Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Anne Godbout | December 5-6, 2025

Anne Godbout is the founder and chief executive of Spiritours, a Montreal travel company specializing in pilgrimages and what it calls soulful journeys, founded in 2003 and now in its third decade. She had worked in tourism for many years when a three-month journey through Southeast Asia at twenty-seven gave her the idea of putting her two passions, travel and spirituality, together; her employer of the time backed her in setting up on her own. She met the Focolare movement at Loppiano shortly before founding the company, and Spiritours has been an Economy of Communion (EoC) business from its first day. In this interview she describes that beginning, what the EoC is and how she practices it with customers, employees, competitors and the wider community, the providence she has seen in the company's life, and the prayer and discernment she brings to running it.

This transcript is arranged by subject rather than in the order of the recording. Anne Godbout's words are unchanged. The interviewer's questions have been shortened in places. After its first appearance in each part, the Economy of Communion is abbreviated to EoC.

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Could you tell us your name, your position, and a short description of the company?

Anne Godbout: My name is Anne Godbout. I'm from Montreal, Canada. Spiritours is a tour operator specialized in soulful journeys and Christian pilgrimages. Our mission is to facilitate personal and spiritual growth on a trip, and to help people stop and reflect on their lives. We've been doing that since 2003, and our vision is to transform lives.

I'm the CEO of the company. I was the founder, the owner. I'm the one in charge; I make sure everything goes well, that everyone is happy. It's my baby, so I feel like the mother of my company.

Interviewer: Tell me where the name comes from.

Anne Godbout: The name was given to me by my ex-employer. He wasn't even keen on it. He wanted me to be clearer, because I had given him some names I'd come up with, and he said, it has to be more specific: you're trying to do spiritual tours, you could call it Spiritours.

He didn't even like that name. I loved it. And I wanted it to be universal: Spiritours works in French, it works in English, and it says what it says.

Part Two: Coming to the Focolare

The vision

Interviewer: Tell us the story of your company. How did it come to be?

Anne Godbout: It all started in the year 2000. I went on a trip that literally changed my life.

I was at a crossroad in my life, and I decided to go away for three months backpacking in Southeast Asia. The destination was not what was important; it was really an inner journey. I needed to go far away. I needed to find myself. I was really on a quest. I was twenty-seven years old at the time.

And I went there with a book, to find my purpose in life. Every morning I was reading it, and there were exercises, kind of like self-workshops, and I was doing them every day, and I found out a lot about myself. But also the encounters I had on my trip, the people I met: it was just eye-opening. It was a transforming experience.

At one point I was in Vietnam, on the beach, doing an exercise. There was a meditation. It's a priest who wrote the book, but he was also really ahead of his time. His exercise was: you do a meditation to go within yourself, and then you project yourself five years later.

And I had a vision of what I'm doing today. I saw myself leading spiritual tours. It was like a revelation, because I thought, wow, why didn't I think about that before? It was the union of my two passions, both my passion for travelling and my passion for spirituality. And it was a big yes inside of me. That's what I really wanted to do.

I had been working in tourism for over eleven years at that point, and I didn't know if I wanted to continue, because I had seen things that bothered me, mass tourism, and so on. But what I was living was this eye-opening experience where I was also opening my heart, opening my mind. I wanted other people to experience the same thing, and to discover themselves.

It was also a spiritual quest, and I deepened my faith. I had a gospel with me, and my trip companions were wondering, why are you reading the gospel? It was rediscovering the richness of it all, and meeting people from other faiths. It was really a wonderful journey.

So when I came back, at first I didn't know how. I thought, this is for later. I don't know when. And I just put it on the side, and I continued working for the travel agency I was working for.

At one point I felt I needed change, and I got a job offer from another company, a big one. I had been working for over eleven years for the same company. So I talked with my boss and I told him, I got an offer, and I'm thinking about accepting it. And he said, why? Is it because of the salary? Maybe we can improve your conditions. I said, I don't know, I need some change. And he asked me: where do you see yourself in five years?

I had never told him about my vision, so I told him. And he said, wow, this is a great idea, Anne. If you stay with us, we will help you do it.

And he kept his word. I had also said I was attracted by Montreal; I had friends there. So he said, well, we need a representative in Montreal. Go to Montreal, continue with us, and we'll help you start your company. It was amazing.

A few years later, I did start it, after I took a sabbatical year. I felt I needed to rethink, to deepen some things. And that's when I met the Focolare movement, just before going away for a year. I decided to visit the little town of Loppiano in Italy. I really felt called to live the spirituality. Actually I went to

Luminosa first; that's where I felt the call first. But then Loppiano was so strong.

So after that year, I started the company, with the help of my previous boss. That's how it started.

Finding the Economy of Communion

Interviewer: How did you get connected with the Economy of Communion?

Anne Godbout: When I took a year off, that was in the year 2002, just before starting my company in 2003, I went to visit some of the little towns of the Focolare movement. I felt a call to get to know more about their spirituality. How to live the gospel in everyday life really attracted me.

And then I heard about the EoC. How business people were able to put the gospel into their daily lives at work, into their business. I just couldn't believe it existed. I thought it was so wonderful.

Then I went to an EoC meeting, and I heard businessmen and women talking about providence. And I felt, wow, this is what I want. This is what I want to live. So I often describe it as the soil where I planted the seed of Spiritours.

Interviewer: Was there anything else that inspired you toward the EoC?

Anne Godbout: I learned more about the EoC through a book called *Ten Years of the Economy of Communion*. It was published for the tenth anniversary, and it has experiences from EoC entrepreneurs all over the world. It really inspired me. I wanted to be part of that after reading the book.

The Ideal

Interviewer: What has it meant for you personally to live the spirituality of the Focolare?

Anne Godbout: That's a deep question.

When I first met the Ideal of unity, in one of the Focolare's little towns in Italy, I really felt a call. But I learned there were many vocations, and I wanted to know: where is my place? What's my vocation? I really felt I had to get the answer right away.

So I spoke with a focolarina over there, a member of the movement, and she told me: *all you have to do is love, and God will manifest himself.* And the answer came later.

It was not so clear at the beginning. It was clear for Spiritours, but not for my vocation within the movement. And it became clear when I got interested in the EoC. That's really something I felt attracted to. It was explained to me that this is really what a volunteer of God does: they take the Ideal of unity, of gospel love, into the world. And I thought, wow, yes, that's what I want to do. That's what attracted me to this vocation, to bring this Ideal outside, into the economy, into the workplace, into the business world.

And one thing that really touched me about the Ideal is that the spirituality of unity is for everyone. It's not just for Christians. No matter what your belief is, everyone is welcome.

That's what I found so wonderful, because in travelling I met a lot of wonderful people from other religions, other faiths, or people with no religion but really a good heart. Loving people. Genuinely loving. And I thought: are these people going to hell? It doesn't make sense, because I had heard that from someone, and I thought, no, this does not make sense. He is asking us to love our neighbour.

And Chiara Lubich says it very clearly. She was teaching how to love, the art of loving. That's what I want to help bring to the world as well, and to the business world, and everywhere.

Interviewer: What do you mean by the art of loving?

Anne Godbout: The art of loving comes from the Gospel. It's how Jesus taught us to love, and it's universal.

It's love your neighbor as yourself. It's loving to the extent of giving your life; that's what he did for us. So it doesn't necessarily mean dying, but maybe dying to your ideas. Giving more space to the other. Sharing what you own, what you are, your talents. Giving a smile. There are many ways of loving.

And I like how Chiara Lubich came up with the idea of putting the art of loving on a cube. I always carry it with me, because I just love it. She made it to teach children how to love, but I think it's good for adults too, to remind us.

On each side there's one of them. To love Jesus in everyone, to see the divinity in each person, that God is really inside each one of us. To love everyone: not just the people who are nice to you. Jesus challenges us to love everyone, no matter their race or religion, without borders. To love your enemies; that's a big one.

To be the first to love means to take the initiative. Not to wait for the other to come and love you first, but to do it first, because God loves us first.

To love until it becomes reciprocal, not to give up even if the other is not really open, or seems to be on his guard. To keep loving that person, and one day it might become reciprocal.

And to make yourself one with the other. It means if the other person is sad, to share his sadness. To open yourself, empty yourself, to receive what the other is going through. And if he's happy, to rejoice with him or her.

So, yes, it's beautiful.

When I was looking for my purpose in life, I read that book by Father Jean Monbourquette. With the different exercises, I came up with a statement, which was: to share this fire inside of me, God's love, that makes me sing and dance out of joy. So I felt that basically my vocation is to love, like Saint Teresa. I think that's why the Ideal spoke so much to me.

That's what I try to do in my everyday life. The EoC has taught me that you can do it in the business world as well, in the workplace. I even write notes and quotes about love in the meeting room for the employees. Once in a while I put up a different quote about loving.

So I think that's my purpose. Well, it's everyone's purpose, but everyone has a different way of expressing it, I guess.

Interviewer: You use the word 'Ideal'. Chiara Lubich was in her early twenties when she began to share what she understood as a light from God with her first companions, and one day, crossing a bridge in Trent with Natalia, her first companion, she said they would call that light the Ideal. The name stuck.

Anne Godbout: I didn't know that.

I use the word Ideal a lot, so I feel I need to explain it a bit. It comes from Chiara Lubich, and from when she started, well, she didn't start a movement. It just started by itself, because she consecrated her life to God, and her first companions were with her. She had this light from the Holy Spirit, and with her companions they said, maybe we could call it the Ideal.

