

Economy of Communion

A Sociological Inquiry on a Contemporary Charismatic Inspiration in Economic and Social Life

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This article tries to answer the question: Is the initiative of Chiara Lubich, called the Economy of Communion (EoC), an example of a “sudden invention” in the field of the economic activity? EoC is an invention with some charismatic aspects produced by a leader who was active most of her life in the religious sphere. Her initiative brought together two functions of society: the economic and the social, symbolically represented by the figures of the entrepreneur and the poor. The article discusses the issue following Max Weber and his analysis of charismatic leadership, as well as other authors working directly on the relationship between economy and charisma. The “invention” of EoC is linked with the preferential option for the poor of the Latin American Church and the birth of new ecclesial movements. Ultimately this

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article discusses the relevance for the contemporary world of the input EoC gives not only at the level of the economic rationality, but to a “culture of communion.”

The charismatic economy is often left in the shadow as if only institutional dimensions were relevant to understanding economic and social life.”¹ This formulation reminds one of the sociologist Bryan Wilson, who wondered if charismatic experiences were still possible in contemporary society. He concluded that only feeble charisms were available, and only on the periphery rather than in the very heart of the dynamics of society and the sectors of society that matter.² In my own sociological study of the so-called Economy of Communion (EoC), however, I believe that I have found a charismatic economy in the very heart of economic life. EoC, created through the intervention of a contemporary religious leader, aims not at the margins of society but at its very heart.

The EoC is an initiative of Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), founder of the Focolare Movement. In creating the EoC, she asked people who were competent in business and economics to develop new enterprises in order to increase profits, some of which could be shared with the poor. This proposal was not directed at people on the margins of society, but to central actors in the entire economic process: the entrepreneurs. In doing so, Chiara Lubich proposed that the economic world establish a more direct relationship with the social aspect of life. In this way, the EoC would bring together

1. “The Charismatic Principle in Economic and Civil Life: History, Theory and Good Practice” http://www.iu-sophia.org/public/documents/call_for_paper.pdf.

2. Bryan R. Wilson, *The Noble Savages: The Primitive Origins of Charisma and its Contemporary Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 131.

two major areas of human activity, two fundamental functions of our society, namely, the economic and the social. EoC thus aims to mediate in a new way between two symbolic figures: the entrepreneur and the poor. It would seek to link them in a new alliance, a new relationship of practical solidarity.

This being the case, two questions arise: Is this an economic initiative of a charismatic type? How can this possibility be explored following the logic of sociological inquiry? I decided to try to answer these questions by following the sociological approach practiced by Max Weber in his studies on charismatic leadership.³ Because Weber's work on charismatic leadership presupposes the presence of concrete needs and innovative proposals, the question then arises: Do the projects of the EoC constitute answers to certain needs, and do they entail true innovations?

A Charismatic Leader in Contemporary Society

The very idea of a charismatic economy assumes, at least from a Weberian perspective, that it is a result of a charismatic leader. Chiara Lubich launched the EoC during her visit to Brazil in May 1991.⁴ Her life up to that point had clear elements that correspond to Weber's ideal/type of a charismatic leader. Few in the Catholic Church or elsewhere would dispute her status as an eminent religious figure of the twentieth century.⁵ For Weber, a charismatic leader has followers, people who esteem the leader as possessing an exceptional idea or gift and who become "disciples" of the message

3. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), pp. 140–42.

4. The speech that launched the EoC was published in Chiara Lubich, *Leconomia di comunione: Storia e profetia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001), pp. 9–14.

