Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Celeste Harvey | July 2, 2026

Celeste Harvey holds a PhD in philosophy from Marquette University and teaches ethics at the College of Saint Mary. With her husband, Andy Gustafson, she runs Communion Properties, a rental business, and works on the academic side of the Economy of Communion. In this conversation she describes the movement as a vocation rather than a method: a business understood as a community of persons, where profit comes out of relationships rather than in spite of them. She traces what that looks like in one household, with tenants carried through hard months, workers who have become family friends, and a century-old house restored one window at a time. Then she turns the argument on herself, asking whether owning rental property keeps other people out of the market, and makes the case, drawing on David Cloutier's The Vice of Luxury, that luxury is a vice our culture has stopped recognizing. She closes on virtue ethics, and on the question she says matters most: not what to do in a hard case, but what kind of person you are becoming.

Interviewer: Please introduce yourself and tell us a little about what you do?

Celeste Harvey: I'm Celeste Harvey. I have a PhD in philosophy, and for the last couple of years, together with my husband Andy Gustafson — who's an EoC entrepreneur, he runs an Economy of Communion business, Communion Properties — we've been working on more academic things around the Economy of Communion.

This project's been going since 1991. It's a very practical project; it started out of a lived reality. But what exactly is going on there, and how you articulate what people are living, the values they're living by, what's inspiring and motivating them to keep on doing this — we've been trying to work that out for an academic audience.

Interviewer: What is the Economy of Communion? If someone had never heard of it, how would you answer that question?

Celeste Harvey: The Economy of Communion is an entrepreneurial movement dedicated to using business to create communion between people.

They see the business as a meeting place for persons, a place where people come together to create goods and services, but also to create relationships. Out of those relationships, profit is generated. And the goal of those profits is to create more communion, more unity between all people — between the haves and the have-nots, between competitors.

Interviewer: When you say profits come from friendships or relationships, what do you mean by that? How do profits come from relationships?

Celeste Harvey: Profit is what's left over after all your costs have been covered. Some companies are more profitable than others because they're more productive than others. But part of the productivity of a company is the productivity of the people working together.

So in the midst of those relationships — the generativity of those relationships — business is a communal enterprise. It is people working together. And so out of those relationships is actually where profit comes from.

Interviewer: Some people we've interviewed have said the Economy of Communion isn't just a way of doing business, but a vocation or a lifestyle. Is that your experience, or do you see it differently?

Celeste Harvey: I very much see an Economy of Communion business as a vocation or a lifestyle.

For us that really plays out in terms of where we live — being in close proximity to the people we work with, to the tenants we rent to, to the houses that we own. There are big ways in which the work is actually made possible by where we live, the house we live in, the neighborhood we live in.

Interviewer: You mentioned that the Economy of Communion creates community — it brings people together. Are there specific examples of that you've seen in your rentals, with the tenants or the vendors or the crew that works for you?

Celeste Harvey: The Economy of Communion really sees businesses as a community of persons, and in our rental properties that's played out in pretty clear ways.

Everything from the guys who work for us coming into relationship not only with us but with one another — relationships they wouldn't have if they weren't doing odd jobs for us, painting and handyman work and all of that. But then they also form relationships with the tenants. You know your handyman; you know who's coming in to fix your toilet. And these guys also live in our neighborhood. So they end up being the handyman to our tenants, but also the neighbor to our tenants.

I had a niece who lived in one of our buildings. We live in what we might call an up-and-coming neighborhood — but fifteen years ago it was not as up-and-coming. And here she is, a suburban girl right out of college. You wouldn't think she'd be comfortable in this neighborhood, with the characters walking down the street.

But one day she said to us: 'All of a sudden I realized, that's so-and-so who lives over there. And there's so-and-so. And there's so-and-so. And I felt perfectly safe in this neighborhood. All these people are friends of my uncle. They work for him. They're all looking out for me.'

So it was a neat testament to the way in which forming these relationships transformed her experience of living in this neighborhood.

Interviewer: How does your faith, and your understanding of truth and God and Christianity, impact your understanding or practice of the Economy of Communion?

Celeste Harvey: I've really appreciated getting to know the Economy of Communion, because it's offered such a much richer way of integrating faith and business.

The idea that the business is a means of God's grace in the world — that you can live out grace and gift toward people, and that this does display God's grace in the world. But then also that the business is a sphere for you to be transformed and changed. The business is part of the crucible of life. It's not something separate from our spiritual life; in the business we are ourselves shaped and molded — if we're open to seeing it as a sphere of spiritual formation.

I think encountering the Economy of Communion has really offered us the language, and a lens, through which to live out our faith in business in a richer and deeper way. We were already drawn to that, but here we found a community of people who had gone quite a way in articulating that synthesis.

Interviewer: Do you think business by its nature shapes us? Are we being shaped by the way we do business?

Celeste Harvey: I think it's definitely true that we're being shaped by our engagement with business, one way or another.

Very often people are being shaped in a way that leads them to be kind of schizophrenic. They feel they have to live their private values in their personal life, and then set those aside and let business be business. And that's shaping your soul, when you live that way.

Conversely, to the degree that you bring your vision of life and your values to your business, that's going to shape you too, as you become more and more integrated as a person with who you are.