To me, when I first heard it, I thought, wow, that's a nice way to summarize the spirituality of unity. For me it's an ideal, like a purpose, like a goal. So that's my interpretation of the word.

Interviewer: What does it mean that you are a volunteer of God?

Anne Godbout: The Volunteers of God is a branch of the Focolare movement, basically it's to bring the Ideal outside. We're like the arms and legs of the movement. It's a group of people who decided; it's really a vocation. It's a call to build unity in all the spheres of life.

And I meet with a group of other volunteers; it's every two weeks for our group. It's really great, because we can share our experiences. We always have a meditation, and we share our experiences from daily life. It's more than a support group. It's really helping me live my spirituality, live my faith.

A job and a vocation

Interviewer: What is the difference between having a job and having a vocation?

Anne Godbout: So different. Having a job is just working, and you don't really own it. Having a vocation is really something that transcends you, and you feel you were born for it.

Family and friends

Interviewer: How has your family responded to your decision to run your business according to EoC values?

Anne Godbout: I think the first person I told about the EoC, and about wanting my business to be part of it, was my dad. My dad was very supportive. He was my inspiration for a lot of things in my life, in faith; he really lives out his faith. So his approval was important for me.

And my husband, well, I got married after I started my company and after I joined the EoC, so I told him about it. He was quite impressed, and he came with me to some of the EoC meetings.

But sometimes he challenges me. He's not so sure about some of my practices, because he thinks sometimes I'm too soft with the employees, or that I should keep some of the profits for the family as well. So he's helping me keep a balance. It's not a bad thing; he helps me put some of my choices into perspective.

Interviewer: How do your friends respond when they hear about the way you run your business?

Anne Godbout: It's not as if I were always talking about it. My friends know a little bit, but very little.

In my nucleus, with the other volunteers of God, I really feel their support, that's for sure. But with other friends, sometimes I don't even bother explaining; they won't understand. Still, I try to witness when I get an opportunity, and most of the time I get good reactions.

Part Three: Spiritours

The work

Interviewer: What is your primary role in your company?

Anne Godbout: My primary role in the company is CEO, so, making sure everything goes well. Helping the employees. The customer service. Being there if there's a problem. Making sure everything is good with all the numbers. And I love it. I love what I'm doing.

Interviewer: What do you love most about what you do?

Anne Godbout: What I love most is to put together a tour, to design a tour. With an organizer, or with a spiritual director who wants to do a special pilgrimage. We design it together. He tells me where he wants to go, and I put all the pieces together to make a memorable journey.

A different way of travelling

Interviewer: How is your travel company different from what people expect of a travel agency?

Anne Godbout: Spiritours offers a different way of travelling. It's not tourism, it's really travel with a purpose. And the purpose is spiritual; that's why we're called Spiritours.

It's not just visiting holy sites and churches and beautiful places. It's about meeting the locals in a true way. It's about understanding other cultures. And it's about building communion within the group of people travelling together.

So we try to build unity, and the tour leader has this responsibility to build unity. That's what we tell them when we have our training every year. They have a very important role.

To facilitate that, they will have sharings at the end of the day. On the pilgrimages, of course, they have Mass every day, so the priest will take the opportunity in the homily to make links between the gospel of the day and what they are living on the pilgrimage. And for the other tours, which are more about personal growth, the tour leader is there to really bring this unity. The sharing at the end of the day really helps to build it, and to enrich one another from what each person experienced during the day. It's really a mutual enrichment.

Interviewer: A lot of tour operators would not have Mass; they'd say it would put some people off, and they want it to be attractive to as many as possible. Why is daily Mass so important to the way you operate?

Anne Godbout: Our customers always ask us, do we have to go to Mass every day? And we tell them, you're free, you don't have to go. We do have Mass every day on the pilgrimages.

And most of the time they all come, because they feel the priest is so humane. It's such a special atmosphere to celebrate Mass, sometimes in a holy site, in beautiful churches. And it brings the group together. So it's important to me that they have this experience. It really makes a difference.

Interviewer: How would you explain a pilgrimage to somebody who doesn't know what that is?

Anne Godbout: A pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place. Actually, even our life on earth is described as a pilgrimage in the church. And it's so true.

So to go on a pilgrimage is to go to a holy place, but it's not just going there. It's the journey, an inner journey as well. So we try to help people have that inner journey, not just go and take pictures in front of a beautiful shrine.

First of all, the pace is slower than on regular tours, to really take the time to take in the sceneries, the places, the people we meet, and a lot of time to share with the other pilgrims and with the locals. That's really important.

And nature has a very important place in our tours, because it's awe-inspiring. It brings you to be amazed, which to me is a gate to the transcendent.

Interviewer: Can you share more about what those spiritual tours are? Who is attracted to them, and what's an example of something you might do?

Anne Godbout: I'd like to share about the last pilgrimage I had, the joy of accompanying it, with a priest. He had the initiative to come and see me and ask if we could do a pilgrimage with the indigenous people in Canada. Because the Pope had come just a year before, to ask forgiveness from the Catholic Church because of the boarding schools.

They were abused, and unfortunately there is a big wound, because they took away the children, aged five, and put them in those schools. They emptied the villages of the children. There were no more children. And the children were cut off from their parents. They cut their hair, burned their clothes. They wanted to erase their culture. It was the government's idea, but they asked the religious communities to lead the schools, because they were there for education.

So the Pope came to ask forgiveness. And that priest thought: if we really want to build bridges with the indigenous people, we need to go and see them. So he asked me, do you think we could do a pilgrimage and meet them?

So we did. And it was just fabulous.

He had the idea to meet different communities, and we designed the tour to do that. There's actually an organization encouraged by the bishops to help the indigenous people, and through them we got contacts, so that we could really go deeper and have a real encounter, not just go and see the museums.

It was a fabulous pilgrimage. Every day we would have Mass. There were a few priests with us, and there was even a bishop.

We were there for Truth and Reconciliation Day. And one day we had a testimonial from an indigenous lady who survived the schools. She told us her story, but in a way that was really beautiful, because she was talking about her healing process.

At the end we had a sharing, and when it came to the bishop to say something, he just stood up. He asked her permission to come near her, and he kneeled down, and he asked forgiveness in the name of the church.

It was just so moving. Everyone was crying, and they hugged each other. It was a beautiful moment.

To me, that's what it's all about: true encounter, and acknowledging what people have lived. It's not a typical pilgrimage. This one was very special, but we now do it every year. We go and meet different communities. It's very meaningful to me.

How the company is run

Interviewer: Could you give an example about the organizational structure of your business?

Anne Godbout: We established a collaborative management style, in line with our values. In French we call it *collégial*, collegial management, where decisions are taken together with the employees and you value their input.

We really want the employees to participate in the decision-making. So we have a meeting every week, and when we have decisions to take, we really encourage them to give their opinions. We really value their opinions and their ideas. So it's not just the Economy of Communion way, but it made sense, and it's really how I like to manage. The co-director really likes it too, and of course the employees like that we take them into consideration.

The collaborative management is really helping us. First of all, we get the employees' input, which leads to great ideas we sometimes didn't even think of. But also, they feel they own it. They feel involved, and they appreciate it, so they're more motivated.

Interviewer: How has the EoC influenced your business structure and your procedures?

Anne Godbout: For organizing the structure of the business and the procedures, a lot of what we put in place came from the employees. They had ideas, we listened to them, and we put them in place.

Marketing

Interviewer: What about marketing? Is there something counterintuitive there?

Anne Godbout: We realized at one point that even though we were spending money on advertising, in magazines and so on, most of our clients came from word of mouth, and from partnerships that we started building. This could be frowned upon in the business world, but we don't spend a lot of money on marketing. We put our focus on the partnerships instead.

So instead of paying for an ad on television, we go and see the Catholic television station and we say: how about we do a pilgrimage together? You advertise it, and if we get people, then you get a free place on the pilgrimage, or you get some money back; we calculate a certain percentage that goes to them, to

pay back for all the advertising.

And because sometimes it works very well, it helps them to continue their good work of spreading gospel values through the media. We did that with Catholic radio too. And with some dioceses, of course. And Saint Joseph's Oratory does a pilgrimage with us every year. And also Bayard Canada; they print the booklets that are in the churches every Sunday, so the advertising is there. We've had that partnership for about three years, and they attract a lot of people. It's really wonderful.

Interviewer: And marketing?

Anne Godbout: When I studied administration at university (I did that after I started working for a travel agency, going to evening classes) I started with a marketing class, and I loved it. Because basically it's all about how you transmit what you do, to attract people.

Even though we don't spend a lot of money on marketing, we try to make a clear message of what we do, on our website and our social media. And I have someone helping me with that inside the company, who has a gift for communication. She really captured the essence of Spiritours, of our mission, and she's able to communicate it through social media. It's the image of our company.

Interviewer: Can you describe what you don't do for marketing, and then what you do?

Anne Godbout: We don't spend a lot of money on advertising. First of all, when we started, we were small and we didn't have the budget. But we realized that people came to us by word of mouth. So I learned that it's better to give a good experience, and then people will talk about your company, about their experience, and that's how we get more clients. So we want to give a good experience.

