

CHARISM SPIRITUALITY

Translation (and synthesis in some points)
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INTRODUCTION

Charism and spiritual theology

Today, spiritual theology considers with much attention the action of the Spirit in the Church as it is explained by Vatican II in LG 4 and 12, and as it appears in new proposals, summaries and realizations in various sectors of the Church's life. It is the competence of spiritual theology to observe, in the Christian spiritual experience, the action of the Holy Spirit and to assist in the discernment of his gifts. The sources of spiritual theology are the Word of God and the Magisterium in reference to this action of the Spirit in history and in the experience of believers.

Charism and spirituality

Fr. Federico Ruiz, ocd, tells us just how important is the Theology that deals with charisms: "What we are dealing with is more than just a simple theme. It is a living, precious, fragile reality. It is a grace that the Holy Spirit raises and nourishes... It is, at the same time, its own life with its experiences and projects." We refer therefore to a reality of consecration and of mission, with its personal and collective responsibility, with its dynamism of interiority and of service.

Spirituality demands a greater understanding of charism, aside from the considerations that must be made in the juridical, sociological, psychological, etc., field. It has, in fact, to do with a life, a living body, animated by the Holy Spirit. It is under this perspective of gift and response that we want to explain the meaning of charism.

At this moment, we shall make only a reflection general in character. Each one shall feel the resonances that correspond to one's own charism.

I. Aspects of the charism spirituality in the Magisterium's perspective

A. From "Mystici Corporis" to "Lumen gentium"

The first source of a modern reflection regarding the charism of the religious life we find in *Mystici Corporis* of Pius XII (1943), which considers the whole of ecclesial life under the perspective of communion in the Mystical Body. This presupposes a re-reading of the evangelical and Christocentric aspect of charism: an experience of the mystery of Christ in his relationship with the Father and with human beings, that is, consecration and mission as, quoting the source of Pius XII, Vatican II remembers in *Lumen Gentium* 46.

A historical/ecclesial perspective of what charism is we find in the Decree *Perfecta Caritatis* I. Historical charisms of consecrated life are gifts and graces of the Spirit for the universal mission of the Church. It is the Gospel unfurled through the times.

The Magisterium's reflection continues with *Evangelica Testificatio* of Paul VI. In number 11, the Pope speaks of charism as the certain criterion of spiritual renewal, a fruit of the Spirit that always works in the Church.

B. *The spiritual synthesis of “Mutuae Relationes”* (1978) nos. 11-13

This new reflection is located in the theological perspective of Church communion. Every charism of religious life is a gift of the Holy Spirit within the body communion, for the mission of the Church, within the complementariness and reciprocity of gifts in the universal Church and in the local churches.

Religious vocation and specific charism participate in the mystery and mission of the Church as call to holiness and to mission.

The description of the charism of the Founders has these fundamental points and these consequences: it is an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to one's followers and disciples so that they may live it, keep it, deepen in it and develop it, constantly attuned with the Mystical Body of Christ. They are functions and graces of the same Spirit: life that begins, grace that is transmitted, the capacity for a new vital, personal and communitarian experience, the conservation and the development of the initial grace attuned with the action of the Spirit in the Church. Communion with the grace of the origins and a constant discernment are indispensable. This supposes a great responsibility of spiritual living, in order to ever move ahead, in permanent docility to the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

In this context, the specification of a charism is:

- a defined style of sanctification and of apostolate;
- a determined spiritual tradition that gradually turns into a family heritage;
- an identity that needs to be safeguarded; it is necessary that it has its clear, non ambiguous integration in the universal Church and in the local churches in order not to deprive it of the gift of the Spirit.

The dynamic elements of charism and of its spirituality are:

- a certain charge of genuine novelty in spiritual life and of courageous apostolic interdependence at times misunderstood and even conflicting in the average environment;
- a strong spiritual experience: fidelity to the Lord and docility to his Spirit;
- a great capacity for discernment: attention to the needs, to the circumstances, to the signs of the times;
- an exquisite sense of ecclesial communion with the Pope and with the Pastors of the Church which is translated into active integration and conscious subordination to the hierarchy;
- a characterizing apostolic and missionary dimension: audacity in the initiatives, constancy in the giving, humility amidst adversities, paschal dimension of the charism through a necessary experience of death and resurrection.