So I think it's definitely true that however you do business, it's going to shape your soul.

Interviewer: Some of the Focolare people we've interviewed, who are also business owners, use the concept of providence to describe things that happen to them in business — things that might be explained in a more secular setting as, well, you just got lucky. How do you see providence being a part of your experience of the Economy of Communion?

Celeste Harvey: One of the things I appreciate most about the Focolare influence on Economy of Communion entrepreneurs is this constant attention to providence.

When you meet with other entrepreneurs and listen to their stories, they're so encouraging — because these people have been shaped and trained in their spiritual life to look for the gifts of God in everyday life, and to name those, to recognize them, and to be thankful for them. That's one of the most

encouraging things about being involved with this group.

In my own life, I think I am a work in progress. I have a long way to go in terms of being ever vigilant and constantly aware of where providence is at work — seeing it, identifying it, naming it, remembering it, telling that story. But I think that's something I'm growing in.

One of my favorite stories of providence in the Economy of Communion comes from the time in Covid when we were pretty deep in lockdown. It was early on, and we were still locked down in our houses, just taking walks in the early morning by ourselves — that was part of our routine.

And when we would go out on this walk, we would just pray for God to send us somebody. We were falling really behind with projects on the apartments. We didn't have as much help as usual, and it just seemed like thing after thing was coming up. So we said, God, we need someone.

And one morning we're coming back from our walk, and this guy we didn't know at all gets out of his truck and starts making a line to intercept us. And we're thinking, who is this person, and why are they headed our way?

And he approached us and said, "Do you need some help?"

And we said, 'Yes, we do need some help.'

And he said, "Well, I can do things. I'm a handyman."

And we said, "What can you do? Could you hang a storm door?'

"Yeah, I can hang a storm door."

"Okay — if you could go over to this property today, we'd be happy to let you hang that storm door for us."

And he did that, and he did a great job. And that was the start of a relationship that we're six years into at this point. So that was a gift from God.

Interviewer: Your business is in your home in a lot of ways, and in your neighborhood. How would you say practicing the Economy of Communion has impacted your family — maybe specifically now that you have children and bringing them into the equation?

Celeste Harvey: It definitely changes our family life to have Communion Properties and to run it as an Economy of Communion business.

The people who work for us and who help us are intimately involved in our daily lives. We spend more time with them than we do with our friends. If you think there are workers and there are friends — well, many of them are friends. They're part of our daily life. They're in our home weekly, stopping by to get their marching orders, to check in on things, to borrow tools, to get paid.

And so the kids know all of our workers. They love them. And it's very clear that our workers love our kids. I think that's beautiful. They're getting to know a wider slice of humanity than they otherwise would — than most other children their age probably know. I think that's a good thing.

We also have a woman who does quite a bit of cleaning for us — after tenants move out, she'll come in and clean the apartment. And she is like a substitute grandma to my kids. She also babysits for us occasionally. I had an emergency the other day, had to take the older one to urgent care, and the baby was due for a nap. I called her up and said, please, can you come by and sit with the baby while she's napping?

What a blessing. What a blessing to have them in our lives.

Interviewer: Those are great blessings. Are there things that are challenging?

Celeste Harvey: People stopping by our house at all hours of the day and night. Sometimes that's a challenge. I don't particularly like it when I've just got dinner on the table and we're all sitting down and someone knocks at the door, and that's a fifteen-minute interruption. I don't always deal with that with grace.

Human beings are human beings. And you don't always want to be available.

Interviewer: Do the EoC values change the way you handle profit, money, cash flow?

Celeste Harvey: I would say that maintaining these properties, honoring their history, creating a beautiful space for people to live, is about living to the glory of God. Human beings need beauty in their life. And they don't have to live in expensive luxury apartments to have beautiful things around them.

Almost all of the buildings we own are from the early nineteen hundreds. There's wonderful craftsmanship that comes out of that era, if it is stewarded and cared for. And there is a way of maintaining that which respects that history, and there is a way of maintaining these properties which uses materials that are easy and accessible and cheap, and which does not respect it.

So for me it's always been very important that we try as much as possible to steward the heritage of these buildings — in part because they're already beautiful. They're already a beautiful place for people to live, if you will maintain that.

Interviewer: Do you feel like that's an Economy of Communion value, or tied to a particular EoC value? The idea of respecting heritage or history as a value of the business.

Celeste Harvey: I have not seen or heard that talked about in Focolare circles, but I think it has to be there implicitly.

If the emphasis is on creating communion, creating unity between people, then architecture and the lived environment in which those relationships are created and fostered is a necessary part of that. There's a background there for human community. And there's very interesting social psychological research about the influence of environment on generosity — and conversely on aggression and violence.

So I don't hear other people talking about it, but I think if you think about it deeply, the lived environment is very much a part of creating relationships, sustaining relationships, providing a place for those relationships to flourish.

Interviewer: The environment matters, clearly. But is it a certain type of environment? Is there something unique about the original design or build? I have a couple of houses from the early 1900s as well, and they are beautiful — but not everyone would say they're beautiful. Is it about the original intent being honored, the original architecture? Or does it not always have to look the same, it just needs to have a certain feel?