And of course the website and the social media: we want to convey, to spread, the message of what kind of experience they could have on our tours. So we spend a lot of energy on that, especially since I have someone inside the company who's really good at communication. She really understood the essence of Spiritours, our mission, our philosophy, and she conveys it very well: the pictures she chooses, the messages she puts on social media. I think people connect with that as well, and that helps.

Part Four: The Economy of Communion

What it is

Interviewer: How do you describe the Economy of Communion to people who have never heard of it?

Anne Godbout: We are proud to be an EoC company.

When people ask me what the EoC is, I tell them it's like a social economy, but the business is in the market. Basically we share the profits: the first part for the needy, the second part to transmit the culture of giving (I often say, to build a new man, like Saint Paul says, to build new men and women) and the third part to develop the company.

But it's not just about sharing the profits. It's about building communion, building unity with everyone: the employees, the providers, the customers, everyone we meet. It's so enriching to build bridges with them. And with the local communities that we meet on our trips.

So it's all about that, and so much more. Ph.D. students have written theses about the EoC.

I find it's also very similar to sustainable development, because we care about the environment, we care about the people, the social aspect, and also about the economy. It's similar, but there's more, because it's our faith, that we live every day. We try to put into practice the art of loving. The Gospel in action. So, fraternity. It's about giving of yourself to others.

Interviewer: How would you explain it to someone who has never heard of it but is interested and open?

Anne Godbout: The EoC is about communion of goods and communion between people. Basically we're putting the person at the centre instead of the profit.

It's all about relationships, with the employees, with the customers, with the providers, with the partners. It's about nourishing those relationships. And reciprocity, and sharing, and unity, and sharing the profits with the needy.

Which is so rewarding, because it gives so much joy. I think giving is really in our DNA. Although sometimes it's hard, it gives so much joy.

A lifestyle

Interviewer: Would you say your business was an EoC business from the very beginning?

Anne Godbout: Yes, we started as an EoC business.

I had met someone from the Focolare movement who was encouraging me, because I told her how interested I was in the EoC but that I didn't know how to start. I said, I'm not going to make a profit when I start. And she said: *you don't need to give profit right away. All you need to do is love.*

That was just so beautiful. It struck me. I thought, wow, okay. Let me love. It sounded easy, but it's not. It stayed with me.

Interviewer: Many people say the EoC is not just a way of doing business but a lifestyle, or a vocation. Is that accurate in your own experience?

Anne Godbout: I think the EoC is a lifestyle, without any pretension in saying that.

Because I'm immersed in the Ideal, it feels like a lifestyle, because it's natural. It's part of my life. And sometimes I don't even realize it. For me it's just natural, but other people think, why are you doing this?

Because of my vocation as a volunteer of God in the Focolare movement, I just feel the EoC is a way of life. Basically, it's being true to my values. So it feels natural. But some people don't understand. They say, why are you doing this? For me, it feels right.

Interviewer: Why are you doing what? What's the contrast that people see?

Anne Godbout: Some people don't understand why I share my profits, for example. Even some relatives, they think it's wonderful, but they don't really understand. And sometimes they think I'm too soft with the employees.

Communion in the workplace

Interviewer: The EoC claims that business can bring about communion among people. Have you seen that take place in your own business?

Anne Godbout: The EoC really helps put communion in the workplace. I've seen it. I've felt it with my employees, but I prefer to say the community, not just those who work in the office, but all the people around us: the collaborators, the tour leaders, the priests, even the customers, the pilgrims. They're all part of the community.

Often I hear, when people come to our office, that it feels like there's a homey atmosphere. And the employees often say it feels like a family. That's very precious for me.

And I notice it also when it's not there. Unfortunately I've had a few experiences (it's now our twenty-third year) where we've had a few negative influencers. They stirred the atmosphere in a negative way, and that was very hard. I felt the lack of harmony and the lack of unity. So it made me appreciate it even more when it came back, when we built more bridges.

Interviewer: The EoC claims that business can bring about communion among people. How does that happen?

Anne Godbout: It happens when you are ready to listen to the other, and really acknowledge what they're going through. When you open your soul and empty it, to really make yourself one with the other. And hear their truth, and not be ashamed to give your truth as well. I think that's how you build communion.

Practising business this way

Interviewer: When somebody asks you what it means to practise business the EoC way, what do you tell them?

Anne Godbout: Doing business the EoC way is simple. It's to build communion with others, and to do the communion of goods, to share, to give.

It seems simple, but it's not. It's really to practise the values of reciprocity. To share, and to love, of course.

Interviewer: And if somebody asked what it looks like to run a business the EoC way, what does it look like?

Anne Godbout: I think it looks like a family. People who love each other, who help each other, who don't try to compete with one another but really are there for one another. I think that's what it looks like.

In freedom

Interviewer: The Economy of Communion's original name was the Economy of Communion in Freedom. How do you see it as something that gives people freedom?

Anne Godbout: I like the words *in freedom*, because it gives us the freedom to do it, I was going to say *our way*, but each person is unique and has their own talent. It's our way, but God's way. So the freedom part is important.

And I give a lot of freedom to my employees to do the work. As long as they reach the goal, they can do it how they want. That helped me get out of micromanaging, to leave the *how* to them. They decide the how, as long as they reach what's important, the goal.

But sometimes employees tell me they feel it's too much freedom, that they need boundaries. There was one employee recently who told me that. And boundaries are of course important as well, even for children, when you raise children, there has to be a balance between freedom and boundaries.

It's the same with the freedom about the profit you share. You need guidance from up above, otherwise you're lost. Sometimes I also feel like my employee, that I would need more boundaries. But all the guidelines are there in the EoC. So sometimes I just take the time to remember the guidelines, everything I've learned through the EoC. It gives me a path to follow.

A culture of giving

Interviewer: Chiara Lubich contrasted the EoC with traditional business by saying we should live a culture of giving instead of a culture of having. How have you practised that?

Anne Godbout: When I heard about the culture of giving, I had never heard about that before. It comes from Chiara Lubich. And I thought, yes, this is the culture I want to live. Instead of a culture of having, which is the dominant culture in our world, in the Occidental world, at least. Instead of trying to accumulate, to give.

It was seen as a utopia when Chiara came up with the idea of the EoC. But she said no, it's not a utopia, because it's in the DNA of every human person. You really fulfil yourself by giving and loving.

And it's so true. That's what I try to live. It's not always easy, even after twenty-some years. You still have the temptation sometimes to keep for yourself. But when you decide to give, it gives you so much joy. So she was right. It's really an important culture. I hope this culture continues to grow, and to be contagious.

Interviewer: You almost quoted her verbatim.

Anne Godbout: That quote from Chiara Lubich is on my wall. I had it printed on a big plexiglass, about this big.

And that was also not from me. I went to Spain and visited an entrepreneur of the EoC who had a business there. I had met him at an international EoC convention, and he said, if you come to Seville, come and visit us. So I went to visit his company with my husband. And they had this huge quote from

Chiara as you enter the company. It was there, and that gave me the idea to get the same thing in French.

Gift, reciprocity and communion

Interviewer: The EoC says that business starts with a gift. Then the gift people give back is reciprocity. And reciprocity, if it endures, becomes a deeper relationship, which is communion. Those are the three distinguishing marks of the EoC: gift, reciprocity and communion.

Anne Godbout: Gift, reciprocity and communion. And that's what I've been talking about since we started yesterday.

I guess the vision was my gift. I had a vision, and I didn't know what to do with that vision, which was so beautiful. Then I told my ex-boss, when I was still working for him, and he believed in me. He believed in that vision, and he helped me. So I started Spiritours, which is quite amazing.

And I stayed connected with him for four years. He had even planned, in the contract, for the moment when I felt I could fly on my own. We stayed on very good terms, and he just let me fly on my own. That was a gift also.

The other gift was the EoC: in between the vision and the start-up, I found out about it. That was a gift too, because it taught me how I could really live my faith in my business.

So, lots of gifts. And I'm trying to give back today, and to build communion.

Interviewer: Some say the heart of the EoC is the human desire to give and to create communion. Have you experienced that in your own business activities?

Anne Godbout: Yes, definitely. The heart of the EoC is to give. The human heart desires to give. It gives purpose, and it brings joy.

And Pope Francis told us that giving is the remedy to greed. And it's so true. It's the best remedy. And it gives meaning.

Who it is for

Interviewer: Does the EoC have something to offer someone who doesn't own a business? People often say, I don't have a business, so I can't do this.

Anne Godbout: I noticed at the EoC meetings that there were people who were not entrepreneurs but who were interested in that way of living in their work, and I heard their testimonials as well. They were sharing experiences.

So it is possible even for non-entrepreneurs to live it, to build unity and communion with the people they work with. And why not also to share what they earn, for the poor? Or to share their talents, share their time with other people. There are many ways they can do it, even if they don't own a business.

Interviewer: What advice would you give a young person who is drawn to business but afraid it could drain their soul? I have students who say they will go into social work instead.

Anne Godbout: That's a very good question, and it's so true.

I think the EoC is a remedy against losing your soul if you start a business. It really is. There is just so much temptation in this world, and this helps you stay focused on your values and live them in your daily life.

What makes it distinctive

Interviewer: There are many other kinds of social entrepreneurship now compared with thirty-five years ago. What still makes the EoC special?

