Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Bill Neu | May 21-22, 2026

Bill Neu met the Focolare movement at sixteen and entered it in 1973. He holds an MBA in finance from Columbia University and a doctorate from the Sophia University Institute at Loppiano, and spent his working career in international banking, first as a financial analyst and then as a calling officer for two Italian banks in Chicago and New York. In this interview he describes how he came to the movement, what the Economy of Communion is and where it came from, how its principles bear on financial analysis, on competence, and on the decision to let someone go, and the Trinitarian theology he understands to underlie it. He also recounts his own encounters with Chiara Lubich between 1971 and 2000.

This transcript is arranged by subject rather than in the order of the recording. Bill Neu's words are unchanged. The interviewer's questions have been shortened in places.

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Could I get you to say your name, your business degrees, from which colleges, and the two or three jobs you think are most relevant? And then, if we could, a version in a sentence or two.

Bill Neu: I've had a variety of positions. Still as a teenager, I scooped ice cream for Baskin-Robbins, and I cleaned the floor and the toilets of Dunkin' Donuts, before the two were even merged. I worked as a laborer for a printer, printing packaging material. I did construction labor, which helped build up my arms; I was not their strongest laborer, but it was valuable and I learned a lot. And a variety of other jobs as a laborer.

My undergraduate studies were in sociology, and then I got an MBA, a master's in business administration, in finance, at Columbia University. It was a good school and I learned a lot. The prestige and the name were meaningful for people, even though I think more weight is given to that than it deserves. But it's meaningful to some people.

After my studies, I worked for Fiat's agricultural machinery subsidiary, Fiat Trattori. There I learned the ag business: what farmers were looking for, what the dealers needed, the American manufacturers, the supply flow of parts, and the introduction of a new line of tractors into the North American market.

I worked for two different Italian banks, at two different moments, in Chicago and New York. Initially I worked as a financial analyst, and that was at the level of what they call wholesale banking, so not the kind of thing where there's a window that people come to. You're dealing with, at that time, minimum amounts of a million dollars; now it would be larger than that, in terms of loans or investments, several million dollars.

As an analyst, I was analyzing companies for credits. That is, for the head office to make a decision whether to prolong that credit, to extend it, to increase it or decrease it, based on the performance of the company over time and the prospects for the company in the industry. So it was a valuable learning

experience for me, to understand also how the economy works.

And then I was asked to be a calling officer, as an assistant vice president for these two banks, calling on the people working in finance at these companies: the assistant treasurer, the cash manager, the treasurer, or the CFO. Again, the value of understanding how that company operates, what its concerns are, with the economy, with the industry. And also building those relationships, because in those relationships I learn what the company's doing, what their prospects are, what they're looking at.

Part Two: Coming to the Focolare

Finding the Focolare

Interviewer: I'd like you to share your story of how you got involved with the Focolare initially, and then some of the highlights along the way of how you got to the point you're at now.

Bill Neu: If I think about it, I met the Focolare when I was sixteen, and I'm seventy-two now. So that's a lot of years. I'll try to select the things that are most interesting or useful at this point.

I grew up in a conventional, traditional Catholic family, one of eight children, in the suburbs of Chicago. Up until I was maybe twelve, I took my faith for granted. It was important, it was significant to me, and in my family.

When I hit about fourteen, I was actually addicted to basketball. Up until that time I had four high schools recruiting me to come and play, but then my peers all passed me up in terms of athletic ability: I wasn't fast and I couldn't jump. It was also that kind of moment existentially, saying, well, what am I doing? What's important? And then I started asking deeper questions. Does God exist? Who am I? What's the purpose, for me, for us, for humanity? I remember reading Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and many other things. There was a lot boiling inside of me.

I also remember, in high school, as I was wrestling with these issues, that many of the other students didn't seem to be confronting them. For them it was: what's the party going to be on the weekend? Except for a small select group, with whom I shared a lot. But it was all kind of unresolved.

I got really involved in student politics, working for justice. I remember I tried to have the Black Panthers come to our high school. It was a big suburban high school, all white, and that was a bit much for the administration at that time. But we arranged to have someone along that vein, an African American civil rights worker, come and speak to the students, and that ruffled some feathers, which I think was good. That was one of a number of things I was working on at the time. There was also some frustration, because I felt we weren't able to awaken the interest of a lot of students. It was a small group working in these areas.

I was a Catholic student in a public high school, going to Sunday school, or CCD as it was called then, and it was about that time that the person teaching the class invited a couple of guys from the Focolare to come and share their experience. One was a bus driver who loved the people on his bus: the drunk, the old lady, whoever it happened to be. The other was from Europe and barely spoke English. The one who had been a bus driver was a carpenter by then. Very much blue-collar.

It was very concrete, not theoretical. I was looking at that time, and in fact I asked the question: do you live a communion of goods? They said yes, and that impressed me, because it meant this was something serious and substantial.

So I thought to myself, I'd like to stay in touch with them, just to know. But I was super busy with my life in high school, my senior year. They did more to stay in touch with me than vice versa.

In the summer they invited me to go to a convention in Rome for young people involved with the Focolare. I was really not well prepared for it; I just didn't know many of the elements. But I saw young people who were really committed to this, really working a revolution based on the Gospel, essentially.

The following week I spent in our first little town outside of Florence, Loppiano, where at the time there were about five hundred people. Now there are seven or eight hundred who live there, families, young people. And I saw all the ethnic variety: wealthy, less wealthy, sophisticated, simple. This was kind of the fulfillment of my dream of how society could be.

I was playing devil's advocate with the guy who was translating for me, who was actually a former civil rights worker, African American. I said, well, maybe the reason it's successful is that all these people are somehow different from the rest of society. And he said, no, what distinguishes them is that they live for God. All the rest, they reflect humanity.

That was a good stimulus for me, to say: the root of this social revolution I'm seeking is in God. It's spiritual. So that was opening some horizons.

But I would say most of all, what struck me in that experience was this presence of God that just took my whole person, without my understanding it. You could say it was a mystical experience: emotions, but also intellect. So that when I left after the week, I was only seventeen, and I said, I've got to come back here. I've got to come back and live here.

I went, with the excuse that I didn't speak Italian, to the first-class compartment of the train as I was leaving, so I could be alone and simply cry. Because I was really taken by the experience. And it took me a good five or six years before I was able to go back and live there. But that was an experience that marked my life.

I think it was an encounter with God, although it was, I guess you'd say, inchoate. I couldn't articulate it, but it marked me. And I saw that those questions I had been raising a couple of years earlier, about the reason for things, does God exist and so on: it was a resolution. Not as if I could write a philosophical or theological article about it, but existentially it was resolved. God is there. And in time, as I went ahead in my friendship with the Focolare, it became clearer and clearer to me that Jesus did live and die and rise from the dead, and he's here, and there's a friendship, a personal relationship with him.

One other thing that was really important in that itinerary: the following year they invited me to go to Rome again. I had started at Notre Dame, and I had to pay most of it; my parents were covering a lot, but it meant working, so I was working in construction in the summer. I proposed to my parents that I'd

like to go again. They said no, you can't go, thinking of the money. But the real reason they were apprehensive is that they thought I was getting too interested in this thing, and they were not excited about that.

They had several reservations. One is that it was something new, unknown in the Catholic Church. Their impression was that it was anti-intellectual, because the people they knew of were mostly blue-collar, and they wanted me to go ahead professionally, academically. So they were uncomfortable with it.

I ended up getting another job as well, working in the evening washing toilets and bathrooms in a bank, plus working construction during the day. So it was really quite demanding that summer. I remember I ended up hitchhiking to work back and forth. And I was painting the house, since my sister was getting married, until it got dark enough. Then I went in, wolfed something down, and went to work at the bank. Certain things only people at that age would do.