Celeste Harvey: I'm not sure all built environments are worth preserving. There are a lot of Soviet-era block apartments that I'm not sure have any uniquely human value in being preserved. They weren't built for beauty and they're not beautiful. If they don't exist in the future, that's fine.

But in the neighborhood I live in — the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Arts and Crafts style — there was an enormous amount of human thought and intention that went into the principles of beauty: proportion, balance, light.

I've taken on a role in our properties of being the resident window restoration expert. I restored nine wooden double-hung windows in our own home, rather than having them ripped out and replaced with vinyl. And since doing that, I've kind of mastered the techniques of wood window preservation, and I've been very involved in the properties specifically when there are window issues.

If you look at a home built in the early part of the twentieth century, and look at the square footage of windows in it versus the square footage of windows that will be put into almost any new build now, you will be startled. They were extravagant with windows, for all kinds of reasons, in that era.

Natural light is a beautiful thing for a human being to live in, and these homes are full of natural light. My home is a very modest twelve-hundred-square-foot home, and if I'm remembering correctly we have twenty-seven large windows in it. You're not going to get twenty-seven windows in a twelve-hundred-square-foot home built today.

And those old windows were also built with a certain kind of proportion that the eye perceives as beautiful. When you rip out those old windows and replace them with vinyl, most people are not going to be able to articulate what has gone wrong — but your eye does see what went wrong. The proportions are no longer right. The way the frame interacts with the trim reduces the size of the windows and the sashes, and your eye no longer sees the balance that was there. They were built with a certain proportionality and balance, and you cannot replicate that with a replacement window.

Interviewer: What I hear you saying is that so much creativity and ingenuity and experience went into that generation of homes that to even tweak them a little is to minimize some of that genius. Is that a fair way to put it?

Celeste Harvey: I would say the craftsmanship and knowledge of proportion and balance that is inherent in late Victorian styles, and Craftsman and Arts and Crafts styles, is inherently worth preserving — because those styles were attentive to the principles of beauty in architecture.

Interviewer: Do you think there are gifts that the North American Economy of Communion in particular, or maybe just American businesses, could offer the rest of the world?

Celeste Harvey: I'm probably not an expert on this question, because I'm not sure I know enough about global business practices to say that the North American way of doing things is better.

There can be a kind of crass search for efficiency, but the American focus on ever more efficient ways of doing things is not bad. It's really important to steward resources well, and when you're efficient you do more with less. So if we're concerned about the environment and the excess use of resources, those are important and valuable techniques, and it's a gift to other people to learn how to do things that way.

Now, the question is what you do with your surplus after you've done more with less. Do you just keep on doing more? That's probably the weakness of the American mindset — oh, we've saved a little bit, we can just spend it. So there's no limit, no cap, no stopping now that we've had enough. But that doesn't negate the value of efficient practices.

Interviewer: With social entrepreneurship growing as an idea — B Corps and so on — what do you think the EoC still has to offer that's unique? How is a B Corp different from the Economy of Communion?

Celeste Harvey: There are a lot of similarities between B Corps and Economy of Communion businesses. And it's totally possible that an Economy of Communion business could find B Corp certification valuable, a value-add, if they wanted to do that — because B Corp certification has a cachet in the public sphere that people know about.

The Economy of Communion is wonderful, but it's very informal. B Corp certification is very formalized: you've got third-party certification, you've got verification. Which is just not what we're about in the Economy of Communion. So they're two very different styles. That's just to say I don't think there's anything incompatible between the Economy of Communion and B Corp.

But it seems to me that B Corps are organizations oriented around the *just* production of goods and services — just to the environment, just to their workers, just to their communities. And that's good. That is excellent.

But I think the Economy of Communion adds a different dimension. There's a dimension that goes beyond justice into gift. The Economy of Communion wants to live out gift and reciprocity and gratuitousness in the firm. Not just to give people what they are owed — which is essential and necessary and should never be neglected — but to manifest also grace in the midst of the business, and to find ways to incorporate gift into the economy.

They're also seeking the transformation of the economy as a whole. They see themselves as a small seed, like the mustard seed that is growing. And that's a different window onto what you're doing: that you're planting a seed here that is going to ultimately grow and transform the broader economy.

Interviewer: I'm glad you brought up the idea of gift, because it's something everyone we've interviewed has raised. For someone new to the EoC who asks, "Gift? What do you mean by gift?" — we should rightly pay people what they're owed, we should treat them with justice. But gift seems to be an additional piece. Could you give an example that would help someone understand what we really mean by gift?

Celeste Harvey: Let me see if I can come up with a good example.

Many businesses have policy manuals, HR manuals. Those are important — important for letting people know what is expected of them, what they're entitled to as an employee, what their benefits are.

But sometimes policies can also be dehumanizing. There are all kinds of situations in businesses where the strict enforcement of the written policy would be cruel or unkind, or wouldn't take into account the complexities of the situation. And that's where — usually it's the manager who's in the role to say, that's the policy, and we're going to depart slightly from the policy right here.

You have to do that in sensitive ways, because there are issues of justice: was this employee treated in a similar manner to that employee? But where the situations are genuinely different, I think there is room for grace, so that you can accommodate the human needs in the situation.