Anne Godbout: Nowadays we hear a lot about the social economy, and I think the EoC is unique because it's linked to spirituality, the spirituality of unity. That's what makes it special. It's not just doing good deeds; it's rooted in a spirituality. It's linked to our faith. It's a way of living your faith in your work, in your business. That's what makes it so unique. It's not just doing good; it's doing something that's meaningful.

The EoC is also international, and I've had the joy and the privilege of visiting a few EoC companies around the world.

I visited Brazil, where it all started. We were there for the twenty-fifth anniversary, and I saw the industrial park where it began. I was amazed: that industrial park was actually Chiara's dream, to have industrial parks where you really have that bond. And I felt it so much in Brazil. They were really there to help one another, even though they were from different businesses. They had common spaces for meetings. I felt there was a strong unity among them. That was really nice to see.

I also went to Spain, and visited a company which is a daycare for the elderly. I was touched by how the entrepreneur was so passionate about what he was doing, so proud, and I felt real fraternity in his team. Everyone was smiling and welcoming me so warmly, even though they didn't know me. I saw joy; even the elderly people who were there seemed happy. They had different workshops, and I thought the idea was just so wonderful. It felt like an inspiration.

I've been to Italy also, and visited the industrial park there. It's so nice to meet these entrepreneurs from all over the world. And in the Philippines, I wasn't there, but I met the owner of a bank in the Philippines, where they give micro-credits to poor people. It's just so inspiring to see all these ideas, all these entrepreneurs.

They have different practices in different countries, but you feel that it's the same charism. So you feel like it's family, even though they are from other countries, with a different company in a totally different field. You feel you're with your family. It's very special.

I was in France as well. I met the parents when I was in Brazil, and then I went to visit them just outside of Paris. There's also a very beautiful community life there.

Interviewer: Some say part of the EoC's mission is to redistribute wealth to help the poor. How do you see that as essential to what the EoC is about?

Anne Godbout: I think it's essential to share the wealth. There are so many people underprivileged. And these days the gap is getting wider. It's not fair. Some people are so rich they don't know what to do with their money.

We need to redistribute, and not just a few people. It should spread, and I don't understand why it doesn't spread more. Big companies should share their profits, not just give some donation, but share more. I think that's the way it should be.

It's hard to express, but I really think our world needs more people who share their wealth, to reduce that gap between rich and poor. It shouldn't be twenty per cent of people having eighty per cent of the world's wealth. That's so not fair.

Interviewer: What does North American EoC have to offer the rest of the EoC? It was started in Brazil, by Italians.

Anne Godbout: I think North America has a lot to offer the EoC by its wealth, its creativity and innovation in different fields, and also by its knowledge.

The Focolare and the Economy of Communion

Interviewer: What does the Focolare movement mean to you?

Anne Godbout: The Focolare movement really spoke to me when I met the spirituality of unity, because it's all about living the gospel in your daily life. It's about being coherent, living your faith, basically.

Interviewer: And how has the Focolare shaped the way you understand and practise the EoC?

Anne Godbout: The spirituality of the Focolare movement really helped me embody the EoC, because it gives you tools to be coherent with your values, and to deal with all the situations you face according to what the gospel says. Deep values of sharing, of loving.

What it has meant

Interviewer: Looking back since 2003, over twenty years now: what impact has the EoC had on your life?

Anne Godbout: I think the EoC impacted me through meeting other entrepreneurs, and professors who were interested in what we were doing.

I'm thinking of one professor who came into the business to write a book about different businesses, Professor John Gallagher. He helped me realize the difference it makes. It was nice to see it through his eyes. It's a culture. It's a way of living. And sometimes, because you've been influenced, you embody it without even realizing it. So he made me realize what was happening.

And I owe it to the movement. It was something I received. It was a gift, that I'm trying to live as well in my company. I owe it to the pioneers.

Interviewer: If you were encouraging a friend to try to live the EoC lifestyle, how would you motivate them?

Anne Godbout: There are all these emotions going through my mind when I try to think about how to motivate my friends to join the EoC. There is hope and despair at the same time. Because for me it was such a revelation, when I heard about the EoC, I told all my friends about it, and I didn't really succeed in having them join.

It's so extraordinary. I couldn't do it without it. It's a big motivator for me to live my faith in my business. It has taught me how to live my faith in the business, and it makes so much more sense to me. It gives meaning to my job.

I think I would have quit doing what I'm doing, because sometimes it's just so hard. But with the EoC, I feel I'm not alone. God is helping me. And if I run into difficulties, I just entrust it to him. It makes all the difference.

Interviewer: Have you had the chance to mentor or guide others in the EoC?

Anne Godbout: I did inspire two people, and I mentored them for a while, but they gave up, so I was so disappointed. But that's life. Sometimes you sow seeds, and you don't know. It might inspire people. It doesn't mean they will join the EoC, but it might inspire them to do something similar.

Interviewer: You said Joan was an inspiration to you. Would you share what inspired you?

Anne Godbout: I was really inspired by Joan Duggan, who is an EoC entrepreneur. Might as well say the full name.

Back in the day, at my first EoC meeting, I met that woman and I thought she was incredible. She embodied the EoC. She lived it, and you could feel her passion about it. There was such humility in her, too. But she was living it a hundred per cent. She was giving all of herself, all of the profits.

And she was really building communion with everyone. For a while she was leading the EoC meetings once a month; she would give a meditation, and then she would take the time to make sure everyone could share an experience on the call. She was really keeping us together. I felt part of a community. It was very special, and she really encouraged me a lot. She still does. So in a way she was like my mentor.

Part Five: Living it in the business

Customers

Interviewer: Can you share a few moments when Economy of Communion values guided a real decision with your customers, that people might consider countercultural?

Anne Godbout: The way we deal with customers may seem to some people countercultural.

First of all, if customers call to get more information, we take the time to really listen to them, to make sure we answer their needs. Sometimes they will say, oh, I really want to go to Santiago de Compostela to do the walking pilgrimage, but maybe they're not fit enough to walk twenty kilometres a day with a

backpack. We encourage them to train ahead of time, of course. But for some people it's not right, so they could go to Santiago another way, or do another pilgrimage. We encourage them to take a bus tour that will bring them there, and they can walk the last five or ten kilometres, and they're happy. It's an experience. It's not the same, but still.

So we really take the time to listen. A lot of our travellers are in their sixties, some in their seventies, even some in their fifties. And some people are so lonely that they will tell us their lives.

I tell the employees: in another business they would calculate how much time you spend on the phone, and you'd have to be quicker. Here, we take the time to listen. Maybe not for hours, but we take the time even if it has nothing to do with the pilgrimage. First to make sure it answers their needs, and second, to really connect and build communion with the customers. And if they come to our office, we take the time to offer them a coffee or a tea. They appreciate it.

Another example of being a bit countercultural with customers is that sometimes we're a bit soft, when people experience a problem with money. They don't have the funds to pay by the deadline. First we ask for a deposit, then they have to pay sixty days prior. Sometimes we give them a little more time, or the chance to pay a little now and a little later.

This came with time. At the beginning I was moulded by the other company where I worked, where we had to follow the rules, the terms and conditions, no exception. With time, I became more easygoing. For the employees, of course, it's hard to make those decisions, so they come and see me and explain the situation, and we try to see what we can do.

Also for the penalties. If customers cancel, normally they lose everything within sixty days of departure, but we see with our providers whether we can get some money back, and then sometimes we give that money to the customer. I say *of course*, but it's not so natural in some people's minds. You should follow the terms and conditions, it says no refund. But we try to help if we can.

Of course we encourage them to buy travel insurance, because sometimes it's not possible, and that's why it's in our terms and conditions. We tell them upfront. But if they don't have insurance, then we try to help them, or we try to find someone else to replace them. Often we have a waiting list, so we find someone else, and we only charge for changing the name. That helps the customers.

Interviewer: Are there any moments that come to mind about loving customers?

Anne Godbout: One time I went on a tour with hundreds of pilgrims. It was a big event in Rome, at the Vatican, for the canonization of a Canadian saint.

And there was a man who came by himself. He was, I think, around ninety years old. He was not able to follow the rhythm of the group when we had a city tour or something similar. And I found out that he was a bit rejected by his peers, because he was quite grumpy, to tell the truth. So nobody wanted to take care of him.

So I started taking care of him. I was leading the whole organization, but there was one escort per bus, so I was delegating, telling them what to do, and then I would go for a walk with him. I discovered he loved ice cream. Not every day, but I spent a little bit of time with him.

It was nice. And he was totally transformed. I was loving him, and I saw the transformation. He went from a grumpy old man to a very kind person, very thankful for the time I spent with him. So, yes, it touched me.

Employees

Interviewer: What about with employees?

Anne Godbout: The EoC has inspired us to deal differently with employees too. It's not the traditional way of doing business.

Sometimes I don't realize it. But the last employee we hired comes from a big company. She worked in a big travel agency where they had goals (how much in sales you have to make per day, per week) and her supervisor was always checking her numbers. She said it was very stressful.

And now she comes into our environment, and it's totally different. I don't look at numbers so often. She loves that it's not so stressful, and that it's quiet; where she worked it was noisy, there were many employees.

So she was very happy, but she was also a bit destabilized, because she's used to having sales goals. And I didn't realize that until she told me. She felt a bit lost. She said, well, aren't you looking at the numbers? And I said, oh, don't worry, it's fine.

