

SPIRITUAL ECONOMY TO LIVE WELL

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When a Brazilian company built the Tucuruí hydroelectric dam, in the Amazon, different groups in defense of the Indians tried to impede the construction. When they could do no more, they insisted that the company pay a just compensation to the Kayapó Indians who were affected by the dam and who lost their lands and crops.

Lawyers for the company responded: There is no need to compensate the Indians. They don't value money. They just receive it and distribute it among all in the village whether they are parents or not.

Hearing this the indigenous chief responded: "It is exactly the contrary. We value the money so much that we make it an object of sharing. Who doesn't value it, is you who do not use it for the community.

The Indian wanted to explain his concept of spiritual economy, that is, economy to live well. He did not have a word to explain this, but he had clarity of the relationship existing between an economy of sharing and the reverence for the spirit of life that inspires all human relations and the communion of all human beings with nature.

1. Another economy is possible

The relationship that some African people like the Zulu call *ubuntu* is the balance in the social relations and economy of peace. The people of the *ioruba* tradition translated this as *Axé*, the energy of love that permeates human relations and the leader with all the goods of nature and of life, and thus the economy. Batholomew Meliá says that for the *Guarani* and for many of the Amazonian Indigenous peoples, this would be called "economy of reciprocity", a form of communion that manifests itself in the cults of food, in the feasts and in the sharing of the hunts and in the fruits of labor.

The religious traditions of the West had difficulty to understand that notion of *spiritual economy* because, in their history, they confused *spirituality* with *spiritualism*. Only in making this distinction, is it possible to re-establish the tie between economy and spirituality that seems to be lost. For the Churches also, in times gone by, economy was a theological term. Fathers of the Greek Church, like Gregory of Nazianzo and Basil of Cesaréia, (s.IV), used it to designate the divine plan of salvation for the world.

The purpose of economy is the administration of the house in common. It is the economy that guarantees the true *Koinonia*, that is, the participation of all and the right of all *to be* and *to have* in common. As this communion is the characteristic of Christian life, it is the proper name of its most important sacrament; the economy is the basis of *koinonia*. Ancient Christian documents said: "If we have in common the heavenly goods, (the Eucharist), how could we not have in common earthly goods?" In the fourth century, John Chrysostom,

bishop of Constantinople, taught: “My *and yours are only words*. Not to help the poor is robbery. All that we possess does not pertain to us, but to all”.

As in all fields of life and human activity, spirituality must give a soul to the economy. Without the spirit, the economy lets itself dominate the market as an idol. And money transforms itself into a fetish. The market, that in itself is a human institution of interchange and of relations between persons and between groups, has become an absolute and disconnected from the rest. To such a point that we could denounce with Jesus: “the market was made for human beings and not human beings for the market”. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the economy became more than ever centered in money and in capital titles, with authoritarian neoliberalism and predominance (arrogance). From 1989, with the fall of real socialism, the tendency toward centralization of capitalism was reinforced and the concentration of oligopolies (“Big Business”) in the most important sectors of the economy. This is producing more poverty, hunger, unemployment and suffering for more than two thirds of all human beings.

Fortunately, various alternative sectors of society have sought “another” economy, a more ethical and human manner to administer the common house that is the land and life. Popular movements develop forms of *economic solidarity*. Spiritual groups speak of an *economy of communion*. Indigenous peoples emphasize an economy starting from the *good life* as the common objective: to arrive at a quality of life for all. They are different modes and alternatives to organize the market relations. In these relations, among the various actors of a transaction, capital, labor, consumerism and institutions, cooperation substitutes for competition, the care for the life of all is above the interest of profit and accumulation.

2. A Theological and Spiritual Vision

The economy that dogmatizes the market as an absolute principle has received theological and spiritual justifications. Theologians linked to the Empire have used biblical texts to exalt the market economy and the ethic of competition as principles of liberty inspired by God. Fortunately, this manner of interpreting and living spirituality is not accepted by the majority of spiritual traditions. These know that the God of competition and profit is an idol that kills and divides human beings.

Frei Carlos Josaphat explains: “Paul lived in two types of culture, Greek and Jewish. He teaches us to distinguish between religions and idolatry. Idolatry is a universal threat. As in all of the New Testament, the Pauline epistles stigmatized greed and corruption, and the ambition to always have more, the famous *pleonexia*, denounced by the Greek ethic and Jewish spirituality. The greedy person, possessed by greed, by the thirst to concentrate riches is the true idol worshiper (Eph 5,5). The root of all evil is greed for money (1Tm 6,10).

So, idolatry is this iniquitous system that impedes the communion and equality of people. The ancient oriental traditions teach the detachment, the renouncing of goods and voluntary poverty as ways of solidarity and a more spiritual life. For Islam, alms giving as a means of sharing and a guarantee of justice is a fundamental commandment of faith. The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that the economy should guarantee the right of the poor the salary of the laborers and the security of the common good (Dt 15 and 24). The prophets

insisted in confidence in God and sharing with your neighbor as the basis for a just economy. In the desert, the people would receive the manna and share it without leaving anything for the next day (Ex 16). The basis for a true adoration of God is an economy of justice and sharing (Is 58). Only this type of *eco-social economy*, does God accept our offerings and our adoration (Jr 7). Jesus concluded: “Do not accumulate treasures on earth, where the thief can steal and moths destroy... You cannot serve two masters. Either serve God or money” (Mt 6,19.24). In order to leave a sign (sacrament) for his disciples, Jesus left them the meal of love, in which one shares the bread and wine. This gesture of radical sharing and of an open table is a sacrament of evangelical economy to be put into practice as a model of spiritual economy for all people and groups that seek a new and different world, with *another economy*, that of communion.

3. To live *another possible economy*

To contest the dominant model of society and economic relations prevalent in the world, without a doubt, the first indispensable condition is to assume a personal and social ethic that impregnates all of our relationships. This ethic of justice and solidarity should guide our way of being, our relationships, both interpersonal as well as social.

The ancient religious traditions had **tithing**, still in use today in some Churches. It is a principle of sharing that we can follow, organizing our personal economy in such a way that a quota of justice and solidarity might be destined every month, be it for help to needy persons or to projects with which we feel committed.

In various places in the world, groups and persons have developed what they call the **balance of justice**, a form of organization of the domestic and personal economy that allows, at the end of the month, to evaluate if our manner of spending is in accord with that in which we believe and propose to live. This new ethic will make us discern that the “soul” of the products that we use and buy, are not produced by child labor in sweat shop conditions or by industries and brands that exploit and destroy nature.

For the validity that another economy is possible, we have to take care to preserve **spaces of gratuity** in relation between people and with nature. These spaces of gratuity and reciprocity are expressions of love and reverence for our life, the life of others and all living beings. The *other possible economy* is an economy that goes beyond the dealings of commerce and concretely savors life in new relations of love and community. Rubem Alves goes so far as to say: “The economy can be a science of the means necessary for the erotic realization of persons (...) It can make possible our dreams of human and artistic pleasure. In this sense, the economy is the divine art of recreating life and the universe”.