





# Harnessing Our Power Through Charism

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**H**e's 50 years old. It's the 1960s. A white Catholic priest is sent as pastor to St. John-St. Hugh's Church in Roxbury, a small Black Catholic community in Boston's inner city. He remembers well the hot summer day when his Baptist neighbors across the street invited him to their porch for a tall glass of cold lemonade.

Smiling in the retelling of the story years later, the priest, Fr. John Philbin, says, "I knew that with that invitation, I was no longer an outsider, but had been now accepted by my neighbors."

Rocking back and forth in the porch chairs during the leisurely conversation that day, his neighbor suddenly turned to Fr. John and said, "You know, I know where you get your power from."

Smiling, curious and somewhat amused, the priest replied, "You do?"

"Yes," his neighbor said, pointing to the rectory across the street and the chapel's bay windows. "From that box over there."

His neighbor explained that he could see Fr. John sitting in the chapel every morning with his eyes closed, saying his prayers before he went out to do his day's work.

The box, the "powerhouse," was the tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. In the Catholic tradition, we believe that the real presence of Christ is in the consecrated hosts. Not just symbolically, but Christ truly present sacramentally in his body and blood.

## CHARISM AS SOURCE AND POWER

"I know where you get your power from."

Would the people coming into our ministry

settings ever venture such a statement?

Even more telling, have we ever in the Catholic health ministry asked ourselves the question: Do we know where we get our power from?

**Our powerhouse is the "real presence" of the Holy Spirit and a unique gift to a founder of a ministry that meets a need in specific times and circumstances that attracts others.**

Let's be clear. We do not get this from our mission, values or vision. Those are all after the fact. Those statements are our reflection upon, discernment about, and articulation of an experience with the Divine power. A Divine power initiates a particular ministry and mission from a time past, sustains both in the present, and promises that ministry and mission in a future, yet unknown, time.

Our "box" is instead the "charism." Our powerhouse is the "real presence" of the Holy Spirit and a unique gift to a founder of a ministry that meets a need in specific times and circumstances that attracts others.

And this presence still attracts others — and continues to do so in specific times and circumstances.

Charism, in the biblical and ecclesial tradition, is not generic. Charism is unique and specific to a story. No more than the Christ, the promised Anointed One of Israel, was generic, but rather born — and given the name Jesus in historical and narrative accounts — in a Jewish family in Palestine and in a specific time and circumstances.

This is an important point because presently, from Rome to some of our ministries here in the U.S., there are conversations about the possible emergence of a new charism generalized as “Catholic health care.” This use of the notion of charism is not supported by the tradition.

All our ministries share in common this healing ministry of Jesus Christ. Charism, however, is the coming of the promised Spirit, the impetus or power to establish these healing ministries of Jesus Christ with specificity, to the time and circumstances, and with particularity, to a spirituality emerging from a founder’s story and faith.

For the Sisters of the Redeemer, for example, this healing power of Jesus is viewed from, and experienced in, the cross. Essentially, the suffering before us in our ministries is united with the suffering of Christ, and the promise of “redemption,” something of worth is going to come out of this suffering, that the founder saw as bringing “life in fullness.”

From Paul’s letter to the Corinthians through to, and culminating with the rediscovery and renewal of charisms at, and following, the Second Vatican Council, these gifts are the real presence of the Spirit initiating, sustaining and promising our ministry and mission. Different perhaps; changed and changing, yes; but as Pope St. John Paul II asserts, even “in this newness, however, the Spirit does not contradict him[her]self.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **CHARISM AS COMMUNITY SENT ON MISSION**

At the end of Vatican II, the bishops writing in *Perfectae Caritatis* recognized the “wonderful variety of religious communities” and the way the gifts “differ according to the grace which is allotted to them.”<sup>2,3</sup> This diversity of gifts is represented in all the ways the Spirit initiates, sustains and promises a ministry and mission that meets the needs of God’s people, and in our case — in Catholic health care — those who are sick, suffering and dying.

Unique and particular to each institution’s founding and emerging story, charism, a particular gift, is of the one Spirit, and is the power and source of our ministry and mission. Charism is the real presence of the Spirit and the gift — then, now and always.

A charism is invisible, real, alive, active, moving and mysterious. It creates the ministry and discovers and discerns its mission.

Not only in our history, but now, every day, in every way, in every place, where we proclaim and live this ministry as a community sent by the Spirit in mission to the world, charism is present.

The irony in this is that we may have inadvertently undermined the power of charism present in our daily operations by creating our legacy walls and celebrating annually our founder’s feasts memorialized in time past. Charism is not past or passive.

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Charism is invisible. Like the wind, it “blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8) We experience the charism even as we struggle to articulate this gift we cannot actually see, but true to the Gospel metaphor, we feel it like the wind.

Charism is real, active and moving. Like the Pentecostal experience of that first outpouring of the Spirit, “suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind,” and then there “appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them.” (Acts 2:2-3)

This power felt from above was real, and experienced by individuals and the community. It is further described as active power, as they were “all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues.” This power was then recounted as moving out to others, “devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem,” for “at this sound, they gathered in a large crowd.” (Acts 2:4-6)



And finally, charism is mysterious. We cannot define it, but we can and must describe it.