But then I felt she also needed to have some boundaries. So I looked at the numbers. It was just two months into the new financial year. I knew we were doing fine, but then I really looked, and I was proud to tell her: you know what, we're fifteen per cent over what we did last year at the same time. She was so happy. She said, I looked at my numbers and they're pretty good. And I confirmed it: yes, they're good. You've got good numbers. She was very happy.

Interviewer: And about loving employees?

Anne Godbout: To love my employees, I always try to find creative things to offer them. I try to spoil them a little bit.

During the pandemic I heard that employers were offering free lunch for their employees. I thought, I could never afford to give lunch every day for all the employees. But I thought, I could give snacks.

I used to do it once in a while: I would buy some chocolate and treat my employees. But then I decided to permanently have a little place in the meeting room with snacks. And a mini bar, with no alcohol, with different kinds of drinks for them. And of course we always had free coffee and tea.

They really appreciate it. And I try to bring new things, so they notice: oh, you brought new snacks. It's nice. It gives me joy to see them happy about it.

Interviewer: What are the unique challenges that come from deciding to live by EoC values? How does that make your business more difficult sometimes?

Anne Godbout: There was a challenge with the EoC one time, with employees. We always tell them upfront at the interview that we are an EoC business. We try to explain it to them and see how they react.

We give bonuses to employees at the end of the year if we have a profit to share. But one year we didn't. So I announced before Christmas: I'm sorry, but we don't have a profit to share this year. And they were very disappointed, because the years before had been very good and they were used to getting a nice bonus before Christmas. They were very disappointed, and I was too.

Now, the previous financial year had been a really good year. And during the year when we didn't have a profit, we sent a cheque, because we had to close the previous financial year, so that amount was actually taken out of the year before.

But one of the employees didn't know that, and she saw the cheque. And she started telling the others: she's not giving us a bonus, but she wrote that big cheque to the EoC. She was very upset, and I heard about it. So I had to explain to her that it was from the previous year. But she was really angry, and she didn't understand.

So now we try to make it even clearer at the interview, that this is how it works with the bonuses and the EoC, and that we share the profits. But it keeps being a challenge.

Money and profit

Interviewer: And what about money and profit?

Anne Godbout: One of the practices of the EoC is to share the profits. That's non-traditional. A lot of people ask, how do you decide what part to give? Because it's in freedom, which is great, but then, the first few times, I was like: okay, so what should I give?

It's really through prayer that I take the decision. And sometimes I talk about it with my husband, who really supports me although he's a bit sceptical sometimes. He's afraid I give too much. I still talk to him, but I don't always do what he says.

I also have my spiritual director, who helps me. And the group of people in the Focolare movement, the nucleus of the volunteers; sometimes I ask them, or someone in charge. But I think it's through prayer that I get to see what share I should give.

And we have also been encouraged to get involved with the poor locally. There's a part of the giving that is managed by the Focolare movement; they have NGOs in different parts of the world, different projects to help people in need.

What I like is that they really build communion first. That's what amazed me when I heard about it. It's not just giving money to help with essential needs and to get people out of misery, but really to build unity with them first of all. And they put their goods in common, and they put their needs there as a good, because it is a good. If they didn't have needs, we couldn't be giving. And by giving, it gives to us also.

They also encouraged us to do the same locally. So we thought, how could we help?

Sometimes we go and feed the needy in the streets. At least once a year we do that, and it's marvellous. Well, it's not marvellous, because we see homeless people in the streets, and there are more and more. It's growing in Montreal, and it's very sad to see, especially in the winter.

But it's beautiful to see the people involved. We go with another organization, and it's really beautiful the way they do it. They really connect with the people. It was not our initiative, but they share something in common with us, because it's their faith that drives them to help the poor. They build unity with each one. They know their names, and they pray for them.

They always have a list of what we could bring if we want to help: not only food but also, in the winter, clothes and hats and scarves, because they're cold, or sleeping bags and blankets. They have a buggy to carry it all, and they go up and say: hey, do you need something? Do you want a hat? Do you have clothes? It's very nice. So we participate.

We also found out that this organization, which shares the same building where our office is, has a space in the basement and doesn't pay rent. They were supposed to give the donations they receive to the owners, but they don't really get any donations. So we decided, since our rent is lower than what we used to pay, to pay a little extra, to give a donation each month to help them.

And I've noticed that since we are giving donations, the owners are more generous too. There's a box where they come every week and take what's in it, for their Friday evening of giving out food and other goods. So it's wonderful.

Another initiative we had, which we want to continue (we had to stop during the pandemic) came from thinking: we're helping people reflect on their lives during a pilgrimage. We want to help also those who don't have the means to pay for one.

So the first time, we offered it at a shrine about five hours north of Montreal, by a lake. It's a beautiful place, managed by friars, and they're just so nice. The homeless people went there with a social worker and a tour guide from Spiritours.

They felt so welcome, and they were all excited to have almost like a hotel room, with their own private bathroom and shower. They were so excited. And then they got to have a bonfire, and it reminded them of childhood memories.

Afterwards they shared the experience. It really touched me. They took the time to put together a scrapbook with the pictures and the thank-yous, and they came to our office to share what they had experienced, and to thank us. It was just wonderful.

Financially it was hard to repeat that every year, so we decided to go to another place, closer, which is actually a cottage that I bought with my husband and that we rent out. During the week, except in the summer, nobody goes there. So our idea is to share this place with them, so they can experience something similar. It's near a shrine also, and there's a lake: they can go canoeing, they can go snowshoeing.

Interviewer: Typically in business, most people think the reason to be in business is to make money, and of course you need to make a profit. But is that your main motive? How is that different, in terms of an economic mindset, from regular business?

Anne Godbout: Usually when you start a business, the main focus is to make money. That was not my main focus when I started.

I had heard about the EoC. I wanted to live that. And really my purpose was, first of all, to live my dream, to put spirituality and travelling together, but also to make a difference, and to share. To connect with people and share what I had experienced when travelling, when it changed my life because of the encounters I had. And because it was a way of finding out more about myself, and opening up. That's our slogan: open your eyes, your heart and your mind, to the world and to your inner world.

That was my purpose. And with the EoC, it went even further. I wanted to share the profits, which is one of the goals of the EoC, communion of goods. And I do it gladly.

A lot of people don't understand. Even my husband sometimes doesn't understand; he thinks it's beautiful, but he also wants me to think about our own future, so of course I need to keep a balance. I used to take almost nothing for myself, just a little salary, but of course my family's needs are important as well, so I increased my salary.

I heard somewhere that managers had ten times the salary of the lowest position. In our business, it's not even double the lowest salary for myself. And I'm fine with it. If we have a good year, then yes, I give my employees a bonus, and myself as well. But I keep a good share for the needy, and I also try to get engaged locally.

Interviewer: Is profit maximization your main focus? And if not, can you give an example?

Anne Godbout: Profit maximization is not my first priority. I've been criticized for that by my accountant. And it has to be considered: for the business to run, of course that's something to consider. But it was never my main focus.

My main focus was to live my vocation in my work, and to have the person central in the business, as I was taught in the EoC. That means the well-being of people is the most important. The relationship is the most important.

With some tour organizers, we agree on something, and I make sure there's a written contract on the agreement. But sometimes there are expectations that were not said. I always try to be aware of their expectations, and to know them from the start and make things clear, for example, about the expenses.

So now we try to really anticipate all the expenses that should be taken care of by Spiritours. It used to be to the detriment of the profit sometimes, but now it's anticipated. So we make everyone happy, and the relationship is not broken by any misunderstanding. I make sure of that. The profit is secondary, but now we try to anticipate all of that.

Interviewer: Going beyond profit maximization. What does that mean?

Anne Godbout: For me, going beyond profit maximization is realizing that the love you build is so much more precious than the profit you have in the bank.

In the pandemic I lost all the profit I had in the bank. But the relationships I had built remained. And I believe they will remain even after our death. But not the profit.

Ethics

Interviewer: The same question, for ethical behaviour.

Anne Godbout: The EoC values have guided me in different situations about ethics. One time my employee came to me very happy, because she had found a mistake in an invoice from a provider, a partner abroad; he was charging us less. She was happy to say that was going to make us more profit.

Well, that's a way to look at it. But I said I would prefer we let them know that there's a mistake. Because if it were us, we would like them to let us know. So let's tell them. I think we'll feel better by being honest. And we'll be okay; we already have profit. She was surprised at first, but I felt she responded well to that. And I've had a few similar situations since.

Also the temptation to cheat on taxes, and, no, no, no, I won't do that. It's my values, but sometimes we're just tempted. The EoC meetings helped me be strong in my values, and not cheat.

Neighbours and the community

Interviewer: What about your neighbours, the businesses around you? How have EoC values guided decisions there?

Anne Godbout: I was influenced by another EoC entrepreneur, John Mundell. He was saying how important it was for him to encourage the businesses around his own, in the neighbourhood. He was going to the restaurants nearby, or buying gift cards from the shops and other businesses around, for his employees. I thought that was such a good idea, so I do basically the same thing. I like to encourage the businesses around, and get gifts from those shops.

And there's Saint Joseph's Oratory just nearby. They've just opened a new cafeteria, so I go there a lot, thinking it's probably going to help them. And I bring friends, and I even advertise it on social media, because the food is really good there.

So that's my way of helping a bit in the neighbourhood. I thought it was just so nice to think about that, and it's really in line with my values and with the EoC values.

The environment

Interviewer: Would you speak to environmental concerns?

