Benedict XVI and the Economy of Communion (Part 1)

Interview with Business Owner John Mundell

By Genevieve Pollock

INDIANAPOLIS, Indiana, SEPT. 8, 2009 (Zenit.org).- People are searching for meaning in work, ways to aid people and the environment while earning profits, and Benedict XVI is pointing the way, says an Economy of Communion member.

John Mundell is the president and founder of Mundell and Associates, an environmental consulting company based in Indianapolis.

In this interview with ZENIT, he explained some reasons why Benedict XVI incorporated the Economy of Communion, a growing worldwide business network, into his latest encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate."

Part 2 will be published Wednesday.

ZENIT: What are some of the basic tenets of the Economy of Communion?

Mudell: To understand the Economy of Communion, one has to begin to understand what the word "communion" means in the vocabulary of the Catholic Church, and what a spirituality that includes communion implies.

How do we live as "church" or as united people, and what does that mean? How does this fit into the message and mission of Jesus?

As one begins to understand this, the fundamental basis for the Economy of Communion, the rest begins to follow as a natural outgrowth.

The Economy of Communion was born from an idea that arose within the Focolare Movement and its founder, Chiara Lubich, in 1991 when she was visiting Brazil and the local Focolare community there.

The previous week she had been reading John Paul II's encyclical "Centesimus Annus," a reflection on the hundred years after Pope Leo XIII's first social encyclical of the Church.

Chiara was particularly interested in the topic of the Church's involvement in the social sphere of the world. As well, as she came to Brazil she had been made aware of the needs of the poor present in the local Focolare community. Our community down there had people who were well-off, but also had people who were suffering and needed help with food, education and shelter.
What Chiara saw is that, despite the Focolare practicing a communion of goods over the 50 years of its history at that time, despite the individual efforts to share and help those in need within our own community, we still fell short, and so something else needed to be done.

Thus the idea was born of starting businesses that could operate, share profits and help the needy associated with the community.

From 1991, this movement began to spread across the Focolare world, and 18 years later we have over 750 businesses involved in the Economy of Communion.

It is something rooted in the experience of the early Christians, a community that was described as being one in heart and mind, where there was no needy person among them. The idea of recapturing that experience of the early Christians gave rise to this way of doing business.

The mission is to promote a culture of giving and social justice through these businesses that are animated by the value of universal fraternity.

These businesses are for profit, and are present on every continent; I think we're in 50 countries. About half of the organizations are service businesses, a quarter of them are manufacturing, and the rest are retail.

The profits from these businesses are put in common. One part of the profits is kept inside of the company to help it to grow, because without capital, companies can stagnate.

Another part of the profits goes to the education of people in this culture of giving, in this attitude of the Economy of Communion. We hold seminars, conferences and meetings to spread these ideas.

The last portion of the profits goes directly to the poor, to help with basic needs: food, shelter, education and health care. But it is a little different than a philanthropic gift of the profits.

We have relationships with the poor in each geographic location, and we really know what is happening in their lives. They are also seen as equal partners in this Economy of Communion. So when they express their needs, it is seen as something of equal value to us sharing our economic resources.

Someone likened it to: not giving a person a fish, nor teaching them how to fish, but fishing with them. In the Economy of Communion we fish with them. It is not something we do apart or for them; it is something we do together.

That is a whole mind shift in this concept of corporate social responsibility and the classic notion of businesses that are helping the poor.

ZENIT: Many people would see the values of the corporate business world as being opposed to those of Christian charity and social justice. How have you found that those two have been able to work hand in hand?

Mundell: I think the time is ripe for this idea of incorporating social mission within a business and we are seeing a lot of that over the last three to four years. We have seen an increasing interest in the idea of corporate social responsibility.

Many organizations, even Fortune 500 companies, are becoming more aware of their social responsibilities in business operations.

They talk about the triple bottom line: people, planet, profit. People, because they are interested in assisting
with social problems; planet, because they want to become environmentally aware; profit, because they need it to sustain the business.

This idea of corporate social responsibility is there in the secular world, and people are grappling with it. They realize that they owe their shareholders a return on their investments, but they also realize that being corporately responsible is also good for business.

One could argue that they are being corporately responsible because it is financially advantageous to them. But I say, however we do it, and whatever the motivations, it is still a good thing.

The Economy of Communion can be seen as part of that overall movement of corporate social responsibility, but it is really more than that.

It is a different model, because in present trends, there are a lot of individual businesses trying to operate in a good way, but not connected to anything else.

In the Economy of Communion, we incorporate the model of the first Christian communities, and we operate as 750 businesses in a network that has global relationships. We stay in touch with each other, and try to operate in the same way.

In this way, we can circulate needs and move resources into different places in the world that require them, based on a collective way of thinking.

