as to reinsert them fully into the dynamic of communion and reciprocity. This three-way sharing of profits is a 'pre-economic' intuition, since it neither represents a new juridical form nor an organisational business model, nor an accounting technique, but rather a vision of the economy and society. This vision points to the principal institution of the market economy – the firm – as an economic phenomenon...but not exclusively so. Besides their growth, *businesses of communion* are also *directly* concerned with culture, need and poverty. For these businesses, profit is regarded as the *means*, rather than the *end* of entrepreneurial activity as the profit is put into communion.²

EoC is about firms. Nevertheless, the EoC is not primarily an organisational formula for a business to be more ethical or socially responsible. The EoC is a project for a more just and fraternal humanism.

The EoC came about from an encounter with favelas or shanty towns. The original intuition of the EoC emerged as a result of the suffering that Chiara experienced when she realised that there were persons who were living in those inhumane conditions. Rather than the need to make businesses more ethical or more human, it was the need to do her part, through the Movement, to build a more just world, where there would be fewer people forced to live in often inhumane conditions. This is why the EoC cannot and should not become a *corporate social responsibility* project. It did not come about to renew businesses, but to renew social relations. The specific novelty of 1991, its *novum*, is elsewhere, as I will now try to explain in the next sections.

At the same time, there is also something that is relevant to business as an institution. EoC thought of the business as an institution as the natural 'instrument' to respond to what is essentially a problem of injustice and the incorrect distribution of goods. Normal logic could have led her to think of other institutions: foundations, NGOs, fundraising activities. In fact, the natural mission of traditional businesses is to create jobs, produce products, goods and services. In the normal course of events, the

² For more information, statistics, data, see www.edc-online.org.

aim of redistributing wealth is not prevalent in business (even if it cannot be totally excluded: there are taxes, but also salaries). Instead, in the EoC the traditional business is invited to go beyond its 'normal' social function or 'vocation'.

3. AN ECONOMY AS AN EXPRESSION OF A CHARISM

The EoC is an expression of a spirituality, of a charism. In the original vision that H. Von Balthasar offers of the Church, which hangs on a number of foundational and co-essential profiles, the EoC is part of the Marian of 'charismatic' profile rather than the 'institutional' profile.³ There are a few characteristics found in many social experiences which come about as a result of charisms.

The *first* characteristic: The experiences that come about as a result of charisms affirm the primacy of life over theory. They are therefore popular experiences, which always come about through praxis, and never as a result of experts or professionals sitting round a table. It is not a case of implementing projects, but carefully listening to life, from which intuitions come about, which are always richer than ideas alone. Therefore, when faced with a mismatch between what is being lived and what should be lived according to a good theory (even the best), the mismatch can never be resolved by simply changing the praxis, since the vital experience in and of itself embodies elements of inescapable truths, which then reveal themselves as essential for the success and authenticity of the project itself. This first dimension is very evident in the EoC. Faced with the spectacle of misery and unequal distribution, Chiara did not exclaim: 'Let's start a study centre to study a new economy'. Her proposal, instead, was an immediate action, based on few intuitions (essentially the sharing of profits in 'three thirds', industrial estates inserted in the small towns of the Movement, and 'we are poor but many'). She left it to life to indicate how to proceed one step at a time. There are many projects to 'fight poverty', which are promoted by institutions, by the State for example. In

³ In order to deepen this aspect, you should look at my book *Il Prezzo della gratuità*, Città Nuova, Rome, 2006, where, in Chapter 1, I indicate the possibility of a charismatic profile also in the civil and economic dynamic, and not only within an ecclesial sphere. You should also consult this short paper for a presentation of the EoC and for the theoretical argument which is not developed in this paper.

the charismatic economy, like the EoC, life comes before the theoretical reflection which always accompanies it, because life is more *dense with truth* than whatever theory (which serves life in as much as it comes from life and is nourished by it).

There is then a *second* typical aspect of charismatic economy experiences. These experiences come about as a response of life to the problems of specific people. Chiara was crossing the city of Sao Paulo and she was struck by the thought that there were people of the Movement, members of her family, in those favelas. The EoC came about for them, it did not come about in an abstract but in a practical way. It is always something vital, alive, rather than a humanitarian project to build a better world. Then, once they come into existence, if they are authentic charismatic projects, they will also demonstrate their universality, but nearly as an unintentional effect, which was not part of the original inspiration.

The *third* characteristic: these charismatic experiences call into question the idea of wealth and of poverty. Here St. Francis is a paradigmatic model. After his conversion he returned from his journey to Spoleto, and straight away threw away the proceeds of his business, since he understood that the true goods are others: *the choice of poverty became his new wealth*. More in general, every time a charism arrives in economic history, it calls into question the concept of 'good'. It says that true goods, 'good things', are not those commonly understood: money, power, success. Goods become poverty, the least, communion, not having but giving. A charism, especially a great charism, turns the ordinary vision of things and goods on its head.

There is a *fourth* characteristic which also summarises the preceding ones: charismatic experiences are gifts of 'different eyes' which make us see beautiful things in problems we face. When a charim is at work, those who are part of it see something different, it is the gift of a new gaze. For example, when Mother Teresa of Calcutta spoke of the poor, she loved to repeat: 'do not call them problems, call them gifts'.

