Introduction

Andrew Gustafson, Creighton University
Celeste Harvey, College of St. Mary

This is a series of essays written by scholars engaging with the Economy of Communion (EoC) movement, the majority of which were presented at Creighton University at the Business, Faith and Common Good annual symposium in the Fall of 2018, sponsored by the Business, Faith and Common Good Institute at Creighton’s Heider College of Business. These scholars have previously published on topics related to business, faith, and the common good, but here they bring their own expertise and interests to bear on how those topics relate to the Economy of Communion. The Economy of Communion has always been an entrepreneur-driven group with a very practical vision and purpose. But insofar as it is rooted in a deep spirituality and informed by Catholic thought, there are many different aspects to consider from an academic perspective, which can be helpful. As one of the entrepreneurs said at the symposium which prompted this publication: “Listening to these thinkers explain the Economy of Communion has really helped me realize why I practice business the way I do. It has enriched my vision for my business.”
In bringing these essays to print through the *Journal of Religion & Society* our hope is that this collection will enhance the richness of the EoC movement, and help inspire other academics to investigate the Economy of Communion’s principles and business practices. First, we hope it will help spread the EoC way of thinking about business in general, but we also hope it will help the business leaders and entrepreneurs associated with EoC as well as like-minded entrepreneurs outside the EoC to think about the themes central to Catholic social teaching which are also central to uniting faith and business. In addition, we hope that by being easily accessible to students and faculty, this collection will prove a useful resource for the classroom, helping the students who are future business leaders to catch a new vision for business, while suggesting to faculty possible connection points with current academic scholarship and their own research.

**What is the Economy of Communion?**

*Spiritual Origins of EoC in the Focolare*

It is common to consider the purpose and values of business activities in isolation from the rest of one’s life. This common view frequently presents an isolated purpose of business, such as Milton Friedman’s view that the purpose of business is profit. This view is also present in the tendency to think that business conduct requires rules different from those which govern the rest of human behavior (e.g., Albert Carr). This view assumes a bifurcation between the business realm and the rest of life. In contrast to this, in the principles and practices of the Economy of Communion we find a vision of the purpose of business set within a wider theory of life. The Economy of Communion was founded as an entrepreneurial movement by the Focolare (pronounced, fo-kó-la-rec), a religious movement within the Catholic Church. The Focolare takes its name from the Italian word meaning “hearth.” The hearth is the symbolic heart of the home, a place of familial intimacy, love, and security, a place of togetherness and warmth. The Focolare’s ideal is a world where all people can join together around a common hearth in peace and unity, and in universal brotherhood, as if a family.

The Focolare trace their origins to the summer of 1943, when Italy was under Nazi occupation and the Northern Italian city of Trent was a target of sustained bombing by the Allied Forces. In the midst of widespread suffering, a young woman began to see God “present everywhere with his love” (Lubich; quoted in Gold: 65). Inspired by her belief in God’s abiding love and presence in the midst of this suffering, she and some of her close friends collected whatever they could spare and began sharing with their neighbors and anyone they discovered with dire needs (Gold: 65). The example they set inspired others and soon they were not only pooling what they had personally in excess, but also taking donations from many others who wanted to do the same. In this way Chiara Lubich found herself the leader of a movement. Focolare has steadily grown and expanded around the globe with over 2 million members worldwide and with significant concentrations of Focolare in Italy, Brazil, Argentina, and the Philippines.

