Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Sasha Ongtengco | February 2-3, 2026

Sasha Ongtengco is director of workforce development at Arts Alliance Illinois, a statewide arts advocacy organization, and she has lived the Economy of Communion almost entirely inside organizations she did not own. She grew up in the Focolare on the south side of Chicago, where her uncle's family arrived from the Philippines with almost nothing and were housed by the movement, and she wrote her undergraduate economics thesis on the EoC over an advisor's objections. For fifteen years she worked at Cara, a Chicago nonprofit serving people facing barriers to employment, and there she built and ran Cara Connects, a staffing firm that charged more than its for-profit competitors, refused conversion fees, and ran at break-even by design. After Pope Francis told a gathering of EoC entrepreneurs that their good work would not count for much if the system producing poverty went unchanged, she left for three and a half years of independent work, and she now spends her days on policy for artists and gig workers. She calls herself a non-business-owner EoC practitioner, on the grounds that nobody gets to decide whether they belong to an economy.

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do now. What's your job?

Sasha Ongtengco: I'm Sasha Ongtengco. I would identify as a member of the Focolare movement, and as someone very committed to social justice. I've been dedicating my career to living out social justice in the form of ensuring individuals have access to resources, and the ability to have the best quality of life possible, through workforce development, which is a fancy way of saying training, access to employment opportunities, or small business development.

I've historically worked with individuals who face barriers to employment. Currently I've been able to transition from direct practice, supporting individuals, to the advocacy side. So there's still a lot of external engagement and building relationships with people, but now more focused on policy, and specifically on supporting the individuals who make up the arts and culture sector.

My role at Arts Alliance Illinois is director of workforce development. That role was really looking at creative workers (artists, and individuals who work within businesses or run their own businesses, advancing their artistic practice across different disciplines), but also anyone working in arts and entertainment, and in the sectors tangential to that: tourism, live entertainment, live events.

Interviewer: How long have you worked there?

Sasha Ongtengco: I've recently gone full-time. Prior to that I worked as a contractor myself: I was a gig worker myself, and that was an intentional choice.

Those in the Focolare who know me have known me to work primarily within the nonprofit space. Arts Alliance is also a nonprofit, but a nonprofit that does advocacy. Whereas prior to that I've always worked in the space of supporting individuals who are unhoused or living in poverty, similarly, to access employment opportunities and be able to truly get back on their feet, having faced other sets of

systemic barriers, in terms of re-entering society and being able to support themselves and their families.

I did that in Chicago, working for a nonprofit, and starting a social enterprise for that nonprofit to create more transitional job opportunities, using a flexible staffing model that businesses already understood. So that we could, similarly, do narrative change: expose job seekers to the nine-to-five, forty-hour work week again, where they may never have had that prior to working with us. But also so that businesses could change their perspectives, and shift the way they saw someone who maybe had a conviction in their background, or a large gap in their work history because they were a parent, or because they were working through mental health issues, or other personal missteps.

And when you combine that with programs and policies (and jobs) that I would say keep people in poverty, it gets really difficult to do something more for yourself and to support your family. So we were creating programs, and then taking a lot of those outcomes to inform policy, for those who were advocating for better workforce development policies.

When I decided during Covid to transition out of that nine-to-five (because running a nonprofit, running a social enterprise housed within a nonprofit, during a pandemic), I felt like I was nearing burnout. But really I think I saw the need to pivot, because there were a lot of new insights I was gaining at that time. Primarily around gig workers: people who were also seeking support from the work we were doing, but who had been working as 1099 gig workers and artists, and whose side gigs in food and beverage or in ride-sharing had been decimated.

It really shone a light on how huge and how important a swath of our working population that is. They certainly contributed to a lot of the services we experienced, and then Covid showed us how much wasn't made available for them.

So I transitioned to working independently, to be able to understand parts of the workforce system, and to work more with unions, and to interact with different public departments at the county level, at the city level in Chicago, and at the state level. To educate myself, but I think also to have that firsthand experience of being a gig worker. Because how could I support a gig worker when I didn't know that experience firsthand?

And then Arts Alliance reached out to me to support some of their workforce development efforts, which was new for the arts and culture sector, because so much of the world of workforce development just did not exist for arts and culture. So the past three to five years have been this mix of part-time workforce development work and gig work as a contractor, and most recently I went full-time with Arts Alliance, to really put my focus on the policy and the organizing and the coalition-building, to envision and advocate for better systems and better programs, through improved policy, to support our gig workers.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself part of the Economy of Communion? Or more part of the Focolare, and you happen to be involved in business?

Sasha Ongtengco: I've gone back and forth on that. Whether I'm part of the EoC, or whether I'm part of the Focolare, practicing EoC principles in my work environment. There was a period when I did have my own business (my own small consulting firm for workforce development), but that was me being a gig worker.

In all of those instances, especially taking it through the lens of where I worked (and where I volunteered) within an established organization that I didn't own, I still have very much felt a part of the EoC, simply because I was consciously living out principles of the EoC.

And I would also say that even if someone didn't know these principles were practiced by a structure, or that there was something called the EoC, a network or a container, even if someone was already living out these principles of reciprocity, and of putting the person first, over anything else in the relationship, over anything else, then technically, in my mind, you are very much already a part of the EoC.

Because no one decides whether they belong to an economy. You're just *in* the economy. And you are either living and contributing to an economy that continues to be generative and sharing, in a circular way, or you're showing up and you're not.

That's how I'd say, at present, I feel very much a part of the EoC. I call myself a non-business-owner EoC practitioner. And I think we're all EoC practitioners.

Interviewer: Being an EoC business owner: does that change what's possible?

Sasha Ongtengco: I'd agree that you don't have to own your own business to be an active member of the EoC network.

The only thing being an EoC business owner allows you to do, I think, is have more influence: scaling the opportunity to cultivate a culture of giving, where the principles of reciprocity, and relationship-first, and providence, and belief in an abundance mindset, can spread. Because part of an abundance mindset, to me, is believing in providence. And providence, to me, is that everything we already needed was within our own reach; it's a matter of believing it's there and then taking the step to live out these principles.

So being a business owner only allows one to spread the culture more. But I think it's more important to actually live the principles first, in whatever environment you're in, whatever your work environment is, wherever you're contributing your gifts, wherever you're part of your community. That's where you get to live out EoC principles.

Part Two: Growing up in the Focolare

My family, and the Focolare

Interviewer: Tell us a little bit about your upbringing. How did you come to learn anything about Focolare and the Economy of Communion?

Sasha Ongtengco: The way I learned about the Focolare was through my own family. But the story of my family knowing the Focolare begins in the Philippines, with the Focolare having, by the sixties and seventies, grown to the point where there was a presence in other countries. So in the Philippines there was already enough of a community.

My uncle, with such faith, brought his family over to the United States, and the place where they landed was Hyde Park, the neighborhood of the University of Chicago, on the south side of Chicago. And my uncle's own experience of providence with the Focolare started from the moment they landed. The home they were provided, that they were able to stay in, was because of the Focolare. The furniture in their home, too. My family at the time came to the United States with very little.

So it was my uncle, my aunt, five kids (my five first cousins), my father, and another sister. Imagine all these people living in one three-bedroom house with one bathroom. In Chicago it's called a coach house, which is the house in the back, where the servants lived; in the front was a mansion. A lot of these homes in Hyde Park had been picked up and were owned by the Archdiocese of Chicago. And the Focolare, having its Catholic roots and its connections with the Archdiocese, had access to some spaces: certainly to start to build community, but really, I think, to allow certain families to root, and to give life to the Focolare spirituality within a home.

So my own experience of knowing the Focolare was because of my uncle and my cousins taking me to what I'd call meetings, or get-togethers, with young people. I think I was four when I went to my first get-together with other young girls. And that happened to be very close to where my uncle's family lived, because they lived right behind the men's Focolare; the Focolare was maintaining and using some of that space for retreats and events. And then my family got to, providentially, occupy that back house, when they had literally nothing to start with. And they all worked at the University of Chicago.

Really, the whole story of my family has so much to do with the Focolare.

My father, who was never really super involved with the Focolare, would say today (and I've heard him say this on many occasions, when asked about raising his three kids; I'm the oldest of three), he always credits the Focolare as this third parent. The community being an extension of my upbringing, and the upbringing of my younger brothers as well.

And I would have to agree with that. A lot of the memories I have growing up were in community, meeting people from different places, all the way through elementary school, junior high, college. I had always remained in touch with the Focolare.

I definitely feel that so much of how I live today, and the choices I've made with my career, and just decisions I've made about what to do with my life, have been grounded in my faith and in the spirituality of communitarian living: thinking about my neighbor, and that my way to God, and my relationship with myself, and love for my neighbor, is what really strengthens and allows me to have this communion with God. I feel like I've lived that out at work, and in my friendships, and in the big choices and small choices I've made about what to do with my life.

The focolarini

Interviewer: You've told us how your family came here from the Philippines, and how the Focolare was part of that. But for you, growing up, what was the training you had? How did you really come to understand the Focolare?

Sasha Ongtengco: The way I came into really embodying and living out and believing in the transformative power of the Focolare principles was through the focolarini, the consecrated individuals who choose to live in community and take vows to live for God, and to make the Focolare spirituality the center of their life.

Since I was a young girl I was so fascinated by the focolarini. And now even more as an adult, when I look back (you know how you think of your favorite teacher, those individuals who come to be role models), there was a mix of how the focolarini were role models and also friends.

It helped a lot, the way they interacted with me growing up, in modeling. You believe something when you see it lived in practice. And it certainly helps to hear the story about it afterwards, if you weren't there to participate or be privy to the experience firsthand.

So: having the presence of the focolarini practicing the principles themselves, and then the sharing of what they lived, and hearing their stories, and realizing: oh wow, they have really different lives from where they are now. How did they get from there to here? What a difficult choice.

A few really stay with me. I think of Jonna de Guzman; she's in LA, I think. And I think of Scia, who I don't know where she is now, maybe Atlanta. They happened to both be Filipina. And I name that because it really helped to have Filipino women who could be so open and so loving and practice the Focolare spirituality, but also because I saw myself in them. I could talk about things in my family and have them understand, because culturally there's a dimension in there that isn't going to be as intuitive for someone who didn't grow up in that culture themselves.

So they modeled that for me, and then helped me live those principles out, asking me, pushing me to share an experience, or giving me the opportunity to plan an event for other young people to come to, where I got to shape it.

I was just so fortunate, because I know the experience I had isn't shared by everyone in other Focolare communities, or in other parts of the world, or even in this country. To really feel trusted, and to be given that ownership, and to have real guidance, to support the life of the Focolare in my community while also feeling seen. They cared so much about my spiritual health. All of that inspired and motivated me to live the principles.

And then: many people who grow up in the Focolare, it's like when you grow up Catholic, or grow up Muslim, or grow up in any faith and you don't necessarily have a choice; you're just exposed to it. Depending on the family culture and dynamics, you can feel forced to live that way, and it's not really out of your own pure volition to follow that path.

I feel very fortunate that in my family, and within the Focolare communities in the Midwest, there was a lot of open conversation and a lot of posing the question: it's so important that you choose this for yourself. Not anyone in the Focolare, and not my parents, and especially in my family, where there were so many people who knew the Focolare, so there's a lot of enmeshing in that way.

For myself, it was having the Focolare in one part of my life, sort of in the background, and knowing I could come back to it as a restorative space when I'd go to school, or play sports, or play music, and all the things I did outside of Focolare spaces. There was a consistency about it.

I almost feel like it's a privilege. And I have so much respect and admiration for those who come to know the Focolare as adults, after college or during college, and then don't have a community to come back to, and yet feel so inspired to live it, and it's in the living that they continue to grow in faith. I do wonder whether that would have been the case for me, because so much of what helped me move along in my journey was having so many models, and, thankfully, models who gave me the freedom to make the choice not to live it if I didn't feel it.

I felt very, very nurtured in my own authenticity. And I think that shaped it a lot. If it weren't that way, knowing myself, I'd have been very quick to move away from anything that's a sales pitch, or inauthentic, and to try to build a relationship outside of the thing they're trying to sell me.

Consecrated life

Interviewer: Did you ever seriously consider becoming consecrated?

Sasha Ongtengco: No, I did not. As inspired as I was by the many stories I've heard, I always felt very called to have a family. I always have, and to this day I really want to have kids. And that could come in different forms, so I still feel that way. That's probably been the defining piece of it: raising a family in a two-person environment, even knowing that there are so many different ways to have family.

I love talking to those who are consecrated focolarini, and they talk with such joy about all the kids they have all over the world, and it's true: these are beautiful connections. But I never felt personally called to consecrate and dedicate myself to follow that path. Who knows? I'm still open. I haven't closed myself off to anything. But at this point in time, I still don't feel like that's my path.

Loppiano

Interviewer: You did go to Loppiano, though. Why did you go? How was that attractive to you?

Sasha Ongtengco: I was attracted to go and live an immersive experience in the Focolare, in a little Focolare city. Partly because I'd heard so much about it from my own cousins, who had also lived it, a few cousins who lived respectively in Loppiano in Italy and in Mariapolis Lía in Argentina. The way they talked about their experiences, and connected that experience to where they were today, made me want that for myself.

And realistically, especially in college, I'd known about the opportunity: you could go live in a different country, live in a little city of the Focolare where everyone is living the Focolare spirituality all the time. This aspiring, utopian reality within society. Okay: is that for real? That was just me needing to see it for myself to believe it.

So both of those were important to me. Wanting to know: what does it feel like to be in an environment where everyone is trying to live the law of reciprocal love and reciprocal relationship-building?

I do not regret it. That was probably the most beautiful period of my life. It was very difficult, but difficult because you're really learning to live without the conveniences and the familiarity of home, and then to experience a new way of experiencing home. While at the same time growing in my own independence.

That period is also when I felt I had made a very conscious choice. That was my "okay, I'm consciously choosing to continue to live this Focolare spirituality." Not because I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint some focolarini back home, or disappoint my cousins and my uncle and my aunt; that's the Filipino dimension, the cultural dimension, of the kind of social pressure that can come with all of this. So I wasn't ignorant of that.

But it felt very freeing, and it felt very good to know: no, this really does feel like so much a part of myself. Whether or not that's because I've been exposed to it for so long; all that matters is that I don't feel forced. I'm not feeling obligated. I really believe in this. And so much of that has to do with the experiences I had living there with people from all over the world.

What my parents make of it

Interviewer: How did your family respond to your decision to work by EoC values? What was it like explaining that to them?

Sasha Ongtengco: Thankfully, my family and my parents very much support the work I do. They don't always understand it.

If we're talking about my parents specifically, having immigrated from another country, they have their own ideas of what stability and success are, and how you achieve and maintain them. I know they sometimes have concerns about whether I'm going to be able to do the work I'm doing and actually support myself. Those are all valid.

What's helpful is that my parents are also still very much practicing their faith. And I think it helps that, having grown up in the Focolare and having been shaped by it (and my parents having always been there and had exposure to it, and being able to see the adults my brothers and I grew to be), that has solidified their trust in what I'm doing. Especially when I can talk about the EoC and those principles.

More than anything, they see that I'm happy, and that I derive a lot of joy and purpose from this. I really do think that's what's most important to them. And knowing that removes the stress about whether my parents accept or approve of what I'm doing.

I happen to be the oldest, so I feel like I'm more sensitive to that sometimes. I've definitely made decisions in the past where I was contending with what my parents were going to be okay with me doing, and what was actually really important to me. We've found a good balance with the work I do.

Part Three: What the Focolare taught me

The distinctives

Interviewer: What are the distinctives of the Focolare? If somebody had never heard of it, how would you explain how growing up around it changed and shaped your vision of the world?

Sasha Ongtengco: I've thought a lot about how the Focolare has impacted me as a person in my adulthood. I'm forty-one; I was born in 1984. I'm very grateful for the past four decades and some change of life experience.

