

CARITAS IN VERITATE AND CHIARA LUBICH: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF UNITY

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Within the vibrant life of the Catholic Church today, many currents of spirituality and specific projects can shed light on the encyclical's themes and provide examples of what its principles might look like in practice. This note focuses on how Chiara Lubich's spirituality of unity might offer a helpful way for people to understand how to live these principles in their everyday lives. It also discusses how the "Economy of Communion" and other concrete projects and practices of Focolare, the movement Lubich founded, foster economic justice and human development.

AT A CERTAIN POINT in his marvelous and still timely essay on love, Josef Pieper struggled with whether the idea of universal love might make any practical difference in the world. He wrote:

On the one hand, universal human love cannot accomplish anything practical in the world; man's historical predicaments cannot be solved by love. But on the other hand . . . universal love is not simply an unrealistic fantasy. Rather it is an innate potentiality reminiscent, as it were, of paradise, which is revealed for a moment solely in the exceptional figures of great lovers [such as Francis of Assisi].¹

One might trace a similar skepticism in some of the initial commentary on *Caritas in veritate*. For example, for George Weigel it was not immediately clear how poverty might be defeated through "increasing openness, in a world context, to forms of economic activity marked by quotas of

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¹ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997) 201.

gratuitousness and communion” (no. 39). He mused, “This may mean something interesting; it may mean something naïve or dumb. But, on its face, it is virtually impossible to know *what* it means.”²

Why might it be challenging for pragmatic North Americans to wrap their heads around aspects of the analysis in *Caritas*? It might be at least in part because we often approach the question of development from the direction of asking: “What should we *do*? What strategies might help?” But *Caritas* approaches the problems that plague humanity today from a different angle: “The Church does not have technical solutions to offer. . . . She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation” (no. 9).

The dynamic tension brings to mind the account in John’s Gospel where Jesus offers the Samaritan woman “living water” (Jn 4:10). She does not “get it” on the first try. Instead she focuses on the practical problem at hand—Jesus does not have a bucket: “You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep” (Jn 4:11). It was only when Jesus had told her the truth about her own life that she was able to enter into this different and deeper dimension. The analysis in *Caritas* reflects a conviction that only if we answer the fundamental questions about our human vocation—only if we face the truth about ourselves—can we then begin to work through the questions of what we should do to foster integral human development.

How might we move beyond the “bucket” level in order to discern the ways *Caritas* might be offering “living water” for the world today? According to Peter Steinfels, one reason why the encyclical was “a tough read” is that it “tried to do too much,” proving that it was an impossible feat to weave into a comprehensive analysis such a wide variety of topics. Further, as part of “a genre wielding theology and philosophy to address complex issues that a worldwide church may confront in many very different forms,” encyclicals tend toward “abstract language and vague or hedged generalizations.”³

Within the vibrant life of the Catholic Church today, many currents of spirituality, streams of thought, and specific projects could shed light on the encyclical’s thematic keys and provide examples of what its principles might look like in practice. In this note I will focus on the spirituality and thought of Chiara Lubich and the ongoing practices and projects of Focolare, the global movement she founded. While the movement is still little known in North America, I believe that its ideas and practices might serve

² George Weigel, “Caritas in Veritate in Gold and Red,” *National Review Online*, July 7, 2009, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NTdkYjU3MDE2YTdhZTE4NWlyN2FkY2U5YTFkM2ZiMmE=> (accessed December 3, 2009). (All URLs cited in this article were accessed on this date).

³ Peter Steinfels, “From the Vatican, A Tough Read,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2009, A12.

as a helpful vehicle to implement the principles outlined in *Caritas* in a variety of social contexts.

The first part of my note begins with a suggested lens for reading the encyclical in which the path to development is understood as a “journey to unity.” It then suggests that Lubich’s spirituality of unity might offer a helpful way for people to understand how to live these principles by building relationships of unity and universal brotherhood in their everyday lives. The second part provides a few more details on how Focolare communities are currently implementing their commitment to build unity through concrete projects and practices that foster economic justice and human development.

