SPIRITUALITY: WHAT IS ITS PLACE IN THE CHARISM OF THE BROTHERS?

Introduction

A charism is a special gift that the Spirit gives to a person for the good of the whole Church community. This gift can be given to a person who is the only one to have it, for example, the charism of preaching. However, he can involve others who will, with the one who has initially received the charism, form a special group for the service of the Church community, for example, a charitable organization such as Catholic Charities. A religious institute is such a group.

A religious institute thus receives, through a founder, a particular gift for a particular mission. This particular gift is called the charism of foundation.

It contains three aspects very closely related which can be called the life-giving force, the family spirit, the task.

- the life-giving force is the spirituality;
- the family spirit is the way the members of the institute - and those who are associated with them - relate to each other, to authority, socially, by sharing (things, competencies, experiences...)
- the task is the work that is given to us to do in the Church: to give a concrete image of life according to Jesus Christ to the children and young people in order to establish a true relationship with the Father accomplished through an educational task where we privilege those who are most in need.

In these three aspects, it is spirituality which provokes the other two, but these in turn enrich and develop spirituality.

It is most important that the three aspects of the Brothers’ charism be considered as a whole, not as individual parts.

Through this experience the participant will:

- deepen his/her understanding of the meaning of “charism”;
- become aware of the importance of the charism underlying our apostolic action;
- learn to identify the elements of charism in his/her ministry;

Readings

- Foundation Charism: Brother René Sanctorum, CIAC
Suggestions for Journal Reflection

1. What is evidence of the three aspects of the charism in your school community? (i.e., life-giving force (spirituality), family spirit (community), and apostolic task (mission))

2. As a leader in your school, how do you foster these three aspects of the charism?

Prayer

God our Father,
    you have willed that we should be associated
    with the work of the evangelization of your Church
    through the education of children and young people.

We thank you for letting us share in the charism of André Coindre,
    the founder of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

Keep us always alert to remain united to you
    and to our brothers and sisters in the Spirit
    and faithful to accomplish our vocation in everyday life,
    through Jesus Christ, your well-beloved son, Our Lord.

Amen.
1. What is a charism?

My definition is mainly based on the Epistles of St. Paul, especially 1 Corinthians and Ephesians.

a) Charism is a gift of the Spirit, but it must be distinguished from the grace that is given at baptism and that remains permanently in us (sanctifying grace) and from the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). These two fundamental gifts of the Spirit to Christians are the same in everybody; they constitute the state of the sons and daughters of God.

b) But besides these, the Spirit grants separate special gifts to each person. We generally distinguish between
   - the gifts of the Spirit, properly speaking, and
   - charisms.

   The gifts of the Spirit are habitual and permanent graces granted to persons for their personal sanctity (for example, the gift of contemplation).

Charisms, strictly speaking, are actual graces, freely given, of course (like all gifts of God), unpredictable (like personal gifts), not necessarily permanent, often even transitory (contrary to personal gifts), and clearly showing the presence and action of the Spirit for the good of the entire body of the Church (this is the most important element).

c) Charisms, being ordered for the edification of the Church, are spiritual (one does not have the charism to teach Latin, in the theological sense of the term charism, even if one may have dispositions for it). They regard faith and spiritual doctrine.

d) In the technical sense of the word, such as St. Paul uses it, there are different charisms: tongues, miracles, prophecy, teaching, visions, and so on, always at the service of the common good, which is why St. Paul asked that the speakers of tongues be quiet when no member of the community had received the charism to interpret them (1 Cor. 14:27-28).