When I think about how I showed up (especially in moments of difficulty and suffering, because I think you aren't human if you haven't experienced loss, or an end to something), when I talk about the Focolare and the impact it's had on my life, it's helped me to see suffering differently. And hand in hand with that: that my presence is a gift, and the presence of the other is a gift. In a non-Focolare term, this idea of an abundance mindset.

But when I talk about why the Focolare shaped and impacted me: I think it's helped me stay connected to my faith. I've really struggled being Catholic in this age, in this country. And the Focolare gave me this lens of collectivism, and the sense that we all can play a role, and have the gift of playing a role, in renewing society at large, but through our own day-to-day choices, and those choices being made with our neighbor in mind.

I find that comes into tension with a lot of the principles of this country, even the history of this country. And I don't think that's by chance. I really do think that's by design.

As someone of faith, knowing something like the Focolare spirituality (and to me it's not the best or anything, it's just the gift I was given, when there are so many other ways God has provided for humans to grow closer to one another and closer to the source), I just feel very grateful that it was the Focolare's communitarian spirituality. Communitarian meaning: it is in relationship with the other, and in relationship with myself. This idea of loving my neighbor as I love myself.

Especially in the context of really difficult moments that we all experience in life, moments of suffering: I feel that's where I've deepened the most. I've felt that suffering in my professional life, and within my own family, and in my own personal experience, from being a young girl to the present day. I can name several real experiences we would call traumatic.

There's so much we talk about now about looking at the experiences that form each and every one of us into who we are in the present day. I feel the Focolare spirituality has given me an additional dimension to what that means. That the suffering certainly happened for a reason, but also that there's a way I can

now connect with others *because* I was given the gift of that really difficult experience myself. Now I can know my neighbor in a deeper way, in a very firsthand way, that allows me to have that relationship.

And I can say now that that's definitely not the norm. I don't feel that's the way the majority of people would look at the suffering they've experienced in their life, or at the role and the importance of their neighbor in all of that coming together.

So it's a long-winded way to respond, but: the Focolare has shaped how I see the world, and shown me that relationships are really the currency. And I say currency only as a way to describe an exchange, because I have gifts and you have gifts, I have experiences and you have experiences, and they're not the same ones. So there really is a currency of exchange, to help each other grow. That's what the Focolare has shown me.

Gratuity and reciprocity

Interviewer: Can you talk briefly about the concept of gratuity and reciprocity?

Sasha Ongtengco: For me personally, reciprocity and gratuity are hallmarks of the Focolare spirituality, and within the Economy of Communion, they're what allows all of us to really live this way, starting with those markers and components of the relationship.

Because of the Focolare spirituality, I've always understood that a relationship between two people is actually a presence of three. And that third entity, I've always believed, is the energy or the gift that comes when there's authentic, sincere reciprocity, where I am really spending my time and being present to you.

Reciprocity, to me, also starts with putting a part of my own interest to the side to make space for you and what you bring. Because I believe that my neighbor (even with all the different human things that could get in the way), I feel that coming to that relationship with the belief that God has given them something to share with me, and that I've been given something to share with them, is the starting point.

So reciprocity and gratuity to me are exactly that: where both people in the relationship are seeing one another, even if it's not at the same time. Usually it starts with one person showing up that way and modeling it. And especially in moments where trust is either not present or needs to be rebuilt, that's where reciprocity and gratuity come most into technicolor.

But reciprocity and gratuity in relationship have first and foremost started, for me, with seeing my neighbor as a source and a gift. And I can't even receive that if I can't put my own interests aside to make that space.

Then there's this idea of currency, especially with the EoC, the economy of sharing. It's all of those exchanges happening in a very regenerative, circular way, and that's what leads to a resilient ecosystem and a resilient community. We're all looking to our neighbor and to one another, knowing that my neighbor is going to be present for me in certain moments, but with reciprocity, I have the time, I want

to be there for that person too. Knowing that my moment might come. Or maybe that time had come, and now is my opportunity to be that person.

It's really so beautiful. But it's not easy. Our mission, for those who have the awareness of this, who have experienced it firsthand and know the joy of it (sometimes the joy doesn't happen in that moment, but there's the beauty of the exchange), our mission is *not* to stay inside our little bubble where that's really easy to build. For me personally it's so important to go where it won't be easy, where reciprocity isn't going to just be there, where I'm going to have to work on a relationship to get it to that point.

If everyone were to experience the depth of that in a really sincere way, I think that's what actually changes a person's heart, to live differently, to make different choices.

An abundance mindset

Interviewer: What do you mean by an abundance mindset? What is that?

Sasha Ongtengco: To me, an abundance mindset is the idea that we have everything we need to be able to meet the need, for everyone. Whether that's in the smaller context of our household, or the classroom, or within a business, or within our community.

The abundance mindset for me is the belief that everyone has gifts, and that altogether, in the accumulation of all our experiences, we have the solution. It's there somewhere. And we have the resources to bring it to life.

But it's up to everyone who stands to gain from living an abundance mindset. It really is up to each person, when you go into a problem, or a situation (or just living your day-to-day life, because it's impossible not to encounter a conflict, or something you have to make a decision about, small or large), to go into it knowing: I have everything that I need. It's all there.

Fear

Interviewer: How is fear a challenge to that? How does fear keep us from living that way, from having that faith?

Sasha Ongtengco: I would say fear is the source of every obstacle that gets in the way of the solution that's already there.

Fear is a natural human emotion, and I feel like God gave us the ability to experience fear because there are certainly benefits to it. It's what keeps us safe, keeps us alive in certain contexts. But in many more contexts, it's fear of our neighbor. It's fear that they will hurt us. It's fear that the decision I make now might repeat pain I've experienced before.

And I can speak for myself: I've certainly acted in fear. I think fear and risk are opposite sides of the same coin. Fear might be on one side, but taking the risk to do something requires me to overcome that

fear, even for that moment. That could be risking rejection, or risking a negative consequence, in service of building the relationship.

To me, having the relationship established, and then being able to give into that relationship, is how both sides begin to know what gift the neighbor has to offer, to solve for whatever we need to solve for. But if I'm scared of learning that (because of my own assumptions, or my own experiences with someone that person reminds me of, or just fear of failing), I think that's what keeps the abundance mindset from being a more natural default in how you'd go into a challenging situation, or even the world we're experiencing at present.

I feel like fear is the source of so much of the pain we end up actually experiencing. Because we don't understand, and we fear what we don't understand. We fear what's not familiar.

But if we have that faith (even if I am rejected at first, even if I do experience the things that were really painful), sometimes I have to literally tell this to myself: okay, I'm risking loving. I'm risking opening myself up to someone. Whether it's a romantic relationship, or a family one. I think I've experienced this with my own family members, when it comes to forgiveness. I'm trusting that by saying yes to the relationship, and yes to the chance of building or rebuilding it, even if it is painful and even if it's not what I expect; my faith, if I can go there, and I don't always go there, but when I'm able to go there, I tell myself: even that is for me to learn from. I'll know how to better deal with that rejection, because I've already experienced it before. I already know I was able to get through it before, so I can get through it again. And that's only meant to fortify me in my ability to continue to build relationships and overcome fear.

But I have to tell myself that. Especially in relationships where I came into it trusting that person. I think this is most prevalent in families. It's hardest when I've believed that I could trust certain people, and then come to learn that I couldn't. And the fear of how terrible that feels does limit so many of us from taking the risk.

And I really think it is faith. It's having that connection to faith, and often it's seeing someone else model that for me. Someone talking it through with me, a friend or a professional. But also someone who has simply shared their experience of doing that in their own life. Which is one of the most important tools the Focolare has shown me: the storytelling, and the experience-sharing, that's been the model. So that I can trust: oh, if they can do it, I can do it too. That's how they said it. That's the mindset they took. I can look back to that in trying to overcome the fear I have in this situation.

Part Four: A vocation

The thesis

Interviewer: How do you feel the Economy of Communion has impacted your whole career?

Sasha Ongtengco: The EoC hasn't only impacted my entire career: it's responsible for jumpstarting it, and for helping me discern and gain clarity about what kind of career path I wanted to follow.

In my final year at DePaul, in the business school, getting a degree in economics, you had the option either to write an undergraduate thesis or to do a final capstone project tied to research and an internship. I opted for the thesis. This is 2005, 2006.

I wanted to write about the EoC. Because in a university where servant leadership was the north star and the guiding principle (Saint Vincent de Paul), it struck me that in all my time in business school we weren't exposed to anything that spoke to the connection between business and responsible business, and the local economic impact it could make. So much of what we were studying in economics and business school was traditional business principles and traditional economic theory, framed within a free-market economy. I thought how great it would be to write about other purposes for business, because I already had an awareness of the EoC at that point.

I remember working on that thesis slowly, and having an advisor (I won't name them), where there was a lot of resistance to this being my thesis. Because I was raising things we hadn't actually covered throughout my time in business school, and the point of the thesis was also to be a cumulative display of what I had learned there.

Ultimately I still pursued it. I wrote about different businesses in the United States that operated on EoC principles. I remember mentioning John Mundell, and some of the different EoC small businesses that were at least trying, and that there was already a network of small and medium-sized businesses across the world trying to use business in a way that would bring social renewal.

That's what had me fall in love with the whole idea of social enterprise, and of using economics in service of finding new solutions. In that case, to address the issue of poverty in the United States, because it just didn't make sense to me that there was poverty in the United States when all the conditions for there not to need to be poverty were present. And yet here we are.

So that started my career. At least my interest in it.

Dialogue

Interviewer: What kind of vocation do you feel called to in the work that you do? And how do you see your Focolare and EoC values driving that?

Sasha Ongtengco: I feel that my vocation (shaped by the Focolare, and grounded in Focolare principles) is a vocation of being a vehicle for dialogue.

I really believe in the importance of dialogue. Just as we say in the Focolare (and I won't name the saint from whom this comes, I think it's Saint Francis of Assisi), where there is no love, infuse love, and you will find love. In the same way: where there's a lack of connection, or where there's no bridge, be the bridge. And dialogue is the bridge.

Dialogue, for me, is those choices made with sincerity to know the other, and to be able to have real curiosity about what's different. Cultivating that curiosity (and you brought up fear earlier), cultivating curiosity in place of fear is what I feel called to.

And I can only do that by building relationships with people. Especially people outside of the Focolare who have similar principles. Maybe they're part of some other movement. Maybe they're not believers of any faith, but they clearly believe in humanity, or in our ability to see the good in the other and connect with the other, and they naturally practice an abundance mindset. Those are the people in my present-day work. If I were to say what my vocation is, it's connecting with those people. So that we can continue to bring the gift of dialogue. Because I feel it's only through dialogue that we can find real healing, and find real social renewal from what we're experiencing today.

So it's tied to social justice too. When I've been asked, "What do you live for?" I live for social justice. And what does that mean? I dialogue. I get to know people who are different from me, and I help others also have curiosity about someone or something they're unfamiliar with, or afraid of.

Social justice

Interviewer: When I think about social justice, I think about trying to overcome some sort of deficit: things aren't right, and I'm trying to right that somehow. How do you think about social justice?

Sasha Ongtengco: At this point I can say with full confidence that I am very sensitive, and I get angry and most reactive, when I see something that seems so unfair, where a person, or an entire population, simply by existing where they are, somehow has a much more difficult life than others. Any version of that lack of fairness, at various levels and granularities, I get really sensitive to.

That's why the vocation and the calling is to help restore justice. And how do I restore justice? First I have to know and see where the deficit is. At a minimum, it's getting others to also see that there's a deficit and to want to help restore balance. Or it's working with those who are experiencing the deficit and helping them see: you're not helpless. You are worthy of the things you want in life. And unfortunately you can work really hard and still not access that. So besides working harder at the same thing, we also need to recognize it, and work together in an organized fashion to restore that balance, by changing the system.

Part Five: Cara

Fifteen years

Interviewer: The Economy of Communion approach holds that business itself can bring about communion between people. Can you give an example of where you've seen that happen?

Sasha Ongtengco: One example is the organization I worked at for fifteen years. It's called Cara, which, pronounced properly in Irish, means *friend*. The founder was an Irish American businessman in Chicago, a Catholic, who basically wanted to help those who needed access to better employment opportunities,

and, through his network, and through the time and care to share his gifts, connected the gifts of his network and the resources they had with those who didn't have them. That's what Cara meant.

And every day, in that organization, I felt like I saw EoC principles lived out.

Cara would identify itself as a direct-service workforce development practitioner. We worked with individuals facing systemic barriers to employment. Some were chronically unemployed or chronically unhoused. Some were situationally or episodically unhoused, because of a bad recession and losing a job, and not having support systems, and then facing losing their home, or really living paycheck to paycheck.

The most important thing I recognized is that the opportunity to really have communion started with being able to be a mirror, for that person to see their own value. To see that their experiences of adversity were really the fuel, and the gift, of their present resilience, and were what was going to pave the path toward their future stability and success.

Cara as an organization already believed in those principles; it just didn't call it an economy of communion. But we definitely talked about seeing things with new eyes. That was a core value, which I saw as reframing a situation, or recognizing that redemption is real. That we can all start again. And in the Focolare we have this idea: start again in the present moment, with the person you're with, or with yourself, or in that situation.

I remember one woman in particular. Because of a relationship that was fraught with domestic violence, she went to a domestic violence shelter in Chicago, just to flee the situation.

When I met her at Cara (and this is the beauty and the power of it), I had lived in Italy previously with many Brazilian people. So to be able to welcome this person, the choice I remember making, wanting first and foremost to create the conditions for her to feel accepted and welcomed, was to greet her with the two phrases I had learned in Portuguese.

And just fast-forwarding: she went on to buy a house. She now has her master's degree in criminal justice, and she directs an entire program at a social service organization, and it connects back to her own experience.

When she has talked about how a place like Cara shaped and changed her life, and helped transform what was a very ugly time in it, she has said that the people who work at this organization saw her with new eyes, and helped her start again with herself.

So I think about the small role I played, just in being the first person to welcome her into the organization. She had tried twice to come, and had admitted to me (and has later shared this more publicly) that she felt so ashamed to come to our doors. Shame in herself, and also, I think, because she visibly still had scars from the abuse.

When I think about what it means to be a mirror, and about where an organization, without calling itself an EoC business, is one: I remember being able to share experiences like that at EoC conferences and

meetings, because it was so evident to me that the principles were alive in that organization, and really helping restore many people's faith, first and foremost in themselves. And then in their community. And again, that abundance mindset: I may not have everything, but I have exactly what I need, and all that I need to get to the next phase, and to transform what was a very difficult part of my life.

I have many other experiences of relationships like that, that helped me get through my own personal turmoil, which was happening concurrently in that period of my life. And I see that as a gift.

When I was going through my divorce, that same woman was there for me. That was about three years after I started working with her, and we had kept in touch. So for her to be there for me in that moment of my life: that was the reciprocity. It really came full circle. Because I cannot speak enough about how much of a rock she was, to love me without judgment, at a time when within my own family and within my own faith community I felt unworthy, so to say.

That's just one story.

Providence

Interviewer: Does your faith play a role in your commitment to the EoC and the Focolare? If so, how?

Sasha Ongtengco: Yes, my faith plays a very strong role in my commitment to living out the principles of the EoC. And where that's most evident is in the concept of providence.

Providence, to me, is almost like the magic, the thing where you think, how in the world did that happen? How did the thing I needed most come through right at the moment I needed it? There's nothing else but belief in a higher power, belief that there's something bigger than me and us, that allows that to happen.

When I've shared this with people who aren't believers, I'm often met with: well, synchronicities and coincidences happen all the time. That thing didn't happen out of nowhere, Sasha; that was many choices you don't even remember, setting things up for it to happen. And to that I always respond: that's very true. I don't disagree for a second that there may be things I had done, or my influence, or a conversation, that set something up I wasn't privy to. But somehow it all culminated in that moment. And the design of that, to me, is because of a higher power and a source. That's the lens through which I see.

Going back to that story: after we stayed in touch, but once she started working, it got much more difficult to stay in touch. And then she called me and invited me over, because she had just bought her house and wanted me to see it. And she wanted me to meet the faith community that had helped create the systems she needed to stay on track.