5. See Maria Chiara De Lorenzo, "Hanno detto di Chiara e dei Focolari," in Michele Zanzucchi, ed., *Focolari: La fraternità in movimento* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009), pp. 136–39.

he or she brings. The Focolare Movement that Chiara Lubich originated is today one of the largest in the Catholic world, counting millions of adherents to its spirituality. Its committed members include more than 100,000 adults and young people of every race, nation, and social class. The idea behind this foundation is also original. Its spirituality, called a "spirituality of unity," is not absolutely original since it is based on central texts of the Gospels. Although Lubich cannot be called a pure type of charismatic prophet, neither can what she has inspired be considered a mere expression of current Catholic discourse. In various moments of her life, Lubich has demonstrated a unique charismatic capacity to reinterpret creatively Christian spirituality from the perspective of unity.⁶ No other contemporary movement for unity has awakened such a global following at the grassroots level of society.

Lubich is known most of all for her original perspective on unity based on her understanding of Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross. In this cry, she found the secret for renewing relationships between persons, between persons and God, and between persons and creation itself. Her comprehension of what she called "Jesus forsaken" offers without doubt an original contribution to Christian spirituality.⁷ For sociological purposes, it should be noted

6. For the concept of creative reinterpretation, see: J. Shotter, *Social Accountability and Selfhood* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

7. For an overview of Chiara Lubich's life and thought, see Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (New York: New City Press, 2007). For an exegetical reflection, see Gérard Rossé, *Il grido di Gesù in croce: Una panoramica esegetica e teologica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1984). For a theological approach, see Stefan Tobler, *Jesu gottverlassenheit als heilsereignis in der spiritualität Chiara Lubichs: Ein beitrag zur überwindung der sprachnot in der soteriologie* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), and Florence Gillet, *La scelta di Gesù abbandonato, nella prospettiva teologica di Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009). For a sociological approach, see Bernhard Caillebaut, *Tradition, charisme et prophétie dans le mouvement international des Focolari: Analyse sociologique* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 2010).

that this contribution creates linkages that surpass barriers between people that impede universal brotherhood. Notwithstanding the normal difficulties inherent in every social concretization of an ideal concept, the ideal of unity born in the Catholic Church and incarnate in the lifestyle of the Focolare not only inspires and unites Catholics as well as Catholics and other Christians, it also builds unity with persons of other religions and persons without any religious commitment.

Many people consider Chiara Lubich to be a prophet of unity because of the extensive dialogues she established with many religious personalities and currents. But from a sociological point of view, it is also fascinating to see how she was able to promote bonds of fellowship and build bridges between parts of society that typically oppose one another. A sociological study made over several years has convinced me that, in the Weberian way of speaking, Lubich is a religious leader with recognizable characteristics typical of a prophetic charismatic. This is particularly the case if we look at how her Movement develops a myriad of social projects that aim to create bridges between different social worlds in ways that contribute to a broad culture of fellowship. This fact, in turn, suggests another question: Is the launching of the EoC itself a charismatic moment?

The Social Context

Chiara Lubich launched the EoC project on May 29, 1991, during a trip to Brazil, where the Focolare Movement had been present since 1958. In just over three decades, it has developed rapidly all over this immense country. There were certain expectations concerning possible results of Lubich's first visit in twenty-five years. This was especially true since it may well have been the last for the

founder of the Focolare Movement. Therefore, many hoped she would propose something decisive for the future development of the Focolare in Brazil. In particular, it was hoped that the founder would address the problem of social inequality in the context of an economy that had the potential to become one of the most important of the world.

There is a history behind this hope. When the Focolare arrived in Brazil in the late 1950s, those involved were clearly convinced that in order to spread the gospel, they needed to give priority to the situation of social injustice. But they found that it took all their energies to spread their spirituality, with the hope that one day they would have enough people to address this social goal. They also realized that the church's "preferential option for the poor" did not in itself suggest how they could contribute to the achievement of social justice. At the same time, Brazilian society operated under the political rule of a military regime determined to maintain the social status quo with its deep inequality between rich and poor. In this context, the church in Brazil evolved and eventually embraced the preferential choice in favor of the poor. This was an option with which the Focolare agreed and supported through a number of specific projects around the country. However, their unique contribution toward realizing this choice remained open.