So that could be one example of where gift or gratuitousness can be displayed — when you thoughtfully set aside a policy in order to take into account the complexities of who you're dealing with and what you're dealing with.

There's also gift in dealing with customers. You might not think of it as gift; you might think of it as standard business practice. But when companies agree to accept returns on products that were bought, and they just deal with the fact that they come back, there's a certain amount of gift in that.

Interviewer: I really like the HR policy example. You have to have structure and boundaries — otherwise, what is it? We're just hanging out together. It's the organization that makes it a business, a recognizable entity. But it's the gift that then allows — and this is back to that environment piece — the policies create the environment that is hopefully just and helpful and inviting. And then within that environment, you need the idea of gift to make sure it's humanizing.

Celeste Harvey: Yes. And I used the example of a manager interpreting or forgoing certain parts of a policy manual. But actually, I think employees can display gift and gratuitousness too — in not demanding or insisting on their exact rights, given the situation, given the needs of the moment.

And I think employees actually do this quite a bit. Even if you're not a salaried person: do you give to get the job done, when it's not technically required? When you've gone beyond what is precisely owed, you're in the realm of gift. You're in the realm of gratuitousness.

And actually, no business would work very well if everyone was constantly guarding their boundaries and insisting on not giving any more than they are required to. One, because sometimes those boundaries are a little fuzzy. But two, just because life is life. So there are a lot of ways in which employees exhibit gift to make the enterprise productive and efficient. You go the extra mile. That's a gift.

Interviewer: Often the Economy of Communion is presented as something for owners, entrepreneurs, business starters — people who make decisions, who are in charge of employees, who take the biggest risks and maybe see the biggest returns. But most people aren't that. Most people are like me: I make a living by working for other people. What does the Economy of Communion offer to an employee?

Celeste Harvey: It's a very good question, and I'm thinking on the fly here.

I would say that no matter your role in the business, you have a sphere of influence. You contribute to culture. The decisions you make, the attitudes you have, the quality of the work you do — that contributes to the culture.

And the question is: are you contributing to that culture in a way that exemplifies gift and gratuitousness, and sows reciprocity? To give, and to encourage others to receive. To be able to give help and receive help. To create a culture in which that is the norm.

Every employee at any level can have a part in that. You can have a part in looking for God's provision in your daily work. You can have a part in naming that.

Middle managers definitely have influence over the culture of a company — probably a lot more than owners and CEOs and people higher up. And if you're not a supervisor over anyone, your presence and your attitudes still have an influence on your team.

Interviewer: In the Economy of Communion there's an emphasis on recognizing the whole person. Do you have examples from your tenants, or from people who have worked for you, of recognizing them as more than just a tenant or a worker?

Celeste Harvey: I've said that the Economy of Communion exemplifies a person-centered theory of the firm, and I've tried to contrast that with other popular secular theories of the firm, like stakeholder theory and stockholder theory.

So what does it mean to put the person at the center? For us in Communion Properties, part of what that means is to treat the tenant as a whole person. They are a tenant, but they're also a mother or father supporting a family. They're also a neighbor. They're also a worker who lost their job. They're also a son or daughter grieving the loss of a parent. They're also a person going through a hard stretch in their life.

We've encountered all of those kinds of situations. And so: accommodating them, finding suitable housing, working with them.

We've had a woman in one of our units who has lost several jobs in the years she's rented from us. Usually when she loses her job, she falls behind in rent. But we have a working relationship with her, and she's proven herself faithful. So we've worked with her, and we know she's looking for a new job, and when she gets one she catches up on rent.

I think that's one example of how we in Communion Properties have tried to treat someone as a whole person.

Interviewer: How does treating people as a whole person give them uniqueness or dignity? What are the benefits they experience from that?

Celeste Harvey: Andy could probably give more examples of people coming back and expressing appreciation for the grace.

But having housing is a pretty big part of feeling like you are a dignified human being. Housing insecurity, housing instability, is really, really hard on people. So I can only imagine that people appreciate the grace very much, when they need it.

And of course, we have bills to pay, and we appreciate very much when they follow through on their end of the bargain and catch up with rent.

Interviewer: How does that ripple out into your neighborhood, your community? By being patient on rent, there's not a person made homeless on the street outside your house — which is a benefit to everyone. Is there a way to talk about that ripple effect?

Celeste Harvey: We're in an industry — the rental market — where you're providing a basic good that is fundamental to human dignity: the ability to be housed.

So our ability to show some grace, to help people bridge difficult circumstances, is really important for their dignity. It means somebody wasn't kicked out of their housing, didn't have their life upended, didn't potentially end up homeless.

If you know anything about the problems of homelessness, it's a hard road to go from homeless to housed. It's a spiral. It ends up infecting everything else in your life not to have stable housing.

So there have been many times when we've been able to use the surplus in our own life to bridge difficult circumstances for other people, and I think that has had a ripple effect on the community. It means there's one less person struggling with that journey back.

Interviewer: The EoC sometimes claims to be distinctive in bringing about social and economic unity, but also in redistributing wealth for the common good. Do you think that's true? Does the Economy of Communion in some way redistribute wealth, if practiced correctly? And what would you say to the person who responds, "But I'm not a communist"?

