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Book Review: The Wound and the Blessing: Economics Relationships and Happiness by Luigino Bruni (New City Press, 2012)

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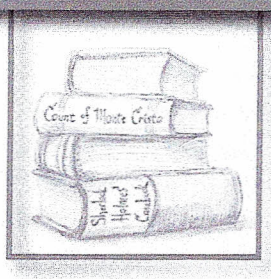
Reviewed by Brian McCall



The Wound and the Blessing: Economics, Relationships and Happiness

By Luigino Bruni

N. Michael Brennen (Translator)

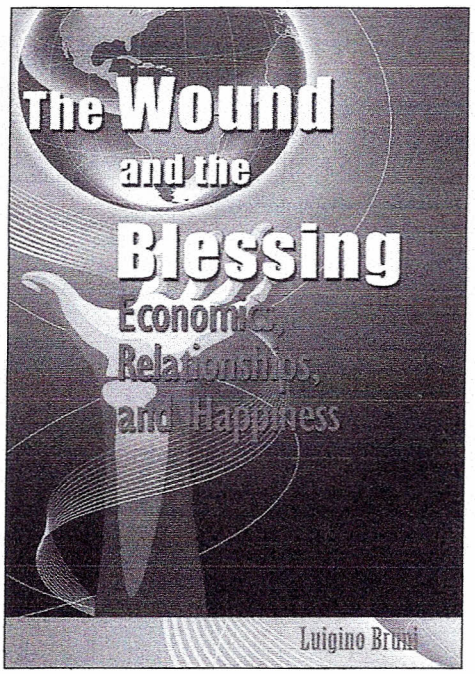
New City Press, 2012 (English Translation) and 2007 (Italian)

123 pages, $16.95

ISBN: 978-1-56548-428-3

A central premise of this timely commentary on post-modern market society is that authentic human relationships offer both good and bad consequences, a wound and a blessing. This dichotomy is an apt description of the book itself. On one hand Luigino Bruni presents numerous valid observations and critiques of the current market centered socio-economic system which are a real blessing to those who have ears to listen to him. On the other hand, Professor Bruni's suggested solutions to the market system's depersonalizing effects are themselves lacking in critical respects which could be a wound to the process of reform.

Supported by a variety of empirical research, Dr. Bruni successfully argues that post-modern society, particularly in the West, is faced with a dilemma. The increase in wealth and available consumer goods of recent centuries has not been accompanied by an increase in happiness. Specifically, the most prosperous among Western societies experience the weakest correlation between increasing wealth and greater happiness.[1] Dr. Bruni argues ironically that one of the causes of this opulent prosperity is itself the source of reduced happiness. He explains that pre-modern society mediated human relations through a hierarchical relationship to the divine. Individuals related to each other through their individual relationship with God. This hierarchical personal mediation was then reflected in economic and social relationships which were rooted in personal and often hierarchical relationships that comprised the feudal system. Dr. Bruni explains that modern society rejected mediation through the person of an absolute God and replaced it with mediation through impersonal contracts and the bureaucratic State. The substitution of the State or contracts for God was viewed as necessary to eliminate what were judged to be abusive hierarchical relationships[2] and to impersonalize human interaction. The substitution successfully permitted an expansion of market interactions but at the cost of depersonalizing and dehumanizing those interactions, avoiding the wounds that come from human relationships at the cost of forfeiting the blessings. Whereas the pre-modern world sought to form a *communitas*[3] among individuals through the mediation of communion with God, mediation through contract and the State aims at an *immunitas* to insulate participants from wounds. "Today . . . the humanism of the market economy, despite having produced many benefits for civilization, is largely responsible . . . for the bleak and lonely drift of market societies. This is truly a joyless human condition."[4] The impersonal market economy may give us more to consume but provides less opportunity to commune and experience the blessings that come from personal interactions.



Dr. Bruni locates the blessings of human relationship in the diversity of their type. Based on the Greek philosophical division of the concept of love into *eros, philia, and agape*, Dr. Bruni equates modern market relations to *eros*, the lowest and least enriching form of love. The motivation of an erotic relationship is driven by satisfaction of one's own particular desires which tends to degenerate into narcissism. Although Dr. Bruni admits that some business relationships in the market can lead to the intermediate form of love, *philia*, which is the love of friendship in which both seek their mutual good, the highest form of love, *agape*, which is a selfless form of love which puts the good of the other before one's own good, is relegated to an ever shrinking domain of private life, excluded from the market and public life. The *immunitas* provided by contractual mediation may prevent the wounding that is potentially present in gratuitous relationships of *agape* love and may have aided in unleashing a flourishing of the market economy that in turn has provided an increase in prosperity to Western market society in general, although not all in particular. Yet, it has been at the expense of *agape* and the central characteristic of *agape*, gratuitousness. The notion of *communitas* is rooted in gratuitousness or gift giving. This virtue of gift giving, of giving without demand or expectation in return, is a source of human joy. Dr. Bruni, like Greek philosophers before him, does not deny a place for *eros* and *philia* which have roles to play; he merely argues that modernity's reliance on them to the exclusion of *agape* and gratuitousness leads to the dichotomy of

prosperity without joy.