Some charisms concern the functions of the ministry: the charisms of apostles, prophets, doctors, evangelists, pastors; others regard activities that are useful for the community: service, teaching, exhortation, works of mercy, words of wisdom or knowledge, eminent faith, gift of healing or of working miracles, tongues, discernment of spirits, and others.
2. Charism of the Institute
   a) Charisms are not things granted by way of exception, even if some of them are unusual gifts (for example, working miracles). The whole life of the Christian people and the whole functioning of the Church depend entirely on charisms.

   b) The particular vocations of Christians (for example, catechizing) are based on Charisms.

   c) Charisms are found at the origin of all the fruitful initiatives and of all the movements or currents that in every era have marked the life of the Church (for example, Catholic Action).

   d) Given at first to a person, the charism then unfurls in various ways that imply other persons:
      — it gives rise to a vocation to some particular state of life or to some particular type of work and activity corresponding to special needs of the Mystical Body;
      — it gives to the activity that has been thus triggered its norm and rhythm through a secret instinct of which the Spirit is always the master; in other words, the charism regulates and organizes the apostolic activity that has been launched. It can thus be at the origin of a stable institution, such as an institute of religious life;
      — it makes fruitful the efforts of all those who give themselves to this work, coordinates the work and fortifies it through the action of all, who no longer act as individuals.

   e) We can thus speak of charism of the Founder. It is an experience of the Spirit transmitted to the founder's followers to be lived by them, safeguarded, deepened, and continually developed, in harmony with the Body of Christ in perpetual growth.

   It is possible for the founder who was at the origin of the charism to be "surpassed" by the institution born of his initiative. The group may then live its life in conflict with the ideas of the founder or, at least, on a different path, without anyone being able to say for all that that the group has thereby been unfaithful. Take, for example, the Rural Missionary Brothers, who took a turn that the founder, Father Epagneul, disapproved of; or Father Vaillaume, who left the Institute of the Little Brothers of Jesus (or "of Faucauld") that he had founded in order to start another institute, the Little Brothers of the Gospel.

   f) This charism of the founder thus becomes a charism of the Institute. The documents of the Holy See use this term as being self-evident, as though there were no question about it, for example, the document *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* of Feb. 2, 1990, even if the Code of Canon Law uses only formulas like "distinctive spirit" or "patrimony of the institute." We read in article 577: "There are in the Church very many institutes of consecrated life, equipped with different gifts according to the grace that has been given them."
I. The Need to Know and to Deepen the Institute Charism

a) First, we do have an institute charism

"There is no single way of observing the evangelical counsels; but each institute should define its particular way of observing them by keeping in mind its particular character and specific goals." "This regards not only the practice of the counsels but also all that affects the life-style of the members in view of striving for the perfection of their state." (Directives op. cit., 16)

It may be objected that we see institutes that are so much like ours (for example, the Marist Brothers or the Brothers of St. Gabriel) that it can be doubted that there is really - for us, in any case - an institute charism that is proper to us. It may also be remarked that a lot of institutes came into being under the same circumstances as ours, indeed at the same time and in the same place (particularly the Marists and the Clerics of St. Viator).

To this we can reply that if very similar institutes came into being at the same time and in the same place, this is a sign of a true charism rather than the contrary; otherwise, there would have been but one single institute. This means that in the face of urgent human and spiritual needs, the Spirit produced a great movement of generosity that was carried out concretely by exceptional vocations arising at the same time and launching enterprises that were similar in many ways, but not identical. Thus, in our days, we see coming into existence in various places of the world charismatic groups that are rather similar, that have come about not according to a pre-established overall plan nor according to a concerted effort of Church authorities, but of very spiritual Christians. So apparent resemblance and the same place and time of foundation do not mean that there wasn't - that there isn't - a particular charism granted by the Spirit for each foundation. It’s evident for charismatic groups; it's also evident for our institutes.

Therefore, it is not true to affirm that there is no difference among institutes of apostolic life and particularly among those dedicated to education.

These differences are found in the spirituality. We stress certain aspects of the Gospel, certain forms of prayer, certain models, certain patrons, certain "symbols"....

They are also found in the way community life is lived. We stress certain ways of acting: warm welcoming of guests, a strong family spirit, a demanding life in common; other institutes stress frugality, long periods of personal or community prayer....

The differences are also found in the way we spend our energies: to the young more so than to older people. Our work is especially educational. Other institutes are dedicated to health services, to the elderly and the dying, to the handicapped; and still other institutes, to culture, to leisure time activities, to the media, and so on.
Our differences are also found in our relationship with the world: for example, a close collaboration with people: in our Institute, the communities are usually small or medium sized; openness to the outside world: with us, this exists to a large degree; different kinds of commitment in the society, outside professional work: our brothers undertake more charitable or social work than political or union activities.

