



Laser Focus on Charism For Ministry to Thrive

FR. JOSEPH J. DRISCOLL, DMin

The political wisdom then, and even now nearly 30 years later, is that then-candidate Bill Clinton won the presidency with his spot-on, shock-succinct message: “It’s the economy, stupid!” Minus the insult, but with the same urgency for the very survival of our Catholic health care ministry, I will paraphrase his words and argue the laser beam focus for us: “It’s the charism!”

Not the mission. Every organization has a mission. Not the values. Every organization has values. Not the vision. Every organization has a vision.

But only a ministry has a charism. We all talk about mission, values and vision, but we need to start talking about, and consciously living out of, this power of charism. Mission flows from ministry which in turn flows from a charism.

Charism is the source. Charism is what makes us distinctive as a ministry.

DEFINING CHARISM

Charism as it has developed in the history of the church is fourfold: it is

- the vivifying presence and gift of the Holy Spirit
 - given to a founder of a ministry
 - to meet a specific need in time and circumstances
 - that attracts others.

This movement of the Spirit is unique and specific to the story. A community’s charism is not discerned immediately, but only upon reflection in the telling and retelling of the originating story. A charism is not a definition of a carefully constructed plan, but a description of a spontaneously faith-uncovered mystery. Words can never

exhaust this mystery, but are necessary to remember and refresh this act of God in history, then and now, in a charism-infused ministry.

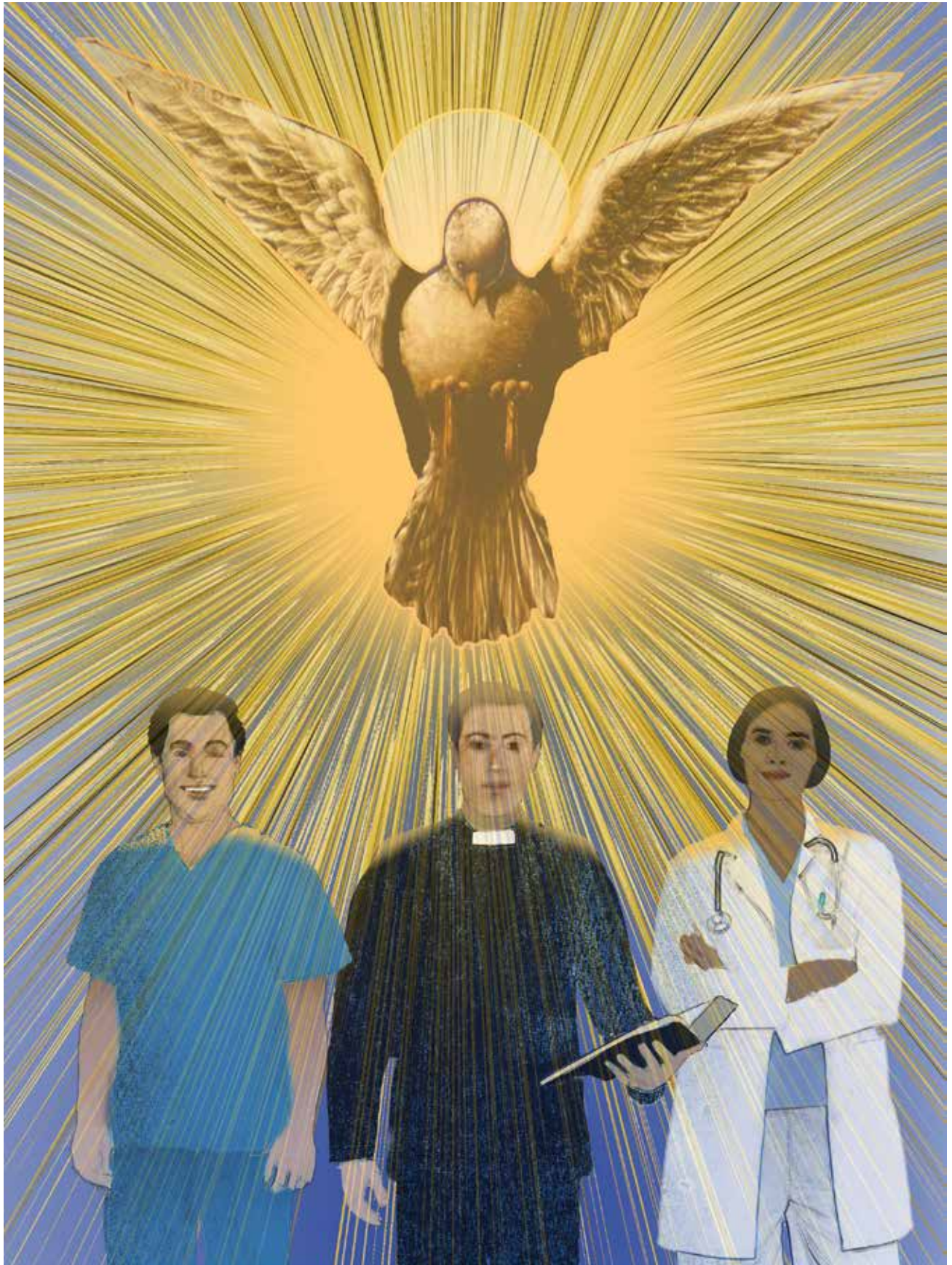
This charism-infused ministry is not a still picture frozen in time on a legacy wall. This charism-infused ministry is organic, continuously moving in the present working of the Holy Spirit daily, hourly, in the moment, in every person, in every place, proclaimed as a ministry.