There are many initiatives and projects of the Focolare – the Economy of Communion being just one – but all of them “share one principle aim and objective: promoting greater unity within the human family at all levels” and overcoming social divisions based on race or ethnicity or tribe or politics, or wealth and class, or sex or age or religion (Gold: 40).
Throughout the life of the movement, an especially important focus has been overcoming the kind of social barriers that arise from material inequality between different groups, where some enjoy material abundance and have more than they need while others lack basic necessities. Recalling the founding experience of the movement, those involved in the community have a regular practice of making a personal inventory of their needs and their belongings and giving away whatever they now regard as unnecessary, so that others who are in need might make use of them (Gold: 74). In this way, the Focolare practice the “communion of goods” with the goal that, as with the first Christian community written about in the Acts of the Apostles, there will be no one in need among them (Acts 2:45; Lubich in Gold: 70). The Focolare live for exceptional and demanding ideals, but in Lubich’s view it is the only way to find true fulfillment and happiness. Speaking of the “culture of giving” that the Focolare seek to realize, Lubich says:

Human beings, made in the image of God, who is Love, find their fulfillment in loving, in giving. This is a need which is at the center of their being, whether believer or not (Lubich, cited in Gold: 65).

There is a somewhat unique attitude towards need once this mentality is adopted.

Within the Focolare, the person in need is accorded a high position. . . Need is not something inherently negative, something of which to be ashamed, but rather a situation that allows sharing to be put into practice among the community. Offering a need to the community is therefore a positive action; people are encouraged to “offer” their need in order to give others the opportunity to help. This in turn empowers the community, creating greater solidarity among the members. The act of receiving is therefore transformed into an act of giving (Gold: 76).

This desire to create solidarity between people and overcome the divisions that so easily separate different groups, especially divisions based on material inequality – from which a sense of inadequacy on the part of the poor and superiority on the part of rich so easily emerge, causing divisions and resentments between people – forms the backdrop of the creation and development of the Economy of Communion.

The Beginning of the Economy of Communion

The beginnings of the Economy of Communion can be traced to Brazil. In 1991 while on a trip to Sao Paulo, in order to visit the Focolare community there, Lubich was particularly troubled by the stark contrast of symbols of wealth and poverty: the skyscrapers, climbing to the sky and gleaming in the sun and, not far from these, the favelas, spread out far and wide with their ramshackle dwellings. There were many Focolare living in the favelas without the basic necessities of life. The Focolare reported that they regularly did what they could to help their neighbors in need, but the needs were never-ending, and so many people were so very poor. To Lubich it was becoming clear that more than sharing was needed. They needed a way to generate funds for sharing, and the poor themselves needed employment and a path out of poverty. In this way, the idea of starting businesses as a way of providing employment and generating profits that could, in turn, be shared with those in need was born (Gallagher and
The initial goal was to generate enough money to provide for the basic needs of the poor within the Focolare. Upon its launch in Brazil in 1991 the EoC had one principal aim: to create businesses that would produce profits to share in common. The documentation relating to the launch of the project comes back to this point – the EoC is about making money to distribute to the poor and for the promotion of a culture of giving (Gold 2010: 117).

As Lubich put it, the culture of giving needed to become productive. Thus a vision emerged for using the potential inherent in the for-profit business model to provide for basic human needs through the sharing out of profits generated in the business. Many people came forward with ideas for new businesses. Others offered their savings to provide the capital needed to get these initiatives started and a number of established businesses joined the effort. Begun in Brazil, the invitation to join the movement rather quickly spread the initiative to many countries around the world, and new businesses were founded and established businesses joined (Gold: 87). In developing this model, the EoC recognized three legitimate purposes for profit: (1) direct assistance to the poor, (2) promotion of a culture of giving, and (3) re-investment in the business.

While the goal of producing profits for the purpose of sharing was a principle driver in the creation of the EoC, and the three-part division of profits is certainly distinctive, it has become apparent over time that the spiritual values of fraternity, gratuity, and reciprocity which originally motivated the creation of the Economy of Communion has far-reaching implications for the daily operations of business and economic activity more generally.

The Scope and Mission of the Economy of Communion Today

In 2017 Pope Francis spoke to an invited audience of EoC members at the Vatican. At that time he said of the EoC,

*Economy and communion.* These are two words that contemporary culture keeps separate and often considers opposites. Two words that you have instead joined, accepting the invitation that Chiara Lubich offered you 25 years ago in Brazil, when, in the face of the scandal of inequality in the city of São Paulo, she asked entrepreneurs to become *agents of communion.* She invited you to be creative, skillful, but not only this. You see the entrepreneur as an agent of communion.