Although Dr. Bruni's work is a great blessing for our understanding of the dehumanizing effects of a society obsessed with impersonal market interactions, his welcomed research contains a wound. His compelling argument is undercut by a desire to reconcile the godless, impersonal *immunitas* with the *communitas* which is necessary for the highest human happiness, *eudemonia*. Although recognizing the dehumanizing mediation of the contract or the State, he believes that *agape*, joy, and gratuitousness can be restored without restoring their source, the mediation of God. Although he wishes to expand the role of *agape* and the gratuitousness it requires, he still seeks to append this higher form onto market and state mediated *eros* and *philia* without requiring all types of relationships to participate, albeit in different modes, within the *communitas* held together by its ultimate source in God. A *communitas* mediated through God is not *immunitas*; it involves risks of wounds. Yet, it provides the source of the ability to transform those wounds into blessings because they can be oriented to our ultimate end. The wounds can be offered in communion with the Five Wounds of He Who mediates. In addition, *communitas* mediated through God does provide some antidotes to the wounding from human interaction, not immunities, but restraints and cures. God mediates *communitas* through the Natural Law which is meant to rule and measure our relationships of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* so as to hold them within the bounds of the *bonum commune* of the *communitas*. Dr. Bruni rightly challenges us "to place *agape* again at the center of the life of the *polis* rather than leave it confined to just the private sphere".[5] Yet, as Pius XI explained "the peace of Christ can only be a peace of justice [a justice which must be] compounded almost equally of charity and a sincere desire for reconciliation".[6] Charity, which I believe Dr. Bruni would agree is another word for *agape*, must be accompanied by the justice of the Natural Law. Dr. Bruni seems to ignore the impoverishment of the rich penumbra of meanings associated with justice—natural, political, commutative, distributive, legal—which modernity has reduced essentially to an impoverished form of commutative justice (enforcement of contracts and criminal law). We depend on both the justice, in its fullest sense, and charity of God to rule and measure our relationships to produce peace and tranquility of order which comprise true joy in *communitas*.[7] A disordered charity—one either opposed to or which ignores justice—will not produce relationships constructive of a *communitas* of gratuitousness.

Dr. Bruni's failure to see the need for justice alongside *agape* may flow from a reliance on the "New Theology" promoted by Henri de Lubac. Although not explicitly cited often in the book, de Lubac's tendency to blur the distinctions between the supernatural and the natural permeates Bruni's text.[8] His analysis is completely devoid of considerations of the effects of original sin upon human relationships. Although charity calls us to transcend justice, it does not supersede it. As grace builds on nature, charity builds on justice. We are called to divine charity but we must strive toward it within a world still suffering the wounds of original sin, which, unchecked, will lead to injustice in all relationships be they rooted in *eros*, *philia*, or *agape*. Although throughout much of the book one might conclude that Dr. Bruni is offering a critique of the revolutionary restructuring of human relations by modern society at its deepest roots, by the end one can conclude that he is merely a disillusioned modern revolutionary. In a telling paragraph, he makes clear that he does not call into question at all the mantra of the revolutionary destruction of the *communitas* mediated and regulated by God—liberty, equality, fraternity. Rather, he merely requests a rebalancing of the emphasis among these revolutionary ideals, with fraternity requiring more emphasis.[9] Although Dr. Bruni's evidence and argument demonstrate the great depths of personal impoverishment of the modern State and market economy, in the end he shrinks from advocating a cure commensurate with so deep a wound. *Agape* which is a blessing is only possible in the Kingdom of Christ,[10] a *communitas* mediated and ruled by the justice and charity of Christ. While seeing the dehumanizing effects of relations mediated only through contracts, he shies away from a real personal mediation, the Person of Christ. As a result his suggestions for reform can at best only reduce some effects of the wound but cannot point to the blessing that restores all things.

Brian McCall is the Orpha and Maurice Merrill Professor in Law at the University of Oklahoma. Holding degrees from Yale (B.A.), University of London (M.A.), and University of Pennsylvania (J.D.), he focuses research on the application of Catholic Natural Law jurisprudence to business issues, including his recent book, The Church and the Usurers: Unprofitable Lending for the Modern Economy.

References

1. See, for example, Bruni, *The Wound and the Blessing*, pp. 75–82.

2. A historical perspective shared by Bruni who explicitly rejects the pre-modern world as a model for reform.

3. Bruni's argument connects *communitas* (with its etymological links with the Latin for gift, *munus*) with the concept of gratuitousness. *Communitas* thus relates to a relationship with gifts where *immunitas* is a relationship without gifts.

4. Bruni, p. xxi.

5. Ibid., p. 57.

6. Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano*, #34.

7. On the relationship between joy, peace and tranquility of order see St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II, q. 28 and 29.

8. The most obvious example is on p. 50 when Bruni seems to suggest that *agape* among humans may result in a third substantial relationship contrary to the Aristotelian position that it is an accident. Aquinas, as Bruni notes, distinguished the substantial relationship of the Trinity from human relationships.

9. Bruni, p. 111.

10. See Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano*.