Celeste Harvey: When we think about redistribution of wealth, the dominant model in our mind is government taxation and redistribution — tax the wealthy, provide social services and even direct transfers to the poor, to equalize income levels or wealth levels, or whatever your goal for redistribution is.

The Economy of Communion is not that. It's not coercive. Another phrase for the Economy of Communion is the Economy of Communion in Freedom. This is business entrepreneurs freely choosing what they do with their profits, freely choosing to give out of the profitability of the business to meet human needs.

But the Economy of Communion is very attentive to the way disparities of wealth create boundaries between people — the way it's much more difficult to be in relationship, to have genuine human relationship, with someone who is in a radically different socioeconomic position from you.

Birds of a feather flock together. We see this all over the place. We see people gathering in enclaves and communities of like socioeconomic situation. And then it turns out to be very hard to be in relationship with those who are in a different socioeconomic bracket.

So how do you create unity? How do you create community and relationship? One way is to choose not to have so much economic disparity between people.

Entrepreneurs are in a position to choose what they do with their profits, with the excess of revenue over expenses. And they are choosing to say: I want to be in greater unity with the poor. I have my needs met. I live a comfortable life. I have meaningful work. I have a position of privilege and influence in order to decide what I will do with my wealth. And I want to choose to be in greater unity with the poor.

I think that is an exercise of redistribution of wealth. But it's not coercive. It's done completely in freedom.

And it's done in very different ways. Sometimes it's the direct transfer of money in terms of profits. Sometimes it's the choice by the business to do business in a way that doesn't generate as much profit — cutting out the charity middleman, as my husband likes to say. Either way, there's a choice there to do business in a way that creates more unity.

Interviewer: Are you familiar with the concept of the wound and the blessing? What does that mean to you?

Celeste Harvey: In the Focolare, and in the Economy of Communion, they talk about the wound and the blessing that comes with relationship.

When you really open yourself up to real relationship with other people — other people are messy. Other people are difficult. If you're in real relationship with other people, you're going to be wounded. But you're also going to be blessed. And if you don't open yourself up to being wounded, you can also never receive the blessing that is that other person.

This can come in very serious and very significant ways, but it also comes in very small ways. You experience the limitations of the other person, and the ways they don't live up to your expectations, or the ways they disappoint you.

But all of us know that our own strengths are also sometimes paired with our own greatest weaknesses. And so to be open to the gifts of that other person, their strengths, you're also encountering their weaknesses. There's the wound, and there's the blessing too.

Interviewer: When I was in Argentina, people would talk about the wound and the blessing in terms of the earth — that the earth had been so wounded by mistreatment that it needed healing, and the blessing came from the wound as it was healed, literally in the fruit that came. That made me think it's not only relationships. Your windows seem like a similar thing: it's a ton more work, and to address the wound you've got to enter into it and learn and be patient — and that's the blessing in it.

Celeste Harvey: That's very interesting. I haven't heard that kind of way of relating to the concept — with the earth, and its generativity in response. That's really fascinating.

If you want to think about it that way, then when you invest in old things and old houses, maintenance is a lot of work. There's a lot of difficulty and time and effort that goes into it. One, mastering old techniques.

And two — I'm in the midst of trying to find crown molding that was probably custom fabricated on site by the carpenter in 1905, when the house was built. They didn't do things to a standard then. Every carpenter had his own way of doing things.

And now there's some rotted crown molding, and I have this choice. Am I just going to put something up there that doesn't match, so the joints don't meet when it comes back together with the original, and it's going to look janky — and that's the way it is, it's a rental, who cares? Or am I going to go the extra mile and try to find something that will work?

There are limits to what I'm going to do. I need eighteen linear feet; I'm not going to buy the blades and pay the setup charge to have it custom milled. That's beyond the scope for this project. But am I going to try to find something that's close? Am I going to maybe pay a carpenter to rip down something bigger that's pretty close? How far do you go?

But my experience has been that when you go the extra mile to take care of the thing, and it's beautiful at the end, it's worth preserving into the future. It's a blessing not only to you — you can feel happy about the work you've done, satisfied with the good work that is there — but it's also a blessing to others.

And it was the wound you bore. It was your sacrifice of time and energy and hassle that produced beauty for others.

When I think about this very funny situation where I'm trying to find crown molding — it'll be up there fifty years. Will it be something beautiful for fifty years, or something junky for fifty years? That's the choice I'm making right now.

Interviewer: I want to ask you about your book on luxury. What is it? Why are you writing a book on luxury? What is luxury?

Celeste Harvey: I read a book by an amazing scholar whom I admire so much — David Cloutier — called *The Vice of Luxury*. It's an excellent academic work, doing a lot of groundwork to recover an ancient Christian and classical notion: that luxury is a vice on par with all the other vices we recognize. Greed, sloth, lust, anger.

The thing that's interesting to me is that with greed — the classical Greeks, the ancient Christians, contemporary modern people — we all recognize why it's bad to be greedy. The greedy person is a bad person, and it's obvious why.

But we stand in a very different relationship to luxury as a quality of persons. Luxury is an attitude to the world where you have an excessive desire for highly refined things that bring comfort, pleasure, ease, convenience, novelty. In the modern world, anything that promotes my personal ease and convenience, gives me a new experience, changes things up, is attractive. It's marketed to me as attractive. And people who live luxury lifestyles, whose built environment accommodates those things for them — they're admirable people. I want to be like them. I want to emulate them.