Business entrepreneurs who see themselves as *agents of communion* believe they have been called to business for a purpose – as a vocation – to help the poor, to benefit the common good, and to use business to bring about improvement in people’s lives and a transformation of society for the better. In the *Vocation of the Business Leader* it describes the challenge given to business leaders to enter into communion with others: “The Church calls upon business leaders to receive – humbly acknowledging what God has done for them – and to give – entering into communion with others to make the world a better place” (Dicastery: 3). The act of accepting what we have as a gift (gratuity) is what enables the entrepreneur to then reciprocate by practicing business in light of that grace (reciprocity) (Bruni 2017). In the words of Bruni and Hejj:
In the EoC, entrepreneurs are inspired by principles rooted in a culture different than what prevails in conventional practice and theory of economics. We can define this “culture” as a “culture of giving,” which is the antithesis of a “culture of having” (378).

While typically the economics of business lead us to a vision of acquiring and having (profit) through business, the EoC vision is one of intentionally giving to others through business activity (for example, giving grace, communion, dignity, and freedom through empowerment).

The practical results of this mentality are many. Teresa Ganzon has said,

Aside from keeping man at the center of the enterprise, fostering genuine relationships among all stakeholders, compliance with ethical practices (not just legal because even legal practices can be unethical), other guidelines for EoC firms are respect for environment, conservation of resources and energy, continuous training and constant communications (quoted in Ferruccil).

Others, like Leo Andringa find the EoC to be a prophetic voice putting forward an alternative to the kind of business mindset which led to the 2008 financial crisis. For example:

Many studies in the economic field confirm that, with the growth of wealth, happiness has diminished greatly – above all in rich countries. We are all experiencing that a financial system based only on profit fell without an enemy. It was an implosion. It is the conviction of many that this type of crisis developed because society and the market lost their ethical reference and the authentic sense of their existence for the common good. . . . The Economy of Communion . . . shows a way that is sustainable for businesses and it can give a contribution to correct the unjust and wrong distribution of goods and give back meaning to economic practice and culture (Andringa).

In this vision, business itself helps “correct the unjust and wrong distribution of goods” rather than relying on government welfare-distribution policies. And additionally, rather than settling for the quite thin purpose of simply “making as much money as possible” and the consequent commodification of culture which typically ensues, EoC aims to “give back meaning to economic practice and culture” seeing our business ventures as meaning-producing activities which enhance the state of human beings and improve the common good.

When Pope Francis addressed the EoC at the Vatican, he similarly challenged the EoC to be “agents of communion” and to resist the currently dominant economic logic. He said,

But you can share more profits in order to combat idolatry, change the structures in order to prevent the creation of victims and discarded people, give more of your leaven so as to leaven the bread of many. May the ‘no’ to an economy that kills become a ‘yes’ to an economy that lets live, because it shares, includes the poor, uses profits to create communion (Francis 2017).

Stefano Zamagni describes the EoC with three words: generativity, reciprocity, and gratuity. Generativity is “the capacity to generate new forms of doing business, new modes of organizing the productive process, new ways of realizing the specific role of entrepreneurship” (46). EoC has an alternative view of business which does not see entrepreneurship primarily
as a pursuit of profit, but rather, as a pursuit using the practice of business to contribute to the common good, especially by providing employment to the poor. Chiara Lubich initiated the EoC movement in Brazil after seeing so much poverty even among members of the Focolare. Charity was not enough, rather, the vision of EoC was to create profitable businesses which would be able to employ many of these poor which in turn gives them dignity, freedom and sociality in relationship to others as they take a place in society through productive and contributive work. Entrepreneurship in this EoC mode is not merely a seeking for profit, rather, EoC entrepreneurship has a vision of transforming lives and society for the better by bringing people into community.