The Economy of Communion is about what we would call a "collective way of living out a spirituality," the Focolare spirituality of unity that John Paul II has spoken about in previous encyclicals.

The spirituality of communion influences the way we operate as business owners, because we are centered on relationships, and the human person as the focal point in the company.

In a Christian viewpoint, we have the potential to develop these relationships to a point where there is mutual love. And as Christ said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." In this way, we can actually have the presence of God, of Christ, in these relationships.

So our model is a little different, but within the sphere of this talk about social enterprises, social entrepreneurs or corporate social responsibilities. We are within that discussion now, especially now that the Pope has mentioned the Economy of Communion in the encyclical.

ZENIT: When the Pope talked about the Economy of Communion in the encyclical, did you find that his ideas confirmed the principles of the project, or did it shed new light on the topic?

Mundell: I think both. The encyclical is a wonderful work and it is going to take all of us some time to take it in and grasp all of the nuances that the Pope has laid out.

It certainly has confirmed and supported our efforts over the last 18 years. For example, in chapters three and four it talks about the need to create space in the market for these new kind of operations, based not just on the pursuit of profit alone, but also on pursuing principles of mutuality and social ends.

It recognizes this new form of business that is between a for profit and a not-for-profit. The Pope holds up these for profit businesses with a social mission as something that is promising, something that should be encouraged and supported in the different contexts, structures and countries of the world.
He sees this kind of attitude, this Economy of Communion, as a way to steer the globalization of humanity in relational terms, in terms of communion and the sharing of goods.

The Pope has also given us a challenge, to expand what we are doing, to be more open and to have the best kind of businesses and the best models possible, so others can see that organizations can be successfully operated in this way.

Some people do not think you can operate a for profit business this way and be successful, but we have 750 organizations that can say it is possible.

We are successful, but success is also measured in different ways. It can be measured in how much we help those in need, in the impacts of these businesses in the local communities, in the relationships they have developed, and also in the way they have become models to steer other larger companies to a more civil way of doing business.

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On the Net:

Economy of Communion: www.edc-online.org

Focolare Movement: www.focolare.org

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Benedict XVI and the Economy of Communion (Part 2)

Interview with Business Owner John Mundell

By Genevieve Pollock

INDIANAPOLIS, Indiana, SEPT. 9, 2009 (Zenit.org).- Running a company according to Christian principles pays dividends that provide sustenance during the economic recession, says a business owner and member of the Economy of Communion.

John Mundell is the president and founder of Mundell and Associates, an environmental consulting company based in Indianapolis.

In this interview with ZENIT, he shared details about the Economy of Communion, a worldwide business network mentioned by Benedict XVI in "Caritas in Veritate."

The business owner spoke about the highlights of an Aug. 21-23 meeting in New York, a new international internship program, and how the network is surviving the economic recession.

Part 1 was published Tuesday.

ZENIT: Have you found other people or business owners looking into the Economy of Communion after the encyclical came out?

Mundell: Yes we have. We had our North American Economy of Communion meeting recently near Hyde Park, in the Focolare Movement's little city called Mariapolis Luminosa. In that meeting we had about 65 people, and one fourth of those had never heard of the Economy of Communion nor the Focolare Movement until they heard about it in the encyclical.

They came simply because of what was said in "Caritas in Veritate," and the desire to hear more about it.

In the last two months, there has been an increase in awareness that this is something to look into, even though it is a small project in terms of the full world economy.

What are 750 businesses in the world we live in? But there's no other idea that has this many organizations globally operating with this kind of attitude and these principles.

I think people are understanding that when the idea of the Economy of Communion has become incorporated into Catholic social teaching by the Pope, it is something that needs to be looked at.

ZENIT: Could you give us some of the highlights from the seminar?
Mundell: It was a three-day seminar titled, "Person-Centered Business: Hope for Today, Sustainability for Tomorrow."

It focused on the idea of the human person as the center of the business, rather than the old way of looking at business as just a means of generating profit.

We had an academic panel to talk about the encyclical, and a session on the influence of these kinds of businesses and their impact on their local community.

When these businesses operate in the local community, and build relationships, we can see how it has helped the poor, or built bridges, because in the Economy of Communion we like to tear down walls and build bridges between different entities.

ZENIT: What are some of the ways that these businesses are spreading this person-centered approach?

Mundell: First, it is simply the way they treat their employees, and operate with their clients, their competitors, and the people that surround them in their daily business.

They are not short-term thinkers. They do not just take advantage of an economic situation with a client, but rather they try to have that Gospel attitude of love when they interact with their employees and local businesses.

They are quality-driven, but quality not just to obtain a profit; rather, it is to help the client in a sincere way, to meet their goals and objectives.

People who work inside the businesses as well as the clients sense something different. Often times these clients ask: "What is the motivation behind this business? I've never seen people operate in this kind of way."