In the ancient world, that was clearly recognized as a vice, on par with greed.

So how is it that we share with them this common view that the greedy person is a bad person, but we've departed from them in the sense that they would have said the person who luxuriates is also a bad person? And now to luxuriate makes you admirable — somebody others want to emulate. I want to live the lifestyle of the rich and famous. I want to live the lifestyle of the influencer.

That's where the book came from — that fundamental question.

Cloutier has done a lot of excellent academic work building the case — the historical case, the socioeconomic case — for why luxury should be considered a vice. But I'm interested in exploring those ideas and translating them for the everyday person. How can those ideas be filtered and sifted to provide practical insight for people who are asking themselves questions about their own money management?

How should I spend my money? What should I dedicate my resources to? Should I be striving all the time to make my life yet more comfortable, full of more novelty, full of newer and different experiences? Or should I put some limits on myself in those areas? And where should those limits be? And why in the world should I put limits on myself?

Because I think in many ways we've lost the logic of why we should. It's my money. As long as I made it fairly and didn't exploit anybody to get it, and I worked hard for it — don't I deserve it? I think that's a very common thought.

So the goal of the book is to help people see why we should still take luxury seriously as a vice. A certain amount of ease and pleasure and convenience is not a bad thing; the vice is when you go to excess. And we should be concerned about that point beyond which it is excess.

Where is that? Can we help define it? Can we help people discern, in their own life, what is excess — and why their life would actually be better if they weren't excessively desirous of those things, and giving too much of their energy, attention and surplus resources to them?

One way of putting it is that it's about opportunity costs. You are gaining something in terms of excess pleasure, convenience, novelty, status — and luxury is very often connected to social status. But you're also giving up other things that maybe aren't as obvious. My goal would be to help people name those things, understand why they're valuable, and see when they're making that trade-off.

Interviewer: Two things. One, I'd love an example of something people trade off without realizing. And two, when I talk about vice, the idea is to rid myself of vice by increasing in virtue. Will the book also talk about the opposing virtue?

Celeste Harvey: Part of working through the book is working out for myself what I think the opposing virtue to luxury is.

At this point in my thinking, I believe the most important virtue is temperance. Just a sense of what is enough. When is this comfortable enough? When was that new enough? When is this status enough? I don't need to constantly pursue ever greater levels of social status and standing and respect in the eyes of others.

So right now I think the opposing virtue of temperance is incredibly important. But that involves knowing what's enough — and that's hard. That's really hard. Because everything around us says it's not enough. And if you're satisfied with enough, maybe you're not an ambitious person. Maybe you're not a go-getter.

Interviewer: What am I giving up? I'm chasing status, chasing another new car because this one's two years old, chasing a new phone upgrade every year because this one has a better camera. What am I trading that I may not even realize?

Celeste Harvey: Let me work out a complex example here.

Especially with things that convey social status: some things convey social status because they are inherently limited. Only so many people can have them. If you were to increase the number of people who could have them, you would reduce the social status they confer.

An easy example is that luxury brands often limit production runs, so as to maintain the elite status of possessing their item. If they produced too many, it would be too easy for too many people to get one. It doesn't matter how much money it costs — you don't want that many people to have them.

But there are other things people compete for that are status-related and inherently limited, where it's not that some human has intentionally restricted supply. Like a house with a view. There are only so many houses that sit on hills looking down toward the river, providing a scenic view.

To the extent that social competition increases for that good, the price is driven up. That good will command a higher price. And in a market economy, that's part of how we adjudicate the social conflict: we say, well, the one willing to pay more must value it more, and therefore we'll let them have it, as they beat out other people in the marketplace. That's just market competition.

But take the example of wanting your child to attend the best school. We know the way competition to get into the best school districts drives up housing prices in those districts.

In the marketplace, when we drive up the price, we assume other producers will come in and produce more of that good to meet the demand — and thus all people will be better off, because more people will get the things they want.

But a school district isn't like that. If you increase the number of seats in the classroom, you would, in principle at least, dilute the quality of the education: the classrooms are overcrowded, there aren't enough teachers to give attention to the pupils. So the size of the school is limited.

But there's so much competition for the houses that get you into that district that the price is bid up. And at the end of the day, it doesn't matter how much the homes in that district go for — there are still only a certain number of students who will be educated in that school. We will not produce any more of that good through this economic competition. The only result is that more people pay more money for that house, in order to win the competition.

So: having your children go to a good school is very important. And we could have all of our children go to good, or even very good, schools. We cannot have all of our children go to the *best* schools. That's where the competition ends up being socially destructive — the insistence on having the best, when the

best is limited in this way.

It creates a social competition where no more people benefit at the end of the day than they would have had there been no competition whatsoever. But the price of housing is bid up, and people end up quite a bit more frustrated in their personal lives — because even if they won the competition, so much more of their resources are going to that one good that very often they end up feeling like they just can't get ahead.