In all this, the hope is to show that in accord with the analysis in *Caritas*, universal love can accomplish, and in fact already is accomplishing, much that is “practical in the world.” Many aspects of our “historical predicaments” are already being “solved by love”—because that “innate potentiality” reminiscent of “paradise” continues to reveal itself not only in the “exceptional figure of great lovers,” but also in the everyday lives of ordinary people.⁴

THE JOURNEY TO UNITY

One possible thematic key that might help unlock the underlying cohesiveness of the encyclical as a whole may be found precisely in the pope’s definition of the human vocation and of our ultimate destination: development is the process of moving forward in the “journey toward unity” (no. 8). Recalling the words of Paul VI, *Caritas* described the “summit of human development” as “unity in the charity of Christ who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all” (no. 19). Like the summit itself, the path to the summit is less activity than vantage point: “*The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side*” (no. 53).

The pope submits that we cannot know what to do unless we first probe deeper questions about the human vocation. Like Jesus’ invitation to the woman at the well, the question invites an initial stance of receptivity:

The vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice, but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted. That which is prior to us and constitutes us—subsistent Love and Truth—shows us what goodness is, and in what our true happiness consists. *It shows us the road to true development* (no. 52).

In *Caritas*, the “one thing necessary” (Lk 10:42) for the journey to authentic human development is the discovery of the human vocation: “Only if we

⁴ See Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* 201.

are aware of our calling, as individuals and as a community, to be part of God's family as his sons and daughters, will we be able to generate a new vision and muster new energy in the service of a truly integral humanism" (no. 78).

Once we realize that we are on a journey to unity, a number of vistas open before us. With the headlights of metaphysics and theology, two directional signs begin to appear frequently in the text. The first is to "recognize the divine image in the other, thus truly coming to discover him or her and to mature in a love that 'becomes care and concern for the other'" (no. 11). The second is to watch closely for a "deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation" (no. 53). In fact, it seems that a deeper understanding of the "category of relation" might actually be a shortcut past some of the rockier parts of the itinerary. If the human person is "defined" through interpersonal relations, then relationships with others become not an obstacle, but a path to personal fulfillment: "The more authentically [the person] lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God" (no. 53).

From this vantage point, we can discover our true identity: we are "made for gift." When we open ourselves to "the astonishing experience of gift," we can see all the ways in which "gratuitousness is present in our lives" (no. 34). The vision carries within itself the power to bring people together in community: "The unity of the human race, a fraternal communion transcending every barrier, is called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love" (no. 34). From this perspective it might also be easier to discern the contours of the "vast amount of work to be done" in the service of human development (no. 78).

How exactly might we move from seeing ourselves as "side by side" to the recognition of being a "single family working together in true communion," and so tap into the new energy that the vision itself generates? One might say that receptivity to God's own desire to help humanity in its journey to unity is the core of the life's work of Chiara Lubich and the movement she founded. The next section summarizes the "narrative theology" at the heart of the movement's origins, and is followed by a more in-depth analysis of how certain aspects of Lubich's spirituality of unity might help to illuminate the analytical weave of *Caritas*.⁵

⁵ Note the link that John Paul II drew between Lubich's "spirituality of unity" and what he termed the "spirituality of communion" (John Paul II, "Address to a Group of Bishops, Friends of the Focolare Movement," February 13, 2003). See also John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (2000) no. 43; and Thomas J. Norris, *The Trinity: Life of God, Hope for Humanity* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2009).

Origins of the Focolare Movement

The Focolare movement was forged in the fiery furnace of World War II, when there seemed to be very little hope that humanity might experience being a “single family working together in true communion” (no. 53). As the city of Trent, a strategic northern Italian mountain crossroads, was heavily bombed, Chiara Lubich, a 23-year-old elementary school teacher, and her friends watched their youthful dreams crumble. Stripped of their material possessions and their hopes for the future, they focused intently on this question: was there an ideal worth living for that no bomb could destroy? What opened before them was the discovery of God as this ideal, that this God was love, and that God’s personal love enveloped every aspect of their lives.⁶

The little group of friends met frequently in the bomb shelters, and almost by chance brought along the small book of the Gospel. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19), they would read, and they began to reach out to neighbors all around—frightened children in the shelters, the hungry, the sick, and the injured. “Ask and you shall receive” (Lk 11:9): “We asked on behalf of the poor,” Lubich recounted, “and each time we were filled with God’s gifts: bread, powdered milk, marmalade, wood, clothing . . . which we took to those who needed [them].”⁷ Filled with wonder at God’s intervention and the freedom and joy that result from a gospel-based lifestyle, they shared their stories with many, and their group grew in number. Since several of their homes had been destroyed, or their families had fled into the mountains, they gathered in a small apartment that came to be known as the “Focolare” (which in Italian means “hearth”) because of the warm atmosphere of family.