I actually got a ticket. This was before 9/11 and everything; this was back in '72. I got it anyway, and I went to my parents the day before the flight. But I was convinced, based on the experience I'd had before, that God would somehow intervene and make it possible, because there had been so many experiences where providence was evident to me, that this was in God's hands. As it turned out, I talked with my parents and they said, "No. Forget it." And I realized I was not going.

So my first reaction was: am I kidding myself? Is this a hoax? This relationship with God, is it real, or am I just convincing myself?

And then, talking with a couple of the other guys in the Focolare, with unity, with Jesus among us, I had a great clarity there. Because the theme of that convention was one of the main focal points of the Focolare: Jesus and his suffering, his abandonment by the Father. And I realized that moment of doubt on my part (is this for real, is God there?) was a taste, not painful, but a taste of that experience of Jesus on the cross where he cried, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

I realized that more than going and hearing talks, it was to have this experience of feeling abandoned by God and trying to fill in that gap by loving. And what helped me so much was the unity with the others. So more than a cerebral thing, it was existential.

That was probably one of the most important experiences of my life, because I realized that union with God that I had tasted was always possible, because there was always suffering, always something, some misunderstanding or whatever. And so I would never be deprived of it; it would always be possible. That was fundamentally important, and it's remained with me all my life.

Over the following year at Notre Dame I had a number of experiences outside of the Focolare movement as well that were, in my mind, providential, especially in helping me build that personal relationship with God, and make a deep personal choice. Before, I was thinking I had twelve different things I was interested in majoring in. All kinds of interests, a lot of correspondence, many friendships. But through the circumstances and the people I met, I was helped to make a radical choice of God, that everything was in function of that relationship. Which didn't mean abandoning any people or anything, but it made sense. Things fit together.

That also helped me a lot in going more in depth into understanding what the Focolare offered. At a certain point I was trying to understand what God wanted from me in my life, and through circumstances I understood that it was with the Focolare. I didn't know how, because there are all kinds of ways of being involved. But after my second year of undergrad, I moved into the Focolare community in Chicago with a group of consecrated men. And after several months, I realized this is what God wants for me.

This discovery of discerning what God wants, I also learned, was not just cerebral, not just white-knuckle it, an act of the will; it was also what my heart was bringing me to. I felt such a great affinity, more than affinity: that this was my element. This effort to always live with Jesus among us, loving one another as the Gospel teaches. That was the beginning of this experience. That was in 1973, that I moved into the Focolare.

One thing I'd say that's perhaps interesting in this context: my parents were vehemently opposed, very apprehensive. I was nineteen, and I felt, I think this is something God wants, and so I persisted. It was the only time I ever saw my dad cry. It was for me a very strong moment, but I thought, this is something God wants, so God will take care of other things.

As it turned out, just at that time, my dad was leaving his lifelong work selling pharmaceuticals and pacemakers, to buy a little hamburger place. His hope was to make enough money to enable the eight of us children to be independent, to not have to experience what he did as a salesman, where he was really treated badly. And in fact, one brother's a doctor, one brother's a dentist, a sister's a lawyer, and so on. And here I was at a very good university, at Notre Dame, saying, I'm leaving that, and I wasn't assured of going to a good school after that. So that was really difficult for my parents to digest.

As it turned out, in a matter of about a month, I got accepted into a very good school, the University of Chicago. I was there for the next year, and then I moved to New York, and I finished my undergrad at Columbia, and I got a master's there.

Also with my father, through the different challenges among my siblings and so on, he eventually wrote to me when I was in New York and encouraged me to go ahead, contrary to that initial reaction when he was so apprehensive. He encouraged me to go ahead, because he saw that this could be beneficial also for my siblings: my seriousness, my commitment. And that has always remained with me, all these years.

Just after Easter, I got a call from my brother, who was in medical school, saying my dad had had a cerebral aneurysm, and it really was in question how long he would survive. So I flew home right away, and he lived another two weeks.

Talking with my mother and my siblings, I saw that there had been a change in his life. The business had failed, because McDonald's had come in as soon as he started making money with it, and put him out of business. So he lost his life savings. But it was also a moment for him to begin to live a spiritual life again, which he had been living before that. And I felt that my commitment in following God was also helpful for him.

So I saw that in spite of my parents' opposition, my being faithful to God ultimately benefited them as well. That's my interpretation and my understanding of it. I could see through this, you could say that golden thread, God's intervention accompanying me, and taking care of the things I couldn't directly.

Over all these years in the Focolare, one thing I'm grateful for is that I've never had a doubt that this is the place God wanted me. And that's not the same for everyone. There are sometimes very, very demanding, different challenges, cultural variety among us. But with that initial experience and understanding of Jesus and his abandonment, that it's a way for me to be united with God, that was the way to address and resolve all of those challenges over the years. I would also say I'm so grateful for that experience of just being immersed in that communal presence of God, which presupposes the personal union with God. That's the basis for the communion we have among us.

Teresa of Avila talked about the interior castle, and Chiara talks about the exterior castle. The exterior castle, the rapport among us, presupposes that there's that interior castle there as well. So all of these years in the Focolare have been that possibility for growing in union with God.

The interior and the exterior castle

Interviewer: Can you expand a little bit more on the interior and the exterior castle?

Bill Neu: Sure. It's not that I'm an expert on Teresa of Avila, although I've read some of her work, and John of the Cross was with her. But she had a light, a charism, let's say, to understand the life of prayer. And she described going within ourselves as being like a castle, going from one room, or one mansion, to another. It's a step, an itinerary in the spiritual life, until you get to that innermost room, where, as John of the Cross described it, you arrive and what do you find? Two eyes looking at you, loving you. In that innermost part is God, dwelling and waiting for you there. And finding that union with God.

Teresa of Avila writes a lot about ways of praying, how to pray, how to have that contemplation. She's been an inspiration not just for Carmelites like Thérèse of Lisieux, but for many others trying to live a spiritual life.

Chiara was reading about Teresa of Avila around 1960, probably a little bit before, but some of the things she said came out in the early sixties. And she said, just as Teresa of Avila talks about the interior castle, we also have the exterior castle. Because it's not only me contemplating God within myself; there's the same God in the other, who's trying to live this way.

So Chiara used the metaphor of a garden. Traditionally we've learned to admire one flower; we find God in one flower, and grow in that. But God's calling us to admire him not only in that flower, but in each different flower in this diverse garden.

And in that process it becomes less subjective, these are my words now, less just my take on God. Admiring God in each of these other flowers, each of these other persons, makes it more my relationship with God as he is, not just my own take on him. But also, it's God in me relating with God in you. And it's reciprocated.

In that reciprocation of loving one another as he loves us (as he said, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them), we can have Jesus among us. And with Jesus among us is also the Holy Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit, which in the letter to the Galatians are joy, peace, and often a certain light.

So when Chiara refers to the exterior castle, it brings up many other images we've learned living this spirituality: that our union with God is also in the collectivity. It's got to have both elements. We can't be missing the interior, but the exterior makes it how the church should be, how all of us disciples of Christ should be together, loving one another. That it's also God among us, not only God within each of us. So it's really a kind of revolution in the way we understand the spiritual life.

Where he has lived

Interviewer: You've moved a lot. Can you give us the litany of where you've been?