Anne Godbout: In the EoC they also encourage you to be mindful of the environment. And *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's encyclical, spoke to me as well.

Since the beginning of Spiritours we have tried to really respect the environment when we travel to any place. We often visit nature parks, and we try to be very careful. Also, in the office: recycling, using less paper, being mindful of the water, the compost. So we do our share.

And now we've just embarked on a sustainable-development journey towards certification. I found out there are even more things we can do, so it's very exciting. We're doing okay, but we can do even better.

I'm glad to see that the employees are motivated. Not all of them, but most feel compelled; they need to train also, to get the certification. I really have to involve all of them, so it's a challenge, but it's really exciting.

Interviewer: Can you explain what that certification is?

Anne Godbout: I was motivated to go towards a certification for sustainable development, although I knew it was a lot of work, many hours already spent and many hours to go. But it was important for me. First of all because it aligns with the values of the EoC. I've always wanted to do my share, and I realized I could do even more.

There are different certifying companies. This one is Travelife, which is specialized for tourism. And it's so good, because they have all these ideas. Some of them we had already put in place, but the social aspect is the one we had probably put more in place, thanks to the EoC.

To think about the destination. To go and see the native communities, even in our own country, and to value their culture, and really encourage the local economy, the local craft-making. And with our partners over there, to really go hand in hand and see how they're doing, and encourage them to do more as well. And to encourage the pilgrims on our tours to do their part, and be mindful of the environment and the water and the people there.

It's a great journey.

Competitors

Interviewer: Was it hard to be that open with a competitor?

Anne Godbout: I'd like to share a story about when I had to be vulnerable in front of a competitor.

They were direct competitors. They were doing pilgrimages as well, like us, but they were also doing sustainable tours, and they were stronger than us on that, because that was really their focus. Their sustainable tours were great, really.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, they decided to close the agency. And they reinvented themselves: they became a consulting agency to help other travel agencies get a sustainable-development certification, or at least coach them to be more sustainable.

They were part of the same association, so I had met them before. We had a courteous relationship. At one point the association offered a grant to help member travel agencies get the certification; they were paying a certain percentage of the coaching with them. So I decided to take advantage of that.

But I felt a bit awkward at the first meeting, to be in front of them. Because they were my competitors, and they were doing a diagnostic, asking for very confidential information about my business. And I was thinking: am I going to tell them all these things? They could become my competitors again. So I told them up front that it felt a bit awkward, and that I didn't feel so comfortable, but that I admired what they were doing, and the way they had reinvented themselves, and that I was happy they were coaching me.

It went very well. It was a very nice experience. We spent many hours going through the diagnostic, and they did a very good job. So I'm happy I said yes to that.

Interviewer: Are there other moments that come to mind about loving your competitors?

Anne Godbout: There was a hurting woman who came to us, and we hired her. At first it was more like a collaboration, and then she became a full-time employee.

And then a disagreement came, and unfortunately she left the company. I was really hurt. I felt betrayed, and I had resentment for years. And I prayed for God to help me forgive her.

Then I thought about her during the pandemic, because I found out that the competitor she was working for had closed their agency. So I thought of her, because I knew she was now without a job. I reached out by email, and her reply was not very nice. So I decided to just leave it. My husband was telling me, you're crazy to open the door for her to come back and work for you. Why do you do that? He didn't understand.

But then I had a dream. I saw myself offering her help. She was just sitting by a wall, and I reached out, and at first she refused, and she seemed angry, and then she decided, at one point, to accept. And she held my hand. And I woke up.

It just felt so real. When I woke up it stayed with me the whole morning. So I prayed, because I didn't understand why I had that dream. I prayed to the Holy Spirit and I said: well, if you want me to reach out again, just tell me, because I don't know what to say.

And I remembered that at the beginning she had been touched by the fact that I believed in her. And in truth I still believed in her, despite everything. Despite the betrayal. Because she was so passionate about the Holy Land; I had never seen anyone so passionate. And I felt she had a mission, and I thought it would be too bad if she could not live her mission any more.

So I reached out and told her that I still believed in her, despite everything. I opened another door once again. And this time she answered me very kindly. She was touched by my message.

I did apologize, because in a conflict there's always guilt on both sides. So I acknowledged that I was also responsible, and I asked her forgiveness. She said she forgave me, and that she was also sorry for what she did.

We reconciled. And we started collaborating again on Holy Land pilgrimages. It was successful until the war in Israel, but we're still in touch, watching the news, hoping we can start again soon.

Legacy

Interviewer: Have you thought about your legacy, and passing the business on with its values? Often when someone retires, they sell the business and the values do not go with it.

Anne Godbout: One of my challenges right now is legacy.

I am thinking about retiring in maybe ten or fifteen years. It still seems far away, but I have to think about it. And I have different scenarios.

One company already approached me, wanting to buy Spiritours. It was tempting, because I was at a point where I'd had it up to here with managing. At one point I wanted to give it up and just accompany pilgrimages, and leave the managing to someone else. So it was tempting.

I went for lunch with that person, and I asked how they evaluate the price of a business. But I also asked them about their values. And I was not very satisfied with his answer. After the lunch it was clear to me that it didn't resonate with me. I couldn't let my baby go into the hands of a company where profit was definitely the main goal. So it was clear that this was a no for that scenario, and I started thinking about others.

Another scenario would be to find a Catholic organization. I already have one in mind, and I've already had a talk with the CEO of that organization. It's a Catholic organization, but one that does business. That would also be an option, because I know the values would stay.

So that's my main concern, and it's not easy. I still have the energy to go on for more years, but definitely it's something I have to plan ahead.

Beyond transactional

Interviewer: Often business is very transactional: I give you money, you give me a service. In what way do you see yourself practising business in a more relational way?

Anne Godbout: In the business world, transactional seems to be the primary thing. But with the EoC, relational is the most important.

For me it was obvious that it should be primary. But it's always a challenge, because a lot of people are in the transactional mode. And of course, for a business to run, it needs to be transactional as well. But really, the relational is the most important for me. It should be the person first. So I try to keep that in mind, especially when I see myself drifting towards the transactional.

Interviewer: What does it mean to go beyond transactional business?

Anne Godbout: Business should be more than transactional. It should be about relationship, relational. Because a transaction, when it's done, it's over. But a relationship should be something precious that will last.

The common good

Interviewer: In what way do you see Spiritours contributing to the common good?

Anne Godbout: Spiritours contributes to the common good by sharing the profit, of course. But the common good is not just the sharing of profit. The common good is collective wellness, and we can contribute in many ways. I love that concept. I keep discovering more and more about it in the social doctrine of the church, which explains very well how we can contribute.

Also by the wellness of the people who work in the company. And that means not just a good salary and good conditions, but also that they feel recognized, that they feel they contribute as well.

Collective wellness is not just about money. It's really to help people grow and develop their gifts. And to discover more about their faith, to deepen their faith; that's also a common good.

In the company I share a meditation that comes from the Focolare movement. We have a daily meditation, and I share it with them. And actually an employee told me that it inspired her, and she started reading the Bible. She hadn't been exposed to that by her parents. She was inspired by what I shared with them. I was very touched when she told me that. For me that's also part of the common good.

And also with the customers: when we go on a tour, that's an enrichment for them on a spiritual level, and that's part of the common good too.

Interviewer: Practising business for the common good.

Anne Godbout: Practising business for the common good is all about collective wellness. Sharing the wealth, but also being conscious that everything you do has an impact on others.

Together you can create wellness that goes beyond profit or money. The harmony that you build together. The knowledge you share. The talents you share.

Unity

Interviewer: How do you see your business contributing to unity? Through your business, how do you bring about more unity in the world?

Anne Godbout: I think it's by our efforts to build unity within the company. It spreads. It spreads to our customers, the pilgrims. It spreads first to the tour leaders, and they try to build it as well, in the little community that is travelling together, all over the world.

I think it's contagious. I hope it is, but I've seen it. It's wonderful. We see it in the eyes of the people we meet when travelling. We build something, and it stays. Sometimes I go back five years later and there's still a bond I feel with the partners there, and with the people we've met in those communities. It's very special.

Joy

Interviewer: What moments bring you the greatest joy in living out EoC values as you practise your business?

Anne Godbout: What brings me the most joy is when I feel the communion with the team, when we get together for a meeting, or to celebrate our success. When we go out for dinner, or for a Christmas party. Also when we get together with all the collaborators and celebrate together, or have a training, and I really feel the communion.

Last winter we had a training for the tour leaders, at a cottage, and it was just so beautiful. We worked really hard on Saturday, and we all went to Mass on Sunday, and after Mass we celebrated at lunch. It really felt like family. I heard the comments from everyone; they were all happy. Some people just felt so joyful, and it really had an impact on them, spiritually, because there were some priests among us.

We have two categories of tours: the Christian pilgrimages, with priests, and the wellness tours, which are more focused on personal growth, with workshops. So these were the tour leaders from both kinds of tours, and they were touched by the priests and by what they heard during the weekend.

We also told them about the EoC, and about one aspect of it. It was actually the theme of the year in the Focolare movement, proximity, closeness. And they were really touched. They took me aside at the end of the weekend and said, wow, this was just incredible. They were moved, so it moved me as well.

Five practices

Interviewer: If you had to pick five of your business practices that feel noticeably different from business as usual, what would they be?