I remember meeting that community and seeing her home, days before we were going to go to court to dissolve my marriage, civilly. And I remember feeling so not ready to do that.

But the timing of that visit (the fact that she reached out to me without my even telling her; that was when she learned I was going through my divorce; she contacted me with her joy about getting a house and wanting me to meet her son), I mean, it was the thing that I needed. And that to me was so providential.

It let me walk into that courtroom with my now-ex (although it's so weird calling him "ex" for my friend) with a belief that even that, even what felt like a break, or a separation, or an end, was also something to meet with belief and faith. That there was a design God had for both of us. And that if we had stayed in the relationship we were in, knowing where and how we were both coming into it, there's no way we would have (looking back now) accomplished what we've accomplished.

So the ripple effect of choosing to seek providence and name it as that helped me have the mindset to encounter the things that were difficult, and to take the risk, and to let go of fear, or overcome it. And then life happened after that, and I'm where I am now because of it.

The wound and the blessing

Interviewer: Luigino Bruni wrote a book called *The Wound and the Blessing*. He says that in business we often try to keep things professional so we don't get involved in the messiness of other people's lives, and that when we do that, we avoid the wounds, but we also avoid the blessings of being involved in their lives. Can you think of a place where you opened yourself to wounding through business, and found there were real blessings in it?

Sasha Ongtengco: I feel like I spoke about her already. But when I worked at Cara (before I started the social enterprise), I was in a department of two responsible for stewarding relationships with social service agencies, probation officers, circuit court judges and others, in order to create awareness about this rehabilitative option for people who'd had challenges with employment and with feeling like they were on their feet.

In terms of sticking my neck out, or going out of my way for the woman I told you about earlier: it was so much about those initial moments. I went out of my way to show love for her in a way that was really intended to help her feel welcome. That this is a place that doesn't see you for the mistakes you made. Because we all make mistakes. This is a place that wants to help you uncover what makes you *you*, and how to apply that in a way that lets you earn an income and support your family.

Remembering that she'd had two previous opportunities to come to Cara, and was too scared, because she felt too ashamed: the fact that she shared that with me at our first meeting, after I greeted her in the two phrases of Portuguese that I knew.

And the way that she still, years later, remarked how nice it was to hear her own language spoken by someone she never expected would make the effort. Something was so unexpected. She said it's like when you walk into a bar or a restaurant or a café and the barista knows your name and the drink you want. Someone paid attention to me. Someone took the time to know a little more about me.

That level of trust is the most important step, I feel, in any kind of change-making, any kind of healing, any kind of dialogue intended to bring two conflicting groups or ideas together.

So that was a way in which I stuck my neck out for someone. But the hundredfold, and the reciprocity of it: it still continues today.

Because on top of everything else she achieved in the years after working with us, and getting her master's, and becoming a director at a social service agency (giving back in the way she had received), she also started her own cleaning services company. Because she understood that launching a business is an opportunity to create more jobs, and to give back. She told me that. I remember how proud I was that she had started her own business, because that is not easy.

And it was her company that I called to clean the house I purchased last August. It was so nice to see her in my own home. And it reminded me of when I was invited to see her in *her* home, when she finally got a home of her own for her and her son.

It's really remarkable how much of a ripple effect there can be. Not only for other people in the community, but even just between us: the relationship continues to grow and strengthen, and it's lasted for so long, I think, because of a choice I made in just recognizing how important it was to welcome someone.

Part Six: Cara Connects

Why I started it

Interviewer: Tell us about the staffing agency you started within Cara. What were you doing, and why did you decide to start it?

Sasha Ongtengco: One specific way I really felt I lived out the Economy of Communion principles (truly within a business context) was when I was working at Cara, the nonprofit in Chicago focused on workforce development for people facing barriers to employment.

One of the areas of growth Cara was pursuing at the time was diversifying its funding streams. That's a very healthy best practice for a sustainable business: diversifying your sources of income.

And one of the things I noticed speaks to a principle within the EoC that I feel was, and still is, one of the most important tenets, and that ties to reciprocity within relationships. There's something about the importance of reciprocity that ensures there's a balanced dynamic. So often in the world, and in society, we see what can feel like a very imbalanced dynamic, where someone has more power or more influence over the other, or where it's very clear that one person can feel more-than and the other can feel less-than.

Something so beautiful about the EoC principles is that everyone has dignity. Relationships are dignified when both sides really see the dignity in one another.

But that's hard to do in the nonprofit world, where you're reliant on funding, reliant on grants. And in our case at Cara, we were also hyper-reliant on the business community to hire, and to create job opportunities, or at least open up access to those opportunities, for a population of people who historically had been overlooked.

We served a lot of individuals who were unhoused; a lot who were chronically unemployed because of mental health issues, or substance abuse, or domestic violence and not feeling safe where they lived; or because of a conviction in their background, which creates a very real barrier to hiring in specific industries.

To overcome that, Cara started talking about social enterprises. There was one that already existed doing neighborhood beautification, and that was great for supporting individuals who had convictions in their background.

We had also come to see that after the housing crisis, a lot of the individuals coming to Cara were mid-career, coming from the finance industry, people who had never imagined they could lose their home, or blow through their 401(k), because of something outside their control. This was when the finance industry, because of predatory lending, was crumbling. So how do we support these people?

There were two things. How do we support individuals who needed employment opportunities that would honor their skills? And there was a balance I wanted to address, something our own participants, the people we were supporting, would express to me. Feeling like they were a charity case. Feeling like: they're only working with us, or they're only hiring me, because they feel sorry for me, or because they're going to get some benefit out of it.

And I felt it too, at the organizational level. There were certain businesses that wouldn't even engage us, or would talk to me in a certain way, as though working with us was doing us a favor. There were a lot of purpose-driven initiatives that businesses were pursuing that made them look much more socially responsible. But how do you get businesses to walk the talk they're espousing externally?

So I had learned a lot about staffing, and the staffing model, something that was really familiar to businesses. A number of businesses in Chicago, especially during that recession, had transitioned to using staffing firms because they could no longer afford to hire people full-time. They'd bring them on temporarily.

And I thought: well, if they're going to bring people on temporarily, why couldn't we be the staffing firm they connect with to get access to temporary labor? At least then they'd have exposure to someone they wouldn't have thought to hire, because of assumptions or biases, or whatever narrative they had about someone with a conviction, or someone who hadn't worked in a long time, or someone whose only experience was as a homemaker. And at the same time, the person who hadn't worked in a long time, or who was doing a career pivot, could test out a new industry. So it felt very win-win. But in terms of living out EoC principles, the most important thing was the balanced dynamic.

And it would feel like such a win when individuals got the permanent job offer, because that employer got the chance to see their work ethic, and their skills, and their demeanor, and whatever positivity they were infusing into that environment.

We did a lot of work at Cara around this idea that your presence is a value-add to your organization, to your team, to wherever you are. That there's no such thing as undignified labor; there are only undignifying conditions, and you can change the condition.

So much of the language, and of how I tried to shape this social enterprise, a staffing firm, housed within a nonprofit, acting as an intermediary so that individuals could get access to companies and employment opportunities, at least on a temporary basis. And then those companies could get to know the talent pool at Cara. Ideally we could shift the narrative about the kinds of people we were supporting, because what had been adversity for them would, in very concrete ways, result in higher retention rates at those companies.

And the dynamic felt different, because now they were paying for a service. Now they were paying Cara, in a business relationship, but a business relationship that was purpose-driven. The dividends were social, and relational, and certainly financial, in sustaining Cara as a nonprofit. Because any profit we made from the business became a funding stream to support transportation services, and food, and professional clothing, and any other needs people had to do the job. All of that was funded through the profits of this mission-driven staffing firm.

There were a lot of lessons, and a lot of real challenges, that helped me grow as a social entrepreneur. But more than anything it helped me deepen, concretely, what it means to bring EoC principles to life within the structures of business and the economy in this country.

What made it different

Interviewer: What made your staffing company more attractive to businesses than others? What did you do that was unique?

Sasha Ongtengco: The name of the business was Cara Connects. Cara makes these connections, and the connections were the touch points between two different entities: a business, and an individual who is a source of talent and skills sought out by that business.

What was unique, I think, was really the principle of people first. We talked a lot about a double bottom line: there's the financial bottom line, but there's a real social bottom line in supporting Cara Connects.

I'd go out to businesses and have business meetings and talk about the services and the value proposition. And a lot of the businesses that kept coming back to hire from Cara Connects did so because of some non-traditional staffing practices I chose to employ, because when you put people first, it really does completely shift the way you do business.

The mission of Cara Connects was to create pathways to permanent employment using the model of temporary staffing. So: if we're putting people and their employment opportunities first, ahead of profit,

then what about something like charging a company a conversion fee, because they liked the person we provided and wanted to hire them permanently?

A for-profit staffing firm would typically charge a conversion fee, often some percentage of the person's salary for the year. For many for-profit staffing models those fees are built into the contracts, and that's what allows them to stay sustainable.

But what was beautiful, and what really worked, about having a mission-driven staffing firm housed within a nonprofit, was that we did not do conversion fees. Because conversion fees would often keep a company from hiring someone from Cara, and that gets in the way of the mission.

So you take out conversion fees, and on one hand, the social enterprise I was leading was in reality in the red. Most often in the red, because I wasn't using the for-profit tactics. But by being inside the nonprofit, we could sustain ourselves: the nonprofit around us could do our payroll, could do a lot of the operational things, which gave us the room and the runway to live out the mission-driven pieces, which was the most important thing.

And I didn't think of that in advance. I wasn't actively creating that when we launched the business. It was as things started to unfold that we'd have these insights, and I'd recognize: oh, *that* worked because we didn't charge a conversion fee. It was just something we thought to do the first time to make sure one person got the permanent job.

When you step back, and you have principles tied to people and not profit as your north star, it's kind of amazing how things fall into place, and the clarity with which you can make certain decisions.

Ultimately, even though Cara Connects was never officially an EoC business, I felt very much like it took on a life of its own. It was a beautiful experience to see it advance and grow, not only in the number of people who could be served, but in the deepened relationships we were building with the companies. Because they came to understand: we love doing business with Cara Connects, because there are things about it that make sense.

It was a win-win for those businesses too. Not only were they not paying for certain things they'd be accustomed to paying a for-profit staffing firm, but they knew that by working with us they were supporting a social enterprise which funded a nonprofit that was doing all this work to serve more people.

So there were really multiple bottom lines. In addition to the financial, you have a social and a relational bottom line that you continue to meet, when there's clarity about your north star being tied to people, and their quality of life, and the relationships you're establishing with all of the stakeholders in mind.

Break-even margins

Interviewer: What about going beyond profit maximization? Any stories that make that concrete?

Sasha Ongtengco: At Cara Connects, going beyond profit maximization was a *requirement* to achieve the mission set out for that mission-driven staffing firm.

And what that looked like on paper was literally break-even margins. Every year. Because we could have followed corporate staffing practices (in our pricing, in the types of customers and the types of jobs we brought in), and we chose not to, because doing so would decrease job quality and go against what was so important about the essence and meaning of that business. Which was creating a place for employees to see their value, their worth, their abilities, and that they could contribute meaningfully to society just by going to work every day and doing the best they can.

The employers were bought into what that meant. Through my engagement with them, they came to understand: wow, not only am I employing a person and filling a need for my business, but this is an opportunity this person is taking that's going to get them onto a trajectory toward something better.

And as a business, I could go with the corporate staffing firm that costs way less than working with this social enterprise. So why would I do that? But similar to other experiences I've shared: just have faith in the process. Hire one person and see how it goes.

It was amazing to see the shift, not only in the people they were hiring, but in the way recruiters and business owners felt. Recognizing: I know I paid more for this service, but I see how much making that opportunity possible means to someone. At that point we were completely ignoring net profit. It was really about: can we make this possible without losing money?

Which is different from: can we create this employment opportunity as another way to generate revenue, in service of having better financials to show the board this year than last year? That's a completely different orientation. How can I make the most impact possible without losing money, versus, am I taking every opportunity to generate the most revenue and profit by year end? What are we prioritizing?

And there were companies that got it. Companies that completely understood it was worth paying a premium, because the translation of that additional cost per hour often led to that person going permanent, and feeling so invested that they stayed at that company. When I would check back in two or three years after someone was employed as a temporary employee and then went permanent: the amount of savings, and the additional value you can't even measure because of how that person shows up in the job and is so grateful to an employer for giving them a chance.

It's really hard to measure what kind of return on investment that is. But you know it's there. You feel it. And gosh, it would be so great if that could be every business owner's orientation to operating their business.

Clients

Interviewer: How have EoC values affected decisions you've made with regard to customers or clients?

Sasha Ongtengco: My relationships with customers: success doesn't feel like how much we're able to produce together, necessarily.

When I have the EoC principles front and center while I'm interacting with a client, whether they're new or I'm trying to figure out what the collaboration is, or whether it makes sense, part of where the principles help is that I care about that client. I'm looking at it from the view that by our interacting, and by our relationship being important, the time we're spending is going to benefit that person. And we're both going to be able to experience something, materially through our business goals or our professional goals, but also as a relationship where there's trust.

Think about the friendships you build. It's worth your time; you enjoy yourself, you feel good, you feel seen. Bringing that same golden rule (wanting to treat clients the way I'd want to be treated) becomes front and center.

But it's also there in knowing: oh, this is actually not the best use of their time. This doesn't make sense for us to work together professionally. If I'm thinking about my neighbor, I wouldn't want my own time wasted, so I don't want to waste theirs. That provides clarity on what the purpose of the relationship is, if it's professional, while also recognizing that the relationship is a relationship. Maybe we won't get to work together. There are so many other ways we can support each other, if we both choose to.

Employees

Interviewer: What about employees, or people who work for you?

Sasha Ongtengco: While I was working at Cara and running Cara Connects, I knew that the way I treated my employees, and the relationships I built with them, was the most important thing for the sustainability and the health of the business.

Because I personally believe that if my team didn't feel supported and feel seen, whatever I was practicing with them was the example of how they were going to conduct themselves and connect with and engage others. It was not lost on me that leadership and culture start at leadership and work their way outward. I took that very seriously.

So for me the EoC principles meant making sure my team felt I could exercise flexibility when they needed to take time. Recognizing that they're a whole person, that they have other needs outside of work, and exercising that flexibility. It was people first for those we were serving through the business, but people first also for my employees' well-being.

How the work was organized

Interviewer: What about the business structure: how work was organized?

Sasha Ongtengco: Cara Connects was really the one opportunity where I got to set the culture, because I got to decide how things were structured.

It was very important to me, first and foremost, that everyone felt they could experience safety in all its aspects. Feeling safe at work, for me, looked like feeling safe to be myself and to ask for help.

It was so important to ensure there was a culture of balance. I know my team saw me as someone who was leading, and that there's some authority there, and I do think that's also important. People need to know who's leading, and without a leader you don't have anyone to follow, and that following is just as important to get something done and to fulfill a mission.

But structurally, creating psychological safety and emotional safety started with how I communicated, how *we* communicated, and how we divided the work. I remember being so sensitive to the time spent doing certain things. There were administrative things all of us were going to be responsible for.

By the time I was about to leave Cara, we had two staffing account managers and an intern. One account manager was more responsible for the operational aspects of the business, and for how individuals' jobs connected to their broader experience of getting employed and supported through Cara. The other was leading special projects and initiatives, because we were growing Cara Connects into a different demographic, supporting Latinos and immigrants.

The important thing was ensuring the level of work and the amount of work were right, and that there was full ownership over that work, that they could just go, and that they knew I would back them up. If something didn't go well, or they made a mistake, or said something they shouldn't have (and it happened, there would be times), I had to follow through on what I said I was going to do. When someone feels safe, I feel like they can deliver at their best.

Over the course of Cara Connects I think I had six people work there in total, because I was doing what I could to hire people we were supporting at Cara into the social enterprise, and then they could work elsewhere in the organization. Modeling within Cara Connects the same kind of transition into something better within Cara. That all happened, I think, because people felt ownership over their jobs, even though there was some decision-making that ultimately had to be done by whoever was leading it.