There is also the area of formation: in some institutes studies are stressed, especially religious studies: in our Institute, such formation is more or less short.

We are also different in the relations between brothers and superiors: our bonds are very strong. From the very beginning, as with Father Coindre or Brother Polycarp, the superiors remained very close, very brotherly.

Finally, there is the relationship with the ministerial Church: in our Institute, we have emphasized our lay character, whereas other institutes have placed more accent on their clerical character; we want to be close to the clergy and be ready to collaborate with them, and so forth.

Also, in the *Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Religious Life*, we find: "In the variety of inspiration and in the specific physiognomy of each institute, the Church recognizes 'the charism of the Founders.'" That is why, even if we consider ourselves very similar to many other institutes, we maintain our own character: let us try to recognize it and not be afraid of affirming it.

Having lived two years with the De La Salle Brothers in a common postulancy, Brothers of the Sacred Heart and De La Salle Brothers, I can assure you that a Brother of the Sacred Heart is not a Christian Brother and vice versa: the charism is not the same. And this is very clear to me even though I like the Christian Brothers very much, have many dear friends among them, and have even found some admirable spiritual directors among them.

We can understand Father Coindre's ardent refusal to fuse his institute with others that were being founded (the churchmen of Lyon first wanted our fusion with the Marist Brothers and then the fusion of the Marist Brothers with us): "The restless genius of Reverend Cattet (vicar general of Lyon and also vicar of religious) wants to tell us what we should do {...}. That it is possible to think of such fusions shows how little understanding there is of men and the works of God. It's like proposing to fuse all households into one" (May 3, 1826, three weeks before his death). Now, we can easily see how strategically beneficial such a fusion would be by multiplying the possibilities of apostolate and the sources of vocations. But the charism would have been betrayed. Father Coindre was too spiritual a person not to have seen the stakes in such an operation. Later, when François Coindre was superior general and Father Louis Querbes presented his plan of foundation to the Archbishop of Lyon, he was asked rather to associate himself with Father François in order to straighten out the community of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. He refused, of course!
b) The Institute charism is not an agreement among the present members of the Institute fruit of a discussion and a group decision. It is absolutely linked to the founder. Father Arrupe said so clearly: “The founder's charism is the characteristic element of the whole Institute; it expresses the specificity of our service in the Church and in the world; we find in it the particular grace granted to the founder and, through him, to the Institute.” From this fact, "The reference to the founder and to the charism lived and passed on by him {...} appears as a fundamental element for the unity of the community" (Mutuae Relationes, 11). This is what St. John of the Cross had said in a different way: "God, in putting the first fruits of his Spirit into these heads of families (founders of institutes), entrusted to them treasures and faculties to be passed on to the more or less large succession of followers who were to embrace their doctrine and spirit." Father Coindre was so aware of this that he took care to make clear to the Brothers what would have to be done after his death: first, to take his brother François as superior general, then to choose a brother "because every other clergyman would not have the spirit of your founder."

c) This charism must be safeguarded and developed.

The General Chapter of 1988 recognized that "the charism of our foundation has not been used up and will continue to be valid to the degree that we manage to express it adequately."

The Code of Canon Law makes it a duty for us to safeguard it faithfully, because it is a heritage of the Church: "The thought of the founders and their plans, recognized by the competent ecclesiastical authority, concerning the nature, end, spirit, and character of the institute, as well as its sane traditions, all the things that constitute the patrimony of the institute, must be faithfully maintained by all" (Can. 578). And again: "The novitiate, where life in the institute begins, is ordered in such a way that the novices get a better knowledge of the divine vocation with its peculiarity in the institute, that they get an experience of the way of life of the institute, that they impregnate their thoughts and their heart with its spirit..." (Can. 646). These remarks are amplified in the decree Perfectae Caritatis: "The suitable renewal of religious life comprises both the continual return to the sources of all Christian life and the original inspiration of the institutes {...}. For the good of the Church, the institutes will try to know the true spirit of their origins in order to preserve it faithfully in the adaptations to be decided upon, to purify their religious life from extraneous elements, and to liberate it from what is obsolete" (par. 2).