By reciprocity Zamagni means not merely an exchange of equivalents, but rather,

According to the EoC perspective, the firm is visualized as a community, not as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market according to the conveniences of the moment. A community to function on présupposés that its members practice the principle of reciprocity (46).

This model of the relationship between company and community is different from what we frequently see today. Frequently, a company may be bought or acquired, and the local office is shut down in the acquisition, and the local workers are simply laid off or asked to uproot and relocate. The reciprocal model takes more seriously the relational aspect between the company and the community, and the company and the workers and customers. In fact, the relational aspects are the central part of the company. Far from a transactional this-for-that approach, this view of reciprocity sees business as a communal practice where everyone is committed to the good of the whole, and each is willing to sacrifice and give to the other. This is not a guarded relationship, but a free relationship of real trust which risks my well-being in the hands of others without caveat. When reciprocity is the principle of economic behavior, “transfers cannot be dissociated from personal relationships” because “the objects of exchange, are not detached from the subjects who create them, with the result that the exchange that takes place within the market ceases to be anonymous and impersonal” (Zamagni: 50). This is why the statement “it’s nothing personal, it’s just a business decision” is so antithetical to an EoC way of thinking about business and life.

Finally, “The ultimate challenge that EoC invites us to take up is to strive to bring the principle of gratuitousness back into the public sphere” (Zamagni: 52). For Zagman, gratuitousness is not merely giving or getting something for free, but “the content of gift as gratuitousness is the specific interpersonal relation that goes to be established between the donor and the donee” (Zamagni: 46). When one gives a gift, or receives a gift, a relationship can be formed on this. Of course in business there are contractual expectations. This is a matter of justice. But in business at times a company exceeds the expected contract, or an employee goes above and beyond what their job requires. This is the sort of gratuity which leads to a sense of loving obligation to the other. “Gratuitous goods on the other hand – such as relational goods – create an obligation that is based on the special ties that bind us to one another” (Zamagni: 53). Ethics deals in the realm of justice. Gratuitousness is beyond justice: “It has more to do with the supra-ethical sphere of human action; its logic is that of superabundance” (Zamagni: 53) rather than mere equivalence (this for that) which is the domain of justice and ethics.
In a spirit of gratuitousness, EoC was begun as a way to especially help the poor and to bring about communion through business, using private enterprise to develop businesses which could not only provide a living for people but which could provide dignity, community, and even communion with one another and God. This is a high calling for business – much more than the simple goal to make money.

Situating EoC in the Political-Economic Landscape

EoC certainly thinks that business should serve the common good. But so do some other forms of free market capitalism and alternatively, anti-capitalist socialist proposals. It is useful to consider EoC in light of other forms of economic thinking, particularly unfettered capitalism and anti-capitalistic socialism. Bruni sketches the variety of ways in which business can bring about the common good, and the place of business in doing so, situating EoC between free market capitalism and socialism (2012: 39). Bruni first describes the capitalist approach, which sees the company as inherently social, insofar as it respects laws and pays taxes and so unintentionally produces the common good as the invisible hand of the market propels it forward. As people seek their own interest prudently and responsibly, they contribute to the economy and so benefit all of society. Bruni says,

The common good as considered by economics today, then, is essentially an unintended result of the actions of individuals; as has been indicated, the purpose of a person who makes a contract to effect an exchange is neither the common good nor the good of the other, but that individual’s own good or self-interest (2012: 54).