Conscious that any moment could be their last, they asked themselves what might be the words especially dear to Jesus. They discovered, “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12–13), and they understood the measure of his love—he gave his life. Lubich remembers how they gathered in a circle and made a pact: “I am ready to give my life for you; I for you, I for you; all for each one.”⁸

As Lubich recounts, the consequences of that pact were twofold. First, it became the source of a new light and energy to understand how to love one another concretely. “We are not always asked to die for one another, but we can share everything: our worries, our sorrows, our meager possessions, our spiritual riches.”⁹ Second, they began to experience an almost tangible presence of Christ alive in the community.

⁶ Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2007) 4.

⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁸ Ibid. 6.

⁹ Ibid.

We saw our lives take a qualitative leap forward. Someone came into our group, silently, an invisible Friend, giving us security, a more experiential joy, a new peace, a fullness of life, an inextinguishable light. Jesus was fulfilling his promise to us: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).¹⁰

In another moment, as they took refuge from the bombings in a dark cellar, they opened the gospel and read by candlelight Jesus' solemn prayer before dying: "Father, may they all be one" (Jn 17:21). Lubich described that moment: "It was not an easy text to start with, but one by one those words seemed to come to life, giving us the conviction that we were born for that page of the gospel."¹¹ The commitment to building unity remained their decisive focus. As Lubich remembered, "One thing was clear in our hearts: what God wanted for us was unity. We live for the sole aim of being one with him, one with each other, and one with every-one. This marvelous vocation linked us to heaven and immersed us in the one human family. What purpose in life could be greater?"¹²

Everything else paled in comparison to these discoveries, to the point that Lubich and her friends almost did not realize that the war had ended. The tiny group, initially made up of young women, grew into a sizable community of all ages and vocations, including married people, youth, children, priests, and men and women of various religious orders. As people of the community traveled to other cities for work or study, they carried with them their newly discovered lifestyle. Focolare houses were opened first in other cities in Italy, then throughout Europe, and starting in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, in North and South America, Asia, Oceania, and Africa. Wherever they went, they brought with them the "marvelous vocation" to build unity in the world around them.

How has this narrative unfolded in relation to the questions about human development raised in *Caritas*? What is especially interesting about Lubich's thought and work in this regard is not only the depth with which it has explored how a spirituality of unity might penetrate and transform social and economic structures, but also the fact that it has generated a global multicultural and even multireligious network of people who continuously engage in deep reflection on these principles, and who encourage one another to live accordingly.

In a meditation published in 1959, Lubich reflected on the impact that Jesus' prayer for unity could and should have on the Mystical Body of Christ:

In this world we are all brothers and sisters and yet we pass each other as if we were strangers. And this happens even among baptized Christians. The Communion of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 17.

¹¹ Ibid. 4.

Saints, the Mystical Body exists. But this Body is like a network of darkened tunnels. The power to illuminate them exists; in many individuals there is the light of grace, but Jesus did not want only this when he turned to the Father, calling upon him. He wanted a heaven on earth: the unity of all with God and with one another; the network of tunnels to be illuminated; the presence of Jesus to be in every relationship with others, as well as in the soul of each. This is his final testament, the most precious desire of a God who gave his life for us.¹³

When Lubich died in March 2008, she left as her legacy not only a profound spirituality, enriched by a vast archive of writings, reflections, and conversations, together with the fully approved General Statutes and guidelines for the various vocational paths within the movement, but also a living, breathing global network of “illuminated tunnels.” This network remains illuminated through concrete practices that sustain ongoing efforts to build relationships of love and unity within smaller and larger communities; ongoing programs of formation toward a culture of unity; and quite a few specific projects for social, economic, and cultural development.¹⁴ Each of these aspects of her legacy merits much more comprehensive discussion than the space here allows. What follows are only a few snapshots and intuitions that mark some ways Lubich’s spirituality might serve as a path for implementing the teachings of *Caritas*.

The “Category of Relation” and the Habits of a Universal Heart

Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, Walter Kasper, reflecting on the future of Christianity, foresaw that the “fundamental form of the faith” would be “the combined love of God and of one’s neighbor.” He anticipated that in this “new form” of life, “being” would be defined less as “substance which exists in and for itself,” and more as “love which exists for others.” According to Kasper, this future should arrive as a consequence of “a new form of holiness and spirituality.” And if Kasper had to put his finger on the “greatest lack” in the modern Church, it would be the fact that the Church did not yet possess “this charisma, this form of holiness.”¹⁵

In *Caritas*, the pope’s discussion of the need for a “deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation” also reaches for a “form” to integrate love of God and love of neighbor into one way of being:

¹³ Ibid. 99.