In the 1960s, the Theology of Liberation and the birth of the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs) had enriched the ecclesial panorama and pushed the Brazilian church forward toward a more engaged presence in the public square. This situation brought reprimands against some of the ecclesial movements of European origin that had come to flourish all over Brazil. The critique was that they privileged middle-class people, were not reaching the poor, and therefore did not realize in some way the preferential

option in favor of the poor.⁸ In the Focolare's case, there were in fact a large number of poor persons in the Movement in Brazil. The middle-class members shared in a communion of goods, but it was not enough to meet the needs of the poor within the Movement. So by the time Chiara Lubich visited Brazil in 1991, there was a large consensus that this communion of goods and the social projects they had founded could not solve the social problem of poverty within the Focolare communities, let alone the entire nation. Within this context, it was hoped that during her 1991 visit Lubich would address the problem in a larger and more innovative way.

At the time of her visit to Brazil, Chiara Lubich had reflected on the Berlin Wall being pulled down and the fall of real socialism in Europe. She also reflected on the conclusions of the recent papal encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, written one hundred years after the first papal social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. In the recent encyclical, the pope made clear that any evolution in the economic field had to take into account the freedom of the entrepreneur, that economic creativity demands space for liberty. These reflections were reinforced by her experience of the actual economic dynamics of the city of São Paulo, where she stayed. Although the city was the economic heart of Brazil, Lubich noticed the enormous circle of slums (baraccopoli or favelas) that seemed to her to be like a "crown of thorns" around the heart of the city. In her diary for May 15, 1991, Lubich reaffirmed that poverty constituted one of the biggest and most tragic problems on earth. She prayed to God for a new insight on how to act. A few days later, an idea emerged.

8. For a synthesis of the situation at the time, see José Comblin, "Os 'movimentos' e pastoral latino-americana," *Revista Eclesiastica Brasileira* 170 (1983): 239–67.

The Proposal of an "Economy of Communion in Liberty"

Max Weber had the following conviction about prophets: "An authentic prophet generally proclaims, creates, or brings about new offerings."⁹ He continues his analysis by affirming that the root meaning of "charism" suggests an inspiration for a concrete call to change that the community of believers recognize as original.¹⁰ In the introduction to her formal presentation of the EoC, Chiara Lubich says: "Here, now . . . is born an idea: God asks our Movement in Brazil that counts some two-hundred thousand people . . . to create a communion of goods that engages the Movement as a whole."¹¹

No authority asked Chiara Lubich to propose the EoC. And while Lubich never said that this was more than an idea, to her it seemed to be a call for change that came directly from God. She never specified that it was an "inspiration" and she used the more neutral term "idea." But she clearly considered it something to be accomplished because it was according to God's will. Lubich used language such as this in other similar situations. She never "played" the prophet, even if she realized the gravity of the occasion. But for Weber, the one who offers the idea is not the only important factor in this regard. It is also important that the persons being addressed

9. Weber, p. 141. The original text says: "der genuine Prophet . . . überhaupt verkündet, schafft, fordert neue Gebote."

10. Ibid. The text says: "im ursprünglichen Sinn des Charisma: kraft Offenbarung, orakel, Eingebung oder: Kraft konkretem Gestaltungswillen, der von der Glaubens-, Wehr-, Partei- oder anderer Gemeinschaft um seiner Herkunft willen anerkannt wird."

11. The Economy of Communion is described in an excerpt from an address by Chiara Lubich during the conferral of an honorary doctorate in economics at Sacred Heart Catholic University, Piacenza, Italy, January 29, 1999. (See *Essential Writings*, pp. 274–78)

believe that what is proposed is in line with a charism, part of the broader message already offered by the charismatic figure.