The founders themselves did not define the ministry. They did not have a strategic plan and map for what would become their ministry and mission. It was first “an experience of the Spirit” that needed time “to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.”<sup>4</sup>

Even today, hundreds of years later, some of our present-day leaders of these founding religious communities still work to describe anew the “genuine originality”<sup>5</sup> of their charism, while at the same time “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation.”<sup>6</sup>

Mystery is the nature of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, we cannot define either the Divine or the Divine’s actions in a word-limited sentence. Yet, we can and must describe with human words as best we can while approaching this mystery, and seek to uncover its meaning anew.

To notice, understand and appreciate charism makes more conscious the source of the ministry and the movement in mission. The sharper the awareness, the better the understanding; and the deeper the appreciation, the more it prepares each of us to recognize that this is ultimately God’s work through us. It is God calling us in vocation to this work.

**This invisible power is in our care delivery places, in our hallways and parking lots, as well as in our chapels and spiritual practices, everywhere, in every way, every day.**

If charism is in fact that which distinguishes us from all other health care, nonprofit and for-profit alike, then it seems the focus on charism is critical for maintaining, enriching and renewing our Catholic identity. We need to consciously and actively go back to the source of our power. This charism is what moves us in our good works through a ministry community in a mission to the world.

We need to point back to God through Jesus’ revelation to us of a powerful love, one that is

brought forth by a creative and free Spirit. This Spirit brings unity in diversity and creates order out of chaos. These fruits of the charism are core to who we are (ministry) and what we do (mission) in the practical day-to-day.

#### CHARISM AS DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICALITY

The challenge is for our present-day ministry leaders and frontline staff to notice, understand and appreciate that there “is” an invisible power that moves above, underneath, inside and through the ministry community, and then outside as mission into the world.

This invisible power moves in every aspect of our ministry community, whether in direct care of patients and residents, or institutional structures such as our boards in deliberation, or strategies decided and acted upon at our management meetings. This invisible power is in our care delivery places, in our hallways and parking lots, as well as in our chapels and spiritual practices, everywhere, in every way, every day.

At Redeemer Health in Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania, we have been on a two-year initiative to help all our ministry partners become more aware of the charism in the ordinary, better understand the charism as a real presence in the now, and more deeply appreciate and watch for the charism in the day-to-day work of ministry and mission.

Redeemer Health provides health care in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, including an acute care hospital, home health and hospice services, three skilled nursing facilities, personal care, a retirement community, low-income housing, an independent living community, a transitional housing program for homeless families, and multiple homes for intellectually and developmentally disabled adults.

Inspired by, and in response to, the 2019 general chapter of international congregation of the Sisters of the Redeemer — headquartered in Würzburg, Germany — we prioritized this formation initiative on charism. Their resolution mandated “the continued deepening and educating of Sisters and our partners in mission in Redeemer Charism and Spirituality.”<sup>7</sup>

With the support of the Redeemer leadership, a Redeemer charism and spirituality work group was formed in the fall of 2020 in order to oversee — even guarantee — the integration of charism

and spirituality in all we do. Assuring maximum buy-in from leadership, our CEO recommended the oversight group consist of two sisters, two sponsor board members, two board of trustee members and two executive leaders (the CEO and mission leader).

Through the group's work, a program called "Charism Animators of Redeeming Love" has emerged, scheduled to begin in early 2023. It is a one-year program that will consist of 25 participants and begin with an initial retreat, gatherings every other month and a closing integrative retreat. The program's impact will be measured through qualitative preprogram and postprogram surveys on charism.

The program's two retreats are core to its effectiveness, as strengthening awareness of the invisible power of charism is a spiritual exercise that needs time and space. Quieting the outside noise allows people to become more sensitive to the inner movements and to the subtle, mysterious ways that we can become more aware of the Divine in and around us, especially in our day-to-day work in ministry.

Unlike other ministry formation programs, the attempt here is more akin to group spiritual direction, not so much the individual's path, but the organization's spiritual journey.

We hope that by heightening spiritual skills such as observation, listening, discernment and deliberation that our leaders will develop a curiosity, and take those skills back into their day-to-day work: to "sense" the invisible, name the experience and to help others appreciate this is the charism at work.

As these cohorts grow in number, we envision making these opportunities available to frontline staff through 15-minute reflection modules developed to increase this awareness, understanding and appreciation through the entire organization and the communities we serve.

## CONCLUSION

As invisible and mysterious as our charisms may be, people who encounter us — staff, patients and residents — have an almost intuitive sense of this power and source in charism. How often do we hear people in our institutions say, "There is something different about coming here," or, "I

have worked at many facilities, but this one just has a feeling that is unlike the others in which I have worked."

Wouldn't it be something to move from intuitive ambiguity of this "difference" to a more conscious and concrete affirmation of who and what it is that is moving through our ministry and mission everywhere, every day and in every way?

One of our sisters recently shared a powerful story that summarizes the power of charism.

During a lunch she had with a 95-year-old resident in assisted living — a long-time benefactor and friend of the ministry — her friend tearfully said to the sister, "I don't know what it is with your people, but it seems they all have 'it.'" She went on to ask, "Do they come in with 'it'? Or do they absorb 'it' here? For me, it's really profound."

We know the 'it' is our invisible, real, alive, active, moving and mysterious charism at work as it was in past times, is now, and always will be.

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## NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, section 12, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html).
2. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, section 1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html).
3. Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, section 8.
4. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, "Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church," section 11, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsrlife\\_doc\\_14051978\\_mutuae-relationes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relationes_en.html).
5. Sacred Congregation, "Directives for the Mutual Relations," section 12.
6. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, section 4, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).
7. "Sisters of the Redeemer General Chapter Resolutions 2019," Sisters of the Redeemer.

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