Whether caring at the bedside or approving policy at the board table, whether folding laundry or setting and reviewing budgets, work empowered by charism is not simply work, or even good work, but a public proclamation as God’s work. Living and working from charism is a conscious, intentional, prayerful act of individual ministry leaders joined together in a ministry community.

The language here is not semantics.

With the rapidly changing partnerships and daily evolving delivery systems, we are moving further and further away from the more simple yet profound foundations of explicit faith-filled work. The mostly women religious who founded these ministries moved every day from chapel to street to building. *Chapel* to street to building.

Theirs was God’s work because of that movement from sacred space embodying sacred consciousness, and intentionality, of not only doing,





but speaking, even proclaiming that this work we do every day in every way is God's work. Today it is called evangelization.

The successors to the founding communities of those religious ministries are lay leaders who are learning in formation programs that responding to a calling is first of all deeply personal, originating in faith, validated and often publicly commissioned by the community. Lay leaders are learning that living out of a sacred consciousness depends on the vitality of daily spiritual practices in silence and solitude before moving into the noise and clutter of the workday.

That's the layperson's "chapel" space before moving to the street and the building. Daily work in a ministry becomes the operationalizing of this charism-inspired ministry and mission. It cannot be simply operations at the forefront of our minds and daily tasks, and then ministry on the side or on occasion.

Frankly, without this conscious ministry identity and spiritual practice, the danger is that the ministry could be reduced to an annual remembrance of the founder on a feast day, or an annual community benefit report that seeks to "prove" our good work, or short, quickened reflections offered at the beginning of meetings that can, at times, seem eerily detached from the business that follows.

Without charism, Holy Spirit consciousness, there is the danger that the classic tension between the mission and the business will deepen its divide. There should be no divide. Charism facilitates a constant stepping back reflectively to look at the forming of a relationship, primarily the relationship of God calling and our responding to that call. That, in turn, informs the processes of living everything we do as a ministry community, transforming the world in a mission that is Spirit initiated, sustained and promised into a future.

The calculus then becomes rightly spoken and lived as charism, ministry and mission. And in that order.

The power of charism-consciousness is that it forms relationships in a shared calling, informs the processes of living out a shared ministry, and transforms a world in a shared mission.

CHARISM INITIATES A CALLING

People in the ministry often associate the word

charism with the history of the founder receiving a gift from the Holy Spirit that created the ministry. While this definition rightly describes the founding of a ministry, the act of locating charism in a singular historical moment suggests a passive event in a time past.

A charism is anything but passive. Rather, a charism initiates a personal calling and establishment of a ministry in a moment in history, sustaining that same ministry into the present moment, and promising that ministry into the future.

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God is the giver of the gift through the Holy Spirit, revealing who God is and relating personally to the needs of the people in forming relationships in a dynamic "call and response" to a ministry.