What was then the precise proposal launched by Chiara Lubich? She reasoned that it was not enough to exercise acts of charity, works of mercy, or the “communion of goods” between individual persons. The key people to whom she directed her speech were entrepreneurs capable of managing profitable companies efficiently. The innovation she proposed was that the profits be put in common.¹² She also proposed that the profits be divided into thirds. One part would go to the enterprise itself, one would be given to the poor, and one would be invested in programs that promote education in support of building a “culture of communion.” The actual amount of the profits going to each of the three would depend on needs of the company and those working in it, the needs of the poor, and the potential of the educational programs being proposed.

What was new about all this? Chiara Lubich made no appeal to traditional ways of doing business that owners and managers were used to practicing. She did not give a traditional speech about profit sharing within companies or contributions to charity outside companies. Sociologically speaking, Lubich’s proposal was a “relative, socially-situated innovation.” At the same time, she was speaking from the very heart of Christian tradition. The idea of putting things in common is as old as the first Christian community, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Looking at the innovative ways of adapting this early communion of goods in the history of Christianity, the original text from Acts “is necessarily

always reinterpreted by the mediation of the socio-cultural coordinates of the times, of the place, and of the tradition lived by the group. It is by this particularization, differentiation, and conditioning that the adaptation is in fact innovative.”¹³ It is also true that in her legitimation of the practice of the communion of goods in the Movement, Lubich always called attention to the experience of the first Christians. But she applied the communion of goods to a new field, to companies and enterprises. Here was the real innovation.

It is important to point out here that Lubich’s proposal not only addressed a social problem (the poor being marginalized from the normal labor circuit), but did so not with an answer made in religious terms (charity or a communion of personal goods) but in economic terms that go straight to the heart of the economy. The answer for Lubich consisted in creating new companies that decide from the beginning to share their profits. The answer was an economic one, with the first part of the profits going to the companies themselves to help the business expand and hire new workers. The second part would go to help people in need, giving them the possibility to live a dignified life while looking for work or by offering them work in the business itself. Finally, the third part provided for the cultural support the EoC would need in order to grow.

This third aspect of the proposal may not be obvious. But if a leader is charismatic, he or she is so because people believe in the message, and this is true also for social movements. The possibility for success is not great without a group that supports an initiative.

12. Pino Quartana, “L’economia di comunione nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich,” *Nuova Umanità* 80–81 (1992): 16.

13. Jean Séguéy, *Conflit et utopie: ou réformer l’Eglise* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), p. 129 (my translation).

But once a significant group exists, and here the group supporting the EoC is the whole Focolare Movement, the potential for success is increased. In the case of the Focolare's support for EoC, Lubich understood that it was necessary that the personal and collective lifestyle of this group become a "culture," a consistent pattern of human behavior expressing a commonly held conviction. Realizing that any level of culture requires cultivation, or education in values, Lubich saw the need to cultivate a culture of giving: "I give, therefore I exist" should become one of the popular slogans of this cultural program as a clear alternative to the reigning slogan in the consumer culture: "I buy, therefore I exist."

On the other hand, it is important to note here that Chiara Lubich did not oppose the free market system. Indeed, she saw that a viable solution to the problem of poverty that she so urgently wanted to remediate demanded an economic proposal that produced profits. Her goal was to cultivate successful entrepreneurs in order to achieve the dignity of actors in a new type of economy, and to cultivate a culture of giving that would provide the support such an economy needed. Most social activists look at entrepreneurs with suspicion, as being part of those who exploit rather than as part of those working in favor of the poor.¹⁴ Therefore, the EoC proposal presented a call to change the way people think about business and social justice—thus the need for education.

14. It is necessary to understand precisely what sociologists mean when they speak of social realities. Usually, they seek to analyze and to understand society as a large set. But here, they are using the term more in the sense used when talking about economics and social policy. So the term has a narrower scope and considers the distribution of wealth in the same way that the economy takes care of the production of wealth.