So: in terms of an organizational structure that's going to allow the business to thrive, and where relationships come first: it's where all your employees feel safe to do their best job, and where you're matching skills with strengths, matching the needs and tasks within the business with the strengths the individuals have. Which really requires you to build a relationship with your employees, to know what their strengths are. And then creating a culture where they can have full ownership over their job.

Marketing

Interviewer: Is there any way in which your EoC values affected the way you did marketing?

Sasha Ongtengco: The principle I'm really thinking about here is the dignity of the person. Whether you're an employee, a client, a competitor, a funder: there are different stakeholders. There's a way for marketing to convey dignified work, and dignity, in the people working in the organization and in the people you're serving.

This is probably most applicable within the nonprofit space, and particularly within organizations providing social services. What matters is what I've heard called asset-based framing.

I remember speaking to the marketing team at Cara (when we were putting out vignettes for our end-of-year report, or our year in review, needing to share with stakeholders both the revenue and the impact) that it was so important that the individuals who were affected by the organization's services were framed in a way that elevated their assets. That they were not someone to be saved. Not someone who was a problem, coming from a background that was a problem, that we're coming in to fix.

There are so many ways marketing can perpetuate the types of narratives that hold the problem in place. So it's incumbent on marketing and PR (where you're externally sharing about your work) to exercise this principle. Marketing has the power to put out a message that can be supportive of the change you want to see, or can hinder the change you want to see, simply by how you frame the work you do and who you serve.

So often, to get at people's hearts, it's easy to frame someone from a deficit: what they didn't have, and now they have it. But more truly: they always had it, and the system wasn't supporting their ability to thrive.

It's tough with marketing, because a lot of the marketing is going to bring in the money to support your organization, but how do you do that without unintentionally perpetuating a bias, or scandalizing?

Mission, and market

Interviewer: Did you ever have tension with the people you answered to, a moment where you disagreed and had to have a conversation?

Sasha Ongtengco: Not so much co-owners. In a nonprofit, those who have influence over your work are the people funding you for specific things, and the board of directors. Often those board members are volunteers, but they still have a responsibility to ensure the organization is using the funds well, and that we're focusing on the mission the organization was created for.

The tension was around what business health looks like for a social enterprise that is a staffing firm supporting people who are trying to get back into the workforce and are often still facing barriers. It's very costly: in time, and in actual material costs, to pay for training, to pay for insurance. Depending on the type of job, if they get hurt there's workers' comp. There are very real costs.

That mission-versus-market tension was tough, because I was seeing things through the lens of: are the people we're supporting getting the jobs? Are they able to go from a transitional job to a permanent job? If we're not able to do enough of that, we're not living up to our mission. Which means we're going to support a smaller number of people, or we're not going to be able to double the number of people, or double the revenue and generate profit on top of that.

Interviewer: What was the mindset you'd go into those conversations with?

Sasha Ongtengco: Very simply, it was clear to me what the purpose of that business was. The way I went into every conversation about Cara Connects was: this business is simply a vehicle to fulfill the mission of the broader nonprofit, which was creating real, lasting success for individuals and their households. Specifically households that had experienced poverty, and were experiencing it because of barriers to employment. You can't always do that and grow revenue and maintain profit. And that would always be my business case.

Especially with different businesses asking, why should we work with you? Because another thing about our staffing firm was that we tended to be *more* expensive than the other for-profit staffing firms in the market. And the way we needed to talk about that was: it costs more because of the mission, and the social dividends: all that you're not seeing, all that feels like extra cost, has these other intangible benefits.

It was not an easy sell to a lot of organizations.

Interviewer: If you had to go back into a board meeting right now and convince them the mission matters more than the market, what example would you use?

Sasha Ongtengco: What we would literally do with our board (they met quarterly) was invite individuals I had worked with, whom the staffing firm had worked with, or whom our sister social enterprise doing neighborhood beautification and graffiti removal had worked with. Both of those businesses were housed under the nonprofit.

At every board meeting we would invite someone who had just recently gotten a job, and in a couple of instances, people who had worked a year or more and would come back and talk about what they had accomplished, and what role our businesses and services and supports had played in helping them achieve it. We let the board be front and center to hear that firsthand.

I do think that was very effective.

One thing I really wanted to see (that I thought would be a real exercise of greater equity and balance) hasn't happened yet. I had suggested and advocated for at least one voting member of the board to be someone who had come through our program. It never happened. But having someone able to be very representative of who we served, and of the needs of the community in a very real way: to me, that's a very concrete expression of how to do it.

Covid

Interviewer: Can you give an example of a decision where mission and market pulled against each other?

Sasha Ongtengco: When you have clarity about your mission and your purpose, it can really help you make decisions that are difficult to make. Mission versus market comes up a lot, especially when it comes to grants and funds and how you spend them.

During Covid, the mission-driven staffing firm I was running became the vehicle we had to create any kind of jobs at a time when it was really hard to work, because you couldn't be in person. But there were a lot of Covid relief dollars available to create jobs whose purpose was getting more people vaccinated, or getting resources and food and medicine to elderly people who were bedridden. We were able to create jobs with that federal funding, and the business I was running received those funds.

What was often difficult was: we want to create as many jobs as possible, but we want to make sure those jobs are right. People are going to have to *work* those jobs. So how do I put people first in deciding how many jobs, and who's going to work them?

And it was one of the participants we were supporting who gave me the idea that made me think, *duh*: this is the best way to do it. And it had everything to do with listening to the people we were supporting.

I had been trying to make all these decisions *for* people, on behalf of people: who should go to work there and who shouldn't, based on their safety, on whether they were immunocompromised, but they might need to work, because they're the ones supporting their household. I don't want to force them to work. I don't want to put them in harm's way. When all I needed to do was bring them into the conversation, and have them develop the solutions and inform what we were going to do.

And oh my gosh, the grant and the programs we were able to execute over a six-month period were so far better than anything I could ever have decided and come up with on my own. And it was easier, because we were doing it in partnership, co-creating it with the people we were trying to support. As simple as letting their voices be the ones to drive the way we used the funds.

So there was a balance. It wasn't me telling people or deciding on their behalf. People got to design the opportunity with me, and help dictate the use of those funds, and did it far better than I would have, just assuming or guessing what they needed.

The press conference

Interviewer: Can you give a specific example of someone who had experienced a significant breakthrough?

Sasha Ongtengco: There were so many people. But there was one: you could probably still find this on the internet somewhere.

We had invited our board to come to a press conference. Governor Pritzker came to our offices to announce extended funding to support workforce development and the programs supporting individuals who had been even more affected by the pandemic, where an industry was completely decimated and they had to pivot in real time to continue to support their families.

I mentioned that big federal grant we were using to create jobs during Covid, and how we brought in the individuals we intended to serve to help co-create the program. We were one of a number of organizations in the state that got similar funding.

And one of the individuals I had brought on to be the project manager for that grant (Andy will appreciate this), the job of administering the grant is, in theory, one I would have had to do myself. Instead I went ahead and created a job, using the funding to do the grant administration, and employed somebody from the community we supported to do it, because they had the skills.

This was someone who had previously been a project engineer, and who, because of Covid and some coinciding personal circumstances, had to leave his job, and found it really difficult to find another that could leverage his skills. We were able to create that job.

We asked him to be the spokesperson at the press conference, following Governor Pritzker, to speak about the job, what he was going to do, and how he had been involved in creating and supporting the development of how we used those funds. We invited our board, and a lot of other people came, so they could hear firsthand and see the impact.

It was so important that we were not doing something for or on behalf of, but with the community we wanted to serve, that they got to dictate and be part of designing what those jobs would look like, how many to create, and what we were going to do. And literally having someone from our community help me administer the grant felt very, very good. That felt very right.

Part Seven: Going independent

Rome, and a challenge

Interviewer: For a period you were doing consulting. What was that like? Did you consider it an Economy of Communion company, or how did you try to practice EoC values in it?

Sasha Ongtengco: I transitioned from my time at Cara (the organization I worked at for fifteen years) in August of 2021, to go completely freelance.

The thought behind it was twofold. First, I knew there was a level of systems change, and of coordination and knowledge within the workforce system, where I had a gap. I felt that if I were working and operating as a neutral entity in the workforce system, I could better partner, and have more openness to collaborating on initiatives, than if I were coming in as Cara.

Here in Chicagoland, Cara was pretty well known, and because of its reputation and people's perceptions of who Cara had worked with, I felt limited: in partnering with unions, and in understanding workforce development funding that comes from public sources. There are a lot of challenges in navigating public systems that I felt the workforce itself could benefit from knowing more about, without losing the personal nature that the privately funded workforce development agencies had.

So working independently allowed me to do more within the workforce system, at a higher level.

I remember coming back from Rome (Andy, you were there), where we had a private audience with Pope Francis. He met with all these different EoC businesses after a special congress we had gathered

for. And in that meeting he challenged us: continue doing the great work you're doing, but ultimately, if we weren't doing anything to change the system, and to move our society toward one that was not producing poverty in the first place through our business practices, then what really were we doing?

I remember feeling so inspired, and a little unsettled, coming back to Chicago and thinking about the workforce development system, and about how much of a role I might be playing in perpetuating poverty. Because the work we were doing was certainly addressing the healing, in a very direct way. But when it came to working with the companies that were exploiting labor, or that were maybe unintentionally unaware that the types of jobs they were creating, which on paper looked great, because the number of jobs in an economy is supposed to mean a healthier economy. What's the *quality* of the jobs? Are they poverty jobs? Can anyone advance from them? What are the mechanisms in the system that allow jobs to improve, to ensure workers feel dignified and valued?

Mechanisms like organizing, and the unions. Chicago has such a strong union identity, and wanting to work more with them was really important to me. There was excitement at the opportunity to take Pope Francis's challenge seriously. And I felt the only way I could do that was to go off on my own.

There was something else that was important to me too. I'd experienced firsthand the number of gig workers in my world, as a musician, with many friends and colleagues also working in the arts. During Covid, when all of them lost the opportunity to work, and were really struggling, pivoting rapidly to perform gigs online and figure out virtual fundraising to support their craft: it was hard.

So there was something intentional in going independent that let me understand the challenges of working as a gig worker firsthand. And little did I know that would set me up for the work I do now.

There's a place for EoC principles in helping elevate different types of work that often go undervalued or taken for granted. A lot of the entertainment industry, a lot of cultural work, the work and experiences that help us reconnect with ourselves. There's often a failure to recognize the person behind that experience that was created for you. Behind the moment that led you to feel a little more whole, because you heard a story that helped you understand an experience you'd had. And yet we weren't doing enough to support that labor.

So I thought about the relationships I could build with areas of the workforce development system that were often ignored, because they were difficult to work with. It's hard to work with entities that are government or publicly funded, because of all the documentation and monitoring that has to happen, and the perceived waste. I could see that was something to address. But how do you go about improving something if you don't actually step up to it and understand the different factors that contribute to the problem?

By working with unions, and with the public workforce system (at the state level, at the county level in Cook County, and with some of the city-level entities that fund programs), I was able to understand more about how we can improve the experience for workers. For all workers.

A lot of the independent contract work I did was directly with companies that were family- or privately owned, and also with larger companies that had HR and community-based personnel doing work on behalf of a big corporation to support the community.

Those were the kinds of challenges that, as an independent contractor, gave me the space to lean into what I knew inherently through my formation and my exposure to the Focolare and the principles of the EoC.

That three-and-a-half-year period was also one of the most challenging times, because it was running my own business: trying to get paid, trying to pay out other subcontractors, and experiencing firsthand the very systems I wanted to improve. I was directly affected by some of these public grants not being managed well.

But to face that not with negative emotion, and not with the frustration that would naturally come up, I felt that really bringing the partners together, collaborating, thinking about solutions and about where different organizations' strengths were, mattered more. Let's really hear from the participants we were supporting, and from the residents we knew had been left out of these opportunities. Let's hear from them about the challenges, and then apply solutions we designed *with* them, to improve a training program to become a CNA, or to stay in that CNA job for a year, which is very difficult, by understanding what the hospital systems could do more of, to create pathways.

So I learned a lot, simply by applying and living into the same EoC principles I'd lived at Cara. Just building relationships. The practice of that throughout my lifetime up to that point really prepared me for the work I was doing as my own little business.

And after breaking up with a long relationship (that employer, Cara; it was like a really long relationship, and then you recognize that the chapter is done), as opposed to jumping into the next relationship too quickly, I really wanted to understand more. Especially with Pope Francis's challenge in mind. If I'm here to bring the presence of God, and the presence of love and renewal, into a system that's fraught with a lot of the human condition and frustration: how could I actually help alter that system to support more people who've been left out of opportunities? And at the same time learn more about the real strengths and talents God has blessed me with, to bring to the table? And in that period, discern: what's the next work relationship I want to have that really feels right?

Taking my time in that way was, I feel, a special grace, and I'm grateful for it, because so many of my colleagues were moving on in their careers in a really big way. During Covid there were opportunities in the nonprofit field to do more, and to advance. And I remember thinking: is it about just my career? Or: we're in the middle of a pandemic, there's a lot of work that needs to be done, and I don't know that I'd be able to engage the real issues that were creating and perpetuating this poverty.

I wanted to be able to step out of that. Which really meant giving up maybe moving into a C-suite spot, or the kinds of roles I saw the colleagues I'd worked with moving into.

What it cost

Interviewer: EoC entrepreneurs are often willing to sacrifice things for themselves in order to help others, sometimes called participating in poverty. Are there ways you've made intentional choices to live more simply, so that you could do things you felt were better in the service of others?

Sasha Ongtengco: I'll go back to the career transition I made, leaving Cara. It's always difficult to leave something that feels really good. It's difficult to leave something familiar. It's difficult to leave something especially when you don't know what's next.

That time really did feel like a moment and an opportunity to reset my orientation, and how I was living out my Focolare spirituality, and this relationship with God that I felt I had lost. Because there was so much happening: in the years prior, but especially during Covid. As a family we experienced loss. And I felt very burnt out from working nonstop, because of the commitment I felt to people who still needed to support their families, and because of the worry about anyone feeling unsafe or getting sick if we stopped operations. All of those reasons made it difficult to transition out. But doing the scariest thing is often when you can completely transform your life.

I saw many of my colleagues and fellow director-level leaders (not only at Cara but at other agencies in the same space) leaving and experiencing really admirable, inspiring advancements in their careers. I remember feeling so excited for them, and at the same time conflicted. Because there was still so much that needed to be done within our own local workforce system, and a lot of my peers were leaving that space to go somewhere different. It felt so much more important to me to focus on the needs, and to better understand how to improve the system. And I have Pope Francis to thank for that, because it also meant the trade-off of career advancement I could have made.

I had the opportunity to join the C-suite at Cara. My boss at that time told me that if I wanted to continue and grow there, there would be a spot, a need for someone to elevate social enterprise at Cara. "You can do that, Sasha. We can definitely advocate for that and make it happen." And I just did not feel very excited about it. Because it removed me one more step away from the people we were directly serving through the social enterprise.

So I transitioned out. I didn't have a plan. I stuck with that first contract, and for at least the next three months that was the only source of income I had, less than a quarter of the salary I'd made for a year.

But I remember feeling liberated. Not in the sense that I had been held captive by something, but in the sense that I now had more creative control over my time. And that I had created the space to do the things I'd been wanting to do, and to partner with people I never got to while I was at Cara.

That felt so much closer to responding to Pope Francis's call. We've got to change the system. And I thought: well, I can't see the forest for the trees. I need to step back to see the forest, and see the issue with a different lens.

A family-owned grocer

Interviewer: One of your clients was a family-owned grocer. Big picture, what were you doing and why were you there?

Sasha Ongtengco: The experience of living out EoC principles with this one client (an independently owned, family-owned grocer) was impactful because the attitude of these general managers completely shifted. Simply by being present to them, and embodying the EoC principles, so that they could live it themselves in their own day-to-day.

Interviewer: Can you say more about what you were actually doing there?