¹⁴ For descriptions of Focolare networks and social projects, see “Site Map,” <http://www.focolare.org/mappa.php?codcat1=18&lingua=EN&titolo=site%20map&tipo=site%20map>; “New Humanity and Social Development,” http://www.new-humanity.org/uk/about_social-dev.htm; “Azione per un mondo unito,” <http://www.azionemondounito.org/english/home.asp>.

¹⁵ Walter Kasper, *An Introduction to Christian Faith* (New York: Paulist, 1972) 193.

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance as well. (no. 53)

Lubich's spiritual writings provide a deep well of reflection on this spiritual trajectory, and might provide interesting insight into both Kasper's question of whether this gift of a "new form of holiness" has arrived, and the pope's project to probe the "category of relation."¹⁶ In Lubich's spirituality of unity, love of neighbor is not only a consequence of one's love for God, but the *indispensable* path to love for God. Love for God *inevitably* leads to love of neighbor. As she wrote in 1946: "Jesus our model taught us two things alone, and which are one: to be children of only one Father, and to be brothers and sisters to each other."¹⁷ She further explained the connection in a meditation from 1949:

Our inner life is fed by our outer life. The more I enter into the soul of my brother or sister, the more I enter into God within me. The more I enter into God within me, the more I enter into my brother or sister. God – myself – my brother or sister: it is all one world, all one kingdom.¹⁸

Within this "one kingdom," love of neighbor is not a secondary consequence of one's love for God, but an integral, inextricably linked, and even essential dimension of this love. What happens as a result? I would note three shifts in one's attitude.

First, when relationships are viewed through this lens, my love no longer carries the weight of conferring beneficence, or even of having generously made space for the other within my own existence. Instead, as Lubich explained, neighbors who welcome my love become my benefactors, for "they have obtained for us what we were seeking all along"—union with God. Therefore, "we should be grateful to them."¹⁹ Within this dynamic, all relationships become imbued with a sense of reciprocal gratitude. As Lubich wrote in 1949: "The person next to me was created as a gift for me and I was created as a gift for the person next to me. On earth all stands in a relationship of love with all: each thing with each thing. We have to be Love, however, to discover the golden thread among all things that exist."²⁰

¹⁶ See Michel Vandeleene, *Io-Il Fratello-Dio nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1999) 98.

¹⁷ Lubich, *Essential Writings* 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 65.

¹⁹ Chiara Lubich, *L'arte di amare* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2005) 99–100, trans. forthcoming: *The Art of Loving* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2010).

²⁰ Lubich, *Essential Writings* 87.

Second, through this lens, everything else in life, including practical projects and the desire to make progress on specific tasks, is completely relativized by the absolute value of love of neighbor. As Lubich reflected,

... the basic commandment is brotherly love. Everything is of value if it expresses sincere fraternal charity. Nothing we do is of value, if there is not the feeling of love for our brothers and sisters in it. For God is a Father and in his heart he has always and only his children.²¹

For this reason, one might say that the “category of relation” is the heart, soul, and driving energy of every Focolare community. As the premise to the General Statutes reads, “mutual and constant love, which makes unity possible, and brings the presence of Jesus among all, is for those who are part of the Work of Mary, the basis for their life under every aspect, it is the norm of norms, the premise to every other rule.”²²

Third, Lubich’s understanding of the “one kingdom” has always included a universal horizon. She described this idea in a set of talking points from 1946:

Before all else, the soul must always fix its gaze on the one Father of many children. Then it must see all as children of the same Father. In mind and in heart we must always go beyond the bounds imposed on us by human life alone and create the habit of constantly opening ourselves to the reality of being one human family in one Father: God.²³

Within Lubich’s spirituality of unity, the universal dimensions of love are coupled with the practice of a strong and total identification with the other who suffers: “Your neighbor is another you, and you must love him or her bearing that in mind. . . . You and they are members of Christ and if one or the other is suffering, it is the same for you. What has value for you is God who is both their Father and yours.”²⁴

Returning to *Caritas*, how might the pope’s definition of the human vocation intersect with Lubich’s “one kingdom” dynamic? If my fundamental stance is shaped by the conviction that at the core of my identity I am a member of the universal human family, and that love for my brothers and sisters is my path to fulfillment in God, then a number of consequences follow for my response to the questions of human development.