Bill Neu: Well, I moved into the Focolare in 1973. I left the University of Notre Dame and transferred to the University of Chicago. I was there for a year, but our center of formation in North America moved to New York. So I moved to New York, and then again, providentially, I was able to get into a good school, Columbia. I was living in the Focolare in Brooklyn and commuting to Columbia in Upper Manhattan. I finished my undergrad, and the Focolare asked me to continue and get an MBA, so I got an MBA in finance there at Columbia. I was in New York for three and a half years.

Then I went to our center of formation at Loppiano, outside of Florence, and I was there a little more than a year and a half, this beautiful experience of community with young people from all over the world trying to live this same spirituality. It really remained with me. It was a lot of light. This all makes sense; it's a new way of understanding the Gospel and living it.

One experience I had there which I think is interesting: I had been living in the Focolare for several years, so I thought, well, I know the ropes, I know how it works. Most of the others were just coming in; they had not lived in the Focolare, they didn't have that experience. And I remember sometimes I was suggesting or asking something based on my past experience. And one of the youngest, newest guys explained to me that what I was suggesting was out of tune.

So I asked the man who had a lot of responsibility for our formation how it was going. And he said, well, you know, the guys who come here with the most experience, oftentimes it's the most difficult for them to enter into the reality here. In a very charitable, intelligent way, he was giving me a kick in the rear end: to completely put aside that past experience of mine, which was in a sense a kind of riches, and be open to what's new here.

I related that to something I'd understood about Mary's experience. Mary had lived with Jesus for thirty years, so this God she had come to know, suddenly she sees him dying on a cross, and it completely turned upside down all that she knew about God. But she remained faithful, and it opened up, through the resurrection, a new paradigm. But that new paradigm would not have been accessible to her if she hadn't put aside what her past experience was, to be open to what was new.

So I saw my experience as a way of living that dimension: to not be full of my past experience or my frame of thought, but to be open to the new way that God reveals himself. That requires a detachment, a purity, a certain humility. And what is new includes what was there before, but it gives it a new light, a new twist. So that experience was very important for me: always being open to what's new, which means putting aside whatever the past experience was.

After that I was asked to go back to the Focolare in Chicago, and I was there about six years. That's where I began working, using my MBA, in international banking. After that I spent three years in our community in New York, which at the time was the headquarters for the movement in North America. One of those years I actually managed our publishing house, which was a good learning experience, how it operates.

I was asked to go to Boston then, and I had responsibility for the movement in New England, only for a year. Then I was asked to go back to Chicago, where I shared responsibility for the movement in the Midwest for about eleven years. That was a very positive experience. There, for example, I met John Mundell and others whom you've all met.

After that I was asked to go to our relatively newly established community in upstate New York, called Mariapolis Luminosa, and I was there about five years. Then I moved to our community in New York, and that's when I went back to studying. So I was no longer carrying a lot of responsibility in the movement; I was going back to school, and I got a master's in theology at Seton Hall University.

Then I moved down to our center in Washington and did graduate studies at the Catholic University of America. I got a master's in philosophy there and did some doctoral work. After that I went to Toronto for a year, to our community, and worked on what would eventually become my doctoral dissertation.

Then I moved back to Loppiano, outside of Florence, because by then we had opened a little university; actually it was Chiara who started this university, called Sophia. There I completed my doctoral studies and my dissertation. It was in the area of how the church relates with liberal society, liberal in the philosophical sense, and particularly how the church relates with the American political experiment. I looked at the First Amendment and its statement about religious freedom, and the document from Vatican II about religious freedom, looking at how these are similar or different and the theological repercussions of that.

After those four years I returned to Mariapolis Luminosa for a year, and I began teaching at that time, which I enjoyed very much. Then I was asked to move to our community in Pittsburgh, and I was there for three years, continuing to teach, mostly online.

And then from Pittsburgh, just last December, five or six months ago, I moved to our community in Houston, for an interesting experiment we're doing. Really an innovation: trying to accompany young adults as they try to determine, understand, discern what God wants from each of them. So it's a beautiful experience of working with young adults. We're doing the same thing other Focolare communities do, which is serving the wider community, but with that particular focus.

So that's a fifty-two-year span of time that I've been in the Focolare.

Part Three: A career in business

Education and work

Interviewer: Could you give us a short version of your education as it pertains to business, and then the different jobs you've had in business in particular?

Bill Neu: In my undergraduate studies I ultimately majored in sociology, among the twelve subjects I would have liked to major in. In business school I ended up majoring in finance, and I learned a lot. I appreciated it, but I would also say my experience studying business was challenging, because I didn't really have experience, and many of the others I was studying with did. Those concepts, just in accounting, for example, they were able to attach to something they had already experienced. For me they were just notions, theory. It was only when I began to work that I thought, okay, now these things fit together. One of the things when I was starting in banking: the bank that hired me encouraged me to take more courses in financial accounting, which I found very, very valuable.

I worked for a little less than a year for Fiat Trattori, which was Fiat's agricultural machinery subsidiary, especially tractors, the office based in Chicago that was serving all of North America, providing components to American manufacturers of farm machinery, and also, at that time, the new introduction of Fiat tractors through Hesston, a company in Kansas that produced other farm machinery. It was something complementary; Hesston was a partially owned subsidiary of Fiat at the time. For me it was a whole new world, because I didn't know farm machinery and I didn't know farming. So I learned a lot through that experience.

After that I moved into banking, and I worked for an Italian bank in Chicago. Initially as a financial analyst, and I learned a lot from that. I enjoyed it, because I enjoy research, working to understand a particular company, usually Fortune 500 companies; wholesale banking, so it wasn't on the retail level. Analyzing a company for credit, either to renew a credit or to get new business with them.

In that process, I read everything I could. Everything in the press, and whatever literature the company produced for the SEC. And I read everything I could about the industry, so that after doing that research I felt I really had a handle on the company: what the trajectory was historically, where it was going, what the criteria were for their decisions.

So I enjoyed that research a lot. It helped me to get my arms around things and understand that decisions were not just arbitrary, that things weren't just in a cloud somewhere. Things made sense; there was a logic within which those decisions were being made.

After that I was promoted to become a calling officer on these Fortune 500 companies. That usually meant calling on the cash manager, or the assistant treasurer, or the treasurer, or even the CFO on occasion, tailoring what we had to offer to what their needs were.

Now, the companies usually had business with these big Italian banks already, overseas, but the hope was to increase that business. My experience was that it was really, in a sense, a commodity, because these people in these offices were seeing one or two bankers almost every day. So we had to see what

we could offer that might be unique, and that was difficult. My experience was that the most unique thing we could offer was ourselves personally, and to build this rapport of trust by doing different services. If they needed something translated from Italian to English, or whatever.

I did that for about four years in Chicago, and then I moved to New York. The Focolare asked me to move, and I managed our publishing house for a year, which is a whole different world, understanding how to produce a book, how to get the authors writing, and then how to market it.

After that I went back into banking, and worked for another Italian bank for a couple of years, again calling on big Fortune 500 companies. In New York I was covering from Boston down to Philadelphia. I worked with the computer industry, so I learned a lot about that, because I'm not an IT person. It was very dynamic at that time; most of those companies are no longer around, they've been merged. I worked with the pharmaceutical industry, and a couple of others.

So I always valued it, just for the learning process and the relationships that were built. That substantially is my professional experience. It's really not a long stretch, because subsequently I had a lot of responsibility in the Focolare movement.

Building rapport

Interviewer: You talk about rapport. As a business development person you're calling on relatively high-level people who control a lot of money, and you're saying it becomes almost like a commodity, there are so many people like you. Can you think of an example of a way that you established rapport by offering yourself?

