

Charism

Etymology of the word “Charism”

The word “Charism” comes from a Greek root “Charis” which signifies **divine gift**. It therefore means that it is:

- 1) Divine gift graciously given by God
- 2) Transcendent gifts gratuitously entrusted to human beings
- 3) Theologians maintain that charisms as gifts of the Holy Spirit are entrusted to individuals not institutes

The verbal form of the word “Charis” is “Charizomai”

- 1) It means “to give” in the basic sense
- 2) Not an inactive thing but an action involving agency
- 3) A divine action that calls for human agency

Working definition for Charisms

The term “Charisms” within the context of the consecrated life refers to a set of phenomena within every religious institute that includes:-

- 1) Its transcendent origin
- 2) Its uniqueness from other institutes/societies
- 3) The deeper agenda of the Holy Spirit for giving birth to it

All of this provides the group’s most important reason for its existence within the Church and wider society

Five Charisms to nurture

The teachings of the Church since Vatican II point to five charisms operating in religious institutes. Knowledge about them and how they operate are essential in understanding how these charisms bring about the maturity of our institutes but also our life as consecrated person. “When Charisms are ill-described, consecrated persons would become part of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way”¹ (*Mutuae Relationes*, No. 11)

1) **The Personal Charisms of each Consecrated Member (religiosis charismata propria)**

- a. “The Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank through which He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks advantageous for the renewal of the Church . . . These charisms, whether they be the more simple and widely diffused or the most outstanding, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation”. *Lumen Gentium* No. 12
- b. Fundamentally, charisms should be understood as “*gracious gifts gratuitously given*”² by God to each of the faithful. This is an important point in four ways:-
 - i. First, *Lumen Gentium* underlines that all who belong to the People of God – be they laypeople, diocesan priests, or consecrated persons – are entrusted with charisms. Thus, consecrated persons do not have charisms because they professed vows; rather, the Holy Spirit entrusts charisms to them by *virtue of baptism*
 - ii. Second, it is important to state that the fundamental character of charisms is “*graciousness*”. All that we have come from the fusion of:-
 1. The grace of the Holy Spirit and
 2. Our genealogy, i.e. the cultural and historical contingencies we acquire because of the place, time and accident of our birth.³

¹ *Mutuae Relationes*, No. 11

² “*Gratiae gratis datae*” (*Summa Theologiae*, 2a2. 172, 3-4 and 178, 1: 3a. 7, 7)

³ Cf. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 39; R. John Elford, *The Pastoral Nature of Theology: An Upholding Presence* (London Cassell, 1999), p. 22

However, not everything in our genealogy is gracious. Graciousness are those things which reflect God because they are *true, good, and beautiful* in the light of the Gospel.⁴ Some of what we have are false, evil, and ugly – take for example tribalism – and thus should not be numbered among our personal charisms

- iii. Third, note that “*charism*” is spoken of in the *plural*, never in the singular. This implies that one individual can be the receiver of a variety of charisms. *Lumen Gentium* however clarifies well that while some of these charisms are particular talents that are unique to an individual, most of the charisms we possess are actually “ordinary”.⁵ Therefore, contrary to what so many consecrated persons wrongly believe in, charisms are not only the extraordinary talents that people possess. Throughout our life, we become gradually aware of these manifold charisms within us.
 1. Ordinary charisms (talents)
 2. Extraordinary charisms (talents)
- iv. Lastly, it would be a mistake to understand charisms the way gifts are generally understood. A gift in most cultures is something that is given by one person to another for the receiver to personally keep and enjoy. Charisms are more than that. Whether they are “the more simple and widely diffused charisms are not for the benefit of their receivers. Rather, all the members of the faithful are called to ***discover, accept, nurture and share*** these gifts – whether they are ordinary or extraordinary – to the Church for the sake of its renewal. They are then enlightened by Jesus’ parable of the talents or minas (Mt. 25: 14 – 30; Lk. 19: 12 – 27)
- c. Encounter of personal charisms with the charisms in the institute
 - i. When a member of the faithful seeks admission into an already existing religious institute, s/he is supposed to sense the other four charisms that are present and have developed in it.
 - ii. s/he need to discern personally and be accompanied in the assessing whether her/his personal charisms are consonant (agreeable, compatible, suitable) with the four pre-existing charisms of the institute
 - iii. **If this charismatic consonance does not exist, the fullness of charismatic formation in the formative process will not be possible.**

⁴Although the idea of “being” in terms of truth, goodness and beauty developed from ancient philosophers, notably Plato, Christian thinkers saw its application to theology since God, as a perfect being, is the source of all three. Thus, “the glory of God consists in the sublime conjunction of the true, good and beautiful” [Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), p. 113] The tripartite union has been a repeated theme in the teachings of Pope Francis who, at the start of his pontificate, proclaimed that “the Church exists to communicate precisely this: Truth, Goodness and Beauty “in person” (Audience to Representatives of the Communications Media, Paul VI Audience Hall, 16 March 2013)

⁵“Charisms in the New Testament are above all seen as the – one might say “ordinary” – gifts of the Spirit of God, and are to be found throughout the Church among the People of God” [Anthony J. Gittins, “Sows’ Ears and Silk Purses: The Limitations of Charisms and Communities,” *Review for Religious* 43 (1984): 710]