²¹ Ibid. 102.

²² *Work of Mary (Focolare Movement) General Statutes* (New York: 2008) 13 (provisional translation from the Italian, *Opera di Maria – Statuti Generali*, on file with the author). The official name under which the Focolare was approved in 1961 is “Opera di Maria” (Work of Mary).

²³ Lubich, *Essential Writings* 17–18. ²⁴ Ibid. 79.

In this “one kingdom,” if I have material goods beyond those required to fulfill my needs, sharing them in order to meet the needs of others is no longer an act of altruism. Through the lens of the spirituality of unity, many theories of altruism would be merely the tautological flip side of individualism, for they are grounded in an assumption that the other’s interests are in fundamental tension with one’s own. Calls for “sacrifice” or even “generosity” make little sense if “my neighbor is another me.” From the perspective of the dynamic life of unity, I share my material goods simply as an expression of my own identity as a member of the universal human family, and as a logical consequence of my connection to this family. Similarly, our common work to improve economic and social structures becomes less an act of problem-solving ingenuity on the part of those with resources or skills, and more an opportunity for a reciprocal exchange through which we discover all the ways in which we have been created as “gift” for one another. (no. 34)

Individual Identity within a Trinitarian Model

Might this “one kingdom”—“my neighbor is another me”—dynamic run at least some risk of total annihilation of individual identity? Or when the dynamic is projected onto the level of social and economic structures or global dynamics, might it risk the suffocation of creative initiative or the submergence of cultural identities? *Caritas* submits that the “more authentically” one lives in the dynamic of interpersonal relationships, the more one’s own “personal identity” matures (no. 53). For Lubich, too, the hermeneutical key to what she termed the “culture of giving” was to discover all the ways in which these everyday acts of openness to others were not in the order of the heroic:

Unlike the consumer economy based on a culture of having, the Economy of Communion is the economy of giving. This could seem difficult, arduous, heroic. *But it is not*, because the human person, made in the image of God who is love, finds fulfillment precisely in loving, in giving. This need to love lies in the deepest core of our being, whether we are believers or not.²⁵

Both *Caritas* and Lubich ground their analyses of human identity as “gift” in the dynamic life of communion at the heart of the Trinity. Reflecting on the relationship of “the Persons of the Trinity within the one divine Substance,” the pope explains, “God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: ‘that they may be one even as we are one’ (Jn 17:22).” In this light, we understand that “true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration” (no. 54).

²⁵ Ibid. 280–81, emphasis added.

For Lubich, the model for finding identity in complete openness and self-giving is Jesus, and in particular Jesus on the cross who cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mk 15:35; Mt 27:46). At this moment of total emptiness and darkness, “Jesus forsaken” reveals the real core of his identity: He is Love. Lubich probes the paradox:

There may be those who think that to affirm self is to struggle against all that is not self, because what is not self is perceived as limit and, what is more, as a threat to the integrity of self. But in that terrible moment of his passion, Jesus forsaken tells us that though the consciousness of subjectivity appears to be diminishing as he is, as it were, made nothing, in that very moment it reaches its fullness.²⁶

Further, Jesus forsaken is also the lens through which Lubich discerns the interpersonal dynamic at the heart of the Trinity: “In the relationship of the three divine Persons, each one is love, each one is completely, by not being: because each one is, perichoretically, in the other Person, in eternal self-giving.”²⁷

What might this mean for human relationships and social structures? It is a vision in which openness and gift coincide with identity. As Lubich describes the dynamic: “Jesus shows us that I am myself not when I close myself off from the other, but rather when I give myself, when out of love I lose myself in the other.”²⁸ In an anthropology modeled on the life of the Trinity, openness to the other, even to the point of emptying oneself in order to fully receive the reality of the other, is not a negative encroachment on one’s personhood, but actually the positive key to self-fulfillment: “whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25).

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF COMMUNION

This vision of “the category of relation” modeled on the life of the Trinity, and these “habits” of a universal heart, are what form the cultural foundation of the Focolare’s project for an “Economy of Communion in Freedom”²⁹ and all the community’s practical efforts to foster a culture based on “the astonishing experience of gift” (no. 34).

²⁶ Ibid. 211.

²⁷ Ibid. 212. See also Marisa Cerini, *God Who Is Love in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich* (Brooklyn: New City, 1992) 42–60.