Thus, "we do not have the right." comments Father Arrupe, "to betray the charism of our foundation, but we have to strive to always understand it better and to adapt it to the present historical circumstances." This is why {...} religious institutes must, first and foremost, acquire a ever-deepening knowledge of their particular charism {...}. This is an important point, for it is not impossible, that in the course of time, the charism, even in its essence, has been open to take on nonessential elements that not only blur it but also can limit its possibility of adaptation and its effectiveness" (Is the Religious life Still a Source of Evangelization? p. 41).
Let us point out again that research into the deepening of the charism the return to the sources, as it is sometimes said - is not to be confused with the nostalgic research of the past, which would be a regression; we will come back on this in a moment.

After having recalled these well-known aspects of the charism in general and on the need to safeguard the charism of the Institute by continually deepening it, let us go finally to what we could have and perhaps should have started with: what does the charism of an institute consists of?

II. The Elements of an Institute Charism
   a) Let us first of all exclude as a counterfeit of charism the attachment to exterior forms. The charism of founders is not a set of forms, such as the habit, prayer formulas, or particular types of institutes. For a Daughter of Charity, fidelity to the origins doubtless does not consist of returning to the gigantic headpiece; likewise the Dominicans or the Capuchins do not have to return to begging; and the teaching brothers and sisters perhaps do not have to recreate the boarding schools of former times, where pupils were kept three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

   b) Also, let us analyze some formulas that, while presenting an idea of charism, are incomplete or insufficient.

      This is the case for most of the definitions that the people or even Christians give of us, when it is not the Brothers themselves: "The Brothers of the Sacred Heart," they say, "are Christian educators" (make a survey among those around you and among people you are responsible for). It's a good answer, but so incomplete.

      We still read in books of the Institute that we were founded to run the "Pieux-Secours." The biographies of Father Coindre clearly affirm it. Community life would have had for Father Coindre no other meaning except to offer basis for the evangelization of unprivileged young people: "Father Coindre resolved to found a society of men ready to consecrate their lives to the Christian education of children. To do that he had to place his charitable undertaking on a firm and durable basis." It is clear that the decision of Father Coindre to group his brothers in a Congregation originates explicitly from his intention to guarantee the permanence of the work, but it is not reduced to that. Otherwise, how explain the fact that he wanted to found other works unlike the Pieux-Secours? Furthermore, it is only necessary to examine, for instance, the way in which he founded the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, without any pressure whatever of urgency or necessity to influence him.

   c) Towards a better definition of institute charism (and of ours in particular),

      The first thing to be said is that we cannot define the charism of an institute in a few words. It is a complex reality and difficult to understand. Wanting to find a simple and concise formula to define it, some have left out some important
elements, thereby reducing the charism to either apostolic activity or to a way of community life.

Now, the charism of an institute is composed of three inseparable aspects: 1. a spirituality; 2. a type of community life; and 3. a particular apostolic activity. This is what the *Formation Guide of the Institute* quite rightly says when it speaks of "spirituality, spirit, style of community life, and mission," even if the word mission is badly chosen, for we are missionaries by the integralness of our religious life, which includes spirituality and community life. It would be better to speak of "apostolic activity."

1. Spirituality

We have often been unaware of this aspect, for the simple reason that it has never been very well explained since the beginning (but this has changed recently). And yet, it must be readily admitted that for the founders, the spiritual experience was first, before one or another apostolic activity or before any plan to organize a group. It is to this experience that we must return first of all. Because it is in this experience of God, personal first, then collective, in the spiritual line of each institute, that the apostolic dynamism is based and that the communal body is unified and strengthened.

Article 113 of our *Rule of Life* ([2007](#)) (in the chapter on the Sacred Heart) seems to me to really understand charism well: "Our founders made us heirs of their devotion (it would be better to say spirituality) to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And so Christ, in his mystery of love, holds first place in our life as Brothers of the Sacred Heart. He is our reference point and the center of our motivations, just as he is the very principle of our total self-offering and of our apostolic action." We see that the central point of our charism is situated in the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus.