Bill Neu: The one that comes to mind is a company in Boston that had business in Italy, though I'm sure that if I thought more I'd have other examples. I could give a lot of guidance, since I'd lived in Italy and was very fluent in the language. When they received correspondence or material from their subsidiary in Italy, I could help personally: how to understand this, or Italian regulations, or whatever. Either I could get the information myself directly, or consult with others. So they saw I was offering a service. There was no benefit to us immediately, but a relationship of trust was established with them.

Some companies, I'm thinking of another in Philadelphia, had absolutely no Italian connection at all. But it was just to say, look, here's what we offer, the risk is good, it's comparable to a good big American bank, and I'm here personally to accompany you through this process. Things that may be obscure within the banking world, I can help you understand. And there was a response to that. In terms of business, they valued that personal rapport.

Another company, a big utility in the Midwest, a major utility, we actually met even with the treasurer of the company. We offered an instrument that was a little bit innovative and sophisticated, and he was intrigued by it, so we developed it so that it could be appealing. As it turned out, we were not able to offer an interest rate that would warrant it, but he valued that.

So it's all in these little services that you do on a personal level, that build that relationship of trust with people. So that when there was a pinch, they would come to us.

Part Four: The Economy of Communion

What it is and where it came from

Interviewer: The core focus of this project is the Economy of Communion. So let me just ask you: what is the Economy of Communion? If someone asks you, how would you describe it?

Bill Neu: Well, my knowledge of it is such that there's so much you could say. You have to try to boil it down. I look at the history of it: it was born from Chiara, on the one hand reading the newly issued encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, and on the other seeing the poverty among members of the movement around São Paulo. In spite of the communion of goods we had been trying to live for years in the Focolare movement, many members of the movement were still poor.

So she posed the question, reading this encyclical, which was Pope John Paul II's encyclical following the fall of the Berlin Wall, bringing out the value of the market economy; it's much more complex than that, but that was one part of it. She posed the question: what does the charism God gave her, gave to the Focolare movement, what can that offer here?

And that is when the idea, the inspiration, came, of the Economy of Communion. Entrepreneurs, many of whom were already members of the Focolare movement, would take the lead. Chiara was not trained in economics, so some of the things she said were, you could say, a bit naive. But the basic inspiration was there. She said, from the profits they could split it: one third for the poor, one third to support and sustain structures that help form new people who could sustain the Economy of Communion, and one third retained earnings.

Now, we know that in different industries that one third, one third, one third doesn't work. One industry might have to retain ninety-five percent of its profit; another might be only five percent. But the basic inspiration was there.

And then, as it developed, especially in communion with the entrepreneurs who jumped on board, the application of Chiara's insights to the whole way of running a business, not only sharing the profits for the benefit of the poor and providing employment for the poor, was in all of the relationships. Relationships with clientele, with the workers within the company, with the suppliers, with the surrounding society; what are called the stakeholders, in terms of following the law, and also in terms of ecology. All of those relationships would be renewed by this charism, by what Chiara had understood.

And of course, Chiara's understanding is based on her insights about Jesus' abandonment: what that tells us about the Trinity, the Trinitarian relationships, and how that ideally translates into the way we relate with one another. Jesus said, love one another as I have loved you. So all of these relationships, with the clientele, with the employees and so on, would be imbued with this. It would in a sense be a real revolution in how we do business.

So that, I would say, in a five-minute synopsis, is the theory of it.

But then I know many of the entrepreneurs and I see their experience. One of the things that convinces me of the authenticity of it is when one of these companies sees they have to let someone go, seeing it for the viability of the business, and for the good of the person. Then I say, this is serious. It's not just

window dressing or PR; they are trying to run a business profitably while doing all that is possible to help each individual person.

These businesses in the for-profit sector are able to operate efficiently and generate a profit, and that means they have to be serious about their marketing, about developing a product or service there is a demand for. So they are real, bona fide businesses operating with these principles.

I would go further and say that by operating with these principles, the relationships they build actually lend themselves to a business being more successful. They're in tune with the needs of their customers, and the employees are happy and contributing. It's a more collegial atmosphere as they innovate together and see how they can improve their product or service. As I've seen this unfold, and there have also been failures among some of these companies, it's real, it's credible.

The other element they talk about, and I don't want to discount it, is what they call providence. That is, God's intervention in certain moments where they may take a risk, really trying to look for the kingdom of God, and a new customer comes along, or some new possibility that was unforeseen. So you see it's something also guided by God, accompanied by God.

The last thing I would say with respect to your question is that it was born in that interaction between charism and this encyclical by Pope John Paul II. And then, some years later, Pope Benedict XVI wrote another encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, and he referred to the Economy of Communion. So the Economy of Communion was born partly from the church's social teaching, and it contributed to it as well, as an experience of working in civil economy.

That's a synopsis, my take on the Economy of Communion.

Describing it to a business audience

Interviewer: How would you describe the Economy of Communion to someone who is just trying to evaluate whether or not these are good business principles? Would you phrase your answer any differently? Not denying that it comes from the Focolare, but explaining why the Economy of Communion might be right for this particular time in history as well.

Bill Neu: That's a good question. I would emphasize something I mentioned in that earlier answer: that it ultimately contributes to the viability of the business, the efficiency, the profitability of the business. For this reason: if I am living each of these relationships in this way, really at the service of the other; think of the customers. We know, from our study of business and from our experience, that essential for a business to be successful is marketing. And marketing doesn't only mean persuading customers to buy our products. It means being in touch with the customers: what are their needs, and what do they not need, so that the product or service is tailored to that. The more I can have that rapport with the customers on the other side, the more I'm able to develop those products.

Within the company, thinking just of John Mundell's business in geology, engineering and ecology, you've got people working together, again with this type of rapport in their collaboration, so that the strength and contribution of each one can come out as they bring it together. It facilitates product development, or the service: how we incorporate some new software or whatever.

All of these relationships help us also with the suppliers. Right now with our economy, energy prices are going up, and if that's a significant component of what I'm producing, I'm in touch with the suppliers. How can I help you? And as that rapport develops, the supplier is also looking out for my good, and for the company's. And also with the environment. So all of these relationships help a company to be more successful.

I would contrast that with a notion of a dog-eat-dog rat race of competing. Because there's a rapport with competitors as well. My intention is not to crush my competitor, but to see what the market share of each of us is, to learn from each other, and even to help each other. I know some of the experiences where, from my looking out for the good of my competitor, it also comes back, that they may have a prospective customer they're not able to service, but they know we can, so they channel them to us. Or vice versa.

So all of these relationships help a company to be more successful, more efficient, more profitable. That would be my response.

Adapting it to other cultures

Interviewer: It's my understanding that the vast majority of Economy of Communion companies are not North American companies. Do you see a difference in approach, or in the application of Economy of Communion principles, for companies in North America compared with those elsewhere? Are there principles that play out in the southern hemisphere that may not work as well here?

Bill Neu: It's a good question. I would say this: anything, including the Catholic Church's social teaching, is universally applicable. But it has to be incarnated into the particular concrete circumstances.

So thinking of the Economy of Communion as a general principle, we'd say, okay, how does it work here? Because the laws are different here from other places. Customs, culture.

Just to give you an example: in certain places in Italy, the joke is that there's always time to die and there's always time to pay your debts. So it's just understood that there's a long lead time between supplying a product and when it will be paid. And that long lead time: four months might be the minimum, it can be longer than that. The suppliers can agonize to get the cash they need, and the customers are trying to stretch it as long as they can. Now, in that context, it's understood. That's how we operate. In the North American context, it'd be thirty days, or we're not going to supply you anymore, or we're going to increase the pricing.