Anne Godbout: If I had to list five things the EoC inspired me to do differently in my business:

First, of course, sharing the profits. That's not usual.

Second, valuing my employees' opinions, and really giving them the opportunity to own it.

Third, listening to the customers, and being sensitive to their needs, trying to help them.

Fourth, practising the art of loving with all the collaborators and partners, building bridges.

And fifth, being guided by something greater than ourselves. In French we say *plus grand que soi*. So you don't need to have a religion, but listening to the inner voice, to God, to something transcendent.

Part Six: Foundations

Providence

Interviewer: What do you mean by providence? And why did it attract you so much?

Anne Godbout: When I went to my first Economy of Communion meeting, I heard entrepreneurs sharing their experience about providence, about how God and the Holy Spirit led them. How they faced challenges and then they received help. How little miracles happen in their daily lives, in their business. It just amazed me.

I felt I also wanted to work for God and with him, and I wanted him to guide me.

Interviewer: What does providence mean to you?

Anne Godbout: I talk a lot about providence, because I've experienced it. People often ask me, what is providence? And basically it's the intervention of God.

In the EoC it amazed me to hear other business owners talk about their experience of providence. And I realize it happens when you really open the door to let God be able to intervene.

Interviewer: Can you share one of your first experiences of providence in your business?

Anne Godbout: One of the first experiences of God's providence was at the beginning of Spiritours.

At one point I got a big contract. It was a bit overwhelming, because I didn't expect it. I was still working four days a week for the travel agency where I had been for eleven years, and I was consecrating only one day a week to starting my company. And then I got this big contract for World Youth Day in 2005 in Cologne, Germany. A lot of dioceses wanted to sign up with me, thanks to a priest who talked about me. It was amazing, but also overwhelming, because I had to work night shifts and weekends.

Then I got interviewed for a Catholic magazine, and I got a phone call from a young woman who had read the article and who was inspired by Spiritours and by the EoC. She called me and said she wanted to work for Spiritours.

At first I wanted to be professional. I said to her, well, there's no position right now, send me your resume. She insisted a bit, and she said she was ready to work for free. She insisted so much that I had to tell her, I'm not even paying myself a salary, so I cannot hire anybody.

She said she was ready to work for free. But she had no experience in a travel agency. So I thought to myself, this is nice, but I'll have to train her, it's going to take a long time, and then at the first opportunity she will go somewhere else to get a salary, because you can't work for free for a long time. So I thought, this is not going to work. I'm going to waste my time. That's what was going through my mind.

But she insisted even more. I said, well, I'll think about it, just send your resume. And she said, well, I'll go to your door tomorrow and give it to you. I said, I'm pretty busy, I don't know if I'll have time. But she said, I'll come anyway.

The next day I prayed a bit, and then there was a little voice telling me: *it's Jesus that you're receiving in your home. You have to take the time to listen to her.*

So we started talking. And at one point I got this inspiration, I don't remember if it was before or during the meeting, and I said to her, would you like to go to World Youth Day? Did you hear about it? She said, yes, I would love to go.

I said, okay, I thought about something. Maybe if you help me, because I do need help. I cannot pay you now, but I have this big contract, and after the trip there will be profit. I could pay for a trip for you. It could be an exchange, if you want to go.

And she said, oh, I would love that.

So that was my first employee. And her last name was Paradis, which means paradise. So I really felt she was an angel sent from God. She really helped me. I really needed help. And I wouldn't have asked for help, because I didn't think I could afford it. So it was really providence for me.

Interviewer: Do you have another story about providence?

Anne Godbout: I have one from during the pandemic.

I didn't know if we could get through it. I'm an optimistic person, so at the beginning I thought this was just going to last a few weeks; that's what they were telling us. Then, oh, it's just going to last a few months. And I was postponing our pilgrimages six months later. I had to postpone some pilgrimages up to three times. It was crazy. Most of our tours are international, so we had to cancel or postpone everything. For a long time we had no revenues.

We were very creative. We started doing virtual retreats, and we also did conferences on pilgrimages with some tour guides: Holy Land, Turkey, Italy, all over the world. They were all our collaborators, and they contributed in that way, so it also strengthened the bonds with them.

And we started doing a lot more local pilgrimages. We were already doing some. We also have an incoming department, for people from abroad who come and do pilgrimages in Canada, so it strengthened bonds with the providers and partners within Canada as well. But we still had a lot of expenses, and that was not covering it.

It's interesting, because a lot of businesses were just laying off their employees. I don't have many employees, but for me it was so important; that's what the EoC teaches us, that the person is at the centre of the business, not the money. So I thought it wouldn't make sense to lay them off, and I didn't want to lose them. I had looked into a shared-work programme, and then the government announced the subsidy for salaries, so that helped, of course.

Each year I had been putting aside part of our profits, because I knew tourism is so fragile if anything happens. I had asked the Holy Spirit to inspire me: how much should I give? How much should I reinvest? And I really had this idea that I needed a cushion, just in case. I had put aside enough for a year of operation.

I thought, am I crazy? Does this come from me, because of my insecurity? Or was it really inspired? But then the pandemic lasted almost two years. If I hadn't had that cushion, we couldn't have gone through it.

And the story of providence during the pandemic is this. We had a rent of five thousand dollars a month, which was a lot of money for us, and at one point I thought, we're not going to make it. How can I continue to pay this? We had a little subsidy from the government for the rent, but it was not enough.

Then the owner of the building where we were renting the office sold it. The new owners came to see us and told us they wanted to transform the building into condominiums.

I had a lease for five years, and we had been there only two or three years, and we had invested a lot to renovate, out of our own pockets, because the previous owner just wanted to pay for paint, and that was about it. So we had really invested a lot, and I loved our office. It was beautiful. It was the top floor. It

was huge, three thousand square feet, and we were renting a third of it to some wellness therapists.

They told me, you could have a smaller office on the ground floor, but you have to give up your floor. And I said no, I don't want to give it up. We're good tenants. We pay our bills every month and we take care of the place.

And two weeks later I got a notice that they were evicting us.

I was about to get a lawyer: we have a lease, and you're going to respect it. But then, at that point in the pandemic, that was in November, I think, of 2020, I was still optimistic. It's going to start again in the spring, and we're going to have our pilgrimages in the spring. And then they announced that we couldn't even get together with our families for Christmas. So I thought, okay, maybe we won't be able to travel in the spring either.

And a friend of mine said, this might be an opportunity. Look at it that way.

And I realized it was really more than an opportunity. I talked to the tenants who were renting from us, and they didn't even want to be there during the construction, because it would be noisy. So we decided to give it up. And it all worked out very well, because I found a place closer to my home, right next to Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, which is a landmark, for the Catholic Church, but really for the city. It's just beautiful.

I knew the director of the organization that was in that building. It's owned by the fathers, and they do spiritual accompaniment. And they had a small office that they rented to me at a very low price, to help us.

That was providence, because I don't know how I could have done it otherwise. International tours only started again two years later. So that really helped us survive, and get through the pandemic.

And I have a chapel. It was a dream. It was a gift.

Prayer and discernment

Interviewer: How did prayer play a role in that decision? Because that's not normal business practice.

Anne Godbout: It's true. When I started, I would always pray the prayer of abandonment. I don't know if you've heard of Charles de Foucauld; he has a prayer that is so wonderful. Basically it says, *Father, I surrender to your will*. And every time I had a big decision, or a meeting, or a presentation, I would pray that prayer.

Something that would not be typical in the business world, for a decision-making process, is that I pray when I have a tough decision to make. I must admit I don't always think about praying, but I really would like to do it every time.

At the beginning of the business I remember praying even more, because I was so nervous. Every time I had a meeting or a presentation or a big decision. And I still do it. The whole prayer is about surrendering to the will of the Father. It's a beautiful prayer, so I love to repeat it, and really surrender myself.

Interviewer: Do you know it by heart? Could you share it?

Anne Godbout: I might cry. It makes me cry. It's a beautiful prayer.

The first time I read it, it was hard to say, because it's really scary. But now it goes. I trust him now. At the beginning I wasn't sure: can I trust you?

Père, je m'abandonne à toi. Fais de moi ce qu'il te plaira. Quoi que tu fasses de moi, je te remercie. J'accepte tout. Je supporte tout. Pourvu que ta volonté se fasse en moi et en toutes tes créatures. Je remets mon âme entre tes mains. Je te la donne, avec tout l'amour de mon cœur, parce que je t'aime, et que c'est un besoin d'amour de me donner sans mesure, avec une infinie confiance, car tu es mon Père.

Father, I surrender myself to you. Do with me as you wish. Whatever you do with me, I thank you. I accept everything. I bear everything, as long as your will is done in me and in all your creatures. I put my soul in your hands. I give it to you, with all the love of my heart, because I love you, and because it's a need of love to give myself to you without limits, with infinite trust, because you are my Father.

Sometimes you want to pray that he helps you take the right decision, but sometimes you're like: I want to ask you, but I want to do it my way. So it's hard to really surrender and go his way. It's hard sometimes, because you know that's the right thing, but you're really tempted to go your own way. So this prayer helps me a lot.

Interviewer: For some people who don't pray, they might wonder: how do you know? How do you hear?

Anne Godbout: I'm not an expert. I still need a spiritual director, until I die, because sometimes I mix up the two: my will and his will. How do you discern what's your will and what's God's will? A lot of people ask me that, and I ask myself the same question sometimes.