All this involves personal and collective responsibility in order that it becomes possible to insert harmoniously personal qualities in view of enriching, developing, and constantly rejuvenating the gift of the Spirit, with great communitarian cohesion, under the discernment of authority and in obedience to it.

II. Spiritual aspects of charism: a reflection starting from experience

A. *The Founder's spiritual experience*

At the origins of an ecclesial charism, we always find an experience of the Spirit lived by a person chosen by God to accomplish one of His works. Meanwhile, these are an object of study and reflection, of communion and imitation: the initial experience, the fundamental texts of doctrine and experience, the proposals, the great spiritual principles, the development, the fruits.

In the experience of all Founders, it has been found out that the works they undertake bear the imprint of God; they then overcome many human obstacles inasmuch as for God nothing is impossible. Furthermore, God confers to them a particular grace of spiritual fatherhood that is manifested precisely in the giving life to a new family and in transmitting to it the spiritual gift received.

It also is important to discover in the person of the Founder that aspect of spiritual pedagogy that enables him to attract others as spiritual leaders and to educate them, as a teacher, with the wisdom that knows how to incarnate the principles into norms of life, at times with the ability to balance all the aspects of an authentic integral formation of persons around a key value of Christian life.

B. *The grace of communion with the charism*

It is a mysterious grace rooted on the same vocation; a grace that allows one to enter in communion with the charism of the foundation, with the Founder's person himself, so that all those who adhere to that charism open themselves up, almost by instinct, by spiritual natural consonance, to the understanding and assimilation of its content. This grace is much more than a simple juridical formula of external adherence to a religious family. It is a mysterious grace of communion with the charism's center and with those who share in it.

This presupposes and interior capacity of identification with the spirit and the norms, with the activities and projects, and principally with the persons who share in the charism. Vocation then appears as a mysterious convocation that creates an internal cohesion, to the point that, face to face with difficulty, there is a generous participation and the convinced "we" of an institute, the sense of being one body, one family. A manifestation of fidelity to the charism shall be the capacity to suffer for the same family, inasmuch as one loves truly for and to what one has suffered and has given his life.

Finally, every authentic charismatic grace is proposed as enthusiasm for one's own vocation and a desire to bring it to realization in its demands for sanctity and mission, and hence the desire to extend once own charism at the service of the Church.

C. *Characteristic notes of this spiritual experience in the Church's today, under the light of spiritual theology.*

From the reflection and the spiritual experience of many men and women religious in living contact with their own charism today, these factors could be underlined:

1. The novelty and the dynamism in the understanding of their own consecrated life in general and in each of its aspects, beginning from the "charismatic" aspect of the Church and from the fact of also being *communio sanctorum*.
2. The rediscovery of the initial experience and the valuing of one's origins as history of salvation, with the consequent reevaluation of the facts, the persons, the writings and the foundational message, with its concrete influx into own legislation and formation.

3. In general this has accentuated in many Congregations the need to better clarify the charism during moments wherein, due to epochal changes, other external factors of one's identity have gone into crisis; consequently is verified an accentuation of one's spirituality and mission, around substantial values and more significant apostolic services.
4. Profound sense of identity and feeling of family and of communion, in a moment wherein, eventually, centrifugal forces and factors of crises have manifested themselves.
5. Charism is like the spiritual blood of the family that makes us become brothers and friends. Hence the growth and continuity in formation makes us progress as well in the identification with the institute to the point of not being able to recognize one's self any more if not starting from such an experience and such a history.
6. The accentuation of the charism allows also the offering to new candidates of an incarnated vocation proposal and a witnessing, hence of the capacity for the charism to be incarnated and to extend in the whole Church.
7. Finally, today the call of all charisms to unity and to mutual assistance is strongly emphasized: in the design and the work of the Spirit, all charisms are parts of a whole and are aimed at unity and communion. It is necessary that much importance is given to collaboration, to complementariness, to reciprocity of charisms.

III. Five spiritual dimensions of charism

A reflection of spiritual theology regarding a charism of consecrated life can be done beginning from these coordinates that are as if five great dimensions of life that have a bearing in concrete spirituality, in consecration and in mission.