Sasha Ongtengco: It was a grocer that over many decades had grown to have several stores, and had supported the career paths of many people from frontline roles all the way to general manager. But they were experiencing attrition and retention issues during Covid, and even after, and they weren't sure what they were doing wrong within their own company.

By working with them for sixteen weeks, starting with the general managers (the head person at each store, with a hundred or more people reporting up to them), we came to understand together how much the relationship, and the skills to build healthy trusted relationships with their direct reports, was the core solution to the continuing attrition, and to employees expressing unhappiness and struggling in their jobs.

Over time, the relationships that formed among sixteen general managers who had seen themselves as *competitors* prior to this training; by the end they saw themselves as one team who could lean on and support one another to continue in these new practices.

We really saw a complete transformation, not only in each individual, as evidenced by what they shared at the graduation, but in the camaraderie and closeness and the general quality of oneness among the group.

And that really landed on the owner of the business, who in the beginning did not trust the change management that was happening, but came to embrace and understand that trusting and having faith in something you didn't understand could yield real, transformative change in the company, and positively affect employees who felt invested in by the care they experienced from their employer.

Poverty jobs

Interviewer: In a nutshell, what are poverty jobs? And why would an EoC approach want to address them?

Sasha Ongtengco: In almost two decades working in economic and workforce development, I've seen many types of jobs. And I've seen many individuals who've struggled to access *any* job, because of the barriers they've faced and the missteps they've had in life.

So imagine coming into the workforce, and it's difficult even to be considered for opportunities. And the opportunities that are most available (and probably the most flexible and considerate of those barriers) are also the jobs that pay the least, that have the least protections, that are the most unsafe. I would argue they're their own form of modern-day exploitation of various kinds of labor, and of populations who are in a more desperate mindset, and who are really willing to subject themselves to it in service of supporting their families.

A poverty job is a job that doesn't allow someone to live sustainably. You're not making a living wage; maybe you're making minimum wage. And unfortunately, from a policy lens, minimum wages nationwide (and certainly in several of our metropolitan areas) do not keep pace with the cost of living.

For example, in Chicago, the living wage for a single parent with two dependents is close to forty dollars an hour, at minimum. And that grows quickly with the way costs are rising even at present. So if the minimum wage isn't even twenty dollars an hour, you find yourself still reliant on the same public benefits you were reliant on before you got the job. And furthermore, because the system isn't designed to account for all these factors, sometimes you *lose* the very benefits that allowed you to go to work in the first place.

So there are poverty jobs, and there are companies and organizations that, while not intentionally creating them, are just making business decisions. And those business decisions don't account for quality-of-life factors, or for the challenges of someone who doesn't have reliable transportation and has young children who need daycare, and has to pay for those things. Put it all together and you continue to perpetuate a situation of desperation for someone who is really just trying their best to get ahead, and who is making logical decisions for their life.

So with the EoC principle of loving your neighbor, which means *knowing* your neighbor, which means talking to the people you're supporting, which can be a scary thing: you stop making assumptions. Why didn't they take the raise? Why didn't they take the promotion? They must be lazy. They must not be motivated enough. Don't they want more for their family and for themselves?

It's those same assumptions, from the same people who haven't lived that experience, that fail to see: that young mother didn't take the raise because it would have taken her to an annualized salary that no longer qualifies her for the childcare subsidy that allows her to work the job she's in. So she's forced into a situation that leaves her in a more impoverished state. It'd be better for her not to take the raise and just continue to struggle.

That's a poverty job. That's the combination of job-quality factors that isn't taken into consideration when employers are writing job descriptions and thinking about compensation, and about the benefits that are necessary for individuals who have faced systemic barrier after systemic barrier. They didn't create it through their own doing. They're just making a decision based on what they're eligible for.

And a lot of those eligibility criteria are, at their core, expressions of the lack of relationship and the lack of dialogue between the employer (those who have the power and the resources) and the talent, the

community residents, who are really the lifeblood of any of these organizations continuing to thrive and grow.

So there's definitely a place for the EoC. When I think about really effective types of businesses that people wanting to live EoC principles could take on: there's something scary about owning your own business or creating something yourself. But recognizing that there are many systemic issues that simply require more dialogue and interaction, and someone to facilitate those conversations.

Some of the work I'm most proud of as an independent contractor was bringing two different stakeholders together to work on a problem, which was going to look like each side compromising, giving up a little of something.

For one hospital system: to move from being a certified nursing assistant making eighteen dollars an hour to a registered nurse, your wage can jump to thirty-two dollars an hour within the same system, if you just get certified. And to get from CNA to RN there's often two to four years of training, and classes, and clinical hours. If you're already working for an employer who is in need of more nurses, and the talent for those nurses is right there in your own system, but they can't advance, because they can't go back to school, because they can't take the time off, because they'd lose their benefits, or they don't have the support systems, then it becomes very incumbent on the employer to do something about that.

And it takes someone who can come into that situation as a neutral party, bringing a desire to see both sides benefit, but really thinking that while it's the employer who will lead, it must absolutely be informed by the employee.

I saw one of these hospital systems, from a policy perspective, allow their incumbent employees to keep their healthcare benefits while moving from full-time to part-time hours, so they could go to class. Something as simple as ensuring your employees don't lose access to healthcare and benefits when they have to work fewer hours to go to school.

There's a lot you have to account for. And I know those businesses are trying to make decisions with a lot of different interests and needs, from supervisors to scheduling to the number of patients. It's a lot. But so often it's done without talking to one another, without involving the very people you want to support.

Seeing your talent as a source of wisdom for the solutions you want to provide to your employees is something that feels very opportune for someone living out EoC principles.

What people notice

Interviewer: Do customers, or employees, or peers, or companies you work with notice something different about the way you do what you do?

Sasha Ongtengco: I've been told I'm a good listener, and that when people interact with me they feel comfortable opening up. I'm also someone who prefers to skip over small talk and really understand where someone's coming from. I don't know exactly what I'm doing that invites that.

But I know that when I'm talking with someone (and I feel like I'm more able to do this now, after many years of knowing these EoC principles and experiencing the transformative ways living into them can change one's life, and I'm speaking from personal experience), something as simple as being present to someone. Being present meaning: I am with you. I'm looking at you. I'm listening to understand before I respond. And doing my best, consciously, not to react if I'm hearing something I don't agree with at all.

Sometimes that looks like asking myself inside: why do they think that way? What did they experience that got them to think that way? Versus: I can't believe they think that way. That shift internally has allowed an openness to receive someone's idea, and to attempt to step into their shoes and understand why they have that perspective. That, to me, is an opening for dialogue.

In my work as an independent contractor, supporting employers and prospective employees to have better experiences (employees having a better job and feeling worthy and meaningfully contributing to their local area and their employer, and the employer feeling they're doing a good job as an employer), all of those things have come to fruition simply from having the ability to be present to their needs. And then finding the language, and the ways, when we're all together in a space needing to collaborate or address an issue, to play mediator, and sometimes to translate what someone is saying that I can already tell is not landing well on the other stakeholders in the meeting. And vice versa.

It feels good at the end of those meetings to get the side message, or to hear in a follow-up: that felt productive. Or: even though we didn't get to a solution, I feel like I understand why they're doing what they do. That, to me, is a win.

And it feels good to have people I've worked with recognize that something as simple as my asking questions that helped get to a better understanding (and *not* talking) let someone feel heard, and say that they felt heard.

Part Eight: The arts

Arts Alliance Illinois

Interviewer: Tell us about the organization. What is it, and what does it do?

Sasha Ongtengco: Arts Alliance Illinois is the state-serving organization focused on arts advocacy across the entire state.

Arts advocacy for us is really about ensuring there are resources: first and foremost, resources within the state budget that are appropriated and made available for arts and culture across the state. In urban areas like Chicago you find that it's very robust; there's a lot the city has to offer, and resources and

access to the arts and arts education are definitely available. But that's not the case equitably across the state.

We've seen through our own research how important the arts are in developing the individual. A lot of the soft skills, a lot of the in-demand skills (when we think about the future of work, and where technology is taking our society, and the types of jobs that are going to be available in the future, and even the jobs available today), a lot of what matters most is tied to relationship building, and problem solving, and strategic thinking, and analytical ability, and our ability to connect with others.

But in rural communities there hasn't been that access, because we don't have thriving business centers. There are a lot of farm communities, places where if you don't have access to the arts you really don't have a lot to do. And there's a lot of connection to mental health and community well-being that is driven by the presence of culture in your community.

So our job at Arts Alliance is really to make the case that we need to have arts and culture available across the state (regardless of where you live, regardless of where you grew up and how you look), and to ensure that everybody, especially the artists who are responsible for a healthy creative sector, has the chance and the ability to thrive.

Because we are not a society, I think, in the United States, that really recognizes the value of artists and the value of the arts.

The artists

Interviewer: Tell me about the artists you're helping. What are they struggling with, and how do you help?

Sasha Ongtengco: I think artists most struggle with access to resources. And related to that: with the stakeholders and decision-makers in the state of Illinois (our government, business owners, foundations, those who hold resources, money and power), caring for the arts in a way that's not extractive and not exploitative.

Because of the way artists work, because of the way the work for artists is structured, it's not a nine-to-five. And the system we currently live in doesn't support the gig worker or the 1099 worker the way it does an employee. You have unemployment, you have programs, you have the ability to access a grant or funding meant to help you improve your skills or find job placement, and none of that currently exists for the arts and culture sector.

So if someone went to school and got trained in the arts, and wants to access healthy job options (healthy meaning stable, with access to unemployment, portable benefits, healthcare, a career path, the ability to advance), you have two options. You either continue to work as a 1099 worker, and hopefully start a small business and continue to grow your presence; but that's really challenging when you have the other market factors and the technology that threaten artists' intellectual property and their creativity.

What we're solving for at Arts Alliance is not only raising awareness about the need to support gig workers in a way that allows them to build a life for themselves, and not feel forced to take a job just to pay their bills where they have to abandon their creative identity (that dimension of themselves), especially when it's so important to have that presence in a healthy community.

So you have these market factors, and then there's the prevailing narrative of the starving artist. Something we want to do at Arts Alliance is both narrative change, and talking to our legislators to introduce new policy that allows gig workers (starting with artists, and especially BIPOC artists, and individuals who have also been disproportionately impacted by systemic barriers and racism) to make a living for themselves. If what they are able to contribute to society is art, through music and theater and film and performance and comedy and storytelling, then first and foremost I feel like we should be creating the environment and the conditions for those individuals to make a living.

And then for those who are not artists but who consume art, part of what we want to do is change the narrative: have folks see the value that artists bring, and see that the value the arts play in society is not just a luxury, or "wow, how lucky you are to be able to do something you love." To really value the labor that goes into all the different things we consume. Those of us who go to the theater and go see films and consume what we consume on social media: creators made all of that.

So: for creators to be valued that way, and ultimately to get to *choose* to do that work, versus being forced to do something else because they're not able to live day to day. Both policy, and programs and resources for those artists, working within the systems we have.

A jazz vocalist

Interviewer: Can you give an example of someone you've helped recently? What did they come in with, and how did you help?

Sasha Ongtengco: There are many examples. I'll give two, because in my world, having studied economics, I do think about things in terms of supply and demand. But as someone who comes into that work living Focolare principles, supply and demand are not objects. They're still people. So: how do I build relationships with those people?

My supply-side story would be building a relationship with an artist who needed support. During Covid there was a jazz musician, a vocalist. At the time, at Arts Alliance Illinois, we had just advocated successfully for the largest single appropriation of public funds for the arts and culture sector. There was a large amount of ARPA funding (American Rescue Plan funds) meant to be used as recovery funding to support small businesses in different sectors. And arts and culture, for the first time, got fifty million.

We knew it wasn't enough. We knew it was a drop in the bucket. But it was important to make sure that all of that money was used up. So a lot of individual artists and small businesses, who for the first time could access public relief funding, needed to apply for this grant. And applying for anything that's coming from the government has a lot of steps and a lot of documentation you need to provide.

This jazz vocalist was supporting two young kids, and was also the breadwinner. She did really well touring internationally and locally. And during Covid, clearly, there was no more work. In a very admirable way, I got to know the other kinds of creative businesses and creative activities she was doing to earn income. She was baking, and she had started an online business selling those kinds of goods.

And still: five thousand dollars in relief funding was game-changing for that household.

And she got the five thousand dollars. I remember the message and the email. And the beautiful thing, especially during Covid, was having that in-person meeting in a forest preserve, which felt safe. Just taking a walk and talking about what life was for her now. What was she planning to do? What was the five thousand dollars going to help her do? A lot of it was just tied to paying down debt, credit card debt, so that it didn't balloon into anything more.

But the thing that touched me most was her realization that there was someone actually thinking about artists, thinking about her personal situation.

That's the demand side: being able to build a relationship with the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and to show, through the stories of the artists we were working with one-on-one, and to help educate those policymakers and government workers, who saw so much in very structured boxes that artists just didn't fit into. And I think a lot of people don't fit into boxes so neatly.

So how do we continue (through that storytelling, but through real, trusted relationship-building) when it could be so easy to blame, and to be angry with the system and the people who keep that system going? Recognizing that they're kind of stuck too. They're people who care and want to do better, and who are often met with a lot of anger. It's a difficult job to be working in government today, and even then.

If you see the whole issue all at once, with all the different moving factors that are difficult to change in a short amount of time: it's going to take generations for some of this to shift. But when you can sit in the present moment and recognize what that relationship yielded for that person, for that household, and know that there's a ripple effect we might never even know about, I think that does keep us going.

That's the mindset I continue to hold, and I'm really grateful to others who live that way, or at least can see that way, because we feed each other in being able to keep going when it can be so tiring and exhausting.

Where the tension is

Interviewer: What experiences have you had with the community around where your work is based, positive impact, or tension?

Sasha Ongtengco: Most recently the work I'm doing has, in its own way, been the most challenging: supporting the arts and culture sector, and helping individual artists and small creative businesses at least subsist, not go out of business. But more importantly, helping those individuals see their own value, and understand and articulate the skills they have. Even if they're not generating enough income

to support themselves or their families through their artistic practice, those skills are highly valued and have other applications in other industries.

It's really challenging, because the system I've been discussing this entire interview (training programs and funds and all of that) is all in service of creating full-time jobs, with benefits and affordable healthcare, for the person who is going to be employed by an organization. But what about the people running their own businesses, or working for themselves? Which is how a lot of artists work.

What's been very promising is hearing a lot of positive response from employers and stakeholders in industries outside the arts, especially given where the future of jobs is going. In healthcare, especially at the intersection of arts and mental health, there's a lot of support. Recognizing that there's real value in using the arts to help individuals feel not ashamed, and to be able to support their own mental health and healing in ways that aren't just talking: through the arts, and in different mediums. Seeing the opportunity to grow that, if I were to call those other industries neighbors of the work we do, has been very exciting, because it's really new and really different.

Where I've experienced tension and doubt about the work, the loudest voice has actually been from the artists themselves. Because when the status quo for how you work has been that way for so long, it's really hard to see something as possible and to trust that it's going to work, especially if you're someone who has worked really hard to make ends meet. And often artists have made ends meet by having to completely abandon their artistic work and do something that feels soul-sucking to them.

I understand that it can be really hard to see how it's going to be possible in a society that doesn't value the arts any more than it values them now. Which is: a lot of arts consumption, and very little compensation associated with it. From Spotify and from so many other things.

So that's where the tension is. And again, with the Economy of Communion principles: everything we need to make this possible is in front of us. But what relationships, and what approach to relationship, do I need to build, or at least model for the artist, so they can advocate for themselves and build the relationships with the necessary stakeholders to move the needle?

That's the work ahead. It's all going to be relationship building. Which is a thing I know; it's just that the approach feels so new. And there's a lot more creativity we're going to have to use.

Advocacy, and unity

Interviewer: Can you describe your current work and how it contributes to unity?

Sasha Ongtengco: The organization I work at now is an arts advocacy organization. So: what can an advocacy organization do to build unity, and to be an agent of communion and change, in the state of Illinois?

