I shall divide my talk into three parts:

1) in the introduction I shall sketch an overview of the economy worldwide today as seen by a person inspired by a spiritual charism. This is one of my working themes: economy and charisms.

2) I shall propose a reflection on the economy, lived prophetically from the biblical point of view, and explain what a prophetic economy means today. I shall point out how the charisms are a continuation of the prophetic view of the Old Testament today. Then I shall conclude by listing the challenges that appear to me to be most relevant for the world, as well as for the worlds you represent and in which you live.

In which context are we today in our frightening and splendid world? I shall deal with the frightening and splendid aspects together, because whoever wishes to foster hope and prophetic action in the world must expend effort to face what is frightening and splendid simultaneously. This means facing the wounds of our time, the fears, the sins and being able to recognize that the world is a marvelous place. However, should we lose sight of one of the two poles or should we become ingenuous people, living in a world where everything runs smoothly, forgetting the poor or becoming pessimists and cynics who do nothing but criticize their own time would be a worse mistake than the first. In fact, were a charism, a spiritual reality, to lose sight of the beauty and goodness of the world, it would become extinguished, saddened and fail to carry out its mission and its purpose.

The most obvious signs of our present economical context, the signs of the times, concern first and foremost the fact that in various parts of the world, certainly in the West, we are noticing a phase of withdrawal, of closure, after twenty years during which it was hoped that Globalization would have opened frontiers and favored the encounter of peoples. Recent events over the last few years, such as: Eastern Europe, now Brexit, North America, the debate in these days in France but also in Italy on the humanitarian crisis with the refugees, has highlighted the difficulty in receiving these immigrants. Alas they say that this period, in which everything seemed to point to a more united, more inclusive world, now shows rather clearly that people have not succeeded in creating a world without frontiers: walls are being built again, frontiers are re-appearing. It is a serious phenomenon because up to three or four years ago there was still a spirit of optimism that the peoples would mix. Therefore, we cannot ignore this fact. In fact today it does not seem that unity, communion, is growing in the world, because it seems to be closure, the difficulty of the inclusion of what is different, the wound of the other, to quote the title of one of my books. To be explicit: the ‘other’ is more of a wound than a blessing. Humanity experiences alternate phases, either ‘the other’ is considered to be Paradise, when coexistence is seen as a benefit; or ‘the other’ is seen as hellish, like Sartre said: “Hell is the others”. In this phase, ‘the other’, the diverse, once again constitutes a problem and we cannot but keep in mind this dimension in which there is a tendency in the world to close in on itself, rather than to open out, despite the fact that Globalization could lead/have led to openness.

Now, there is a second trend in our times: capitalism, the economy is becoming a religion. This refers to an old opinion that capitalism is a religion. It refers to Walter Benjamin’s statement in 1922: “Capitalism is a religion”, since it responds to the same questions and anxieties that religion responds to, and promises its own form of eternal life.

The real difference between God and Mammon, as mentioned in the Gospel, between spiritual life and money is that, money linked to power constitute two human realities that most resemble God. Capitalism is a great mechanism whose goal is not only the means; since the search for money as an end in itself is a con-
struction of a sacred religious type. The world following God’s death is not an atheistic world but an idolatrous world, a world that has filled itself with idols that have taken the place of religion. One of these idols is easily identifiable with capitalism. Gustav Jung commenting on Nietzsche, remarked: “Man without God cannot live, but now that we have slain God, in his place on the collective level, we have put various –isms: Fascism, Nazism, Communism, that have become alternatives to God and to religion, and on the individual level, the new God who has become the “ego”, takes the place of God.

