

Called to give and receive

Catholic social teaching and the Economy of Communion



Michael Naughton with Amy Uelmen at a recent EoC conference

BY AMY UELMEN

Last summer, many noticed that Pope Benedict’s letter on economic and social structures, *Caritas in Veritate*, used the buzzword “economy of communion” to describe the “broad intermediate area” of for-profit firms consciously working for the common good. Many connected the dots to the Focolare’s network of businesses, in which profit serves as “a means for achieving human and social ends.”

Dr. Michael Naughton, a professor of theology and business management at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, is renowned for his work at the intersection of Catholic social teaching and business ethics. We asked him to help us take stock of the Economy of Communion in Freedom project and whether it furthers the ongoing dialogue on economic life and culture.

Q: In today’s economic climate, many business projects now frequently refer to “corporate social responsibility” and other positive human values. What do you see as the similarities and difference between this trend and a project like the Economy of Communion?

A: I think we have much to learn from the language of “corporate social responsibility” and other ways of talking about values in business. But a danger is that it can begin to look like a bouquet of cut flowers—it appears very nice, but may not last long, because it is not planted in rich soil. A similar concern was expressed by Vaclav Havel concerning human rights. While he was heartened by the increasing attention to human rights, he was concerned that politicians at international conferences “may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from respect for the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence.” Once ideas, whether about corporate social responsibility, human rights, business ethics, philanthropy, or social entrepreneurship are severed from transcendent roots, they are prone to a mechanical repetition, which over time, empties itself of its meaning and importance.

A tree of a certain size needs deeper roots. This is where Focolare comes in—it is able to give economic activity deep roots because it is grounded in a culture that has this deep understanding of the human person as one who both gives and receives. Focolare brings this contribution precisely at the time when the roots of culture—whether in education, family life or the Church—have been weakened. People are working more and consuming more, but because they have been severed from their cultural roots, they have lost a sense of the meaning of it all, and they sense that their life is divided. They may still go to church, but they cannot always draw out the meaning. In school, the children focus on multiple activities and

all kinds of exterior achievements, but they struggle to find a sense of who they are, as people who give and receive. What is so exciting about the Economy of Communion and the Focolare, as well as the work of the other movements, is that they are able to help people make these kinds of cultural connections between who we are and what we do.

Q: Can you explain more about this connection between economic life and culture?

A: The teachings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict have illuminated this in a very helpful way. What happens when economic life is embedded in culture? First, it helps us to understand that economic life is not the whole of life. Think about the practice of not working on the Sabbath—that is a cultural practice that sets a limit on economic life by reminding us that production and consumption do not own us. Second, culture also helps us find meaning in economic life. The Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, says: we cannot find ourselves except through “the sincere gift of ourselves.” It is culture that helps us recognize both how we are gifted, that we are called to give, and that we can find meaning in this dynamic of giving.

Q: What do you see as the main challenge for the Economy of Communion at this stage in the project?

A: EoC is a relatively new movement. Its impulses and inspirations are right, but it is still learning how to find the language to express the ideas. The practitioners are thoughtful, but they also have pressing issues to deal with. For example, in the midst of the economic crisis, when 50% of your income disappears, you need to work on that problem. How does one practice the economy of communion in such an environment? This is where those working in the academic world can help, not so much in giving an answer, but researching and sharing patterns of how the different businesses are living the principles, to clarify what the practices are, and to think through how to communicate these ideas. It is important to find a language that others can understand, otherwise there is a risk of becoming something closed in on itself. We need to make what we have experienced in the Economy of Communion accessible to the world, so that others can also participate in it.

Q: Many EoC business owners are working within a religious framework,

living the Gospel-based spirituality of unity and trusting in God’s providential love. Do you think that will make it harder to find a language that everyone can understand?

A: In the academic world, trends such as post-modernism, pluralism and the ideology of tolerance, tend to restrain people from speaking from what I will call a “religious center.” I think one of the most important questions for our time is to find models for conversation that let people speak from their authentic center—religious or not—in a way that does not block further conversation but instead invites others to do the same.

Q: Are there models for the work of finding this kind of language?

A: The Catholic social tradition is a great resource. It is theologically grounded but it also aims to be accessible to those not within the Catholic tradition. For example, I remember a conversation with a CEO with whom I had shared some of the work I had done on Catholic social thought and business principles. He was from a Protestant Christian background, and had actually grown up in an anti-Catholic environment. He said: “You know, I feel that these popes are my spiritual grandfathers.” From within his own tradition he had intuited that his business practices were helping him align his work with God’s plan, but Catholic social thought helped him to see in a more direct way that his work was part of an even longer tradition.

Q: Do you think the EoC has something unique to offer to other for-profit businesses that hope to serve the common good?

A: There are a lot of good companies out there, but most are not linked with a community that is helping them see the big picture of what they are doing. In a difficult moment, they might sell the business, because they did not know what a precious gift they had. Or they might start out with new ideas, but eventually move to how other businesses are operating. Because the EoC is part of a larger community, it sees itself as a movement and not simply an episodic event that will end once the entrepreneur sells the company. It seems to me that Benedict XVI mentioned the “economy of communion” in *Caritas in Veritate* precisely because he recognized the unique character of what such businesses can model in a rather precarious future.

Amy Uelmen is the director of the Institute on Religion, Law and Lawyer’s Work at Fordham University School of Law in New York

The Economy of Communion is

an innovative economic proposal based on a culture of giving. It was founded in 1991. Among the 700-plus businesses worldwide now following its guidelines are:



Bangko Kabayan, Philippines



Pensione Mondo Unito (Bed & Breakfast) Rome



Enertech Air Conditioning, Ischia, Italy



L'Arcobaleno Bookstore, Incisa Valdarno, Italy



Prodiel Pharmaceuticals, Brazil