At its most basic, the mission of Arts Alliance Illinois is to ensure that arts and culture, and anyone affected by arts and culture, has the ability to thrive in this state. And that's only possible if there are resources, and care for arts and culture in general.

The value the arts play as a unity builder is huge. And I really appreciate that at Arts Alliance there's a lot of recognition for the power of storytelling, and how storytelling is what builds great advocacy. Your advocacy for any issue isn't going to be as impactful if it's data only. The data is important, so that you have credibility. But the story is what can change a heart, and change a narrative, and change a mind.

So building unity there is twofold. One: supporting artists, and helping them understand the value they bring into their own local communities, and then articulating their skills and that value in a way that makes the case for prioritizing investment in arts education, and funds to help small businesses get started, and access to capital, and improving the systems that deliver these services so that everyone can access them, not just a few.

And two: the importance of arts and culture as a vehicle for dialogue, because it's only through dialogue that you build unity.

In the three years or so I've worked at Arts Alliance, I've had the opportunity to gain new perspectives and to facilitate perspective-sharing between individual artists and people completely outside the arts and culture sector. Recognizing that they need each other. That they're all part of the same community, and that what each brings and can contribute to the health of any community (the arts, the business community, all of the residents) means that everyone matters.

I never thought that through an arts advocacy organization I'd have a real opportunity to keep building unity. But it's definitely the newest challenge, and a new way of living out the principles, in support of those who are underrepresented in that sector.

A policy roundtable

Interviewer: Can you think of a specific moment that embodied that kind of unity?

Sasha Ongtengco: I had Pope Francis's voice in the back of my head, about how important it is to rewrite the rules of the system where possible, and to really change the system if we want to experience a world that is truly equitable and shows the same care for every person regardless of walk of life or where they came from.

At Arts Alliance, when I was working on refreshing our creative worker policy agenda, something so important about landing on the six priorities of that agenda was that it represented, as much as possible, all the stakeholders across Illinois who are involved in arts and culture, so that they felt seen in the final agenda. That can be challenging when you're working with very different stakeholders who have very different needs, and very different ideas about the best way to get what they need.

I conducted a series of policy roundtables around the state, and invited small business owners of arts organizations and arts nonprofits, and individual artists working for themselves and maybe working two or three other gigs to pay the bills.

So what did it look like to embody unity in a policy roundtable? First and foremost, facilitating a space where everyone can feel safe to share, without being scandalized by the many different perspectives.

And then, once you have all those perspectives unearthed, how do you whittle it down and find the common ground among the majority of them? It's not easy.

I can think of one experience where one individual had had a very negative experience trying to access a public individual-artist grant from the state. I don't know how or why it happened, but he met a lot of obstacles trying to access funds and get a grant he'd been told he was going to get. So how do you not let that negative experience take over an entire convening that's meant to find common ground?

I remember walking away from that not feeling good. If anything, I felt that individuals were walking away from that roundtable more deflated than anything else, because of that one person.

Afterward I went back and spent the time to contact each of those individuals (I think there were eight of them) and just checked in. Now that we've had two days since that moment, what did you take away from it?

And it really reaffirmed, or gave me some sense of: you're on the right path, Sasha. It had to go down that way, and all you did was try to love each of these people, and you're loving them now, by calling each one of them to check in.

It mattered to me that they had an experience that was going to be meaningful for them. And when I listened in those debriefing conversations, the overarching theme was: we have a lot of work to do, and we can only do this together. Because at the end of the day we're all feeling some kind of way, but collectively we all agree that the arts and culture sector is underinvested in, and needs a lot more attention.

And to hear each of those people express that they felt cared for by the statewide arts advocacy organization, that I took the time to come down to Peoria to talk to them. That's something I had taken for granted. To me it was just part of my job. But it wasn't part of my job, and I didn't have to follow up with each of them.

Those are the simple, concrete ways I got to embody the kind of unity I wanted to foster among that group.

Artificial intelligence, and the environment

Interviewer: Have EoC values guided you on environmental concerns, or the environmental impact of your work?

Sasha Ongtengco: There's always a consciousness, lately, in all businesses: a high level of sensitivity to conservation of materials. Things I've seen as common practice: let's go digital so we're not killing a bunch of trees.

In my current work at Arts Alliance Illinois, there's a lot of discussion about the various impacts artificial intelligence is going to have on the creative community, but also, in a very real way, on the environment.

In Chicago, in Illinois, there's very much an AI race. But a race to what end? Do we really know? We do have to know how to better use artificial intelligence. But there's a real need to talk about the guardrails, and to make sure all the stakeholders who are going to be directly affected are in the conversation: in terms of entry-level jobs that get eliminated, and in terms of the artists I'm supporting, who are very concerned about their intellectual creative property.

There's some real grappling we're going to need to do. Not only ethically, but: how healthy is a society, and what are the types of economic decisions we'll need to make? This is where I think the EoC is going to be really front and center. How will the economy need to be restructured to ensure healthy well-being for all of us?

If we don't have an economy focused on the value of people's skills and labor the way we do now, and that gets eliminated, then what is the meaning of people? What is the meaning of our skills? We're going to have to really rethink care, and find different ways. And we would need to restructure a lot of things so that those skills don't go to waste.

The pace of technology is outpacing our ability to monitor it, and outpacing our governmental leaders, and even those who own all this technology, and the governments investing in it. They don't know where it's going. The fear for me is that it's all moving so fast and we're not keeping up with the social infrastructure that needs to be in place to make up for what artificial intelligence is potentially going to take the place of.

So we need to educate everyone on how to use it well, and at the same time, EoC principles: people first. People first, before any of this. And people first means the dignity of the person, and valuing their skills, as opposed to saving time. That trade-off (someone's dignity, and their ability to feel they're contributing meaningfully to society, against efficiency) is something I existentially grapple with.

So those principles of the EoC are going to be really important, and will probably become more visible. And prioritized, hopefully.

Artificial intelligence, and the arts

Interviewer: Do you have examples of AI already displacing jobs in the arts?

Sasha Ongtengco: The artists I've talked to are expressing fear about the threat of artificial intelligence.

Even myself (outside of ChatGPT and the other large language models), as a musician, I remember an application where you could just prompt it to generate a thirty-second song. I'm not going to name it, because we don't need to put it out there. But it was incredible. It had lyrics. I said something completely made up, something I didn't even think existed as a genre, and it generated something that sounded like it.

And it scared me. If that's the direction: how easy it is now for anyone to generate creative content. And it's only able to create that because it's taken from all the other inputs floating out there; it's learned from them.

But it's not even only about the ownership of that intelligence, though for some artists (and for me personally) that's important. In a healthy economy we would willingly share our gifts, because each of us is choosing to, and we're all doing it equally.

What artists have expressed fear about is not having the ability to earn income in their creative practice, and then, if they had found ways to earn in other industries, if artificial intelligence also takes away copywriting, and takes away what entry-level accountants are doing with bookkeeping, then where does that leave them?

Artists have always struggled to fully live off their art. But I think another real threat is: *my side job is also going away.* So what am I going to do? That's where I'm starting to see more concern.

It's not that I think there are opportunities that are completely gone. It's: how do we share our gifts together? Again, with relationships: how can we figure out how to work within the change that's happening? How can we use artificial intelligence in a way that helps advance our artistic practice? How can we help companies design new jobs that leverage the skills artists have? If you're not doing copywriting now, how else can these skills strengthen the culture in a workplace, or help get a message out?

There's just so much we have yet to see.

Part Nine: Economic choices

Servant leadership

Interviewer: Given your economics background, how have Economy of Communion values guided a real decision you've made about economics?

Sasha Ongtengco: I went to DePaul. What was great about DePaul University, and its ties to Saint Vincent de Paul, was servant leadership. And what is servant leadership in the realm and the field of economics? It's: how can I make choices as an individual that serve and improve the quality of life for those around me? How do I make choices in service of a better and renewed society, even in my own small corner of the world, where I work, where I go to school, where I live, where I'm a neighbor on the block? I can make choices that have a real impact: on the entire culture, and on decision-making, and on participation.

Stepping back from business, just in terms of everyday living in a community: it's been really amazing to see something as simple as being able to cross the street safely to get to the park on the other side of where I live. There's not an actual crosswalk where there should be one. So certainly we can do some advocating, and we need to talk to our local elected officials to get the crosswalk put in. But in the meantime, you see the kindness of the business owners on the block putting up bright signage to draw attention. And the neighbors who live closest to the intersection will wave traffic down, just to get it to stop so that Zoe and I can cross the street safely.

Those are economic choices. They're just kindness, but I really do think that in terms of the economy, the local ecosystem thriving in a healthy way is dependent on all of those little choices made in service of keeping your neighbors safe. Without realizing it, that strengthens the relationships, and all those relationships are interconnected, and that tissue is what allows a block to thrive. And it's why in Chicago it really is block by block. It takes one neighbor, one block leader, to model that.

I chair a board for the Northwest Center, a community-based organization serving the northwest side of the city, which has a very concentrated Latino population and has always been underserved. You see how people make economic choices when you have an organization teaching and educating citizens on how to make better economic choices in service of a healthy community.

There have been entire days set up where young adults volunteer and go block by block and take note: that stop sign has been crushed into; there's all this brush here; there's a huge pothole on the street that needs to get addressed. They literally take notes and bring it to their alderman, and say, here are all the things on my block, and here are the neighbors who are going to be impacted.

That's a combination of an economic choice and a choice to use your voice. And all of those are real economic choices making a real impact. Because you can certainly make an economic choice about how to use your time, and what you spend your money on and what you spend your time on are, to me, interchangeable.

Money, and profit

Interviewer: How have EoC values guided a real decision you've made about the use of money or profit, in business or personally?

Sasha Ongtengco: To keep the abundance mindset (for me to continue to actively believe in it and feel its presence, that everything I need is here) requires action.

A healthy economy, to me, is an economy where the resources continue to flow. If they get concentrated in one area and become stagnant, the thing dies, because somebody didn't get access. It's got to flow.

Personally, what that has looked like (and I would love to be better at doing this month by month) is that the end of the year is when I do all of my giving. Yes, there's the tax declaration, but in the end, how much can you really deduct in charitable giving? It's not really that impactful. But it gives me a chance to see how much I have in excess, to be able to support the organizations and causes I care about. I feel like I could probably do more if I were looking at it more consciously, month by month.

In terms of profit and money, providence is a real thing, because of the various economic choices people make consciously in a spirit of servant leadership. I'm doing this in service of helping my community. So even with money: lending money out to someone.

And recently I actually had a great experience of being the *recipient* of that kind of recognition: that money and profit are just a vehicle. The real currency, to me, is the relationship you've built with

someone. For that reason, anything material in excess feels easier for me to give than to receive. It was actually harder for me to receive it, because I'd think: there's no string attached to this. Is there?

I was in a really bad car accident after Thanksgiving. I was trying to bring Zoe down to Indianapolis to stay with Liz Wallin and her dog Luna. It was the first big snowstorm after Thanksgiving, and there was black ice still on the highway. I hit that patch of black ice, and based on where I was I had nowhere to go, so I collided into the guardrail and then into a car, and it spun. We were fine; that in itself was a blessing. But my car was totaled. And it wasn't even my car. It was a car I had borrowed from someone. They were lending it to me; it's a funny story, and a long one.

In that moment, to be the recipient of what I felt was providence, and again a circulation of money: the person whose car it was had the ability to purchase another car, a better car, and then could lend that one to me for the time being, while I had just bought a house and was still trying to get my finances together so I could purchase a car myself. That's where I'm at right now.

That was providence. And why did they feel the need to do that? I think it's because we are so often talking about exactly this. Money is just a vehicle to strengthen relationships. But really it's the relationship you want to be investing in. Because ultimately, if your house burned down and insurance wasn't a thing, your relationship with your neighbor is going to matter so much to help you rebuild that house. But if you're an asshole to everybody on your block, no one's helping you rebuild it.

To me that care is tied to the way I think about money and profit, and how I choose to spend and use it, and not be attached to it. Which is hard.

The common good

Interviewer: What about practicing business for the common good?

Sasha Ongtengco: My career has been guided by wanting to play a role in increasing quality of life (for a community, for a household) and recognizing that one way to do that is through employment, and through training, and at its core through discovering the value and worth of an individual's existence and capabilities, when there's someone taking the time to recognize it.

When people ask me, what's your life mission? How would you describe your career and why you do what you do? My response is always: I just want to see quality-of-life improvements for everybody. That everyone has the possibility of making for themselves the life they want. To get there requires doing business, and working with businesses, and embodying as a business myself, the types of principles that ask: what is the benefit for the whole?

By working with one person to help them discover their value and their skills, and the gaps in their skills, and asking what we can do to support the development of those skills, and matching all of that with an opportunity, ideally with an employer who has also been engaged around what it means to be responsible, and to think about their employees and treat them as their own customers, maximizing their experience instead of maximizing profit.

In growing that mission-driven staffing firm, I was often thinking: investing in this one person, the return we're going to experience is going to be a true social benefit for the common good.

Because that person having an opportunity and starting to work is a social return on investment in the form of them going home and feeling better, and showing up better to their community members and their neighbors. But on a real economic level, that person is also earning an income and paying taxes. And those taxes go toward services. There's a savings when someone is working and (if they have a previous conviction) not getting arrested again and going back into the system. There are very real cost savings to society.

But the common good that emerges from business practices that really prioritize people is the ripple-effect benefit to the entire community. That, to me, is the common good. Who stands to benefit from one person experiencing transformation in their life? And all the touch points that person has (with their employer, with their family, with the different stores they can now shop at), all because they were able to take a step in the right direction, with someone thinking about their value and their worth and their experience, and being in community with someone living out these principles.

Part Ten: What the Economy of Communion is

Describing it

Interviewer: If somebody came to you knowing nothing about the Economy of Communion, how would you describe it?

Sasha Ongtengco: I would describe the EoC as a lifestyle.

As I was saying before: in any economy, we are all participants of our local economy. There's the economy of our household, and it could just be me and my dog, but there's an economy there, in the choices I make.

So the EoC is a lifestyle in which the relationships that exist between people, and the recognition that people and their talents and their skills and their abilities are what creates resources, or assets, or things we can exchange: that can simply be your experience, or it can be a physical thing because you're a creator, or it could be a business because you're able to set that up.

I often have to explain communion. Communion is to exchange, and to really be in relationship with another. So an economy of communion is one in which we're all actively choosing to be in relationship with one another, and recognizing that the quality of those relationships (and the belief in the good of the other, and the belief in what together we can bring forth) is what allows everything else.

For someone who isn't a believer, that's how I'd explain it.

A culture of giving

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

Sasha Ongtengco: The culture of giving that Chiara professes: I think we've come to understand that giving, and the gift involved in giving, can take many forms. But the most important giving is the giving of one's time, and of one's self.

And what does it mean to give oneself? Especially when she contrasts it with a culture of *having*: it's recognizing that ownership is false. Ownership is a construct we've created as humans. None of us actually owns anything other than the choices we make, and how we show up.

A culture only becomes a culture when there's enough repetition of certain behaviors that somebody who isn't immersed in it, when they walk in, *feels* it. They feel a difference from the environment they just left.

To have a culture of giving is to be somewhere where the practice is to put your neighbor's needs at the same level as your own. They aren't better than you or more important than you; you aren't more important or better than them. And most importantly, the things I have: my time, something material, but sometimes just making space, which is a gift. So the culture Chiara speaks of is that continuous choice of *yes* to your neighbor. But a yes that's tied to: I love you. I'm showing love for you.

And I'm going to give myself permission to say this: the most meaningful gift I could contribute, in terms of the culture of giving I want to cultivate around me and in my life, would be the gift of *no*. But a no that is a thoughtful yes to myself, so that I can continue to be able, when I do spend time with my neighbor, to make it the most sincere and authentic giving of myself.

That's actually really difficult to do. It's a difficult culture to cultivate in today's society and in this country, given so many shifts and changes in the way we live. So now more than ever, a culture of giving is probably the solution most needed right now, to heal a lot of the suffering and the loneliness and the isolation. If we're not experiencing it ourselves, then our neighbors are.