Capitalism is certainly one of the new idols and this can be seen in the centrality of consumerism versus labour. In the twentieth century, the economy was an economy based on labour and at the centre of the economic system were the labourers, the factories, the fields, the offices. The twentieth century was still heir to a certain type of biblical humanism that viewed work as something complicated, tiring, but good. Thus, fatigue, creation, the homo faber, the ability to transform the earth was by putting labour at the centre of the economic system. In the twenty-first century labour/work was no longer put at the centre of the economy but consumerism. Consumerism is at the centre of an economy of pure pleasure, and it is the most typical idol. The difference between labour and consumerism is that consumerism is not tiring, consumerism is mere pleasure and it is the most typical idol. The idol is an experience of pure pleasure. The unending controversy of Jerimiah and Isaiah against Baal was due to the fact that it concerned worship from which the people wished to draw pleasure alone. An economy that puts pleasure in the place of work is very similar to the worship of someone who sought pleasure in the totem, in the fetish.

The huge crisis of labour in our time is not only due to the computer or to machines, but also to indifference and to the rejection of hard work and fatigue. In a world that only understands pleasure the value of labour is no longer understood since labour means fatigue. Therefore the ideal of our time is to be able to consume without working. The invasion of slot machines, of gambling, of scratch cards, of video poker, that are overtaking many of the Latin American countries, of Eastern Europe and Italy too, cannot be understood except through this ideology of unrestrained consumerism, of being able to consume without working! Once again the goddess of Fortune plays the protagonist wherever the great Western Humanism had stated that Virtue beats Fortune, and that it is Virtue that makes us happy.

There are two great spin-offs from capitalist idolatry: meritocracy, a great dogma of our time, and the culture of incentives. Why not meritocracy? Is letting the most meritorious govern a problem? Meritocracy engenders enthusiasm because it seems to be a form of justice, it may partly be so, but today what has meritocracy become? Today the large enterprises define merit, and today a large business is the place of merit. In the last century the model to look to, from which to learn, was that of politics, of democracy, linked to dialogue, debate, voting.

Today, the ideal sphere to which people look is the business world. The large enterprises and managers are what attract attention, are taken as a model, because they are exemplary and uphold the right values. The firm defines the qualities required of an employee to be meritorious quite simply: the deserving employee is whoever furthers the firm’s goals. In life there are many meritorious qualities, a person may be deserving for many reasons: the capacity to express sympathy, kindness, humility, concern. These are all good qualities but they are totally disregarded by the firm!

Let us take humility as an example: should a member of staff be humble in a firm, that person is considered a looser. Therefore, the first step a company takes is to say: “I shall establish the scale of merit”. Second: by using grades, it sets up a ranking system, a hierarchy. Thus, it can gage merit and takes the easiest method, based on figures, goals, performance. The third step: in civil life the other qualities are hardly ever measured. How much is a merciful person worth? Infinitely more! There is no yardstick for this. How much is a docile person worth? Infinitely more! Instead, economic merit is quantifiable and so it is taken as the optimal quality in life! Thus, it follows that a looser at work, is a looser everywhere else. The result of this process, which has led to a strong ideology that views the poor person as someone without
merit, as a culprit and to seeing poverty as a fault, is gaining ground once again. In the twentieth century the poor person was regarded as unfortunate, as one who had to contend with difficulties in life, with the social sphere, and so needed help. It always makes me think of Job, who throughout his Book kept repeating: “I am alone, unfortunate, but blameless”. One may be poor but not at fault.

When I think of religious and charismatic works (in line with St Paul: i.e. the spiritual gifts the Spirit gives to members of the community for the benefit of all), the biblical prophets immediately come to mind: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Tobias, Amos, Ezekiel, but Hosea and Jonah too…. One must look to these great prophetic figures of the Old Testament, if one wishes to understand the relationship between the economy of charisms and religious works. The first point to be learned from the prophets is that, should the life and the worship of the community fail to put the poor, widows, orphans, the marginalized at its centre, it is instantly idolatrous worship.