We get to the common good not by intentionally considering the good of the whole, but by simply considering our own good, and the market forces help things to work out for the collective good. So this first approach to the common good is somewhat paradoxically rooted in self-interest. Another important characteristic of the “capitalist” approach is that it attempts to prevent the human interaction and concern which would lead to wounding: “Basically, economic personnel theory and agency theory are worthy attempts to foresee, mitigate and minimize the ‘wounds’ that face-to-face encounters cause” (Bruni 2012: 35). Since Coase’s 1937 “Theory of the Firm,” Bruni claims, contracts (which are typically of an exchange between equals) have been strangely mixed with the hierarchical notion of the manager-agent relationship, so that this market system leads to an oxymoronic hierarchical contract situation, which is not a contract between equals, but a contract between a superior and subordinate (2012: 32).

In contrast to what Bruni calls the “capitalist approach” (or what might better be called an individualistic approach), there are two cooperative traditions. First there is the French social economy tradition (i.e., socialism). Advocates such as Luis Blanc’s anti-market and anti-capitalist thought “can be summarized in the motto ‘competition is the disease; association is the cure.’” In Blanc’s view, the market is “simply uncivilized and dehumanizing, because – despite the apparent freedom and apparent equality – it conceals a lack of freedom and relational inequality” (Bruni 2012: 35-36). The French social economy tradition sees business as inherently anti-social as it is oriented around the interests of one individual or a small group of individuals, who then make their money by establishing unfair contracts and relationships with employees, suppliers, and other businesspeople. Merchants are civil only if they work in
informal or local business because most businesses are concerned only with the interest of the owner or small group of owners, not society. No corporation can be civil because no corporation can be responsible – on this point Luis Blanc agrees with Milton Friedman, who argues that companies have no social responsibility because only humans can be held responsible.

A third position (the second type of cooperative tradition) is what Bruni refers to as a civil economy, which depends on private enterprise working within the free market economy (not socialism) but by which the practice of business itself helps society in intentional and humane ways, not merely the unintentional benefits of taxes in the first model, and not relying primarily on the government intervening with a welfare state in the second model. This fits the EoC model. The French social economy advocates find this civil economy position absurd, since in their minds it involves the paradoxical view that an inherently anti-social entity (the company or corporation) should be responsible to society – not unlike saying that sociopaths should always practice altruism. Yet Bruni claims that the famous Italian economist Antonio Genovesi and even John Stuart Mill are in the civil economy cooperative tradition. This civil economy cooperative tradition did not see cooperation and the market in tension, like the French thinkers. Rather, they saw that the market and company could be reformed through cooperation, synthesizing the capitalists and workers together (such as through worker-owner movements, among other alternatives) (Bruni 2012: 37). On this view, which Bruni refers to as the “civil economy,” the marketplace is a self-interested arena and the market forces help direct our activities to remain civil, for the sake of future market activity: “If in fact the market is seen as a place in which to practice the civil virtues, then there is no need to socialize it at a later time, because it is so from the outset” (2012: 44). Bruni sees the EoC clearly in this third tradition, saying,

Economy of Communion, although socially focused, is open to the market; in this sense it is not heir to the French-inspired radical tradition … but precisely to this Millian and Italian cooperative tradition. (2012: 38)

This, we think, is a very useful way to conceive of the Economy of Communion, and to understand the method and values which direct those of us who attempt to practice business in the EoC way. The EoC businesses are in many cases designed for the sake of employing the poor and thus providing them a means to dignified work which is more respectful to their humanity than keeping them in an underprivileged position through our charity which assists with their living but does not substantially improve their condition. There is certainly a concern for cooperative work and subsidiarity – the notion that every person should be encouraged to exercise as much of their own autonomy as possible – which pushes decision-making to the proper level of those most affected (Naughton et al.). There is a reason why the movement is often called “The Economy of Communion in Freedom” and that is because this is far from some sort of socialist or communist vision (although that mistaken identity has been given to the group, simply due to the use of the unusual word “communion” in the name).

So the EoC model is this: within the free market, without centralized government planning but rather by the wits and wills of entrepreneurs pursuing the common good alongside profit in this market system, poor are helped, community is established, humanity is enhanced and redeemed, and the vision of Christ that we should love one another becomes a
central driving force in the very way we think about business activity and practice. This is a vision of business that inspires us and helps us to live integrated lives.