Second, it is the way the business operates in their local community. For example, here in Indianapolis we saw a lot of businesses going through difficult times during the economic downturn. We decided to try not only keep ourselves economically viable, but also to help these other small businesses survive by trying to find opportunities for collaboration or to bring them work.

In difficult times like this, going to the extra mile to help someone, even when it does not seem like it will help your business, is recognized by the local community.

We also do things like work in schools and with local churches. In America there are a lot of good businesses that are active locally. We also do that, but we try to go beyond what one might expect in order to become part of the local community.

Lastly, a new thing we have established is an international internship program, where we have youth from all over the world come and work in these businesses to try to understand how to run an ethically driven organization, with a certain set of morals and principles.

These interns come from a variety of fields: management, engineering, administration, etc. They come to both learn the technical aspect, to become better at what they do, and also the entrepreneurial aspect, the heart and soul of the business and how to run it.

This program is just starting to take off, in the last three to five years. This year our business had four interns, from Argentina, Brazil, Italy and Spain.
They came to learn more about environmental work, but also to understand how to operate a business according to this principle the Pope talked about, where you have a sense of communion and relationship as the basis of the business.

ZENIT: What kind of impact have you seen in other countries?

Mundell: In some countries like Brazil and the Philippines the Economy of Communion has had a substantial impact on helping the poor, and has been recognized by the governmental agencies.

The president of Brazil, for example, knows about the Economy of Communion, because it has helped the poor in the favelas, the shantytowns around São Paulo, where the Focolare communities are. We send a lot of the support there from the businesses, and it has helped to employ the poor and has become a sustainable model.

We also have a micro credit program that is operating now, that is relatively new, because in the last two or three years we have understood that it is not just about making those profits and giving them away.

It is how you distribute those that is important, how you encourage, track and sustain the poor on their way out of poverty toward a more sustainable future. That is the real challenge, to do this while respecting their integrity and not be seen as the old style do-gooders.

ZENIT: How has the Economy of Communion network faced the current challenge of the global recession?

Mundell: Fundamentally we have faced it together.

It has been difficult. This year, I'm sure we will have less profit to share worldwide.

But we have also had something unusual happen. During these difficult times, when people are faced with the choice of working with different companies, relationships become even more important.

Thus, those companies that have fostered relationships around the world, have seen that in difficult times, people will work with people they respect and they believe are the right people to work with.

So in one sense we have seen support for what we are doing, from the relationships we have made an effort to develop during the good times.

It is like a sign of God's providence. In trying to do what we think is God's will in the business life, these relationships are actually becoming supportive for us.

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.

Thus, I would say on average, we're doing better than most businesses, though that does not mean that it is not difficult.

We also have a certain attitude about how to accept difficulty, sufferings and challenges. We view difficulties in light of the suffering of Jesus on the cross, when he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"
We understand that in our suffering, we are part of that transformation of the world into the new heaven and new earth.

So even during these difficult times, when we go through it together, and we understand the meaning of suffering, we sustain ourselves perhaps better than the average company.

ZENIT: How did you get involved with it?

Mundell: I started a business with the Economy of Communion 14 years ago.

I previously was the technical head of one of the largest environmental consulting companies in the world, and decided through my involvement with the Focolare Movement that I had this desire.

I had never had the desire to start a business before. I always thought of businessmen and entrepreneurs as people who always seemed to be focused on money and profits.

When Chiara Lubich began this notion of the Economy of Communion, I could see that one could actually make it a vocation, a way to sanctity, a way to live out your Christian life in the world.

So I left my previous position and started my company, and today we have about 20 employees.

ZENIT: Do you find that this is usually how it happens with people, that they get involved with the Economy of Communion and they like the idea, and so they go off and start businesses? Or is it more the idea that people who already own businesses hear about these ideas and try to incorporate them in the established organization?

Mundell: We've had both, actually. We've had people who have been out in the working world a long time, and are very good at what they do, and realize that this is something that will bring meaning to their lives.

There is a big push to find the meaning of work, to ask, "How do I integrate myself and my faith with my work life?"

This is seen as one of those ways of doing that, of practicing your beliefs within the context of a faith tradition. Thus we have people who are experts, and they start a business. Or they convert the company they have according to this new vision and begin operating it according to Economy of Communion principles.

It gives me great hope that people are finding out about this project. It has been one of the most life-changing experiences for me, having been involved with it and being part of the network and community of business owners that are trying to live these principles out.

If one is searching for meaning in the business life, and a sense of joy, one can find it by trying to live this lifestyle that the Pope is encouraging.

And really, it is born out of a lifestyle within the Catholic Church. I think that is how early Christianity spread. People said, "Look how they love one another; look, there's no one in need among them."

That was pretty dramatic in those early years, and I think it is also dramatic today.

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On ZENIT's Web page:
Part 1: www.zenit.org/article-26804?l=english

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