And when you're feeling like you're working so hard and you just can't get ahead, part of the problem is that getting ahead means beating the other guy. So here you see the way luxury is connected to a destructive social dynamic — a competitive social dynamic. There's a lot of competition that is good for human beings, that is uplifting, that promotes excellence. But some of these kinds of competition, especially the ones connected to luxury and the status it confers, I would say are socially destructive, because they inherently rely on beating out the other person, on getting ahead of them.

When the social competition is over things that are not in principle expandable in their consumption, you just drive up the price — and the frustration of having even won the competition. Does it do those families good to have paid a fifty percent markup? Well, they got their child into the school district they wanted, which is very, very important; I'm not denying that. But when all of society does that, there are a lot of other things we aren't spending our resources on.

Interviewer: While you were saying that, I saw the connection between luxury and greed. If we're sitting on a luxury item, and it's a luxury because only so many people can have it — the school is a luxury item. But in doing that, they became greedy without knowing it. Because they needed not everyone to have it. That's what greed is, I think: it's taking more than you need, which means I need to take some from you. And that's what something needs to be in order to be a luxury — limited, just to me. So I can see now how the two are very close cousins, if not twins. Once you make something a luxury, you almost need greed to maintain it, and to go get it in the first place.

Celeste Harvey: Yep. I would say luxury and greed are distinct vices. If you think of greed as an overweening desire for more — that's one way I think Aquinas defines greed, as the desire for more, endlessly, more and more. I might be getting that reference wrong; please don't quote me there. But a lot of people don't see themselves as greedy, because they're very happy to part with their money. What they do see is themselves as needing more, and needing to save more, to get the things that confer status, or that are the newest and the best and the greatest, or that promote their convenience and ease. So they're always looking to save a buck in this area so they can have greater levels of ease and convenience, or pleasure, or novelty, in these other areas. There are these constant trade-offs going on.

One other problem with that is the question of justice. Are you refusing to pay just wages to workers when you buy a cheap cotton t-shirt, so that you can save the money to have an expensive coffee drink in an enjoyable setting?

Interviewer: Yeah. This raises an adjacent question for me — I need to ask Andy this too, but I want to ask you first. Something I think about as a property manager, as a landowner: in the same neighborhood I have three houses, two of them in midtown, one further out. I've decided, at least for now, that I'm not going to buy any more houses. One, capacity. But two, what really made me start

thinking about it was becoming aware that there's limited housing, and a lot of people who are where I was twenty years ago — got married, starting on a starter home — are trying to buy the houses that I have, because of the price point.

And I thought, I'm an investor with more resources than they have. I can close on houses much more quickly. I imagine you and Andy can too, if you want to. You have knowledge of the market, you know exactly what a house is worth, you can get the funding quickly. It's not truly competitive.

Celeste Harvey: You're not competing on an equal playing field.

Interviewer: Yes. So for a while there I was saying, should I even have the houses I have? I still have them, and I'd like to think there is a need for rentals — not everyone can own — and I think I meet a particular need that is important. So for the moment my conscience is clear on that. But I don't know if I should buy any more.

So I'm just curious how you think about that. Now that you've, with the best of intentions — and I'm not judging your intentions — you got started in this and you've got many properties. It's a valuable asset that's used for good. But is there an unintended consequence of keeping other people out of the market for the kinds of homes you buy, at the price point they're at?

Celeste Harvey: Yeah, I think it's a definite concern. Andy's actually written an article called *How Many Houses Is Too Many?*

I think it's a very relevant and pressing question that's really hard for individuals to answer, in part because of the way the market is structured. Just because you divest doesn't mean another investor will divest. And just because you don't own that home as a rental doesn't mean it won't be a rental.

So I think we have very important questions about who we choose to sell to, when it's our time not to own it as a rental. I think it would be important to be willing to work with homeowners who are getting a traditional mortgage, and are going to require an inspection, and it's going to take longer to close, and it's going to be a hassle to me. It would be important to choose to work with those people, if I had the option to sell one of my rentals to a homeowner rather than take the easy way out and sell it for cash, without a bank involved, to another investor.

The honest truth is — just as an easy example — we sold a property recently. We owned it with a partner and we were trying to shut down that partnership; it was time for that partnership to dissolve. We tried to fix up the house in a way that could make it attractive to homeowners, but there are just certain things about that property. It's on a busy street, it's landlocked, it doesn't have any off-street parking — things that make it not very attractive for a homeowner. It's the kind of place people are willing to rent, but they don't want to buy it. So we did what we could to attract a homeowner. It would have been great. But at the end of the day, we sold it to another investor. And there are reasons for that.

But I do think it's very important to be conscientious about the way the current economy around rental homes is locking out the next generation of homeowners. We have some responsibility as rental owners to do what we can to mitigate that problem — even though I think it's ultimately a structural issue that requires governmental policy to really address.

What you end up asking is, was I presented with that option? I had it on the market this amount of time and I didn't get any bites from homeowners.

One thing I would say about our portfolio is that we've never bought a home that was previously owned by a homeowner and turned it into a rental. All of the homes we bought were previously rentals. Very often they were houses that had already been cut up into apartments — and sometimes we've kept those apartments, and sometimes we've transformed the house back into a single-family dwelling. But they were rentals in any case.

Interviewer:

I think what you were getting at earlier was that we need community to make these big decisions together. How many houses is too many houses? I feel like what you were starting to say is that we can't really know when we get to a certain scope, so we need other people, or the community, to help us answer that question. Or maybe the community itself, the neighborhood.