There are ways to cultivate that kind of culture without it being extractive, recognizing that the gift often gets reciprocated. And that reciprocity is the springboard to continue giving. The love we put in never comes back unreciprocated.

It starts with a gift

Interviewer: From its start, the EoC has said that business begins with a gift. Do you think of your business activities in terms of a gift?

Sasha Ongtengco: I don't think I'm conscious of my business activities being a gift for my neighbor in every moment. But I definitely feel that the choice I made early on, to commit to, and adopt, and continue to believe in, the values I was exposed to when I was younger through the Focolare movement,

and to make a conscious choice to practice them of my own volition, because I have experienced the gift of someone's love, and the reciprocity of the kind of giving Chiara speaks of, where you give with no expectation. You give as a means to connect with your neighbor, and that's your connection to God and to a higher source.

So at the end of the day, choosing to pursue a career in workforce development, being really intentional about working with employers and on initiatives focused on those who've been left out the most in the economy and in our society; that's maybe the first gift.

I don't have a business now. I don't have something I currently own or have complete creative control over. But even the most recent choices I've made, in wanting to do something that is actually more challenging and difficult for me, the world of advocacy and organizing, which requires you to use your voice, and to stand up for somebody else, and to take the risk of your reputation, because there are consequences when you choose to confront an inequity or something that's wrong: that to me is already a unique version of the gift Chiara speaks about, when we're talking about the gift of self within a culture of giving.

So it's the combination of the time, and the choice to use all the skills I've gained and the experiences I've had leading up to right now, where the common thread among all of it is a yes to bringing the presence of God, through my love and my kindness for my neighbor.

Agents of communion

Interviewer: Pope Francis called EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. When have you most felt like one?

Sasha Ongtengco: There are many contexts in which I feel like an agent of communion. Communion, to me, means an exchange, and not just any exchange, but in the context of the EoC, an exchange of something of depth and meaning, that will inform the other person about my story and who I am and why I'm engaged in the thing we're communing over. And the same for me, in learning about the other person.

I do that in my work, and I try to do it at home and in my personal relationships, and in day-to-day interactions, sometimes even with strangers. But the most meaningful communion is when I'm the agent who gets to foster greater communion within a group, or among people who have different perspectives on a specific topic.

I do that most when I'm engaging in and fostering a dialogue intended to improve an issue or a conflict where there's been a misunderstanding, or at least, from where I'm sitting, a lack of the *story* that one or both parties has about the other. I almost feel a responsibility, if I'm thinking of "agent" as the catalyst for communion. And really motivating those parties, getting them feeling safe and comfortable enough to have that communion, is part of the job description.

More specifically, thinking about the work I do within the Focolare outside of business practices: one of those contexts is interfaith dialogue.

Within that dialogue there are multiple faith-based groups and communities of other religions we strive to connect with, in service of "may we all be one." And we have had a longstanding relationship with the community of W. D. Mohammed. I've felt most energized by the communion we have with their community, and I've felt like an agent of communion in the initiatives we've co-created and produced together as two communities.

We have a group called the Next Now Group, made up of younger people of the Focolare (thirty to fifty, the middle-aged adults) who really care about bringing forward the life of our respective communities, and coming together to learn from one another.

Being able to work on that team, as agents of communion, has been an experience that I think transformed all of us. Seeing members of the Focolare movement and members of W. D. Mohammed's community, which is majority Black Muslims here in the United States, and creating the space for an exchange of experiences, and then inspiring and inviting members of both communities to go into their own local communities and do local service together, or to understand how we're each living principles that are very common between our two communities, though informed and inspired by different sacred texts. But it's the same journey.

So we work together. And I feel like an agent of communion when I'm able to create the space for that continued activity, and the strengthening of relationships, and greater understanding: literally between Black Muslims and, in the Focolare movement here in the United States, many Christians and Catholics. There's a lot of diversity among all of that. But we see ourselves together as one community working toward renewing our societies, and we know that we can only do it together.

So: communion as dialogue between two different faith-based groups is how I feel I've most concretely responded to Pope Francis's call.

And specifically, this steering committee of young adults from both movements: we know it starts with us modeling communion within our own small group of ten, which is then an example for the rest of our community. And if we can do that, at least within these two faith-based communities in this country, there's a lot of hope that we all feel, and that we hope others feel, that they can continue down that same path, especially when encountering someone who is different from them.

No more victims

Interviewer: Pope Francis also challenged EoC members to create a world with no more victims. How have you taken that challenge personally?

Sasha Ongtengco: This question feels very personal for me.

In Pope Francis's vision of a world that no longer has victims, another way I interpret it is a world where no one any longer *feels* victimized.

And the reason I reorient the sentence that way is because of my own personal journey. From the experiences I've had in my life where I felt like a victim (and I'm very grateful to all of the support

systems I've had, and one of those has been the Focolare community, and the genuinely non-judgmental spaces that have held me in my low points, in my own chapters of darkness or suffering because of things that were out of my control and were happening to me), the learning is that you're only a victim if you continue to feel disempowered.

There will no longer be victims in the world if we can transform the part of our modern culture that is victimizing. There are many aspects of today's culture that can feel disposable and transient and transactional. Those are all different paths to victimization.

So the social renewal needed to eradicate those paths: how do we stop a disposable culture? How do we change the aspects of our culture that create victims, or that create people feeling victimized?

I think it all starts with ourselves. Each one of us has experienced things in life, and even if we're young and there's more life to go, life will bring difficult moments and difficult experiences. But something like the Focolare movement, and the principles we live in Focolare communities and in the EoC and in the businesses (really, the spaces where we are bringing God's presence into the world by way of how we treat our neighbor and how we show up for our neighbor), and very importantly, mirroring the value and the worth of our neighbor back to our neighbor: that cancels out any feelings of victimization.

So it's through relationships, and through continuing to live with intention the principles that build trusted spaces where people can feel safe, that there's that internal transformation: I no longer feel victimized. I'm no longer a victim. I'm a survivor. I am an agent of change. I am enacting change in my own life.

It's very difficult for someone to do that by themselves, and to come to that understanding by themselves. And that's part of what we do in the Focolare movement, and what's so important about these kinds of structures: a business, and the ecosystems of choices we make collectively, which is an economy. Therein we choose to show up for our neighbors in a different way, we really choose to be different, and we come into something with our own empowerment.

It's very Gandhi: be the change you want to see in the world. Be the survivor you know you are. Be the survivor who can inspire those who need to know they're not alone in the kinds of things that are hurtful and harmful. Ultimately we're all one in our own human condition. And I think we all have the opportunity to do that for our neighbor at any given moment.

Part Eleven: Practicing it anywhere

The challenges

Interviewer: What are some unique challenges that arise from trying to practice business within an Economy of Communion framework?

Sasha Ongtengco: Literally interacting with people who have not been exposed to it.

For example, with the board: trying to make the business case *and* the mission case for why we do a thing, and having trouble landing the importance of it. I can think of real people and board members who feel very strongly (and it doesn't mean they're wrong) that we need to prioritize healthy profits to sustain the business. That's not wrong. That's a strategy, and for long-term sustainability it makes sense to monitor and measure those healthy profits. But then having the conversation about: okay, at the expense of what?

How do we get more businesses whose leadership and owners (or nonprofit leaders) see that you can run a healthy business without maximizing profit? A healthy business, where "healthy" is tied to the health of the people involved in the organization, or benefiting from it.

Where I've come into tension in making that case is sometimes with individuals who, in a very real way, have been wronged or have had some kind of injury.

Because a lot of what I'll say about EoC principles I'll articulate and tie back to spiritual or faith-based principles. And the moment I touch anything related to religion, that has sometimes turned people off. They've already shut down.

That's just a reality. I believe every person has the ability to exercise kindness, and to feel and show love for another person and for themselves. But because of painful experiences, and of not resolving or healing from deep wounds, you don't always get there. It doesn't mean you're incapable. It's just so many walls.

You see a lot of that with individuals I've encountered who've experienced real deep wounds from their interactions with their church, or their synagogue, or their mosque, somewhere they were told, and thought, was a safe and trusted community, and then were sorely disappointed by it.

So only through relationships and communication do I get a sense of that, and of why it's so important to have language that can connect with and appeal to a wide variety of audiences. Because the principles are all universal, but recognizing that there's sensitivity to certain words. Family. Brotherhood. Solidarity. The associations certain people might have with them. Sometimes you don't realize it until afterward. But at least you can learn from it.

Where it is needed

Interviewer: What are a couple of needs in society that it'd be good to have an EoC company address?

Sasha Ongtengco: Honestly, I feel there's a place for an EoC company in every industry and every aspect of society. I don't think there's any limitation to what someone would want to do, because there's no job, even if you're working remotely, that isn't going to require interacting with another person. There's no job that isn't going to require some kind of relationship building.

If there's anything the EoC offers to anyone who feels inspired by it, it's really building up the skill of forming trusted relationships that are reciprocal and transparent, and that allow each person to feel

seen and heard, so that together you arrive at a solution, or are able to meet the goal and achieve the mission.

There is a place for an EoC business anywhere. A place for even one person to bring that into a relationship, and into their industry, or their part of the world locally.

You do not have to own a business

Interviewer: People often say, "I don't own my own business, so I can't be an entrepreneur; the EoC is for entrepreneurs." What are concrete ways anyone can practice the EoC?

Sasha Ongtengco: It is possible for anyone to be EoC. While not an EoC business owner, you can absolutely own EoC principles and put them into practice in your everyday life, and certainly in any level of employment, in any type of job, within any type of institution.

Because whether or not you're a formal entrepreneur, it is entrepreneurial to take risks. It is entrepreneurial to find an open window when the door closes. It is entrepreneurial to be okay with *no*, because that means there's a different path.

So it's up to each person first to cultivate those EoC principles within themselves. And then whether you're a janitor, or a teacher, or a daycare provider ("I just work with little kids," "I just watch the dogs all day, I walk dogs"), there's a way to live your EoC principles and, in your own way, be an EoC entrepreneur within your own role, wherever it is that you sit.

Even as a student. Even in your community choir, or the youth basketball league you coach or play in. To really be the presence of possibility, and to model an openness to understanding someone's experience, so that you're able to renew or bring new life to your situation: I think that's just as valid as being an EoC entrepreneur who formally owns a business.

Because you *are* your own business. You run a business; you run yourself. It's a wild thought, running your own internal business. But that's what it's about. And I'd argue we often miss that step when we set out on new ventures, even those who are capital-E Entrepreneurs.

Mentoring

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

Sasha Ongtengco: I think one of the most important roles in society is the role of the mentor, because it requires self-awareness and self-reflection about *how* you do what you do, now that someone is looking up to you. Whether that's a formal mentoring relationship or an informal one.

Some of the formal ones I've had were going back to my alma mater, DePaul University, to guest-lecture in undergraduate classes (an organizational behavior class) and being able to talk about my experiences. At that time my experience had only been in hospitality, because I was actively going to grad school at

the same time at DePaul. So I'd talk to these undergraduates about the difficult situations I was encountering at the front desk of a hotel, or as a junior salesperson.

The opportunity to address a whole classroom of excited future entrepreneurs (our future leaders) is a serious role to take on, when they're looking to you to hear what you've learned in the workplace and in life.

I would often share, especially for young people who don't know what they want to do, I'd literally say: imagine an economy of sharing. An economy where we're sharing our talents, and also recognizing the talents of others, and putting those things together to make something great. You can do that in any industry and in any career path you follow. You don't have to know what that looks like today. What's most important is to know what your values are: the ones that are so dear to you, that give you joy, that get you excited, that motivate you.

EoC principles, at a minimum, inspire someone to be better, and cultivate (they spark) an internal joy, when you think about the possibility of changing the world around you. Even if it's not the entire world, but the small corner of your world. Simply by bravely living out what concrete kindness looks like with your neighbor. Or thinking about your enemy (who is your future competitor) and how you might build a bridge to actually work together.

With mentoring, most importantly, to the extent possible: bring that person along with you. Have them see for themselves what it sounds like to really create an opening: how are you able to do that? In those classes it was great not only to offer those experiences, but to provide opportunities to role-play, and put into practice some of the things you could say to ultimately build a relationship. Though the way I framed it was: to uncover your next opportunity.

So the role of mentoring is really important. And you can do it simply by being a guide, and creating time for someone who's asking for help, especially when you feel like you're too busy. Those moments matter.

And it can go all the way to finding a way, within your own company or the one you work at, to create an internship or an apprenticeship for those coming after us, so they can be in the presence of someone who is living into EoC principles very intentionally and actively, day to day.

Part Twelve: The movement

What would make it stronger

Interviewer: What do you think could make the Economy of Communion stronger today?

Sasha Ongtengco: What would strengthen the EoC worldwide (but certainly in North America) would be finding ways to create spaces for more education about the EoC, and more opportunities for people to share experiences of how they're living these principles.

And maybe not limited to EoC business owners. More importantly, having different representatives from within the business structure (from employee to owner to the middle supervisor, to even a vendor or another stakeholder in the sphere of that business), able to share, and to have a platform for those experiences to be made more public.

So that there's the awareness that allows more people to put those principles into their own day-to-day. But in terms of strengthening the movement, it's about having sustainable structures that allow for more of that exposure and broader education.

That could be through external funders, or EoC businesses themselves coming together locally to have business fairs, or to speak at existing conferences. Sometimes you have to apply to speak at those. So having someone dedicated within the EoC to support EoC businesses in doing that is one way to scale impact.

Interviewer: What would that look like?

Sasha Ongtengco: Someone dedicated in a part-time or full-time capacity, to find and apply for those opportunities, or to work with stakeholders in local areas to create those convenings ourselves, as an EoC movement, so that business owners can talk about their experiences with non-EoC business owners, or with business students, or community developers, or policymakers.

That kind of interdisciplinary convening, at a local or regional level, strengthens the EoC. When you feel supported as an EoC business owner, or as someone practicing the EoC, and you see stakeholders who know nothing about the EoC engage with it, even if it's just asking questions, or "can I come visit your business and see this in practice?" or "I'd like to write a paper and research more about what these businesses do."

That has been done. There are business students, and entire networks in different areas across the globe, attempting to do more of that. But particularly in North America there's a unique opportunity to inspire a different way of doing business, or a different way of *being* within a business, by simple exposure. And I know that's not something that's happening currently.

A seal, or a leaven

Interviewer: Is it more important to get more businesses to become official EoC businesses, or to spread the EoC leaven through as many loaves as possible?

Sasha Ongtengco: It's a both-and.

Strengthening the EoC can definitely look like doing what's possible to get more non-EoC businesses to adopt the principles formally, and identify as an EoC business within the network, and perhaps to do that publicly.

I've often thought about a seal, like the LEED certified seal or the Certified B Corporation seal. How cool would it be to say: we're a business that celebrates and practices the EoC principles? Of course that

creates a whole other body of work. But there might be something attractive about it, and about the right kind of attention it might bring to those businesses: a business I might want to patronize, or purchase services or buy products from. Along the lines of responsible consumerism, and positioning the EoC better within that space.

But I do think making possible the broader education and awareness-building (the leavening that can go out into the world) matters too. Ideally, yes, you might have new loaves of bread that grow from the leaven because of exposure. But whether or not those businesses become formal EoC businesses, there's a place for a business that is already doing really well from the traditional profit-and-loss view to learn about the principles of doing business better via the EoC approach, and find a way to incorporate it into their existing model. That can only improve the business. And perhaps there's something we within the EoC learn about what sustainable business can look like in this market, in a capitalistic, free-market economy in the United States.

So both types of EoC scaling (and I don't know if evangelization is the right word, but just putting it out there) are definitely good, concrete ways to strengthen the EoC.

Elsewhere in the world

Interviewer: How do you see the EoC lived out differently in other parts of the world?

Sasha Ongtengco: It isn't so much that the principles are lived out differently, because the principles are universal. The real difference is in the structures that support the EoC's ability to flourish and spread toward a much wider audience.