This theme is certainly treated in Isaias and Jerimiah as well as in Jesus’ words. Therefore, this does not mean to say that although worship is necessary, it is better and more important to attend to the poor. No! What is said to us: is that if you forget/leave aside the poor and go to the Temple, and pray to Yahweh there, you are praying to an idol. The presence of the poor is what tells us that that prayer of yours is not addressed to idols but to God. – Therefore a Community, a people who goes to mass often, as Isaias states in the First Chapter, who prays a lot, has no guarantee that it is speaking to God but on the contrary to itself and to idols. The condition for worship to be authentic is that the poor be put at the centre of the community. This is the strong message of the prophets. It is therefore a very serious matter indeed! When a community is not only missionary but wishes to model itself on the Christian biblical message but forgets the poor, although it may have built a hospital fifty years earlier for the poor, enlarged this hospital in time, embellished it, attracted good doctors, and become ever more luxurious so that only the rich go there, (this is called mission shift, that is, it starts as one thing and then becomes another with time), well, Isaias says, the presence of the Spirit is no longer there. This means that a relationship of friendship, brotherhood, with the poor people is the precondition for not being idolaters.

I have always been impressed by what Francis of Assisi said in his Testamentum, which is a sort of autobiography. “I understood that I had been converted when I went to Assisi to the Rivo Torto, the place where I embraced and kissed a leper, because, formerly I loathed lepers, but conversion led me to embrace and kiss them”. While, the State, Government, Municipality, may work as NGOs and as cooperatives without touching the poor, since qualified people treat them; a charism does not take care of any form of poverty without embracing and kissing the leper. The typical cure, the typical charism of love for the poor is an embrace, a kiss, contamination with poverty, taking them home, not acting as an NGO so as not to see them anymore. This is the culture of immunity: I contribute to foundations to take care of the poor so as not to touch them, not see them; let someone else deal with them.

The second dimension that we learn from the Prophets is that they spoke with words, but even more with gestures. Isaiah for example went around Jerusalem in the nude for three years, to alert people to the fact that they would become nude exiles, if they did not convert. Instead, Jeremiah went about with a yoke on his shoulders, meaning that the people would be enslaved. These actions are as strong as words. A mission, a school, a hospital are a prophetic gesture. When one of our works, unlike the actions of the prophets, no longer has meaning, one needs to understand whether the environment has changed or whether it is simply because the charitable work has become mute/meaningless, is no longer expressive. If some of our signs now mean nothing, they are useless. Thus, the meaning a charismatic economic work is a sign. It speaks.

A third challenge that charismatic works have to face concerns the relationship between supply and demand. A charismatic, economic work is active if it is able to adapt its historical responses in order to be faithful to the original charismatic need. Let us take Don Bosco as an example. He opened schools because he had a question in mind, a problem. He wanted to ena-
ble the youth of Turin to flourish; enable them
to live their youth to the full. Therefore to an-
swer this need he did several things: he opened
oratories, schools. But say, after 150 years if
one wishes to be liege to the original charis-
matic need one must tackle it differently, update
one’s response, because if one gets too used to
one’s initial response, the original demand gets
forgotten. A charism dies if it forgets the origi-
nal situation of need by growing too fond of its
initial response. A charism is alive if it adapts
its response to answer the new demands faith-
fully.

I now portray my article published some time
ago on Avvenire, titled “The Counter melody of
the Prophets”

The natural condition of the prophet is the
failure. The false prophets are the ones to be
heard and followed, to respond fully to the ex-
etections of their time. Being followed,
achieving fame and honours has always been a
sure sign of false prophecy - and continues to be
so. True prophets, however, are always out of
time, uncomfortable, obnoxious, annoying.

They ask for and scream about the defence of
the poor, the oppressed, the widows and the or-
phans, they struggle against idolatry; and while
they do so they still live in a society where the
poor are downtrodden and exploited and the
idols are multiplying. In response to their com-
plaint they encounter persecution, stoning and
are often jailed and killed. Knowing and re-
 tracing the history of the prophets of yesterday
and today is a great lesson on the dynamics of
power, and therefore on the nature of all ide-
o logies which, in their essence, are instruments
produced by the ruling class in order to in-
crease power and privileges.