Catholicism and Economic Theory

How can we situate this proposal in the context of the relationship between modern Catholicism and economics? Émile Poulat, a well-known French sociologist of contemporary Catholicism, identifies three kinds of relationships between modern Catholicism and the economy: struggle without rest (traditionalism), upgrading and fighting (progressivism), and accommodation (modernism). As a matter of fact, none of the three approaches account for the way that EoC integrates respect for existing free market economic logic with solidarity-based evolutionary change.

The fundamental question here is: Down through the centuries, how has the church been doing in regard to economics? Poulat synthesizes his own research into the reaction of the church to economic thought in the conviction that it "was always the Achilles heel of the Catholic Church. She [the church] produced social thought, but never possessed realistic economic thought."¹⁵ The result has been that Catholics active in the economic world have lived in ways that have not been guided by church doctrine. They have not been preoccupied with theories presented in specific church social doctrines that do not seem to relate to their life experience. Poulat proposes an explanation considering the period of time from the Middle Ages until now.¹⁶ He considers a triple

15. Émile Poulat, "Pensée chrétienne et vie économique," *Les Cahiers de l'Unité* 16 (1988): 50.

16. Poulat explains, using the situation during medieval times as a starting point: "Within the moral battle that placed the Church in opposition with the commercial sphere, the mutual lack of comprehension obscured a mental transformation that was operating: money didn't have the same scope any more. In other times one lent money to the poor; now one lends money to the rich. We are at a crossroads in ways of acting economically. The moralists didn't catch this transition; they missed the train as it left the station, that in the meantime accelerated at a faster and faster pace. Wealth poses

separation. First is the separation between the social teachings of the Catholic magisterium and the reality of life lived by Christian people. Second is the separation between economics and religion. It was the same as for science. Economics constituted itself out of the church and did not ask anyone in the church for the principles of their own development. Third is the separation between economic and social thought, as if there was something like a division of labor: for the entrepreneurs it was the economy, for the workers it was the social aspect of life. This antinomy positioned the church on the side of the social aspect, and this reinforced the two other separations.¹⁷

There is another significant quotation from Poulat:

Everything started with the long conflict between holy poverty [the Catholic approach, symbolized by St. Francis] and holy enrichment [John Calvin and the bourgeoisie of Geneva], where pastors and theologians thought they were working in their own religious fields. When holiness disappeared, there remained two naked forces face to face. The question for Catholic thought remains how to understand

all kind of problems connected with modern capitalism, from industrial development to the internationalization of the economy. We can't delude ourselves: integral [an opposite to liberal Catholicism, in the sense Poulat uses the term] Catholicism concentrated on the social aspect where it already had some leverage, because the Church couldn't make any real impact on the economic side of life where liberalism reigned sovereign. Here, her doctrines touched upon one of her most severe limitations." Émile Poulat, *Le catholicisme sous observation: Entretiens avec Guy Lafon* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1983), p. 105.

17. Poulat, "Pensée chrétienne et vie économique," p. 54.

what the Church can really do in her own terms for this [purely secular economic] topic.¹⁸

To this end, the church in recent decades has invested in a more systematic thinking on economics, the letter of the Bishops of the United States on the economy in 1983 being the most famous example.¹⁹ However, this recent effort cannot hide the fact that the Catholic world has had serious and enduring problems in thinking about the economy from its own perspective. Therefore, the initiative of the EoC stimulates the Catholic world to foster new ways of interpreting the economy based on this vital initiative from within the economic world itself.

The proposal of Chiara Lubich came from a non-economist, a non-professional who had nothing to do with the economic sector, and who obviously also was a non-entrepreneur. It is even more surprising that she took an approach to economics not really taken in the social teachings of the church, as mentioned above. But she did use the economy as her principal leverage for social change. Certainly this is nothing more than an intuition; it is not a scientifically articulated and validated economic position. One might object that this intuition is more of a mystical type than of an economic type. But one can reply that with the vigor of a prophet, she defines what constitutes the very heart of economic acting. Such economic action, she contends, should ultimately be "love" articulated as concrete "reciprocity" or "communion." Or one could

18. Ibid., p. 55.

19. United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986: http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf.

paraphrase Poulat's "holy sharing" as "solidarity." This definition engages the symbolic figure of the modern economic world, the entrepreneur. In so doing, Lubich wanted to support enterprises in functioning according to the logic of entrepreneurship so as to produce more goods and services. Therefore, it is not surprising that this approach has awakened interest in the academic world, and that she was awarded a doctorate honoris causa in economics at Piacenza in 1999.²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI in his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) refers explicitly at n. 39 to the kind of experiences the EoC brings about.