Sometimes it's just clear. I feel it inside: that's the right thing to do. Just thinking about it (should I do this?), it feels right inside. I feel peace. I feel joy sometimes. And I think, okay, yes, that's the direction I have to go.

But sometimes I'm not so sure whether it's my will or his will. That's when I ask for help. I ask a friend, or someone in the Focolare movement, or my spiritual director, who really helps me discern. He gives me hints. He will never tell me what to do, which is wonderful. Well, sometimes I tell him, you should tell me a little bit more. His words of wisdom really guide me. Sometimes he does tell me, but indirectly. It helps me find the right path.

I think it's important to listen inside, and also to validate outside.

A good example, I think, is King David. In the Bible, every time he had an important decision to make, he was praying and asking God: should I go into battle? Should I do this or that? And he listened, most of the time. So I want to be a listener. Sometimes I just follow my own will and I regret it, so I know. It's tough sometimes, but I know it's the right thing to do.

Faith and the gospel

Interviewer: I'd like to hear more about how your faith plays a role in how you live out your life, and how that affects your business.

Anne Godbout: My faith plays an important role in leading my company. I nourish it by my prayer life, and by going to Mass, receiving the Blessed Sacrament, reading the gospel. It gives me strength. It really does.

And I see that it makes a difference, because I can look back at my story and see that when my prayer life was not nourished, I was struggling more. We had a few dark years, and I think I was just not letting God intervene. I was trying to control everything and not letting him. They were like dark nights of the soul, I think. And when I got out of that, things started being brighter again.

So I really see a difference if I don't nourish my prayer life.

Interviewer: People pray in different ways. What kind of prayers help you?

Anne Godbout: When I'm praying, basically I surrender myself. I ask that he intervenes, that he gives me strength, and that he helps me make the right decisions.

So every time I have a big decision to make, yes, I will ask the employees for their opinion, and yes, I will talk to the people around me. But I always come back to God, and try to discern in prayer what his will is.

Interviewer: What about reading the gospel? I grew up in a Protestant world where you read the Bible to learn things. Is that why you read the gospel, or is something else going on? How does it give you strength?

Anne Godbout: I like to read the Gospel because the Gospel is alive. It's the Word of God, and it's not static. I can read the same story of the gospel and it will speak to me differently.

It guides me. It's really a lamp for me, that guides me through life. And sometimes I find answers to my problems reading the Gospel.

When I met the Focolare movement, I heard about the spirituality of unity and how to practise the gospel, to live it. And it appealed to me, because I used to have a very compartmented life. I was a different person with different groups of people. I was a good daughter, and then with my friends I was doing things I knew were not aligned with the values my parents transmitted to me. So I was living different lives.

So it really appealed to me to live the gospel, in your workplace too, because I wanted more coherence in my life. And that really helped me first of all to build unity in myself, and then to build unity around me.

Agents of communion

Interviewer: Pope Francis calls EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. When have you most felt like you were living that out?

Anne Godbout: I just love how Pope Francis called EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. I like that term, and I do feel like an agent of communion.

I'm not always succeeding, but that's really what I'm trying to do, to build communion and unity within the community of Spiritours, the employees, everyone, and to bring them together. So this really resonated with me.

Interviewer: You mentioned you were there when Pope Francis called the EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. Can you tell that story, being there, hearing those words?

Anne Godbout: I had the privilege of being in Rome for the thirtieth anniversary of the EoC. Pope Francis invited us, and we had a gathering with him.

He said that he saw us as agents of communion. I just loved that acknowledgement, and I felt it fit what we are striving to do, to really build communion and unity with all the stakeholders. So it was fantastic.

And he also said that giving was actually the best remedy to greed. That really inspired me to give even more. That I was not just giving away for nothing, but that it really helped me grow, I guess in holiness. We're all called to holiness, and holiness is to do the will of God. And when one is able to find that spot of being in the will of God, you feel you're really fulfilling yourself, and it feels good.

Interviewer: He also challenged EoC members to help create a world with no more victims. Have you had an opportunity to take that challenge personally?

Anne Godbout: When I heard Pope Francis entrusting us with creating a world with no more victims, I thought, that's a big challenge, and definitely I cannot do this alone.

Am I contributing? Well, I hope. I'm not sure, but I'm trying. If we can alleviate poverty, I guess that helps.

But *victim* means there's a persecutor. The dramatic triangle tells us that if there's a victim, there's a persecutor, and there's a rescuer. And there's a way to get outside of that triangle: there's the virtuous triangle, where the victim becomes the creator.

You can empower. Even me: I used to be a bit of a victim, victimizing myself and complaining about what's in my life, or about the difficulties I was confronting. To become the creator is to transform the challenges you face into opportunities to grow. To change what you can change, what you have power over. And to acknowledge your responsibility in the situation you're in. So I guess, if I did it for myself, I can help other people do it, and on a larger scale.

And then the persecutor becomes the challenger. Because in us, or in our environment, there's always a persecutor. Sometimes the boss of a company is seen as the persecutor, because he's criticizing, putting people down, thinking that's how he's going to gain power over other people. I've never been like that, but I've known people like that. The transformation, in the virtuous triangle, is that he challenges people instead; he acknowledges the good, and challenges them on the faults he sees, to get better.

And then the rescuer. I also have a side of trying to help, and sometimes helping too much, doing things even for my children or my employees. I was micromanaging, and I'm trying to get out of that. The coach, instead, will help them find the answer by themselves. Just give them hints, coach them to find their own answers, and the tools to go ahead.

So I think we can all teach one another, first of all to do it ourselves, and then to teach others how to get out of the dramatic triangle.

Another road to the same place

Interviewer: You were telling us about another organization you're involved with, and about the man who went to meet Mother Teresa. Can you tell us about the organization first?

Anne Godbout: Yes. It's really about the social doctrine of the church as well. He was inspired by it, as Chiara Lubich was, and he emphasized prayer. The EoC emphasizes more the alleviation of poverty, and he emphasizes prayer. So I think they complement each other.

It was very providential how I met it. I had a meeting at a university in Montreal with a lady who was interested in having me talk to her students about the EoC. And then her colleague heard about it, and he gave me a book that was a summary of the thesis of a man called Robert Ouimet. What's special about his thesis is that he tried to incarnate the social doctrine of the church in his business. He had this inspiration, just like Chiara; that's a similarity.

And his story is very interesting, because he was born rich. His dad had a big company that he took over, and he always felt guilty about being rich. He was raised Catholic, and every time he heard the gospel about the rich man who asked Jesus how he could go to heaven: first it was about the Ten Commandments, and then Jesus said, if you want to be perfect, sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and follow me. And the rich man left sad, because he had great goods. He was not ready to share them.

So he felt guilty, and he decided to go and see Mother Teresa. He wrote to her many times. He didn't get answers, so he just decided to show up at her door in India. He took a flight to go there.

He wanted to ask her a question that was burning inside of him. And he got to meet her. He asked: Mother Teresa, should I sell everything I have and give it to the poor?

And her answer was quite amazing. She said: *you cannot, because your goods are not yours. They're God's. He gave them to you, so you should manage them wisely.* Basically she was telling him: pray to be the steward of the goods that God gave you.

And that transformed his life. He stayed a few days with her and saw all the work she was doing for the poor. And she told him: it should be God first, then your wife, your kids, your employees. And when you die you will have to give an account to God for all these people who were entrusted to you.

And she told him, you won't be able to do it if you don't pray a lot. So when he was on the flight leaving India, he promised God he would go to Mass every day. And he did, to be able to live up to the ideal that Mother Teresa told him about. Because he realized he was doing everything upside down. His wife was

not right after God.

So he changed his life totally. He wrote a book about it, a biography, and then he decided to go to university to write this thesis about how to treat your employees well, how to live the social doctrine of the church. Basically it was about ethics in management, and the well-being of employees.

He said there are two pillars: the economic side of the company, and the well-being of the employees. And he was really a pioneer, because in those days there were no unions for the workers, or it was just starting. Nowadays it's common to hear about that, but he was really a pioneer.

He said that for the two pillars to stay strong, you need a *clé de voûte*, the stone in the centre of an arch. And that centre stone is God. For him it was clear. He later changed it and put *spirituality*, so it would be acceptable for anyone, no matter their religion or faith. But for him it was God, because he understood from Mother Teresa how important prayer was.

Because he said, if you don't have that, then as soon as you have a crisis the managers will focus on the economic pillar, and the well-being of the employees will crash. And we saw that in the pandemic, because there were a lot of layoffs. So we need that centre stone.

I learned a lot from him when I read that book. It resonated with me. It was at the beginning of Spiritours, and I thought it was a complement to the EoC. So I started implementing some of his ideas for the well-being of the employees.

One of them is a room of silence, for meditation, in the business. They had that in their big factory. So I decided, why not have a room of silence? And I've always had one. Now it's a chapel, in the new building where we are. I'm so happy. It's so that the employees can go and meditate if they're stressed out, and have the spirituality to help them.

So a lot of ideas came from him. And I met him at one point. He was giving a conference, and he came and sat beside me. He didn't know me. We talked a bit, and then I met him again on a few occasions, and he heard about my company and the EoC. He asked me to join the board of his foundation.

His foundation is called À Dieu Va, which means *to God go*. The purpose of the foundation is to help leaders integrate spirituality into management and ethics. I'm still part of the board, and I'm happy to be part of it.