

Understanding Charism



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Frequently, the word “charism” is used in reference to the spirit or gifts of a particular religious institute. The word does not appear in the Code of Canon Law or in the spell-check mechanism of computer dictionaries. Instead, we find the words “charismas,” “chrism” or “czarism.” Webster’s dictionary defines charism as “an extraordinary power given a Christian by the Holy Spirit for the good of the church.”¹ Where do we get our direction for understanding the term properly in the ecclesial sphere of religious institutes and their works?

A recent Vatican document *Starting Afresh From Christ*² aptly gives meaning to the word “charism” by summarizing concepts from the previous church documents *Mutuae Relationes*, 11 and *Vita Consecrata*, 37:

Consecrated life, like all forms of Christian life, is by its nature dynamic, and all who are called by the Spirit to embrace it must constantly renew themselves in growing toward that perfect stature of the body of Christ. It came into being through the creative prompting of the Spirit who moved founders and foundresses along the Gospel path, giving rise to an admirable variety of charisms ... Their experience of the Spirit must not only be preserved by those who follow them but must also be deepened and developed ... instilling the courage of interdependence and inventiveness needed to respond to the signs of the times.

Earlier, *Evangelica Testificatio*³ stated that a charism arises not from an impulse of flesh and blood or one derived from a mentality, which conforms itself to the modern world, but is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the church. The following seven indications make it possible to form criteria by which a charism can be recognized:

- A dynamic prompting and experience of the Spirit
- Fidelity in witnessing to some aspect of the Trinitarian Mystery
- The evangelical intentions of the founders

- The example of the founder’s holiness or the pattern of God’s wisdom and power exemplified in human experience

- A constant renewal and desire to be conformed to Christ
- Ecclesial awareness in serving the mission, responding with genuine creativity
- Openness to discernment and confirmation by the church

Christifideles Laici provides a parallel conceptual framework for authenticity of charism.⁴ It includes the primacy given to the call of every Christian to holiness, the responsibility of professing the Catholic faith, the witness to a strong and authentic communion in relationship to the pope, conformity to and participation in the church’s apostolic goals, and a commitment to a presence in human society.

From time to time, new groups form with an intent to carry out a mission and apply to bishops for recognition or a decree of approval. A diocesan bishop looking at a new foundation should be considering some or all of the following:

- A willing action to build up the body of Christ
- Having a purpose to do something together that an individual cannot do alone
- Doctrinal integrity in its full content and as currently taught
- Financial responsibility and viability

The bishops of France, in their circular letter on associations, give four criteria for the evaluation of new charisms:

- They are not the fruit of personal efforts or analyses, but are received in faith
- They are given for the common good
- They are subject to renewal under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- They are in harmony with other charisms given for the entire community⁵

Charism can be understood as the original inspiration of the founders embodying the grace of unity. St. Francis, for example, was always

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watchful to preserve among his followers the bond of unity.⁶ Theologian Bernard Lee, SM, suggests that charism is about “the deep story” of community, which defines a group identity. It is viewed as a relational event that has a specific and social context. As such, a charism is not transmitted to a later historical context. Fr. Lee said in order to bring a charism into a future period of history, persons must identify with the “deep story” as they respond to a new social context with the essential spirit of the charism.⁷

The distinction between charism and mission or ministry is crucial. A ministry may be an expression of the charism, but is not the charism itself. Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* suggested that, rather than speaking of the “founder’s charism” as in *Evangelica Testificatio*, it is more accurate to speak of the “founding charism,” because as long as the institute is alive, it is in a state of “founding.”⁸ This concept helps to move beyond the notion of a stable charism as identified with a specific ministry and allows ministries to evolve with the needs of the time.

In establishing a new public juridic person for the sponsorship of health care, the new entity builds its identity or bond of unity upon the founding spirit of the institute(s) that now inspire the contemporary expression. It informs or influences the way the ministry is performed.

In the case of my institute, we speak of “adoration” or “presence” as a way in which we give character or a unique quality to the work of health care, education, or spiritual development. Adoration of the exposed Blessed Sacrament is a prayer form that provides symbolic meaning to the way we are present in ministry outside and beyond the adoration chapel. Similarly, the Bon Secours Health System headquartered in Mar-

riottsville, Md., speaks of a charism of compassion, healing and liberation. The Sisters of Mercy refer to their charism of mercy. Other institutes claim reconciliation or peacemaking as charismatic indicators of authenticity in their apostolates.

Countless references are available in this journal and in *Catholic Health World* that speak of “charism in action,” [the ministry] as “integral part of the charism,” ministries “embracing the charism,” “lending cultures and charisms” and sponsorship as “guardian of the charism.” While Vatican documents use the term sparingly, religious institutes and their lay partners have embraced it and have vigorously taken up the call to fidelity. ■



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NOTES

1. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, July 2003).
2. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (Rome: The Vatican, May 19, 2002), 20. Also available online at www.vatican.va.
3. Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio* (Rome: The Vatican, June 29, 1971), 11. Also available online at www.vatican.va.
4. John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici* (Rome: The Vatican, December 30, 1988), 30. Also available online at www.vatican.va.
5. Conférence Des Évêques de France, “L’apostolat des laïcs. La libre association des fidèles en vue de l’apostolat,” *La Documentation Catholique* 96 (1999): 1053-1060.
6. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman and William J. Short, *Francis of Assisi: The Saint: Early Documents*, vol. 1 (New York: New City Press, 1999), 223.
7. Bernard Lee, “A Socio-Historical Theology of Charism,” *Review for Religious* 48 (January-February 1989): 124-135. Also see Bernard Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings* (New London, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), 16-35.
8. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (Rome: The Vatican, March 25, 1996), 63. Also available online at www.vatican.va.