²⁸ Lubich, *Essential Writings* 211. See also Norris, *The Trinity* 154.

²⁹ See generally <http://www.edc-online.org>. See also Luigino Bruni, ed., *The Economy of Communion: Toward a Multi-Dimensional Economic Culture* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2002); Lorna Gold, *The Sharing Economy* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004); Norris, *The Trinity* 113–30; and Luigino Bruni and Amelia J. Uelmen, “Religious Values and Corporate Decision Making: The Economy of Communion Project,” *Fordham Journal of Corporate and Financial Law* 11 (2006) 645–80.

The Economy of Communion in Freedom

In their initial discussions about the encyclical, several commentators focused on the pope's mention of the "broad intermediate area" of "traditional companies which nonetheless subscribe to social aid agreements in support of underdeveloped countries . . . and the diversified world of the so-called 'civil economy' and the 'economy of communion'" (no. 46). John Allen associated the reference with the Focolare's network of businesses that do consider profit as "a means for achieving human and social ends."³⁰

Weigel also acknowledged the influence that the "economy of communion" school of academics had had in the drafting of *Caritas*, and noted that this connection would merit further exploration.³¹ One of the pope's economic advisors, Stefano Zamagni, also noted that the Focolare's "Economy of Communion" project and Communion and Liberation's "Company of Works" had long served as examples of how the social vision of solidarity and fraternity can fully "enter" into economic life.³²

The "Economy of Communion in Freedom" emerged during Lubich's visit to Brazil in 1991. As she brainstormed with the local communities in the light of John Paul II's then-recent *Centesimus annus* about how to ensure that the most basic material needs of all Focolare members were met, an idea emerged: the formation of for-profit businesses could generate additional jobs and voluntarily allot profits in three parts: (1) for direct aid to people in need; (2) for educational projects to help foster a culture of giving; and (3) for the continued growth and development of the business. Initial businesses began with the active participation of hundreds of people putting their resources together, often selling chickens or other livestock to purchase "shares" for the initial capital.

Currently just over 750 Economy of Communion business initiatives are in operation in more than 50 countries worldwide, with about half operating in the service sector. Most are small and medium-sized; some have more than 100 employees. The businesses commit themselves to permeating all their relationships—with employees, customers, suppliers, regu-

³⁰ John Allen, "Indiana Firm Can Claim a Papal Thumbs-up from New Social Encyclical" and "Pope proposes a 'Christian Humanism' for the Global Economy," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 7, 2009. See also Austen Ivereigh, "The Hidden Hand in 'Caritas' of Focolare," *In All Things*, America Magazine Blog, July 8, 2009, http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&id=10760395-3048-741E-9522355227676310.

³¹ George Weigel, "Charity in Truth," *National Review Online*, July 13, 2009, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NTgwOWY5MDkyNTIzNmQ0OTQ5NzAyMTJiNTU3MTAzN2M=>.

³² "Zamagni: Diciotto anni dopo la Chiesa non gioca in difesa ma va all'attacco," *Il Sussidiario.net*, July 8, 2009, <http://www.ilsussidiario.net/articolo.aspx?articolo=30039>.

latory agencies, the general public, and the environment around them—with gospel values of love and respect. For example, John Mundell, the CEO of an Indiana environmental consulting firm run according to Economy of Communion principles, explained how their long-standing decision to constantly prioritize relationships of love and respect is now helping them through the current financial crisis: “It is as if we have been making deposits in a bank account through our attitudes, our love and our relationships with others in the community. In difficult times, this providence of God acts like a withdrawal that we are able to take to sustain us till things get better.”³³

Those who receive help are not considered “assisted” or “beneficiaries.” Rather, they are regarded as active participants in the project, all part of the same community, who also live the culture of giving.³⁴ Sharing one’s needs with dignity and sincerity is welcomed as a contribution to increase the life of communion. As expressed by a Croatian family of nine living in a two-room apartment: “The assistance we receive means so much to us, not just for the financial assistance which is helping us to survive, but especially because like this, by sharing our need, we can be part of this ‘sacred’ reality.”³⁵

The poor also share their experience of how God’s love reaches them through the help they receive. As a woman from Uruguay wrote, “I have experienced the love of our heavenly Father on many occasions, but I never thought he would even help me with my teeth. Through the help I received I was able to take care of an infection I had. I felt extremely happy, as if I were the Father’s favorite child.”³⁶

For some the assistance helps to sustain microeconomic endeavors. For one Kenyan woman, a small amount was the difference between spending the night in jail and getting the permit she needed to grow her small vegetable business.³⁷ Others share the help they receive with others whose need is greater, and many renounce the help just as soon as they have the bare minimum of economic independence. As a young man from Nigeria

³³ Genevieve Pollock, “Benedict XVI and the Economy of Communion” (Part 2), *Zenit*, September 9, 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-26812?l=english>.