I would say in Italy there's a much greater emphasis and reliance on personal rapport. That's a beauty in that culture; that's a strength. But it's a different culture. Here there's much greater focus on what the rules are, and there's a beauty in that too: a certain predictability and reliability in how we operate.

So translating the principles of the Economy of Communion into this particular context, it has to be different from Italy or Brazil or Argentina. And that depends on the particular persons and how they operate. I don't have enough experience to say much; someone like John Mundell could say more about that, because he has done work in Brazil as well as here.

So culture is an important factor, and the regulatory environment, the history, and so on. I don't have any magic wand to say, this is how we need to do it here; I don't feel I have the experience or the depth of knowledge. But as a principle, yes: it must be adapted to this particular environment.

Part Five: Living it in a business

Finance and accounting

Interviewer: You were in finance. What advice would you give a student who's thinking about working in accounting and finance, who's going to see all the inner workings of a business? How can I approach doing that kind of work with the Economy of Communion in mind?

Bill Neu: Accounting is different from finance, but finance uses accounting. Financial accounting is the public reporting by a company for the SEC, if they're publicly traded, and for investors. There are regulations and laws for that accounting, so as not to deceive potential investors. The investors rely on that accounting, including the auditing that's done by the auditing firms.

So from the standpoint of financial analysis, where I'm looking at those accounts that have been published, I do a thorough job. There are different things that are done: a number may be given and there's a footnote, and the footnote says this is related to that. And that footnote may mean a lot. So you have your eyes open, you consult with other experts in the field. Each detail in those financial accounts is important, because you don't want to be naive.

The other side of accounting is internal, managerial accounting. I have less experience with that, but it's what's useful for the decisions the company makes: cash flow, what the real cost to us is of this sector or this part of the business. That's all communication, so you want it to be accurate and transparent.

The temptation is to try to tailor or doctor the financial accounts that are shown, so as to increase the investment or whatever. So it's really imperative that there's transparency and accuracy. Someone working in that area has to have their eyes open to those things, and to make sure you're abiding by the regulations and that there's no deception there. It's an obvious temptation, because there are interests in portraying things in a certain way.

Sometimes that could even involve objecting: I don't feel comfortable reporting this particular thing. But ultimately that's for the benefit of the company, of the operation itself. I'm sure that any serious student of these areas is already aware of these things.

I remember one pharmaceutical house that I went to visit with the manager of the branch in New York. I had discovered a little thing in their financial accounts indicating that the interest rate they were being charged was actually higher than the one we were charging, and they said, this is the best that we get. So just discovering that gave us the possibility to say, what's going on here? They had to go back and look at it and rework it, for the benefit of our bank as well.

So in finance and accounting there's a lot of communication, and sometimes it's quite complex. I was also working with investment banks, those are the ones that are not commercial banking, but arranging these big deals, whether it's a leveraged buyout or whatever, and then the commercial banks finance a

lot of that for a short period at very attractive interest rates. It can be quite complex.

I'll give an example. This isn't investment banking, but the bank I was in was involved with Chrysler way back in the eighties, and Chrysler had gone through a lot of financial challenges. Eventually they were sustained by the government, and a lot of the loans were repackaged; the agreement with the banks was reworked. I had to wade through the complexity of all of that to put together a picture, and I consulted with the people at Chrysler and with other experts in the field.

So the thing I would say is: do your work thoroughly. One thing I would say as an Economy of Communion person is, be professionally competent. There are no shortcuts in that.

Competence

Interviewer: The focus can be on how to bring Economy of Communion values to bear on the job you're doing, people over profits, that sort of thing. Another huge piece of that is: be great at the job you're doing. Could you expound on that, the value of just being great at accounting, or whatever your job is?

Bill Neu: Whatever one's position is in one of these companies, whether marketing, accounting, finance, or the CEO, I am made to be a gift to the other. And I want to be a gift to the other, and vice versa.

Now, to be a gift means, in this context, that I do my job as well as I can. And that means continuing, ongoing education, study, and so on. Because the company is successful not only because of providential intervention; God asks us to do our part. So I need to be as competent as I can be in my particular area, precisely as a contribution to the overall operation.

When someone has to be let go

Interviewer: You had mentioned earlier, about companies that were firing people, that you saw it almost as a point of: this is how we know the Economy of Communion is business-legitimate. There are teeth to it. Could you say more about that? When we say people over profits, we don't mean we always choose to keep the person working here; it's a way to treat people even when we have to let them go.

Bill Neu: Right. I think it relates also to what we were saying before about competence. That is to say, it is an institution and an operation that has a social dimension within it: it is a society of people, serving customers and other stakeholders. And so the performance of each person is important, an important contribution to that process.

A naive approach, which is what I'm critical of, is to say, well, this is a person, this is a friend, we don't want to make life uncomfortable, we don't want to demand that they do their part. And so it can become a haven for not being efficient and competent.

That's why I say, when I see a company ready to ask someone to move on, it says to me: okay, they're serious about this business. And that doesn't mean being uncharitable to that person; it means helping that person find another position, helping them improve in what they're doing.

But each person is contributing to an overall project, and the others depend on that. If we're doing things in such a way that's not asking for everyone's full contribution, it's at the expense of everyone else involved. So in that sense, I don't want to make it too big, but it's a kind of litmus test for me. This is a serious business. And they really do want to be at the service of everyone.

Advice on entering business

Interviewer: Do you have any general advice for someone coming into the business world? If you were starting again, these are the things I would look for in a job, or things I'd want to be very mindful of, whatever the job is.

Bill Neu: Two things come to my mind.

I remember one company we had developed a good relationship with. The treasurer brought us to meet the CEO of the company, and the CEO was an interesting person. He had a great interest in Japan, in Japanese culture, and I had taken a couple of undergraduate courses in Japanese literature. So as he was talking about his interest in Japan, I was able to talk with him a little bit about Japanese literature. It was more just to get to know each other, rapport.

Now you say, what the heck does that have to do with business? But at the time, we're talking in the eighties, Citibank, which was then the biggest bank in the world, valued people with knowledge and interests outside the field of business. And I see that: whatever the thing is, someone may be an expert in IT, or in the World Cup, or whatever it is, all of those things are valuable, because they're all means for relationship with people. Because the relationship goes beyond just the immediate service or product we're providing: that's a human being I'm relating with. So I would say, don't discount any other interest or thing you've studied. I think it's all valuable.

In terms of the interviewing process and choosing where to work: if I find people who are interested in people, that's important. That is, an institution that wants to foster the development of its personnel for their good. It'll serve the interest of the institution, but it's for the good of the personnel as they go ahead. That is very important, I think.

Now, that's an ideal scenario. You don't always find that. But if I'm choosing between two, and I see one that may have a very good product, and another where the product has to be good as well but they also value their personnel; that's important.

I was talking with you all before about how you can walk into a company and immediately see there's a particular culture there. And I think it reflects the top management, inevitably. But if I go into a company and I see an atmosphere where people are relaxed, are working, but there's a good rapport; that means a lot. That's significant.

Part Six: The theological foundation

The Trinity and the Economy of Communion

Interviewer: You said something earlier that intrigued me, that there's a Trinitarian understanding that in some ways is expressed in the Economy of Communion, or in the way it's practiced. Can you summarize that?

Bill Neu: I would say it's really the core of the spirituality, of Chiara's insights. She had a particular intuition of Jesus crying on the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" which was really perplexing, I would say, even for the Fathers of the church back in the first centuries. How do we understand this? Because it's God calling to God.