The first sign of the presence of a charism: People in the ministry are conscious and explicit in their awareness, understanding and appreciation that God is revealing and relating himself to everyone in a shared calling.

This dynamic of calling is of course rooted in the ancient story of the Israelites. God reveals first who God is: "I am the God of your fathers ... the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And then God relates to the needs of the people: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering." The call to action in this instance is a call to Moses to lead the people.¹

So too in the Christian story with Jesus and his call to disciples into a ministry community with a mission to the world. The slow, hesitant, curious nature of call is exemplified in the dialogue with Jesus.

Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?"

"Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

"Come, and you will see." So they went

and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day.²

The same God is revealing and relating a call to ministry in the founding story of our ministry in the past, and through us now in the present in an emerging story. This is the power of charism to form relationships.

The literal root of the word *charism* in Greek is the verb, *charizesthai*, “to show oneself generous ... present”; it is conjoined with a variety of words with the suffix *-ma*, which “expresses the result of the action indicated by the verb.”³

This same charism is generating “emerging stories,” continuous with, yet responding to, new needs in the ministry while still attracting others. The founding charism was the initial “impulse” of the Spirit⁴ but continues as an “interior driving force” with new forms of expression.⁵

What this means for operations in this complex business of a health care ministry in our own time: God is actively relating and revealing the mystery of God’s love through this charism in the present situation and circumstances.

What this means for the ministry leader: what is required is a conscious, intentional discipline of starting from one’s own spirituality and spiritual practices, so as to concretely and specifically discern where and how the Spirit is moving in the daily operations of the ministry, and trusting that Spirit, and calling upon that Spirit, in her or his leadership.

CHARISM SUSTAINS A MINISTRY

The second sign of a charism: People in the ministry are conscious and explicit in their awareness, understanding and appreciation that the Holy Spirit is free and creative in the midst of institutions and structures in this shared ministry.

The founding of a community is not a straightforward linear plan to a clear mission. Pope Paul VI following the Second Vatican Council said that before a ministry was formally established there was 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.”⁶

Part of the freedom and creative force of the Spirit is by definition empowering a “genuine originality” and as such “may appear trouble-

some and may even cause difficulties, since it is not always and immediately easy to recognize it as coming from the Spirit.”⁷ The free and creative power of charism meets resistance, especially from institutions and structures.

And yet out of change with all its pull of energies and resistances, the charism continues to evolve the ministry. The witness of the last 50 years in Catholic health care has changed significantly from the almost exclusive leadership of vowed religious in the ministry to a predominantly lay-led ministry today.

In 1996, Pope St. John Paul II wrote an encyclical letter, *Vita Consecrata*, (On Religious Life) where he spoke more about charism than any

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previous church document or even the originating biblical sources. In the more than 70 usages of the word charism, he particularly made mention of the positive direction of the consecrated religious inviting the laity to share their charism. He celebrated what he called “a new chapter, rich in hope [that] has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.”⁸

Furthermore, this relationship with the laity is not a one-way relationship where the charism simply draws the laity into the mission. Rather, Pope St. John Paul II goes on to say, “participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from its directions for new activities for the apostolate.”⁹

What does this mean for operations in this complex business of a health care ministry in our own time? The charism ensures that the movement of the Spirit is free and creative, and no matter how burdensome and seemingly insurmountable the stumbling blocks in our way, there is unshakable hope.

What does this mean for the ministry leader? It means that what is required is a conscious, intentional discipline of starting from one’s own spirituality and spiritual practices, so as to concretely and specifically discern where and how the Spirit is moving in the daily operations of the ministry, trusting that Spirit and calling upon that Spirit in the exercise of leadership.



CHARISM PROMISES A MISSION

The third sign of a charism: People in the ministry are conscious and explicit in their awareness, understanding and appreciation that the Holy Spirit brings unity in diversity and order within chaos in its shared mission to the world.

As already established, the genesis of the word charism is St. Paul in his letters to the various early churches that were growing into self-awareness and identity as a community of believers. The word had no prior usage in either philosophical or religious literature. Paul was trying to find a common expression of his day that could describe this generous, gift-giving Spirit that was powerfully moving hearts and minds of these communities to the God and Father of Jesus, to the church entrusted to his memory, and to his salvific mission to the world.