The Economy of Communion and the Charismatic Practice of Economics

There is another way to illustrate the novelty of the proposal of May 1991. The Weberian approach touches also on the charismatic fulfillment of needs. Jean Séguy, discussing the connection between religious institutes and charismatic economics, affirms that there can be certain elements of charismatic economy in contemporary modernity.²¹ Séguy notes that Weber, in his notion of charismatic economy, distinguishes two possible types:

20. Beginning in 1998, Chiara Lubich asked scholars in economics to direct their studies so that the Economy of Communion "becomes a truly scientific discipline, giving dignity to those called to demonstrate the theory in practice, a true 'vocation' for those involved in it in any capacity" (see *Essential Writings*, p. 285). The serious studies generated in response to this call have led to numerous scientific and academic initiatives and publications. See www.edc-online.org, as well as the worldwide archives of the theses related to the Economy of Communion: www.ecodicom.net.

21. Séguy defined rational economic practice in the sense of the capitalist economy as a rationality of "accumulation, from the investment of capital in the market, of a return on the investment and the profit of modern daily life." For him, the charismatic economy functions with "the gift, the sharing, the ascetic motivations, gratuity, the

Those that correspond to the pure type—the ones that consider the fulfilment of needs with an answer that includes only a charismatic way, outside of all rational economies; and the ones that conform less to the pure type but in certain instances are very near to a pure charismatic economy. The latter is the case with a minimally or relatively administered charismatic economy that introduces a certain degree of daily economic rationalization that does not impede or dominate the whole process. He [Weber] stresses the fact that many religious institutes do not have anything more urgent than to produce a surplus—in part by following an ascetic rationality—in order to escape . . . from accumulation and the need for investment, which means, from the very logic of the capitalistic market.²²

The regular economy of the Focolare Movement is founded partly on the professional labor of the members who live in community, partly on the communion of goods of the whole Movement according to the members' free choices, and partly on Providence. The latter is an important part, estimated a few years ago as half of the Movement's entire economy. Thus the Focolare economy can be said to be at least partially charismatic, with one part that is foreseeable and another part that is always a surprise. The companies that began to adopt the EoC way of conducting business according to the distribution of profits remain enterprises that obey rational economics and thus submit to the logic of capitalistic markets. But at the same time, out of a charismatic logic,

non-daily exceptional." Jean Séguy, "Instituts religieux et économie charismatique," *Social Compass* 39 (1992): 48.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

they allow part of their profits to “escape.” So here we are not talking about the logic of a pure type of charismatic routine, but about a rational economy that is charismaticized only in part.

It is difficult to deny the presence of an innovative aspect to the EoC. We are not in the presence of religious people who administer enterprises of an abbey or of a religious institute; we are looking at laypeople who act as entrepreneurs.²³ Considering the three terms of the expression “Economy of Communion in Liberty” the full title of the EoC project, on the one hand the company is integrated in a free market economy, but on the other hand it receives charismatic inspiration from the Focolare that provides an impulse toward communion. Thus, an enterprise that integrates into the free market system can be managed according to a charismatic logic of relationality, gift, gratuity, and ascetic motivation, together with a heightened acute sense of the exceptional outside the daily routine of modern economic life.