So in itself, it reveals the diversity of the Trinity. In the Hebrew scriptures, it's "I am who I am," in Exodus. And Jesus also said many times, "I am," and that was a shock for the Jews, because, what's this man saying? He's saying, "I am God." But he also said, "We are": that they may be one as we are one. So he's revealing the Trinity there in this relationship. And then it's fully opened out in this experience of abandonment: that he, as a man, felt abandoned by God. So he identified himself with our experience.

But he also filled in this gap by loving. He said, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Without even seeing the response, he still loved; he filled in that gap. So it also shows his divinity, and that's the basis of our salvation, because he has to be fully man and fully divine for us to be saved. That's the teaching of the Fathers of the church.

But in that, that abandonment is like a window, that transparency through which God looks on humanity and sees us redeemed, through the lens of Jesus forsaken. Chiara used the metaphor of the pupil of the eye. But it's also a window for us to see into the life of the Trinity. Because Jesus also said, "Who sees me sees the Father." So what he lived is a revelation of how the Father lives.

The Trinitarian relationships: he emptied himself, as the letter to the Philippians says, of his divinity, to take on our humanity. So it means also that the Father empties himself entirely in generating the Son. And that's reciprocated by the Son.

So Jesus, in this experience, was also revealing to us how life is in the Trinity, this self-emptying out of love for the other. The difference, of course, is that in the Trinity, in God, there is no suffering, because it's all instantaneous; it's eternity. We live in time, so we see these things sequentially, but in God it's instantaneous. It is this giving myself out of love, and having the resurrection also in this relationship. But it shows that the life of the Trinity is dynamic, not something static: each person giving to the other, emptying themselves.

Now, Jesus was like an immigrant coming into our society, our world. And as an immigrant, of course, you come in and you learn the new culture you're in, but you also bring the culture you're coming from. So when he said, I give you a new commandment, my commandment, love one another as I have loved you, he was introducing the life of the Trinity, the culture of the Trinity: that we love one another as they love in the Trinity.

And the measure of that, as I have loved you, is that he gave his life. He said, no one has greater love than the one who gives his life. But how did he do it? He even gave his relationship with the Father for us. And what is that relationship? That relationship is a person: the Holy Spirit, that mutual love between the Father and the Son, personified. So he gave us the Holy Spirit, so that we could be united with the Father, with Jesus looking to the Father. And he felt that deprivation of the Holy Spirit in that cry of abandonment. And then in the resurrection, of course, there's a resolution of that.

So we see this relationship in the Trinity. Now, we have to be careful, because probably everything I'm saying, someone could say, you can't say that, because it's God; God transcends us. We have to be careful of anthropomorphism, of imposing on God something that's human. But Jesus is revealing something. So we try to understand that of the Trinity, and he's asking us to live it in our relationships.

So that has repercussions in everything: in the field of education, in politics, in economics. That is, our nature, the way we're made, is to live this Trinitarian relationship. With original sin that was distorted; Jesus is bringing us back to our nature, and beyond it. Our nature is to love one another.

So getting back to your earlier question about how this can be viable in business: the way we were made is to have these relationships of mutual love. So the business is going to be more successful, because it corresponds to the way we're made. That's how the Trinity translates into all of our relationships there.

I want to be careful, because it could almost seem trite, because it's really God we're talking about, and God is much bigger than all of us.

From Augustine to Chiara

Interviewer: You were just sharing some interesting things about Augustine and Plotinus, and how in some ways the idea of the importance of community, rather than just individual relationship, came to fruition in the Focolare. Can you give us a little of that history? And you also mentioned two scholars who had talked about that.

Bill Neu: First of all, I think it's important to acknowledge and affirm that all the things the Holy Spirit has inspired over these centuries come from the Gospel. And so, to some extent, every new charism in the history of the church contains the collective dimension. Of course, the charism Chiara had of the Focolare brings it out enormously. But it would be a mistake to say the collective dimension was totally absent before and now it's present; it couldn't be Christianity unless there was the collective dimension as well, an emphasis on community.

But if you look, for example, at Anthony of the Desert, the emphasis was very much on fleeing the world in order to be alone, and to grow in sanctity. He was kind of the father of the life of consecration to God: of giving one's life to God, of poverty, and living as a hermit. That was historically after the end of the persecution of Christians: there was no longer martyrdom as an option, and so that was chosen. And that, together with virginity, was the way people strove for sanctity, for perfection in life.

But what happened is, as I would understand it, and I'm not an expert, there was a heavy influence of Greek philosophy, which is focused very much on the individual, on individual happiness. So for example, Aristotle focused on substance, which is the thing that remains in itself. If you remove my

arm, I'm still Bill. If you remove my other arm and my legs, I'm still Bill. If you remove my head, I'm no longer that. Substance is what remains; the other things are accidental. And Aristotle had what he called the categories, ten different categories. Substance was the most important, that's what remained, and the others were more accidental. One which seemed to be relegated almost to the last position was relationship. You look at what is the substance in relationship to another: it's above, it's below, it's next to it. So it seems furthest removed from substance.

Now, as the doctrine of the church unfolded, or developed, to use Newman's expression, take first of all the understanding of the person of Jesus. In the first two centuries the focus was on: Jesus Christ is my savior, he saves me. But at a certain point, as Christianity interacted with the Greek philosophy of the time, the question was posed ontologically: who is he, not only as my savior saving me, but who is he in himself?

And there's where you had the Arian controversy come out, that Jesus is the greatest thing since sliced bread, the greatest of creation, but he's not God. That was the Arian heresy. And Athanasius fought that at the Council of Nicaea, saying: if he's not God, we cannot be saved. But also, if he's not fully human, we cannot be saved. So then the Christological doctrine came out: he's fully human and fully divine.

And then the understanding of the Trinity. At the end of Matthew's Gospel: go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So there are the three persons who comprise the Trinity, and Jesus is the second person, the Word who became flesh, became a human being.

And so, in that context, we arrive at *person*, which in our language today we contrast with the idea of *individual*. An individual is something separate; a person is someone in relationship. So philosophically, the whole understanding of person came with the development of Christology, seeing that this person was in relationship with the Father, and with the Holy Spirit also.

Augustine, taking all that had been written up until then, including the Council of Nicaea, wrote his famous work on the Trinity, *De Trinitate*. And he really wrestled with all of this, trying to understand. In fact, there's an account, I don't know if it's a legend, that one time he was walking along the beach and there was a child pouring water into a hole in the sand. And he asked the child, "What are you doing?" And the child said, "I'm putting the Mediterranean Sea into this hole." And Augustine said, "Well, you can't do that. It's impossible." And the child said, "Just like you can't get the Trinity into your mind."

So the understanding is that whatever we say, God is much bigger than that. We say it in this human language.

And yet, with Jesus' experience and what he revealed, in the Exodus account God says, "I am who I am," and Jesus several times in the Gospels says, "I am," and that had clear meaning, that he was identifying himself with God. He also said that all may be one as you and I are one. So it's more than just "I am," but "we are."

And so Jesus was introducing this, and I would say especially in his experience of abandonment on the cross, where it was he crying out to the Father, or to God, why have you forsaken me? So the paradox, the mystery, the challenge for us as we try to understand what Jesus revealed, is that it's God calling out to God. It seems almost absurd. But in that, he's opening a window for us to see into the Trinity.

So Augustine was wrestling with all this, trying to understand. And if you read *De Trinitate*, I think it's in the eighth book, at a certain point… The whole work is the psychological analogy, where he's saying that within the person, the memory reflects the Father, the intellect the Son, and, now I'm mixing it up, the Holy Spirit would be, I don't know if it's the imagination. But in any case, these three dimensions within ourselves reflect the Trinity within us.