4. GOODS AND POVERTY

Up till now we have spoken about the charismatic economy. As the EoC came about through a charism, it shares all of these characteristics which can be found in all experiences of charismatic economy.

Within this great history of charisms, is there something specific about the charism of unity of Chiara? There is something specific, and it has to

be grasped by looking at the specificity of the *charism of unity* in general.⁴ In this paragraph I will try to outline some characteristics which emerge when the charism of unity is expressed in the spheres of consumption, relationship with goods and therefore with poverty.

The style of consumption which results from the charism of unity is the communion of goods. The typical note of the charism of unity in relation to goods is communion: it does renounce everything in order to point the way to something transcendental 'beyond', but rather, it puts goods in common to point the way to a 'beyond' also in the midst of the community. This is also one of the differences between the spirituality of St. Francis and that of the Focolare (who was also influenced by the Franciscan spirituality). St. Francis points to poverty above all as a way to sainthood, freedom from goods so as to attain the Good with a capital G: God. Chiara proposes the same radical choice in the relationship with goods, but putting them in common with the others in view of unity.

Even in a (hypothetical) world without poverty, the lifestyle of the charism of unity would remain the communion of goods, since in the light of this charism you understand that goods become 'more good' when they are put in common; whereas goods that are not shared are become 'bad'. Goods which are held tightly, jealously guarded, in truth impoverish the one who possesses them since they deprive him of the capacity of gift and reciprocity, which is the true human patrimony which brings happiness (as empirical studies are now bringing abundantly to light). It is for this reason that the communion of goods is at the origin of this characteristic sociality, like its cornerstone. When the Movement started in Trent, it did not come about through giving rise to social assistance structures or prayer groups, but through bringing about a great action of communion of goods amongst five hundred people as a result of living the Word.

⁴ The two cornerstones of the charism of the Focolare Movement, are 'unity' and 'Jesus Forsaken'. Unity, which we could also call 'communion', is the deep vocation of those who participate in this charism, and is also its mission in the church and in the world. Jesus Forsaken is the key to living unity, also when it is absent, to build it where reciprocity is missing, transforming suffering into love, and 'wounds' into 'blessings'. The kind of suffering which the Ideal of unity makes us see, live and transform into love is not so much physical suffering but spiritual suffering. It is the suffering of broken relationships, of lack of unity, of being abandoned. It is therefore a suffering which comes about above all through broken relationships and disunity.

The charism of unity, moreover, makes us understand the forms of misery have a lot to do with *relationships*, and far less to do with merchandise, as is commonly thought. People fall into misery (as individuals but also as communities or peoples) when relationships are broken. This aspect has a lot to do with the EoC. When the profits from the businesses are given as a help for those in need, the first help is the offer of a close relationship and reciprocity. The first cure for poverty is the relationship itself. Before the material help is given, a relationship, communion, proximity is established with the poor person. The true cure starts there: without this 'first' no help is effective from the perspective of communion.

This vision of poverty also gives rise to a typical way of culturally and theoretically understanding misery and deprivation: it always has something to do with wrong or sick relationships. Within the EoC, when you want to attend to the different forms of poverty – lack of goods, culture, education, clothing, healthcare, a home – the first question which is asked is always 'Which relationship is not working in this situation? In this family, in this community, which relationship is wrong or ill and has created this material poverty?' The cure for every form of poverty is first and foremost always a healing of relationships: interpersonal relationships, but also trying to change power relationships, political and institutional relationships and with the natural environment. From the perspective of unity and communion, one looks at poverty (and wealth) starting from relationships, given the specific vocation of the charism of unity. When a family lives in misery, for example, the point of departure is to understand, through entering into a relationship with them, which relationship is not working anymore (whether between husband and wife, parents and children, in the community...). Perhaps, after a first look, it may be understood that that misery has resulted from the communion of goods which is not longer functioning, from an absence of fraternity in the community. In this case, before any material assistance, the most important intervention is to revitalise the communion of goods in the local community and only then to give rise to concrete initiatives to help. This way of working, amongst other things, is in line with the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic Social Doctrine.

This is also the reason why the interventions of the EoC are directed towards persons who are inserted in living communities, otherwise it would not be possible to meet all the characteristics which would enable communion (the aim of the project) to come about.

This is both the limit and the prophecy of the EoC.

CONCLUSION

The EoC is not an experience where there are philanthropists or a great entrepreneur who gives his superfluous to the poor, without questioning his own life and becoming a brother or sister and equal to the 'poor' he or she is helping. When a poor person, with the thousand sacrifices they have made to buy a share,⁵ brings his son to the Industrial Estate and says with pride: 'this Industrial Estate, this new economy, is also mine', one of the greatest and most prophetic innovations of the EoC comes about. For this reason, the EoC businesses are really an economy of communion also when they have no profits to give, but when they are working and producing a culture of fraternity.

Today the economy and the market have a vital need for communion, happiness, feast and Providence: the EoC with remain faithful to its vocation if day by day is increasingly capable of producing these typical 'goods'.

⁵ We always have to remember that Chiara also proposed to poor people in the favelas to buy shares in Spartaco Industrial Estate through monthly subscriptions. And this is the way it was.