Innovation in the Role of Classical Distribution

The EoC project introduces within the economy a charismatic logic related to distribution. This raises the question whether this charismatic logic is more in line with the authentic logic of human and economic acting than the logic that dominates economics today. An example of this kind of critical questioning can be seen

23. Séguy observes that for religious institutes, internal cohesion is a consequence of putting the profits in common. The firms that practice the EoC undergo an analogous evolution. The operation of distributing the profits is perceived as an ethically and religiously valorizing element. Séguy concludes: “It allows the interested people to be free of the feeling of guilt that eventually emerges because of the obligation to produce capital for purposes that are beyond their will, and so to risk the rupture or the weakening of the solidarity *ad intra*” (ibid., p. 47).

in an observation by the Italian economist Stefano Zamagni, who denounces the paradigm of competition that is invading other spheres of associative life:

If the rules of social life become competitive, the other becomes my adversary, someone with whom I must fight. And that is the paradox: We know we need each other. You cannot be happy on your own. How can one attain happiness if the rules by which human relations are organized tend to see the other as a rival?²⁴

For Zamagni, the EoC reinforces “interpersonal relationships by the concrete demonstration that one can stay within the market and be competitive without undergoing the conditioning that derives from the motivational structure which considers that the only reason to act in the economy is purely for the maximization of profit.”²⁵

But another of Zamagni’s observations leads to another point about the EoC worthy of consideration. The desire of the EoC to produce in order to distribute profits also goes against current economic thinking. As Zamagni says,

Everyone who knows about how the economy functions is aware that at least for the last 150 years the basic idea was this: The market is the place where wealth is produced; and as for what concerns distribution (to counter all kinds of

24. Benedetto Gui, “Intervista a Stefano Zamagni,” *Economia di Comunità* 14 (2000): 10.

25. Ibid.

injustice, inequalities, etc.), that is for the State to think about. The State has to determine redistribution with the help of well-known instruments among which taxes come first. This economic model thereby also provides the logic for a dichotomy between market and State. It seems to me that the EoC project represents a provocation to this model and its logic, because it uses the market itself not only for producing wealth, but also to realize objectives of redistribution . . . of income and wealth.²⁶

In Zamagni's view, the EoC represents a kind of innovation for economic theory that clearly stands in contrast to the founding practices of Western liberal-capitalistic society. Above all, as a consequence it gives a whole piece of the economy the responsibility not only to produce wealth but also to distribute wealth.

The Poor and the Entrepreneur Pericoretically at the Center

Many times, scholars have difficulty forming perspectives of social movements, and, most of all, in reflecting theoretically on a possible role for the middle class in addressing the conditions of the poor. My study of the EoC and its innovative character, as well as notes I took during a trip to Brazil in 1988, some years before the birth of the EoC, suggest how to address this difficulty. Among the people I met there was the well-known theologian Leonardo Boff, one of the most prolific authors of the Theology of Liberation and a highly regarded participant-observer of the life and projects of

26. Stefano Zamagni, "Economia e relazionalità," in Vita Moramarco and Luigino Bruni, *l'economia di comunione: Verso un agire economico a misura di persona* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), p. 57.

the CEBs. At the end of a long conversation at his home in Petropolis, he said that the cause for the relative lack of real impact of the Theology of Liberation and the CEBs on Brazilian society consisted in the fact that they did not engage the middle class. This was a reason that I could accept without difficulty as a sociologist. At that time, I was already aware that a society is more socially balanced when it develops a strong middle class that assures social mobility from the bottom to the top and a good rate of return from its elites. The middle class also assures the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises, which often are a sign of a country's economic health.