At a certain point, I think it's in the eighth book of *De Trinitate*, Augustine says: well, there is the lover, the beloved, and the love. And that obviously is reflecting an understanding of the Trinity. So Augustine said, I think the key to penetrate what the Trinity is, is precisely in love. And then he returned to the psychological analogy that he was doing, until the fifteenth book.

Now bear in mind that he wrote *De Trinitate* over many years. But in the fifteenth book he looked back at the whole work he had done, and he said: there in the eighth book was an insight that was a way, but it was too bright, it was too much to get there, to penetrate that. And he had returned to the analogy. He wrote that with a certain regret, in the fifteenth book, the last book.

What he did show, though, in this book, was that the Son could only be the Son inasmuch as he's in relationship with the Father. Otherwise he's not the Son. Likewise, the Father is only the Father inasmuch as he's in relationship with the Son. And of course we understand that relationship, that mutual love between the two, is the person of the Holy Spirit, who unites them and also helps them to be distinct. So Augustine, with that insight, saw that relationship is actually much more important than Aristotle had said.

Augustine also was heavily influenced by the philosophy of the Neoplatonists, Plotinus in particular, as you can see in the *Confessions*, his own autobiography. That's a philosophy he valued, because he felt it was a good preparation to understand Christianity. But it was also a philosophy that was very individualistic. Plotinus of course felt he was completely consistent with Plato, five or six centuries earlier. But if you read the *Enneads*, which were compiled by Porphyry, Plotinus's student, writing about Plotinus's thought, it was really between God and myself individually, separating everything else out. And it's for me to return to God. So with that as the philosophical base Augustine had, he lacked the tools to penetrate further into the dimension of relationship in the Trinity, in God, and consequently in our life too, because we're made in the image and likeness of God.

Now, two theologians of the twentieth century, one of whom is still working in the twenty-first, still doing great work. One is von Balthasar, who's very well known as a major Catholic theologian. And the other is Piero Coda, whose main inspiration is Chiara Lubich's thought, but who is very widely known and highly respected. He's actually currently the Secretary General of the International Theological Commission. Both of them observed that Augustine lacked the philosophical base, the concepts, to be able to develop this understanding, this value of the Trinity.

Now if we fast forward, there are many developments through the thought of Aquinas, who further developed Augustine's insights. But if you fast forward to the 1960s, Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, wrote that the dimension of relationship is so important that it kind of revolutionizes how we think philosophically and theologically, and that we're only touching the surface so far. So it's a very interesting statement that he made.

And Piero Coda's observation about Augustine, that he lacked the tools, he also said that it is only now that the Holy Spirit has given this charism to Chiara Lubich, that there's a greater insight into these intra-Trinitarian relationships.

Always bearing in mind, we're talking about something very transcendent, so whatever we say is very delicate, because it's always more than what we say. But the insight we have from Chiara Lubich in particular, from her mystical insights, is that that moment where Jesus cried, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" was a revelation. First of all, of our salvation, because in that, Jesus saved us: he experienced the fully human experience of separation from God, of utter desolation. But he also filled in that gap by loving. He said, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." Which was heroic, because where he felt no response, he still reached out, and it culminated ultimately in the resurrection. He filled that gap for humanity. He took upon himself all of the sin; he made himself sin, as Paul wrote, so that we could have union with God, with the Father.

So there is our salvation in that. But he's also revealing to us things about God, about the Trinity. Because he also said, who sees me sees the Father. So those actions that Jesus did, everything he did, reflected the Father. So also his experience of abandonment, which Paul, in the letter to the Philippians, the second chapter, calls the kenosis, the Greek word for emptying. He emptied himself of his divinity to take on our humanity. And the Fathers of the church said he made himself human so that we could be divine by adoption.

So in that emptying himself of all that he had, out of love for the other, he's revealing the relationships in the Trinity. So analogously, the Father empties himself entirely to generate the Son. And it's in a sense a risk, but the Son reciprocates and gives back to the Father. So Jesus, in that experience of abandonment, is revealing to us the intra-Trinitarian life, the immanent Trinity, the Trinity in itself. This dynamic. And the Holy Spirit lives it by being transparent, so that this love between the Father and the Son can be.

Now, going further with this dynamic of mutual love: one danger, I would say, is anthropomorphism, where we project our human experience onto God, which is not right. We have to allow God to reveal himself to us, and draw from that what it means for us. As the philosophers said, and it is true, God cannot suffer: he's always active, not subjected to suffering.

But going beyond that, it's saying: God is also relationship, that is, persons who are in relationship with each other. So it's dynamic. What we experience in this life as suffering, because it's in time, has a death and a resurrection. In God instead, this kenosis, this self-emptying, is in a sense instantaneous. There's no time in God. We are in time. But it's instantaneous, and there's an immediate resurrection as well: the giving of life, and finding life as well, in the intra-Trinitarian life. For us instead it's in time, as Jesus experienced it as a human being: there's a death and a resurrection.

Now, saying that in the Trinity this is the form of love they have for one another, inasmuch as we can understand it, if we also recognize, in the Genesis account, that we're made in the image and likeness of God, then it means it's in our DNA to have this life among us.

Jesus also gave us the Holy Spirit. He felt the deprivation of the Holy Spirit when he cried, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" That relationship with the Father is the Holy Spirit. He experienced that deprivation precisely so that we could have the Holy Spirit, to be united with the Father, to be united with God, with Jesus, or in Jesus.

So for us it's an experience over time; in God it's immediate. But it also says: this is what we're made for. Before even thinking of original sin, we're made to be in relationship with one another, to love one another. Jesus said, no one has greater love than the one who gives his life for the other. Well, that's what they do in the Trinity; they give their life for one another.

He also said, "I give you a new commandment." So it's different from "love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; love your neighbor as yourself." He's saying, "Love one another as I have loved you." He's inviting us to live the life of the Trinity: that it's reciprocal love, that we live this way with one another.

So this brings out how important relationship is, reciprocal relationship. Chiara, for example, said that the culmination, the peak of love, the perfection of love, is precisely in reciprocity. Now, it's important also to recognize that reciprocity is not healthy or valid if it's a closing in on itself. It's always open to a third. In fact, one of the things Plotinus teaches is that the good always overflows, always spreads to others. And so this love, if it's divine love, if it's a supernatural love for one another, inevitably overflows to others. So it's always open to a third, always open to others.

But I think the main thing I draw from this is that the life of the Trinity is our model of how we are to love one another. And in that love, it generates life in different ways.

So getting back to the Economy of Communion: if we look at the understanding of what's called economic man, rational self-interest, that's not the complete anthropology. The more complete anthropology is that we're made for relationship, with reason. Aristotle and the Greek philosophers bring that out: what distinguishes a human being is that we have reason; the human being is a rational animal. But the human being is more than just that. We're made for relationship. And ultimately we're made for relationship with the transcendent, with God, but also with one another, because there is the presence of God in each person. So as I relate with others, through that I'm also relating with God. Jesus said, whatever you do to the least, you do to me.

So the Trinity is central to understanding what a human being is. And part of our human life is economics. That is, we produce things, and we transport things, we trade things, so that we can all live, because we are part of the cosmos. We live, we eat, we breathe, we drink. So economics is an essential part. But to understand economics not with that limited anthropology of the rational, self-interested man, but as a human being made for relationship with the other, economics changes radically. You see the value of relationship, of gift, one for the other.

Part Seven: Chiara Lubich and the charism

Meeting Chiara

Interviewer: Can you share a little about your own interactions with Chiara? How did you first meet her? What was the nature of your relationship?