³⁴ Caterina Mulatero, “The Needy Are Full Participants in This Initiative,” *Living City* 40.5 (2001) 14–15; Bruni and Uelmen, “Corporate Decision-Making” 653. See also Stefano Zamagni, “On the Foundation and Meaning of the ‘Economy of Communion’ Experience,” in *Multidimensional Economic Culture* 130–40, at 132.

³⁵ Mulatero, “The Needy Are Full Participants” 14–15.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 15.

³⁷ Carla Bozzani, “Lettere dal Mondo,” *Economia di Comunione* (Quarterly Newsletter) 7.14 (October 2001) 3, <ftp://bbs.quasarbbs.net/universi/tesi2/Not-edc/Edc14.pdf>. The archive of newsletters and theses on the Economy of Communion is available at <http://www.ecodicom.net/notiziario.php>.

who was able to finish high school and find a better job, wrote: “Now it is time for me to help someone else in need, someone whom I do not know but who needs my small contribution. . . . I ask God that he may always give me a heart as big as his, in order to see others’ needs.”³⁸

The Culture of Giving

The Economy of Communion business network is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg—the most publicly visible but proportionately small manifestation of the global Focolare community’s deep and widespread efforts to let the “reality of being one human family”³⁹ transform their attitudes toward material goods. Lubich encouraged everyone—entrepreneurs, laborers, and housewives, small children and teenagers, those with resources and those with less—to let the “culture of giving” permeate daily habits and choices.

As noted above, since the origins of the movement in war-torn Trent, inspired by the example of the first Christian community (Acts 2:44–45), Focolare communities have practiced a “communion of goods” aimed at meeting the basic needs of all participants. Helping Focolare members discern the ways in which consumerism and materialism might be creeping into their lives, Lubich encouraged the regular practice of making a “bundle” of all that could be shared or sold. As she explained in a global conference-call message: “We know how easy it is, living in the world, to gradually accumulate objects which are useful more or less, or superfluous, and keep them in our homes. . . . If we collect our surplus and give it away, our charity toward our neighbor shall be real; that way we shall preserve in us the presence of the Risen One.”⁴⁰

I remember, as an elementary school child, listening to her advice to be like beautiful flowers that take from the ground only what they need.⁴¹ Who did not want to be beautiful? Whenever my sister and I sensed that we were overwatered by suburban mall culture, we would bundle together what we felt we could share: clothes, toys, and other household items

³⁸ Mulatero, “The Needy Are Full Participants” 15.

³⁹ Lubich, *Essential Writings* 18.

⁴⁰ Chiara Lubich, *Journey to Heaven: Spiritual Thoughts to Live* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1991) 122.

⁴¹ See Chiara Lubich to the Gen 3 [Teenagers] Supercongress, response to “What can we Gen 3 do to limit consumerism?” Marino Ice Arena (Rome), June 12, 1992, transcript and video at <http://centrochiaralubich.org/index.php/en/component/rokdownloads/downloads/pdf/146-chi19920612en.html?ItemId=48> (“You should keep for yourself . . . only what you need, as the plants do. They absorb from the earth only the water, salts, and other things that they need, and not more”).

(with parental permission), and bring them to the Los Angeles Focolare community house to be shared or sold.

Lubich's point was not to live poverty for the sake of "sacrifice," but as a way to clear out enough space to be able to hear and receive the invitation to enter into a dynamic in which all involved could experience God's providential response to individual and communal needs, and perceive the ways that God is at work in our daily lives. As a law student on a tight budget, I made an envelope with two columns, "amount" and "source"; this helped me to constantly reflect on the "astonishing experience of gift" (no 34):

75 cents: beautiful day | walk instead of bus
 \$5: received salami | money from lunch budget
 \$20: sweater from Mom | money from clothes budget

At the end of the month I would bring the envelope to the Focolare house to share not only the money but these stories of God's loving intervention in my life.