In Europe, and perhaps in South America, they've made the spaces, and been able to integrate the EoC networks and businesses much more successfully into their existing local economy. Most visibly with the business parks: actual places you can go to and visit and learn about the EoC, with these businesses co-located together.

There's a lot of benefit to businesses being co-located, in terms of economies of scale, and sharing business practices, and business-to-business procurement and sourcing opportunities. Quite independent of the EoC, it's very beneficial to a local economy when businesses strategically co-locate within a park or a corridor.

Mariapolis Luminosa

Interviewer: Can you tell us about Mariapolis Luminosa?

Sasha Ongtengco: The little towns of the Focolare are already the best existing way to learn about the EoC firsthand, because there's a physical place you can visit.

And while Mariapolis Luminosa unfortunately no longer stands as a place you can go and visit, there are other little cities of the Focolare around the world. A little city's ability to remain open and available for the public to visit is made possible by the business parks and industrial corridors created by smaller EoC

businesses, either sprouting from the surrounding area, or from individuals aware of the Focolare who decide to intentionally come to that area and start a business.

Mariapolis Luminosa had a couple of businesses operating near or right on its property: a tutoring service, and New City Press, which was based out of Mariapolis Luminosa. Those were two longstanding EoC businesses that supported Mariapolis Luminosa as a little town: in terms of the revenues, and the jobs it created for residents living in the community, and also being able to host visitors and talk about the business and how they ran it very intentionally according to EoC principles.

To see the Focolare spirituality expressed so concretely through a business model, and through a physical space, is a really powerful experience for someone who isn't aware of the Focolare at all. And that's an experience you can still have in Argentina, and in Italy, and in Brazil.

Loppiano, and Polo Lionello

Interviewer: What kinds of businesses are at the one in Italy that you've been to?

Sasha Ongtengco: Polo Lionello is the business park located outside the first little city of the Focolare, which is Loppiano.

At the time I was living in Loppiano there was a gelateria; of course that's the first one that comes to mind. But also Centro Ave. And, which is really beautiful to me as someone who cares a lot about the maker economy and the creative economy, several of the small EoC businesses located outside Loppiano were dedicated to woodworking, and handmade crafts, and textiles.

I want to say there was also an entity dedicated to *agriturismo*, local tourism, which was possible because of the regional area there in the hills of Tuscany. There are many wineries in the area, and specifically for Loppiano there was a line of Chianti produced using grapes from vineyards in the vicinity, and then sold, again, within a business structure that lived out the EoC.

All of those were expressions of it, with offices or actual operations right within that business park. And the fact that they were all located close together has so many benefits. As a visitor you can see it all at once, and do your local shopping and your education at once, and get different perspectives from different business owners in one visit.

But especially for a community developer (someone trying to learn from other models and figure out how to implement that contextually, in a way that meets the needs of the local context you're coming home to), that kind of cross-pollination of learning and exposure is a very effective way for the EoC community to grow, and for existing businesses to continue to thrive.

Mariapolis Lía

Interviewer: Is Lía like that too, in Argentina?

Sasha Ongtengco: Mariapolis Lía, in O'Higgins in Argentina, there's a little local hotel there where most of the staff are young people of the Focolare living within that little city, spending a dedicated amount of time experiencing living the EoC principles twenty-four seven.

And anyone who lives within the little city is also contributing to it by working. Some of those jobs are within an actual EoC business; some are not formally tied to a business, but you're doing work within the little city that gives you the opportunity to own EoC principles and live them out as part of building and sustaining a healthy expression of God's presence in the world.

In general, the little cities are great examples of how that can work: you have small businesses, and residents who live in the town and make decisions democratically, together, not unilaterally. You see that within many of the EoC businesses too, despite there still being some hierarchy, because there's always an organizational structure. But that structure exists within the business, or within the little town, or within the household, and I think you see it mirrored pretty similarly.

Part of the goal of the little cities is to allow anyone to experience what life could be if we were all living these principles that are directly tied to caring for one another. What does an economy of care look like and feel like?

And that can't be limited to what's happening inside the business. It's how that business is interacting with the local community and economy around it, that it's supporting, and that it's also potentially taking resources from. So you can go to a little city and actually experience the generativeness of the interactions between businesses and households and the other entities of a local community.

What North America brings

Interviewer: What do you think the North American EoC brings to the EoC worldwide? What are its gifts?

Sasha Ongtengco: First and foremost, the EoC presence in North America is important in itself: that EoC principles can be lived out within a business structure in the United States, given the socioeconomic and political climate of our country compared with others. Starting there is important.

The history of the United States is unique in some ways and similar in others, in terms of the movement of people to create something new and leave their legacy. But uniquely within the United States because of the diversity of people and cultures that coexist across the country.

And also recognizing that what happens in the United States often gets replicated in other countries. That's not to say we don't also learn from those countries. But so much of how we do business here has ultimately dictated the way the rest of the world conducts business, and structures its economy, and its policy.

I wish we could see more employee-owned businesses, period, in the United States. I think the EoC is a good base, a framework from which to build and add other models that look out for the well-being of the person. Models like employee ownership, or the succession of larger businesses, allowing the

employees who helped shape a business to have partial ownership, some stake in it. Imagine businesses doing that *plus* living EoC principles. Being conscious of their practices and impacts on the environment as well.

The United States has experienced a lot of its success through extraction of its own local resources, and that's not limited to the environment. In a very real way it's also its labor.

So the experience of EoC business owners here, having to operate within a market whose forces run opposite to what the EoC framework is trying to bring about (contending with challenges that are rooted in a capitalist market economy), those are very unique experiences that other countries and other EoC networks across the world can learn from. Because more or less, they may find themselves facing the same thing.

What the EoC brings that B Corps do not

Interviewer: The EoC started in 1991, when B Corps didn't exist, conscious capitalism wasn't a thing, and social entrepreneurship was a strange phrase. Now all of those exist. What does the EoC bring that's different? What makes it still relevant?

Sasha Ongtengco: The EoC today still brings something unique to the marketplace. And nothing has changed about what it brings, compared with what it was bringing in 1991.

It goes to the *motivation* of the practices, practices intended to do good, to do right by the people working in the business, to do right by the environment, to do right by any stakeholder who's going to be affected by the business.

Certified B Corps, and LEED-certified organizations, are all important instruments and networks and ways to incentivize businesses to do better. And the EoC was a trailblazer in bringing awareness to the way business was being done that ran counter to doing right by the community and the people interacting with those businesses.

But the EoC specifically still looks at the relationships that make the business possible. It's not just something you apply to the business itself and to its practices. It's looking very specifically at relationship, inclusive of the relationship of the business to its local environment.

The EoC is also not just a framework, not just a list of things you can do to show that as a business you're being conscious and considerate of the resources you use and the people you employ. It's more than a framework. It's a lifestyle. It's cultural. And it starts not with what you *are*, not with the policy you're putting in place, but with the person who *makes* that policy embodying the principles, having a real, authentic motivation, and belief in the importance of being better in business. That's what creates the shift in practice. That's what creates the shift in how I interact with all these different stakeholders, and how I treat my employees.

Because the EoC is rooted in the Focolare spirituality, it starts not with me but with my neighbor. And yes, I have to account for myself and my health, and ensure I can show up to my neighbor in a healthy

way. As a business, I need to show up to my community in a healthy way. But it starts with the internal work, in order to externally create the practices that transform the business and the community that surrounds it.

So it's still so relevant today. Because you can have all of these structures, but they lack the soul. They lack the belief, and a faith, either in a higher power, or in your fellow human, your neighbor.

Without that sense of faith and belief and desire to be better, and to think about who other than me stands to benefit or stands to suffer from how I show up: that's really what differentiates the EoC from any of the other genuinely positive business frameworks aimed at improving business and the role of business.

Recognizing an EoC business

Interviewer: The B Corp and LEED approaches are metrics-oriented, and external: you meet this many criteria and you get the seal. How do you look into someone's heart and see whether they've been sharing?

Sasha Ongtengco: I have thought about how an EoC business would be able to bring recognition to the way it shows up in its community, in a way that remains faithful to the EoC principles, because it runs counter to checking off boxes on a list, which is so external and objectified and sterile. EoC principles are the squishy, soulful essence of the thing. Like how culture operates: you can't really see it, you feel it. But there are certainly customs, and symbols, and things you *can* see.

In certain EoC businesses I've seen something like: here is our manifesto, here are our core values, here's what's important to us and the priorities we live by. And they're straightforwardly EoC principles, or principles pulled right out of Catholic social teaching, looking at the importance of the community and the other person and relationships.

But in terms of a mechanism for recognizing that an EoC business *is* an EoC business: it can't be one external party saying "that's an EoC business." It's all the stakeholders who interact with that business, and all the employees within it, whose input or testimony or endorsement would collectively need to be considered in granting a seal.

I think of the surveys here in the United States, the "top 100 places to work" lists. I actually put a lot more weight on the businesses named in those lists than on some of the B Corps, if we're thinking about relationship and culture and experience. Because to make that list is determined by surveying your employees, and having them attest to certain aspects of how they're treated and how they feel. A lot of that criteria is tied to job quality.

Something between an employee survey and a good-jobs framework would be the closest external tool (not currently affiliated with the EoC, but that could be applied to it) to get closer to recognizing the EoC-ness of any business.

Part Thirteen: Others

Project Lia

Interviewer: Some say the heart of the Economy of Communion is the human desire to give and create community. How have you experienced that?

Sasha Ongtengco: Someone who has exemplified for me that heart (and turning desire into reality, and wanting to create community) is one person I got to work really closely with in launching an organization three hours away from Chicago, down in Indianapolis. An initiative she chose to call Project Lia. Elizabeth Wallin.

To create community already implies that there wasn't a community there to begin with. So often you're starting either with very few resources, or with many resources that aren't coordinated in a direction that creates the community that's needed.

In Indianapolis, Elizabeth recognized and paid attention to the issue of there not being supportive programs and resources for women coming out of the women's prison there, and then wanted to do something about it.

I can't forget the call I got when I was still working at Cara, where Elizabeth was asking for support: what would it take to start a program like the one you're doing at Cara, to provide that for the women here who don't have very much offered to them?

And then, what a journey, really seeing Project Lia come to life, with Liz's hard work and constant commitment to the women she was working with, and to every stakeholder she engaged, which went all the way up to the mayor of Indianapolis coming to an event in support. This community rallying around a recognition that here are our neighbors in our own backyard who don't have access to things they also deserve, and we can show up for them.

And it starts with at least one person modeling that. That was Elizabeth.

When I think about the kinds of choices required to create that kind of community, I think it's a gift to recognize the stakeholders who need to be brought in, who are going to be the transformative changemakers for the community you want to cultivate. Not only to serve a specific underrepresented group, but also to facilitate a dialogue about the social injustices that created those issues in the first place, and to get decision-makers involved, or at least aware.

There are some really amazing things about Project Lia, and I felt very honored to accompany Elizabeth on that journey.

Advice to a young person

Interviewer: What advice would you give a young person who feels drawn to business but fears it can drain their soul?

Sasha Ongtengco: I'd first remind them of the context, that the society we live in now is in great need of great talent and great care. And the fact that you care, and are drawn to this, and feel this small little call, is not something to ignore. It's not something to be scared of because of all the other voices, and all the other things that might make pursuing business daunting.

It's only going to be soul-crushing if you choose to ignore your own personal values in pursuit of that career.

I'd want to tell any young person drawn to business: every single business owner took a risk, and didn't know what was going to happen on the other side of their yes to an idea. And still they went through with it.

So much of what you're going to learn, and what you get to build, and what you're going to encounter that you don't have control over: at every point there's an opportunity to express your values. And that means staying connected to the people, and to the different ways business is important to a society other than making money, other than the externally driven reasons people pursue business: I want power, I want to look a certain way, I want money.

The first work you have to do now is to understand what is important to you. And if somewhere in those priorities is the well-being of, and the opportunity to support, your neighbor, you can't go wrong. Every business has an opportunity to do that for someone. Every endeavor you pursue (but in particular a business structure) has a lot more opportunity to affect a lot of people, for good or for worse.

If you don't know what's important to you now, and you pursue things without a real grounding in it, you risk incongruence. And the moment you start doing something incongruent with what's important to you, it doesn't matter if it's a B Corp, it doesn't matter that it's doing all these great things; ultimately you're not going to feel in line with it.

So: recognizing that those choices have a ripple effect. And that any business has the opportunity to positively impact your community and your neighbor.

Part Fourteen: Last words

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to share?

Sasha Ongtengco: Going back to Pope Francis: it was a beautiful sandwich of a comment. All the things the Economy of Communion does that are so important for renewing society, for renewing humanity: keep doing that. And: it's not going to be enough. In fact, it really won't matter that you're doing all this, if we're not rewriting the system.

If the system continues to be one that produces poverty through its current practices (even if we're doing our part to stop one practice here, or shift one policy there, and sure, that helps some part of the ecosystem), at large, what Pope Francis was saying is that we need a complete overhaul in how we exist in this world and how we relate to our neighbor. Everything from detachment and ownership, to having

new models and frameworks that move us away from the old thinking that leads to the structures that create poverty.

I think a lot about that. And about the ways EoC business owners, and EoC enthusiasts, have owned the principles in their own ways, especially when the prevailing narrative about how to conduct yourself points elsewhere.

During Covid, there was so much going on about needing to wear masks, and then, when vaccines came, needing to get vaccinated, because that's how we protect our loved ones and our neighbors.

Even in those acute moments, there are rules and structures, and sometimes we need to push back, or go against the current, or bend the rules. I feel like there are so many experiences of choosing to push back, because you're orienting yourself to the greater good and the common good.

I think specifically of the organization I currently serve on the board of. They did so much to get the word out about vaccines, because of the local community of immigrants and non-English speakers, and the fear residents had about getting in trouble because they weren't documented. Things that are important even right now, but during Covid it was all of that plus a pandemic.

The city was requiring so many different things in order to get vaccinated. But at the end of the day, if we're in the neighborhood with the highest infection rate in the city, we've got to do something better.

It's in those moments that you lean into an EoC principle: what does care look like for my neighbor? And to what end am I going to act?

Those are scary moments. But the hundredfold: as we call it in the Focolare, you show love and God reciprocates that love a hundredfold. There could have been a lot of fear about needing to follow the process, but there was so much more orientation around: we just don't want the elderly people in this community to die. So people need to get vaccinated. How do we streamline this? How do we activate what this organization does so well, which is organizing? Everybody knows how to canvass. Everybody knows their neighbors. So let's just do that.

And how quickly we went from being the area of the city with the highest infection rate to having the highest vaccination rate, within months of vaccinations becoming available to the public. And then the city of Chicago altered its own policies, having seen how effective that was, and replicated it. And that got attention, in service of helping more communities.

The hundredfold we experienced there was affirmation that we did the right thing. But most importantly: look how much more tight-knit and connected this community feels, during such a scary time, because someone made a decision. And it wasn't me; it was supporting a decision. As a board we could have said, don't do that, it's going to put the entire reputation of the organization at risk.

But are we going to care about the reputation of the organization? Or are we going to live into the values of our organization, which are to ensure the health and sustainability of a community that's been so under-resourced?

How great it is when you can always orient to the relationship, and to people's well-being, and everything follows after that.

So EoC businesses get that. They have this extra sixth sense (and gosh, this is going to be so controversial to say this way, but I really feel it), a sixth sense of when to push against the rules and when to follow the rules. Which is okay. Because we have our own set of rules. Rules guided by these principles of care for our neighbor. It makes things so easy after that.

Something that has always stuck with me about the Focolare, as a community just trying to live the Gospel concretely, is the idea that living the Gospel concretely is actually *radical*.

If you're trying to be punk, and go against the current, and be so different from the status quo (especially as a young person, where there's a desire not to be put in a box as part of your generation, the way our parents and elders look at us), simply living the Gospel, and doing it with integrity, was the most punk rock thing I could do as a young adult at that time.

So sometimes I wonder what the language is that's going to attract people. How do we convey that this is radical in its own way? Because it's still very countercultural: the EoC, and the greater economic picture.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Sasha Ongtengco: Thank you for the opportunity.