

Why do we need an Economy of Communion?

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Most of you here today have probably come to this conference with a fair degree of curiosity regarding what the day is going to be about. I'm sure that many of you are sitting there with one burning question on your mind: what on God's earth has "economy" to do with "communion"? I have to admit that this is a question that has followed me round ever since I started doing research on the Economy of Communion some ten years ago. I have often found myself on the receiving end of many perplexed looks! I still remember the reaction of some lecturers when I first started my thesis into the topic at Glasgow University. One lecturer saw the title Economy of Communion and quite innocently asked me "So you are going to be doing a study of the price of communion bread and wine?" I realised very soon that Communion is what most people only associate with going to Sunday Mass! Clearly that is not what we are here to talk about today – so if you are here from the association of Wine Merchants or the Bakers Guild, I am sorry to have to disappoint you.

So what are we here to talk about? We are here primarily to examine a specific socio-economic experience that has emerged from within a spiritual movement within the Catholic Church over the past 13 years. The Focolare Movement, whose founder and president, Chiara Lubich is here with us today, is a movement centred on the renewal of Christian values, in particular mutual love and unity, within all spheres of private and public life. In the course of its sixty year history it has given rise to a new current of spirituality, noted for its communitarian dimension. It is a spirituality that has spread far beyond the confines of the Catholic Church, and contributed towards unity between Christians of over 300 churches, as well as a dialogue of life between different religions. In recent years, it has also begun to contribute towards a new school of thought in fields as diverse as theology and economics, art and politics, for which Chiara Lubich has received numerous accolades. This may still sound like a rather dubious topic for a business school to be reflecting on. Yet the powerful appeal of the EOC, both as an idea and practical experience, has generated more than its fair share of curiosity and serious research over the past decade. Hundreds of scholars, including myself, have become fascinated by the questions and possibilities that it raises in addressing some of the most difficult economic problems today.

But why, you may say, do we need to use such Churchy terminology to describe this phenomenon? As I progressed in my research, I began to delve further into the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the EOC, which one could describe both as a practical approach to economic life as well as a new perspective on economic theory which seeks to put the human person, in their multi-dimensional nature at its heart. I went through a number of crises regarding the name of this some what awkwardly translated Italian phrase "economia di comunione". Being amongst the first to have written on the topic, I looked for some terminology that would sit more easily within our cultural vocabulary. The phrase "Economy of Sharing" was proposed as a possible translation. But on closer examination, this too seemed a rather reductive term as sharing can imply a simple exchange of goods. Other proposals included "communitarian economy" – which again, captures something of what the EOC is about, but

that term has also been coined for another kind of economic philosophy and could be confused with the EOC. Another possible term was “solidarity economy” – but yet again, this term could give the impression of some kind of non-profit associations, which is not what the EOC is about. In the end, despite the sense of unease, EOC has stuck. But I have come to see this sense of discomfort more as a challenge and opportunity which offers the possibility of introducing a radically new concept into the vocabulary of economics. It is a concept which, in my view, is long overdue and essential to overcoming some of the chronic problems of injustice we are facing today.

By communion, we are referring to a dimension of human life which is, in effect, totally absent from dominant economic thinking – but does exist within sociological writings. Communion, from a sociological perspective, is defined as “the manifestation of real sociality” – “reciprocal immanence between the self, the others and us finds its apex in communion”. It is a relationship of total self-giving. For those who are rooted in the Christian tradition, communion is much more than this: it is the imprint of the Trinity on the heart of the human person. It is the deepest vocation of every human being.

During the course of this day, I hope you will have many opportunities to discover, through the various theoretical reflections and practical case studies, what the EOC means. In these words of introduction, I would like to go into a bit more depth about the relevance of religious thinking in economic life today.

Nowadays there is a widespread perception today that somehow religion, as a portent of ethical and moral values, can stand apart from the economic choices we make everyday. Historically speaking, this is a very recent phenomenon. Karl Marx and Max Weber, in different ways, recognised the enormous weight of religious doctrine on economic life. Indeed, such topics were at the very heart of their writings. Weber’s Protestant Ethics, though challenged in many respects over the years, still offers a powerful perspective on the rise of capitalism.[\[1\]](#)

Religion, however, through the process of modernity, has been re-defined as a private affair. Its realm of influence should extend no further than the personal. After all, in a pluralistic society in which everyone has embraced freedom and democracy, no one religion can claim the right to dominate public affairs. This is well and good. Gone are the days when merchants had to carry out their affairs outside the city walls because their trade was thought to be less than human. Gone too is the belief that allowing access to credit is tantamount to usury and hence, sinful. The direct control of religious beliefs over economic action has lessened.

Yet the privatisation of religion from economic thinking and action has had other important consequences. Over the past two hundred years, economic advances have revolutionised every aspect of human life. Technology and communications have offered untold possibilities to those who have access to them. Humanity is richer than ever before and has more than what is needed for everyone to live comfortably. Yet, at the start of the 21st century, we find ourselves facing global problems which, in no small part, have been created by the excesses of the economic model that has been allowed to dominate and by the lack of a communitarian perspective therein.

Many of the global problems we are facing today - poverty, environmental destruction, conflict over resources, organised crime, corporate corruption – have their root in an over zealous belief in the power of the market to come up with the best solutions. Yet things are getting worse, not better. It seems to many writing in this field, that at the heart of the matter is a flawed understanding of what market are, how they work, and how human beings influence them. Economic literature around social capital, relational capital and trust has demonstrated time and time again that human beings are far more complex that we ever imagined – and that one ignores this complexity at their peril when it comes to markets.