In her conversations with Focolare communities from developing countries, Lubich never pulled back from her conviction that they too were called to be protagonists in a culture of giving. During her 2000 meeting with the Focolare communities in Africa, Francis, a teenager from Congo, asked Lubich how their group of children could live the culture of giving when they possessed only the clothes they were wearing and were not always able to find something to eat every day. Lubich answered point blank: "There is something you can give." She then explained all of the "spiritual things" that can be shared: help, advice, comfort, prayers. "Maybe someone hurts you and you forgive him. . . . Forgiveness is like giving someone your home to shelter him. Then someone might annoy you, maybe because he is noisy while you are trying to study . . . you patiently put up with him, and that's another work of love; it's as if you were giving him a vase of flowers. . . . These are all things you can do."⁴² She knew that material help was on the way for that particular community, but she also knew that the most authentic solutions would emerge from, as Pope Benedict put it, "free subjects in favor of an assumption of shared responsibility" (no. 17).

Human Development through the Lens of Reciprocity

In *Caritas*, the pope suggested that unity might unlock the true meaning of globalization: "The truth of globalization as a process and its fundamental

⁴² Transcript, Meeting of Chiara Lubich with Focolare Communities of Africa in Fontem, Cameroon, May 8, 2000, reported in "Si può sempre dare," *Mondo unito* 6.1 (January–March 2001) 8–9.

ethical criterion are given by the unity of the human family and its development towards what is good. Hence a sustained commitment is needed so as to *promote a person-based and community-oriented cultural process of world-wide integration that is open to transcendence*" (no. 42). What might these words mean in practice?

In the 1960s, several Focolare doctors moved to Fontem, Cameroon, in response to a request from the local bishop for help in reducing the 98% infant mortality among the Bangwa people. Despite everyone's efforts and good intentions, a crisis emerged because the Bangwa felt the relationship with the Focolare was generating excessive dependence. As Lucio dal Soglio, one of the doctors, explained, "We are always the ones, 'who were holding the knife from the handle's end,' as the saying goes"—because Focolare people had procured the means of transport and had the resources and technical knowledge to carry out various jobs and repair the machines.⁴³

The community took the crisis as an opportunity for profound reflection. Dal Soglio remembered how the Focolare members resolved to change: "We are here to live with the Bangwa, not to make big things," he said. "We are not here to save the life of the Bangwa; we will do so if the Bangwa ask this from us. We do not want to build a super hospital, we do not want to set up a university, we do not want to teach this or that programme; we just want to do what we agree to do together with them." As a result, the whole community experienced a deeper sense of equality that then permeated the further development of the town of Fontem.

The town now includes 600 homes, a school, a hospital specializing in tropical diseases and AIDs treatment, a hydroelectric plant, a church, and several workshops. As dal Soglio explained: "We were blessed with a true grace because we understood that we had to be equal and that this is where universal brotherhood really begins. What you say is as important as what I say. . . . What counts is that we understand together, in a reasonable manner, what should be done."⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Josef Pieper was right to observe that "universal human love" is limited in the sense that human perspectives only get us so far. As *Caritas* reflects, "Reason, by itself is capable of grasping the equality between men and

⁴³ Interview of Lucio dal Soglio, "Breaking Dependence," International "Social-One" conference of Focolare sociologists and anthropologists (Rome, February 11–13, 2005), <http://www.social-one.org/index.php/en/convegna-mainmenu-177/convegno-2005-mainmenu-238/29-grompere-con-la-dipendenzaq.html>. See also Amy Uelmen, "Get into the Reciprocal," *Living City* 47.10 (2008) 10–12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

giving stability to their civil coexistence, but it cannot establish fraternity. This originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father who loved us first, teaching us through the Son what fraternal charity is” (no. 19). Lubich, too, consistently pushed beyond the bounds of human perspectives in order to tap into the divine source of universal love.

But if universal love is associated with an “innate potentiality” reminiscent of paradise, Benedict XVI and Lubich would, in contrast to Pieper, place much hope in the capacity of universal love to permeate and transform every aspect of human life and of the social and economic order, and so accomplish much that is practical in the world. And this is because they have both intuited that it is God’s own desire to bring humanity into the life of communion at the heart of the Trinity: “that they may be one even as we are one” (Jn 17:22). Looking at human development from the vantage point of our fundamental vocation to unity, it becomes clear that it is precisely in loving openness to the spiritual and material needs of others that we discover the truth about ourselves, that we are “made for gift” (no. 34). Who could ask for more?