I remembered this meeting with Boff when the EoC emerged. Without being a specialist in economic and labor sociology, Chiara Lubich's religious "philosophy" and her evangelical "instinct" counted on the middle class to be important actors in bringing about the EoC. In this regard, she appealed directly to entrepreneurs. She wanted them to use their own talent—economic entrepreneurship—to serve the poor. A careful reading of Lubich's talks at that time reveals that for her the core question was the situation of the poor. They were the center of her attention as she sought to realize the dream of equality in the evangelical sense, where all are sons and daughters of God. It was for this end that the EoC was created. Here we find the very heart of the preferential option for the poor made by the Latin American Church. But Lubich added a surprising charismatic innovation to this option: giving a central place to the entrepreneur, and therefore not exclusively to the poor. She sought to put the dynamism of the entrepreneur at the service of this "cause" in a way that would give him or her a new social and religious dignity and motivation for doing his or her

work.²⁷ Miles N. Hansen has also commented on this point: “The ideological and religious values—in other times underestimated as irrational, suspected, or estimated only negatively relative to economic growth—could in numerous cases be utilized as fundamental motivations for rational economic action.”²⁸

The atypical construction whereby Chiara Lubich put the poor and the entrepreneur both at the center of the EoC project is also significant. This will not surprise those who know about the fundamental way in which Lubich has built bridges, has built reciprocity between diverse people and situations. Lubich’s spirituality itself is built on a Trinitarian experience that seeks unity in diversity. During the early Christian era, the Greek concept of *perichoresis* was used in Trinitarian theology. It signifies that “two realities can exist one within the other, without confusing them and maintaining (and even expressing better in a certain way) their proper identity: united without confusion and distinct without being divided.”²⁹ This term, keeping in mind the obvious distinctions that must be made in this kind of comparison, suggests that an important aspect of the EoC’s search for a more solidarity-oriented economy is the realization of the religious significance of linking at a deep level the two figures, the poor and the entrepreneurs. This relationship

27. It helps them acquire a capital of social prestige. Jean Séguéy, discussing the religious institutes, said this about the theme of social capital: “The religious acquire prestige (in religion as well as in modernity) by practicing a poverty that is partially adapted to the modern daily economy; transferring via ascetic conduct the products of the ordinary capitalist market rationality into another market that has its own logic, the one of the social economy, based on humanitarian and religious motivations.” Séguéy, “Instituts religieux et économie charismatique,” p. 47.

28. Miles N. Hansen, “The Protestant Ethic as a General Precondition for Economic Development,” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 29 (1963): 473.

29. Enrique Cambón, *Trinità, modello sociale* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2009), p. 31.

tends toward the pericoretical. It is important to note that as far back as 1964 in Recife, Chiara Lubich told leaders of the Focolare in the country at that time that the presence of the Movement in Brazil should serve the poor. The common incapacity of the Brazilian society to bridge the social gap between rich and poor revealed at that time not only the lack of concern for the poor in the daily life of the nation, but also suggested a closed mentality of the rich. Lubich saw a need not only to free the poor but also to free the rich, because—in the Trinitarian view that she held—true liberty is found in real social relationships. With charismatic intuition, the founder of the Focolare saw the difficulty that Boff formulated for me so clearly twenty-four years later.

Conclusion

The EoC project innovates in the Weberian ideal type of a charismatic economy by identifying a need and addressing it in an innovative way. The need: more social justice, the opportunity for the poor to find a job and an entry into the social life of Brazil (or elsewhere). The innovative way: help businesses successfully complete their usual scope of economic action so as to build profits in order to be able to distribute more. It is clear that here we are facing a novelty in at least three ways: (1) the engagement of the middle class in an active role; (2) the provision of a distributive role for economic production rather than leaving it only to state agencies; (3) the offering of a charismatic role to the world of free enterprise by integrating religious motivations and actions into a more finely tuned sense of the exceptional social potential of the economic process. The EoC project innovates in this sense by stimulating an ecclesial reflection on economics itself, not just on certain social aspects of economic life. In this innovation, Lubich adds a fourth

pillar to the framework of the Focolare Movement's economy—labor, communion of goods, and Providence. In this way she puts “holy enrichment” at the service of the poor by practicing a new form of “holy poverty.” Lubich brings together the middle class and the poor by bringing together Francis and Calvin.

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