Yet, opting for a return to state-centred economy and landing the responsibility on governments is by no means the solution. In my current job, my role is to encourage governments to take responsibility – and a lot more can be done there. Yet, the critical questions today are often left unanswered by the policy debates about development. Those debates have a tendency to seek technical solutions to the world's problems, but sometimes miss the underlying question of social justice and ethics which lies at the heart of many of the problems we face today. Reaching solutions to these problems presupposes a sense of responsibility and an ethic of care towards the other – be they near or far. Our modern economic and political system, it seems, precludes such an approach if it threatens to intrude on our own comfort zone.

At the heart of the matter is a vision of the human person underpinning the market – that of rational economic man – which is wholly inadequate both in terms of its explanatory power and as a normative model. Adam Smith, who was the first Professor of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow University, is hailed as the father of the market ideology by many. His infamous assertion about the butcher and the baker is often quoted as the underlying rationale for economic transactions. Yet it does not tell us the whole story. It may have been partially right, but if one pans out from that isolated transaction and situates it in a community, a society, and a history, there is a very different picture. The self-interest described in that passage can only work against a backdrop of other moral values and cultural context.

Adam Smith, in fact, understood this all too well. In his other major work – the Theory of Moral Sentiments – he reveals the moral context in which his Wealth of Nations should be read. The first passage of this more difficult book reveals one striking passage: “That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane.”^[2]

Perhaps Adam Smith was too optimistic in his assertion that such empathy was ‘too obvious’ to require the burden of proof. What he took for granted as the unspoken bedrock of a wealthy society, the capacity to suffer with others, it has been shown, has been profoundly weakened by the over stretching of self-interest as the organising principle for society today. The speed of globalisation and the quest for financial profit has somehow blinded us from this simple reality: without the capacity to put sympathy at the heart of our society and economy, we are all doomed. The force of markets not only has the capacity to create growth and jobs – it also has the capacity to destroy the very values on which such a market is based. .

Recent economics literature – but also a good dose of common sense – tells us that markets

rely not so much on self-interest, but on people who are able to relate to each other and put into practice that quality Adam Smith called 'sympathy.' They depend on social capital – that intricate network social relations - that underpins every society. They depend on a vibrant civil society to build strong institutions. Yet the philosophical underpinning of our free society positively excludes such niceties from the public sphere. Love, understanding, compassion ... are for the private sphere.

This leads us to some very difficult questions that have puzzled economists and philosophers alike for over a hundred years. How does one somehow re-inject that sense of responsibility for others into economic life, whilst retaining the good of what we have?

It challenges fundamental principles at the heart of the economic model we have today, based as it is on a uni-polar understanding of the human person. How is it that we have come to accept self-interest as the universal governing principle for our economies and societies? Is this what it means to be truly human? It seems that in our quest to rid economics of any kind of humanism, we have opted for a de-humanised economy. Yet to challenge that uni-polar vision requires a different vision of who the human person is, where they are going and what it means to be human.

This is where the place of religion comes in. No other body of thinking and teaching arguably tells us so much about what it means to be human. In the words of one well-known economic sociologist:

Yet to attempt to re-connect, let alone reconcile, the two is it is also a profoundly daunting task. Economics has developed in such directions as to make discussion of religion seem an irrelevance, though there is growing interest in the topic in certain circles.^[3] Moreover, the context of a pluralistic society raises the question of whether it is possible to apply a religious ethic at all in a multi-cultural, multi-religious context. In attempting to draw together religion and economics, one runs enormous risks. One only has to think of the religious justifications given to all sorts of economic and political projects. Religious thinking can be used to justify practically anything and abused to suit all ends and slippage into fundamentalist principles can happen much easier than we think. In the words of one economist: "Everyone claims biblical support for his own pet economic ideas. Like the devil, the economist can quote Scripture to prove what he wants to prove."^[4] And we all know where that can lead to.

Yet to abandon the wisdom of religious teachings is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As in other times in history, insights can often come from a spiritual impulse and not from the inside of a particular discipline. It is here that the experience of the Focolare Movement, that has given rise to the Economy of Communion, comes into play.

The EOC emerged in Brazil in 1991, against a backdrop of massive wealth and poverty. For years, the Focolare Movement, which numbers around 500,000 in Brazil, had been working through social service projects to eliminate poverty in the country. During a visit there, Chiara Lubich noted the work of the Movement, but recognised that things would not change until the system that created such wealth and poverty was transformed. It was then that she launched the idea of an EOC: an economy based on the principles of entrepreneurship, but also

embracing a communitarian spirituality in all its dimensions. The project took off, and through it over 800 businesses throughout the world have adopted this vision in their day to day running. There are now four business parks in Brazil, Argentina, Italy and the Philippines, where the project is implemented. Part of the project involves a redistribution of profits – as a concrete expression of communion with those who are in need. But it is much more than a simple transaction. The aim of the project is the total transformation of the business into a place of communion: a community of persons.

In conclusion, addressing the problem of injustice today requires a radical rethink of the role of business. Such a rethink means redefining business and its place in society. A lot of thinking to this end is taking place – amongst those advocating Corporate Social Responsibility, and more will be said about this later today. A radical rethink, however, requires more than a gloss of social concern. The principle need today within the economy, as in society, is to recover our humanity – not as producers and consumers – but as persons in relationship with each other, with the capacity to feel the sorrow of the others, no matter near or far, and act on it. It is to set the market within a wider framework that respects the person – each person – in their entirety.

Whilst the terminology of this proposal may sound quite strange at first sight – more suited to the pews than a business school – I hope that today you will discover that it is not that strange when it comes down to it.

[1] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*

[2] Smith, A *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Liberty Fund Edition p.9

[3] See the recent special issue of *Markets and Morality* dedicated to “Making Christianity relevant to economic scholarship” 2004, Vol.6, 2

[4] Herman Daly, *Beyond Growth*