

Formation Opens Us to Gifts of the Spirit

By Fr. CHARLES E. BOUCHARD, OP, S.T.D.

When they had crossed over, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask for whatever I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha answered, "May I receive a double portion of your spirit." "You have asked something that is not easy," he replied. "Still, if you see me taken up from you, your wish will be granted; otherwise not." As they walked on conversing, a flaming chariot and flaming horses came between them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind."

2 Kings 2:9-11

The story of Elijah's ascent in a fiery chariot is one of the most dramatic scenes in all of the Hebrew Scriptures. Having completed his ministry on earth, Elijah is swept away. His mantle, which symbolizes both authority and the gift of prophecy, falls on Elisha's shoulders, giving us an image for passing on authority that remains embedded in our imagination to this day.

This story illustrates two of the essential elements of ministry: call and anointing. We accept a call to minister and the burden of a mission. But we also receive the guarantee of anointing by the Spirit that enables us to accept this responsibility. The Elijah story is dramatic but by no means unique. The succession of charisms it represents happens over and over again in the pages of Scripture and the life of the church as one generation completes its work and passes the mantle on to the next.

We see it at Pentecost, when the Spirit descends powerfully on the disciples; in the great commissioning when Jesus sends the disciples out and assures them of his presence until the end of time. And we see it in the emergence of monastic orders in the 4th century, the mendicant orders in the 13th century and apostolic religious communities in the 17th century. We see it again today as the Spirit calls a

new generation of lay women and men to lead our health care ministries.

The fact of these transitions and the continuing vitality of the church are proof that the Spirit is abundant, powerful and adaptable. It will continue to make itself available to us in many times, places and cultures. But as Elijah warns when Elisha asks for a double portion, it is also a "hard thing." Apart from a few saintly exceptions, most of us are not fully prepared to accept the gifts of the Spirit and the demands they make of us.

That is why *formation* is an essential complement to call and anointing. Formation opens us to this Spirit and empowers us to accept it. Formation helps build the communities that sustain and nurture the Spirit. In the many years I spent in leadership of Aquinas Institute, a theological school, I experienced many different kinds of formation. Some, like priesthood forma-

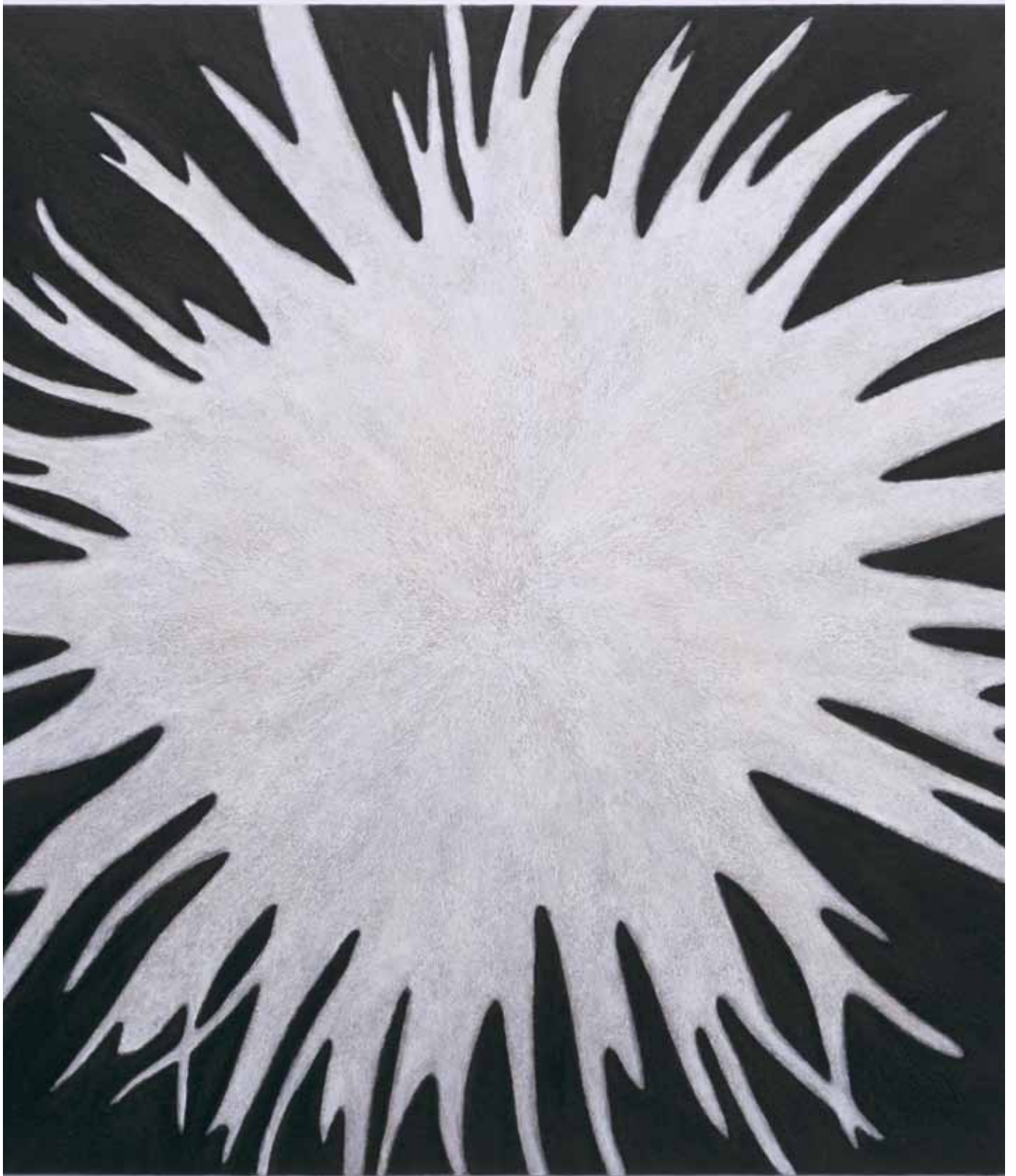
tion, was familiar and traditional. We knew a lot about how to form priests. Others, like formation of lay ecclesial ministers, lay preachers or lay mission leaders in health care, were new and daunting.

More recently, my role as vice-president for theological education at Ascension Health involved formation of board members. This was an even bigger challenge because, until recently, board members dealt mostly with tangible matters such as finance, strategy and quality. They did not deal with ministry and ecclesial matters, which were left largely in the hands of religious and clerical sponsors.

Today, board members and other leaders in Catholic health care must learn new skills and acquire new virtues appropriate to *ministry* governance. It requires the traditional governance skills, plus spiritual maturity, theological fluency and ecclesial savvy.

This moment is new, perhaps unprecedented. Never have we as a church attempted to form such a large number of leaders for such a vast institutional ministry in so short a time. The following pages are in some ways a progress report, in others, a look ahead. They show clearly that the Spirit is at work and that our efforts are already bearing fruit. May God give us Elisha's courage so that we do not shrink from the hard work ahead.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, September-October 2011
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