The Essays and Contributors of this Issue

A diverse group of authors has contributed to this collection, some of whom have a longstanding relationship with the Economy of Communion, and others who have become more familiar with it during the course of this project. All of the authors here have given serious thought and consideration, and in many cases written books and essays on issues concerning faith and business and/or Catholic social thought and the economy. The topics vary, but in all cases the author has brought their own expertise to bear on the EoC. The result is that we have expanded the scope of EoC thought and research and hopefully provided some new avenues and opportunities of research for the future.

John Gallagher, co-author of *Structure of Grace*, one of the definitive books on Economy of Communion in the U.S., contributes “The Economy of Communion as an Exercise of Prophetic Imagination.” Drawing on the concept of the prophetic imagination, as developed by Walter Brueggemann, Gallagher makes the case that the Economy of Communion offers a prophetic vision of business and he highlights the challenges of this calling to practice business in an alternative way.

Jesus Moran and Amy Uelmen live and breathe the EoC life and have written extensively on the Focolare, Pope Francis, and the EoC. Their contribution, “Pope Francis and the Economy of Communion,” illuminates the ways in which the vision and values of Pope Francis parallel those of the Economy of Communion.

Greg Beabout who has written on Catholic social thought, business ethics, and economics provides “Ownership and Business Succession: Considerations from Catholic Social Teaching and the Economy of Communion,” which raises very important and significant issues about how business owners who have a vision for their company to serve the common good can sustain that vision and purpose even as they retire and transfer ownership of their company.

David Cloutier who has written extensively on consumerism and the vice of luxury provides his essay “Simplicity of Lifestyle as a Goal of Business: Practicing the Economy of Communion as a Challenge to Consumer Society,” which highlights the challenges EoC values bring to us as consumers.

Angus Sibley who has written extensively on Catholic social thought and economics provides “Economy of Communion: A Different Attitude Toward Work,” pointing out the very positive view towards work which is found in Catholic social thought as well as the Economy of Communion.

John McNerney whose work has centered on the human person and the personalist tradition of Pope John Paul II, provides here “The Business of Business: Recapturing a Personalist Perspective” in which he points to the very uniquely person centered nature of the EoC.

Jean Buckeye who has written books on both EoC and Subsidiarity here provides her essay, “Exploring Subsidiarity: The Case of the Economy of Communion,” in which she explains subsidiarity and how it permeates the Economy of Communion practices.
Andy Gustafson who has written on the EoC and business and the common good provides “The Economy of Communion: Catholic Social Thought Put to Work,” in which he brings together theory of Economy of Communion and Catholic Social Thought with his lived experience as an EoC entrepreneur.

Celeste Harvey who has written on eudaemonist ethics, the concerns of women, and business and the common good, here provides “A Person-Centered Theory of the Firm: Learning from the Economy of Communion, in which she contrasts the EoC model with that of the traditional stockholder and stakeholder models of the firm.

In addition to these original scholarly works, we are delighted and grateful to be able to reproduce here Pope Francis’s comments to the Economy of Communion at the Vatican in 2017, Chiara Lubich’s short essay “For an Economy Based on Communion,” and renown EoC scholar Luca Crivelli’s previously unpublished essay “Economy of Communion, Poverty, and a Humanized Economy” which is a talk he gave at the symposium.

Bibliography

Andringa, Leo

Bruni, Luigini

Bruni, Luigini, and Tibor Hejj

Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

EoC (The Economy of Communion)
Ferrucci, Anthonella

Focolare

Francis, Pope

Freidman, Milton

Gallagher, John, and Jeanne Buckeye

Gold, Lorna

Lubich, Chiara
1984 May They All Be One. Hyde Park: New City Press.

Naughton, Michael, Jeanne Buckeye, Kenneth Goodpaster, and T. Dean Maines

Zamagni, Stephano