Articles 14 to 16 of the same *Rule of Life* articulate well the three aspects of the charism in speaking of spirituality: Article 14: "Love of Christ: The spirituality of the Institute flows from contemplating Christ, whose open heart is a sign and a revelation of the Trinitarian love of God for all. We respond in love to God's goodness by our consecration in a way of life totally focused on Christ, gentle and humble." Article 15: "Love of our Brothers: The Institute is marked by a spirit of love expressed through simplicity, acceptance, community, and brotherhood. As true brothers, we share our life and our apostolate. We develop a family spirit which makes each brother feel loved for who he is." Article 16: "Love of neighbor: Challenged by our contemporaries and the developments of our time, we reach out in love through understanding, discernment and involvement. Set free by the cross, the world awaits our efforts so that the Father's plan 'to bring all things together in Christ' might be fulfilled." (Eph. 1:10).

So the charism of an institute does not consist firstly in an educative or charitable mission, or in helping any particular class of people in distress, or, by even greater reason, in a profession, such as that of teacher. It is firstly a certain look at Christ (for us the open Heart of Christ on the cross) and a witness to this contemplation. A confirmation of this is given us by the present coming together of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of India and us. It is not only questions of a similar apostolic work, for then why
not draw near to the Marist Brothers (so numerous in India), or the Brothers of the Holy Family, or of the Holy Cross; rather, it is a question of an identical spirituality.

2. Secondly, charism is defined by a certain way of life. "The Institute of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart," says article 17 of our Constitutions. "is a lay congregation" It was thus that our founder wanted it; it was thus that all the Brothers of the Institute, from the beginning to now, have understood it and lived it, even if "the Institute may call some of its members to the priestly ministry for the service of its particular charism, while maintaining its lay character" (Appendix 10).

But our lay state constitutes only the juridical base of our coming together as brothers. Less definable, but not less real and powerful, is the type of relations that exists among us. Article 15, quoted above, does not only enact a sort of precept, but also records an observation that all of you have made at one time or another in traveling to the various regions of the Institute simplicity, (for example, between superiors and the other brothers), fraternity, concern about what is done here and there, the welcoming of each person regardless of where he comes from..., we have experienced these; so have other people, for that matter, from outside the institute, lay or religious. Many of you could give quite a few other examples; personally I would have much to say about this.

3. Finally, the charism is defined by a determined apostolic activity, Let us remember that this activity flows from spirituality. Article 13 of the Rule of Life states it almost perfectly: "To be a member of the Institute today is to believe in God's love [we would have to add, to be complete, 'contemplated in Jesus Christ on the cross with his open heart'], to live it, and to spread it; it is to contribute as religious educators to the evangelization of the world particularly through the education of youth."

The Rule gives us evangelization as our specific mission; this is how it reminds us that our task is, before all, of a spiritual nature; the rest is a means, which does not signify an accessory reality which therefore we can do without, but rather something subordinate to the mission, which is of a spiritual nature.

This is why our means of action can and must be reviewed in order to enable us to better carry out the apostolic task that has been entrusted to us: "The founder and the first disciples {...} perceived a need in the world and undertook to respond to it effectively and evangelically, The forms are secondary {...}. On the contrary, afterwards, religious first find the Institute with its forms {...}. There is a great risk - and history shows that it is not an imaginary one - that vital attention may be given more to fidelity to structures than to a concern for today's needs, to which the structures should be adapted" (Father Arrupe). We see the enormous difficulty met by clairvoyant Brothers who, through fidelity, have undertaken the task of restructuring: so much criticism on account of a school being placed in someone else's hands, so many reproaches to those who try new things in a spirit of returning to the priorities of the origins! On the other hand, what aberrations result from wanting to cling to venerable institutions that have certainly done a lot of good but that have become burdensome and in some cases counter-witnesses. You all have examples in mind. It is therefore important to be attentive to the signs of the times, a phrase used by John XXIII, so that our means of apostolic activity will be in conformity with the charism and will always flow from our spirituality.
III. A SCHEMATIC VIEW OF THE PRESENTATION ON CHARISM