Bill Neu: The first time I met Chiara was actually in 1971, when I was at a convention for youth of the Focolare movement. I was so new, and I knew so little, that it was just a whole discovery at the time. Two things remained with me. One is the enthusiasm of the young people, who were just taken by her. That was 1971, so she would have been fifty-one years old, and I was sixteen, seventeen. And also the wisdom of what she was sharing, that impressed me and really impacted my whole life: the teaching that she offered, and her experience as well.

Over subsequent years there were different events where I was in the same place with her, maybe with several hundred people. On one occasion I was able to introduce myself. But if you think of the thousands and thousands of people Chiara met constantly everywhere, I wouldn't say that it was yet a personal friendship.

In 1990, Chiara came to visit Mariapolis Luminosa, the permanent Mariapolis in North America. I had been asked to accompany one of her first companions, Father Foresi, simply driving around the area, just to relax. And so I built a good friendship, a unity you would say, with Father Foresi, and through that I was introduced to Chiara.

I remember one of the first times talking with her, saying my name, Bill. That pronunciation of the letter *i* doesn't exist in Italian. So Chiara really struggled to understand my name. How do you say that? What is it? And so I said, well, Chiara, it's like Buffalo Bill. And she understood: ah, okay, now it makes sense. That was something she remembered, so a year or two later, just by circumstances, I was actually at Buffalo Bill's tomb in Colorado, and I took a picture there and sent it to her.

Over the years I had more and more responsibility in the movement, so I participated in meetings with those who were responsible, with Chiara. And I always valued so much the insights she shared, even in these more intimate meetings, because they were more applicable to my particular circumstances.

I would send letters to her, and in particular I remember one time when I shared some of the challenges I faced, because I felt that this North American society, being so full and so wealthy and prosperous, was sometimes not as receptive to the charism she had, and that was challenging: to be able to find the way to communicate, to offer this charism, because it had so much to offer to American society.

And one time I felt that Chiara, in pointing me to a particular meditation, was helping me to address this challenge I was facing. She referred to a meditation she had written, I think in '49, "The Resurrection of Rome," where she, coming from a deep mystical experience, went to the city of Rome, post-war Rome, and found it to be a not healthy environment, a life of hedonism.

In the meditation she shares how she turned to God within herself, and in union with God within herself she was able to see things through another lens. So that looking at other people, she found that divine spark that was in each person, more or less. And in relating with God and with the other, she was

able to bring out that good, that light that was in the other, and to build a reciprocal relationship, so that it was God among us, or between us. So that this was the key to renewing the society. It enabled her to see the potential that was there in that society, which was so challenging, by finding God within herself, in the neighbor, and then among us.

I felt that was one of those many moments where Chiara's insights helped me, and I felt she was pointing me to that, to understand that. So it's also, in my own life, a constant experience of growing and going into greater depth in my understanding of the charism. Because the charism can't be put in a box. It's something from the Holy Spirit, always something that transcends us.

The moment when I had the opportunity, really the grace, to talk with Chiara was actually in 2000, when she visited the US and I sat down with her for half an hour and shared some of the challenges I felt we faced in trying to bring this charism into this society. Part of the challenge was this process of what we would call inculturation, or another way of saying it, making ourselves one with the society, which is different from the Italian culture where this charism was first born, or many other places in the world. So it's inevitable that there would be challenges, and ways we could do better.

Chiara in this process also asked me several questions about different things in the movement in North America, and about North American society. And I answered very candidly and simply, as I understood it. But from that, a certain esteem developed: Chiara valued the perspective I could offer on different things.

So I remember, after 9/11, I wrote to her about what I observed. For one thing, the churches were overflowing right after 9/11, because everyone was asking the question, what does this mean? How do I understand this? So I shared with Chiara some of these things about North American society, but I also looked at them through the lens of her own insights over the years, through the lens of her charism. And she herself made a kind of unusual observation after 9/11, after that disaster, she said, well, we're closer to universal brotherhood, to that all may be one; that through this there will be a resurrection somehow.

So it was a mutual exchange. I remember one time in one of these more intimate meetings, with those with responsibility for the movement in North America, we dealt with a number of practical things and decisions to be made. And then a little bit of time remained, so she said, "Okay, Bill, tell us what's happening in the States in terms of society and politics." And I had been reading a number of things, particularly at that time the writings of Benjamin Barber, a political scientist. So I shared with her a lot of that perspective. And she was grateful.

But I was also a bit taken aback that she would take this time to ask me to share about these things. So it meant that there was a certain mutual respect there. So I'm grateful. That is a grace that no one could ask for, to be able to have this personal friendship with Chiara.

What a charism is

Interviewer: Can you give a very brief definition of what a charism is?

Bill Neu: Paul refers to charism in his writings, and I think the translation of the Greek word is *gift*. But probably the most widely used definition today is what von Balthasar, the theologian, wrote. I'm paraphrasing, and probably not doing it full justice, but: it's an insight into the Gospel that gives us a glimpse into God, that helps us live the Gospel today, here and now, in these circumstances and particular conditions.

A way to understand a charism is also to look at some of the major charisms over the centuries. For example, you could say that Saint Benedict had a charism, and it's manifested, incarnated, in the Benedictine order today. And it's undoubtedly oversimplified, but it's defined as work and prayer: that through work and prayer I'm able to reach union with God.

Another famous charism we recognize is in Saint Francis, who stressed poverty. Blessed are the poor in spirit, that beatitude. And his life demonstrated this, of being poor of everything except God, to have God alone.

Another charism is Saint Dominic, which is incarnated in the Dominican Order, and it's summed up as contemplation and preaching. So it's the Order of Preachers: to contemplate the truths of the faith in prayer, and then to share that with others.

Another charism we know is Saint Ignatius, and that's manifested in the Jesuit community. There are different ways that would be expressed: to the greater glory of God, discerning what is from God and what is not from God, obedience, complete submission to God.

Another charism would be Teresa of Avila, and with her John of the Cross: through prayer, finding union with God. So she wrote the *Interior Castle* as a way of prayer to reach that union with God, that contemplation.

And related to Teresa of Avila is Thérèse of Lisieux, who was just around the turn of the century, and who found the little way. That it's by being children that we will enter the kingdom of heaven. Finding that simple way of perfection in this little thing I'm doing in this moment, and trusting in God, who would bring me to perfection, to union with God, to sanctity.

Chiara had this charism. She was born in 1920, and in 1943 she gave her life to God. And so her life, already with her first companions, reflected many essential elements of the charism, especially the collective dimension. That is, the purpose of her life together with the others was to contribute to the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer that all may be one. And to do that meant to have unity among ourselves, to have this presence of Jesus among us constantly. He said, where two or three are gathered in my name. So there's the whole collective dimension there.

Some with a lot of insight recognized this as a major charism. One of them was Montini, who was in the Vatican Secretariat of State and was later elected Pope Paul VI. He had met Chiara already in the fifties, and recognized this as a charism of major significance.

I would also say that Chiara herself understood that this charism, which is that all may be one, unity within the Catholic Church, among Christians, among all people of different faiths, with all people of good will, that we work for universal brotherhood, also brings about a harmonization, a unity among all of these charisms we've had over the centuries. So that there's a complementarity between the Jesuit

charism and the Carmelite charism of Teresa of Avila and the Benedictine charism. It brings them into harmony, so that the church becomes that beautiful garden, as in the famous meditation Chiara wrote, that it's not just me contemplating God in this one flower, but I contemplate God in each of these different flowers.

So it's more, you could say, objective: it's God in himself whom I'm finding. And in this way the church becomes that fullness, that harmony of all the different graces the Holy Spirit has given over these centuries. And then each of us personally is called to a particular way, but having the whole breadth of the church within us as we live that.