True prophets do not like their condition of a
prophet. They do not choose it, and if they could
they would do something else. But - and here is
the essence of this specific vocation - they can-
not choose. They cannot escape, even if they try.
The prophets are neither better nor worse than
all the others: they are simply different. Some
have even thought, and still think, that the
prophets are useless if not harmful, because
their words are vanitas that does not transform
the world. In the end, all they do is deceive the
poor and the marginalized promising a salva-
tion that never comes. Some, many think so. But
they are wrong. All the prophets can know is the
misunderstanding on the part of the people, due
to their “singing” a counter melody. There is
also the deliberate and intentional persecution
by those who understand them very well, and so
fight them. The Pharaohs and Herod recognize
and know the prophets, and that's why they fear
them more than anything else. But there is
someone who believes and loves the prophets.
They are the poor, the oppressed, the humble,
those pushed to the margins, the lepers. And not
just because they see the hope of redemption
from their unjust condition in a prophet, but be-
cause they are in the anthropological and spir-
tual conditions to understand their voice. The
Kingdom of Heaven is just for the “poor” and
those “persecuted for righteousness' sake” be-
cause in their condition they can see, under-
stand and desire it.

The powerful, however, are very fond of the
false prophets, to the point of worshipping them.
They are their flatterers and devotees, because
false prophecy confuses the collective con-
sciousness and legitimates the positions of
power. Yesterday and today, the market
abounds with intellectuals, writers, sometimes
religious people that generate theories and ide-
o logies for the sole purpose of justifying the
power of those who support them and feed them.
When it is too expensive or inconvenient to
eliminate the prophets directly, the powerful do
so indirectly, by hiring false prophets. They be-
have like the plants that defend themselves from
the attacks of some insects by generating odours
and other substances to attract the predatory in-
ssects of those threatening them. Therefore, the
main virtue of those performing some prophetic
function is resilience and stamina to persevere
in the condition of frustration over their words
pronounced because of their vocation not being
listened to. Especially when times passes slowly,
persecutions have no respite, and the prophetic
word should continue to be pronounced. But
why does the prophet go on saying his words if
he cannot see the end of injustice or the advent
of a new kingdom of the poor? Certainly not be-
cause he hopes to convert the powerful. He
knows very well - or learns it as he becomes an

1 Luigino Bruni, Il controcan to dei profeti, published on
Av venire, 19/06/2016
adult - that the pharaohs are inconvertible. He
doesn't even hope for revolutions of the poor,
because he knows that once they become pow-
erful, the poor of today will behave exactly like
those who oppressed them yesterday. Neither
are they the men and women of the reform of
small steps, seeking a gradual improvement on
the level of what's possible, here and now. This
reformist vision, which is just as important and
cost-essential, is that of the (good) institutions,
not of the prophets. What they announce is too
different from the status quo, and no marginal
improvement could adequately respond to their
prophecy. They are eternally dissatisfied. Be-
cause what they announce is a reign that's too
righteous, a God who is too close, man who is
too different. But prophecy is not to be confused
with utopia, because unlike the utopian word
(which is often produced to distract us from that
of the prophets), the prophetic statement is al-
ways concrete. It calls people by their name; it
takes specific actions and makes visible gestures
using the “jars” and the “yokes” of all. It is an
“already” that indicates a “not yet”. For this
reason the word of the prophets is always be-
trayed the promised land is never reached, and
their existence is marked by a constant and
growing feeling of certainty of failure and suf-
f ering.