1. A GLOBAL GLANCE AT CHARISM

This schema has the drawback of implying that spirituality, community life and apostolic life are three separate and unconnected realities. But there is still something to learn from it. First of all, there is not a solid wall between the three aspects of charism; furthermore and above all, each element contains the others and is contained by them, to the point that it is impossible to determine where it all begins: apostolic activity leads to spirituality (for it invites each person to be called by the Gospel) and also to community (we come together for a common apostolate); and community pushes towards the apostolate and leads to spirituality, etc..

2. EACH ELEMENT WHICH WEAKENS OR DETERIORATES CAUSES THE RUIN OF THE OTHER TWO.

If spirituality disappears, action risks becoming overwhelming, but most often, it ceases to be apostolic and becomes activism.

Or again, if spirituality degenerates, it becomes formal: from being spirit (spirituality means spirit), it becomes institution and functions for itself: in this case, apostolic activity loses force and community life is relativized. This is the danger of becoming totally involved in a charismatic movement, for example. It is the same if, to the contrary, community life absolutizes: "what is important is to be together, to form a close community, to share, etc." We can forget the inspiration behind all we are doing (spirituality) and why and for whom it is being done (apostolic activity).

But if apostolic activity dwindles to the point of almost disappearing, the result is as deplorable.

Thus, we realize the interdependence of the three elements: to touch one is always to touch the other two. Interdependence, but also the need for balance. And balance is always to be monitored, even restored.

3. It is possible to use another image for the three elements of charism, which shows even better how they overlap: it's ocean water. If water represents religious life, and fish, the brothers, the temperature of the water could represent community life (do we not speak of warm brotherly relations), the minerals represent apostolic action, and oxygen, spirituality. Just try to isolate one of these elements! Takeaway the temperature, for example, and you take away the water itself. If you eliminate the minerals, you destroy the sea water, and the same for the oxygen. In the same way, if you modify the elements, you modify the milieu of life, to the point sometimes of making the existence of the fish in the sea impossible. In the religious life, it's the same way: modify only one of the elements of the charism and immediately the brothers' way of acting is changed.

It is necessary therefore to ensure a balance to obtain a vibrant religious life and, as we French say, to have brothers as happy as fish in water.
CONCLUSION

After having attempted to define the elements of an institute charism, it remains, by way of conclusion, to say a word on its dynamic character. We have spoken of adaptation, of renewal and of restructuring. It concerns more than the renewal of works in keeping with the new needs of the moment, even though this aspect is important, for if the charism is given once and for all inasmuch as it is a spiritual impulse, it is not so given as a concrete embodiment which has only to be maintained as is.

But, fidelity to the charism demands more than restructuring. It is always our spirituality that we must examine on the personal and collective levels. In the course of history, we regularly witness the blockage or crystallization of the initial charism into a still institution where the thrust has been dulled, as we recalled above. In such a case, the intuition of the Founder to become a source of light and life, must be reassumed today by the whole Institute and by each member. To reassume does not mean only to rediscover something through historical research; but also to reactivate it in a spiritual experience; not only the head, nor only the hands, but also the heart. We have to accept, in prayer and in submission to the Spirit, the impulse received by the founder, which will drive us constantly to creativity, to new initiatives. We have to be, in our hearts, other Father Coindre's today; we have to receive our charism in the present.

Then, it may be that our charism, which is always current, always present, will be revealed to us as richer than we ever knew it before. It will uncover treasures for us that have not yet been brought to light. I have mentioned before, for example, that we have in the recent past somewhat better examined the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus. But how much remains to be done! It is up to each one of us, whoever and wherever he may be, to understand our charism even more and to share the results with all. We have to be "dynamically faithful" to the charism, according to the expression in the Formation Guide. For the charism is a tree whose branches have not yet all grown and that is perhaps holding more than one surprise for us. Maybe some branches, recently grown, will not last; it is because the sap of the charism is not flowing in them. But many buds have yet to appear; the springtime lies ahead of us!

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