The charism-infused gifts ironically became a source of tension, especially in Corinth, as diversity became divisiveness and the attempt at order became chaos. The fight was competitive: who were the gifted leaders and what were the higher gifts? Paul is intent on drawing the community at Corinth to the relationship between the gifts and their free distribution by the Holy Spirit and on emphasizing their function solely for building up the Body of Christ.

The solution for Paul comes when he contextualizes the diversity of the *charismata*, or the gifts given to individuals, in Chapter 12 with the crowning Chapter 13 of I Corinthians emphasizing the “single charisma” of love that unifies the diversity of the particular gifts.¹⁰ It is here that Paul most directly confronts sin and darkness in the world, even and especially, this growing ecclesial world. It is here too that Paul teaches that the same Spirit can bring unity in diversity and order within chaos in both worlds. This earliest example of sin and darkness in the community at Corinth, even in the midst of a charism-infused ministry, seems an important reminder of our own fragility and weaknesses as ministry leaders. And this reality further underlines the need for careful discernment borne of our own spirituality and spiritual practices, individually and collectively as a ministry.

What more powerful way of testing the fidelity to our mission than asking, watching and discerning how the charism is moving our ministry in this day and age? Pope Francis said it most recently,

“he [the Spirit] alone can raise up diversity, plurality, and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity.”¹¹

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time: the charism ensures that the movement of the Spirit brings unity in diversity and order within chaos.

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CONCLUSION

The evolution to a predominantly lay-led ministry is, I would argue, at a new and critical juncture. The progression from the lay participation with the vowed religious has now transitioned to lay ministry leadership. The historical “chapel to street to building” of the religious communities necessitates a similar movement of lay leadership to sacred consciousness, intentionality, spirituality and spiritual practice tied to, and essential for, the task of ministry leadership.

The way to this radical transformation is turning the calculus of mission and ministry completely around. “It’s the charism!” front, center, distinctive, conscious and intentional. That is what makes our work more than even good work, the Spirit prompting and promising the truth that because of charism, ours is God’s work.

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NOTES

1. Ex 3:6-7 NAB.
2. Jn 1:38-39 NAB.

3. Albert Vanhoye, "The Biblical Question of 'Charisms' After Vatican II" in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987) vol. 1*, ed. Rene Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 442.
4. Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio* [On the Renewal of Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council], Vatican website, June 29, 1971, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_pvi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio_en.html, 53.
5. Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 12.
6. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Mutuae Relationes* (Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church), May 14, 1978, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relations_en.html, 11.
7. Sacred Congregation, *Mutuae Relationes*, 12.
8. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* [On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World], March 25, 1996, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html, 54.
9. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 55.
10. Margaret M. Mitchell, "'Be Zealous for the Greater Charismata': Pauline Advice for the Church of the Twenty-First Century" in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Collegeville MN: The Order of St. Benedict, 1999), 24.
11. Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel], Vatican.va, November 29, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/apost_exhortation/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 130.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Fr. Joseph J. Driscoll says it is charism that makes Catholic health care distinctive as a ministry. He explains that charism is the vivifying presence and gift of the Holy Spirit, given to a founder of the ministry, to meet a specific need in time and circumstances and that attracts others.

He says the Holy Spirit works in a charism-infused ministry in every moment, in every person, in every place. He poses some questions for thought, that can then be used for discussion, when considering charism as the source of the Catholic health care ministry.

1. Do you have a story in which you experienced God's presence in the organization this last quarter, month, week, day? Does your ministry have an ongoing and sanctioned way for employees, care givers, managers and leaders to give expression to those stories?

2. Do you have a story about a surprise in the ministry that moved you and others? Why is it important to you and what did it tell you about the work of Catholic health care? How can you move the role of storytelling beyond the historical perspective to a lively account of the present and a hopeful anticipation of the future?

3. Do you have a story about a meeting where suddenly things came together from an unexpected movement in the room? What happened and what seemed to prompt the change? Do you have suggestions about the use of quiet time or open-ended questions to help bring about more occasions of that?

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