To truly understand that happiness is not the
most important thing in life, we must get to
know the prophets. A prophet is not happy, simply because happiness does not interest him.
He would not understand or know how to an-
swer the question: “Are you happy?” He only
wants to remain a “voice crying in the wilder-
ness”, without waiting or even hoping to see the
desert flourished. True prophets always cry in
the desert, and the much heat and thirst cannot
silence their voices. And when they see some
signs of spring, they wonder whether those
shoots are anything but a sign that their voice
has lost truth and prophecy. So why does the
prophet continue to talk, to cry, to lose his
health, well-being and not infrequently even his
life? Simply because he cannot help to do it. He
is inhabited by a mystery that he does not pos-
sess, does not know, and one that does not obey
him. But if he does not give voice to that voice,
he will really die. This is the sad and wonderful
destiny of the prophets. The wonderful story of
Jonah, the radical simplicity of his unique and
paradoxical literary genre is among the most
revealing of the essence of this dimension of the
prophetic vocation (the dimensions of the pro-
phetic vocation are many, and it is not easy to
break them down to units). Jonah, as often hap-
pens to the prophets (Moses, Jeremiah, Elijah ...
...), does not respond to the call immediately.
When Jonah receives the first call to prophesise
in Nineveh, he escapes and embarks on a ship
going in the opposite direction. After being mi-
raculously saved from the wreck (thanks to the
fish), he answers the second call of YHWH and
brings his message to the big city: “Yet forty
days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3,4).
And, as an exceptional event, the city of Nineveh
and its king repent, and convert fully and imme-
diately. Having observed this conversion, God
changes his mind and does not destroy Nineveh,
acting differently from what he had said through
Jonah. No prophet is master of the word that he
has to announce due to his call. He knows that
God cannot be caged either by the prophecy
that He himself puts on the lips of the prophets.

The most mysterious aspect of the story of Jo-
nah is his disappointment and anger about
God’s repentance: “But it displeased Jonah ex-
ceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to
the Lord and said, «O Lord, is not this what I
said when I was yet in my country? That is why
I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that
you are a gracious God and merci-
ful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and re-
 lentent from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord,
please take my life from me, for it is better for
me to die than to live.»” (4,1-3) This pain and
indignation of Jonah can tell us something very
important. Prophets are the great lovers of the
word. Because of this, they are its custodians.
Like women and mothers are experts and
guardians of the body, so are prophets of the
word. They live only for this, they cannot do an-
other more. But they are not only lovers and
guardians of the words they say: they are also
their great defenders. Against men, but, says
Jonah, they are defenders of the word even
against YHWH. Since they are not its masters,
they can be - and are - its protectors. More of
an artist who keeps his work, the first task of the
prophet is to protect the word, even if its sender
change their mind. If he didn’t do so, the word
he is announcing would soon get worn out and empty. The prophets can defend the word of God from God himself. The word is always a very serious matter: prophets have the task to remind everyone, even God of this, knowing that they will not be heard. If the prophets did not love the word they are announcing more than themselves, they would be false prophets, journeymen of words that they only sell and do not serve. The paradox of the end of the story of Jonah opens up to us only if we take prophecy radically seriously and don’t transform it into a merely ethical or religious matter. Faithfulness to the word of God is more radical for the prophet than obedience to God himself. It is in this paradoxical obedience-faithfulness that the true prophet is truly faithful.

Whoever has had a task in life, while unwinding it responsibly, can sense this mysterious and paradoxical dimension of every vocation. Their most valuable and crucial moments were those when they had to protect that task and that work precisely against those who had entrusted it to them. To keep believing even when the one who had "called" them no longer spoke, or had changed his mind. It is on this tremendous and wonderful faithfulness that you play a lot of the truth of an entire existence. It is also because of this strange faithfulness that it is not easy to understand the prophets. But it is not impossible. We must at least try. And so, after having commented on Genesis, Exodus, Job, and Ecclesiastes during the recent years, next Sunday we will begin to get to know the first writer prophet, perhaps the greatest of all: Isaiah. A new journey will begin that's unpredictable now, but certainly fantastic. Together.

So I wanted to share this personal experience with you on the paradoxical aspect of prophecy, but which seems to me interesting for the economic life and responsibility of each one.