Maybe this pertains to the whole luxury conversation too, with prudence playing a role — the line is going to be different for different situations, for different people. Surely I don't live a luxurious lifestyle, right? Well, am I the right person to know that? So can we know luxury as an individual? Can an individual business know how many houses is too many houses? Or do you think that has to be done in a broader context?

Celeste Harvey: That's a great question. I think, especially around luxury, communal norms are really important. And part of the difficulty of discerning luxury is that we have lost — or are losing, quickly — our communal sense of luxury.

If you think about older norms, people would be embarrassed to drive cars that were too nice. Literally, the social stigma surrounding owning a luxury vehicle was enough to prevent people from buying the luxury vehicle. In my view, that's a good thing, because it means they didn't overspend on a fancy car, and it left resources for other important human goods in their family and in their community.

As those norms around what's necessary, what's nice, and what's excessive erode — I'm not sure I can say this is what you always find universally, but I think it's what we find in the United States right now — the level of what's necessary to maintain social respectability just keeps creeping higher and higher. People's sense that "no, I need this to be basically socially respectable" keeps going up and up.

And so they would benefit, in their personal lives, from not having as much pressure to own as many things, to own as nice of things, if there were more communal norms in place that said, here's the cap, and if you go over the cap we're going to give you the side eye. They might think that's all just judgmentalism. But what it does is it means that now I know what's enough — and other people recognize that I have enough. And that gives me a certain security in my social standing.

For me, human beings are not the kinds of creatures who can just ignore that. We have an inherent consciousness of our social standing, and we need that to feel secure. You can't just say, "Well, you shouldn't care what others think." No — we do care what others think. Very much. And so those communal norms that would help us limit in that area would really be very beneficial.

Interviewer: That is great. And as you say that, I'm thinking we could probably document pretty easily the rise in the cost of social status alongside the rise in mental unwellness. Because of all the stress that we carry — you're saying social status, and I think that's right, but also just social inclusion. If I'm not at the right status, I'm not included in society. And then how do I feel? Do I have dignity? Which contributes to this mental unwellness.

Celeste Harvey: And in a culture which — how should I say this? If you don't condemn luxury, and you're willing to let luxury, and a person's ability to acquire it, serve as a stand-in for their social standing and their social status, you're going to lose other kinds of important markers that give people social respect. Like their character. Like their contribution to the community.

There are lots of things that could give people standing and respect in their community which are not at all tied to their wealth or their socioeconomic status. But the more a culture lets luxury and wealth signify standing — the more it equates those two — the more you have the problem that the poor don't have social standing. They feel like they don't have a place. No matter how virtuous they are, no matter how much they have to contribute to their community, or already have contributed to it.

Interviewer: Can you remind me what field of study your degree is in? What do you teach?

Celeste Harvey: My degree is in philosophy. I have a PhD in philosophy from Marquette University. And most recently I've been teaching philosophy at the College of Saint Mary. I mostly teach ethics, at the undergraduate level.

Interviewer: How has the Economy of Communion — as you've grown into it, met it, experienced it, practiced it — how has that affected the way you taught?

Celeste Harvey: I teach business ethics, and through our involvement with the Economy of Communion I've started teaching a unit on the Economy of Communion approach to business, as a good example of papal teaching coming out of the Vocation of the Business Leader, which comes out of *Caritas in Veritate*.

I teach at a Catholic university, and so I consider teaching this kind of approach to business as an aspect of mission. It's giving the Catholic tradition a voice there, and giving those students who are interested a vision for how they can live out their faith in business.

Interviewer: You also teach virtue ethics. Why do you like them? What are virtue ethics?

Celeste Harvey: Virtue ethics is a theoretical framework for ethical thinking that says the most important thing to consider in the ethical life is the kind of person you are becoming. Your character expresses your habits and desires, your loves and your passions. And if you want to make good and ethical decisions, what you need to do is become the kind of person who has good habits — the virtues

of prudence and temperance and wisdom and justice and courage. Then, when you encounter a decision, you'll make the decision the courageous person would make, if you are the courageous person. If you are the temperate person, you'll make the decision a temperate person would make.

So in virtue ethics, particular concrete decisions about what is right and what is wrong are important, but virtue ethics says the prior questions are really about your character and the kind of person you are — because out of the kind of person you are come your actions and decisions.

Interviewer: What attracted you to the study or the teaching of virtue ethics? Was it something that happened, or was it always intuitively important to you?

Celeste Harvey: It just seems intuitively right to me. In ethics, the temptation is to focus too much on the hard cases, so to speak — those moments when you have an ethical conundrum, and it's save the five people or save the one person. Those kinds of examples are really important for critical and reflective thinking, and there's a lot to be gained from thinking through those questions. But as far as actually living the ethical life, the important question is: who am I? What kind of person am I?

A public intellectual talks about résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. When you put it like that, most of our life is focused on the résumé virtues — those things we accomplished and did and got onto our résumé. But when you hear it that way, at the end of the day it doesn't matter. I don't want them talking about the items on my résumé at my funeral. And that's not what they're going to talk about. They're going to talk about the kind of person I was.