A. *Christological and evangelical aspect*

If we want to go deeper, on the theological level, on the spirituality of a charism, we must go to its roots with the perspective that is offered us by the Magisterium of the Church.

The root of every charism is found in the life of Christ, in the imitation of an aspect of his life or of his mystery of salvation that offers the vital synthesis of everything because it is rich and significant (prayer, poverty, preaching, action...). This is the perspective of *Mystici Corporis* and of *Lumen Gentium*.

The perfect measure of every charism is found in Christ more than in the Founder. In this sense we can affirm that every charism, through the work of the Spirit, discovers and tries to bring to realization an evangelical word, a word of the only Word (Ch. Lubich). Every charism is as if a window that opens for the first time through the work of the Spirit and casts with its light in an untried manner on the heart of the Gospel and invites that it be lived with a new and original synthesis of spirituality and apostolate (von Balthazar).

Around an aspect all the evangelical demands, so to say, are bound together as a bundle of essential values that the charism gathers, puts together and arranges. And at the bottom of every charism must be found the reality of the love of God and of neighbor that blooms in a peculiar and unseen manner inasmuch as the root of every charism is love. It is precisely in love that the possibility of community among various charisms could be found.

The Christocentric and evangelical aspect fundamental to every charism brings light to all the other elements and confers strength and dynamism to them. Having to do with imitation and imitation with Christ, it is always an expression of sanctification, it is Christ-forming. The origin and goal of all Christians, the culminating expression of each one of them is found in the heart of Christ

an in particular in the heart of Christ Crucified and Risen, wherein all and every charism finds realization and their point of unity.

B. *Dynamism of the grace of the Holy Spirit*

Every charism is an expression of the renewing action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, so LG 4 reminds us. Men and women Founders bring to her service their own humanity and their own character, beginning from their own concrete history.

The Spirit finds them as the interpreters of the new historical needs of the Kingdom of God. Attentive to the signs of the times, they open new prospects and frontiers to the action of the Spirit in the Church and they are capable of raising new vocations. Although charisms appear in a precise moment of history responding to particular needs of a place or of a time, usually their force goes beyond the limits of time and place and are destined to last and to make themselves present in the whole Church.

The measure of the authentic charismatic dimension is not narcissism but the ecclesial extroversion, the pro-existence of the charism, its humble subjection to the service of the Kingdom and its offering of self to the Church in order to collaborate in her universal mission.

Finally, we need to remember, as a sign of hope, the bond that charisms have with the character of the future and of universality that the Spirit guarantees to the Church by animating a constant preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ. And to renew the conviction – another sign of hope – that, although persons can become unfaithful to a charism, the Spirit is capable of raising it up if it is dead, of strengthening it if it is weakened, of renewing it if it has turned old, of opening it to new wealth and generosity if it has remained closed to itself.

C. *Ecclesiality and ecclesialization of charism*

By definition and by nature, every charism is at the service of the common good of the Church; hence it responds to a project or to an unceasing action of the Spirit who brings the Gospel of Christ to fullness of understanding and of life. It is easy to understand the relationship that charisms have with the dimension of holiness, universality and apostolicity of the Church.

Although the distinction is not current or accepted by all, I find it convenient to speak of ecclesiality and of ecclesialization of charism.

Ecclesiality is as if an internal quality of charism that helps it to establish sincere, absolute and cordial communion with the Church, under whose judgment, discernment and approval it submits itself. It is the capacity that every charism has to maintain a firm and sincere ecclesial communion with the Pope, foundation and sign of universal communion, with the doctrine of the Magisterium, with the Pastors of the Church, with the mission itself of the Church.

The ecclesialization of charism supposes living and experiencing the values of life and of apostolate at the service of the universal church and of local churches. The religious families have not to live for themselves but for the Church and for the Kingdom of Christ. The narcissism of self contemplation is not ecclesial, the giving in service is. The dimension of service, to live for Christ and for his cause, is a criterion of discernment, a note of maturity of persons and of Institutions. To live in communion and in the mission is the only form for maintaining alive the vitality of charism, its creativity, its possibilities of raising new energies, vitality that is still unknown, entrusted to grace and the dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

Hence an adequate expansion of charism offers in fact the possibility of noticing the dimension of catholicity that each authentic gift of the Holy Spirit has for the Church. Born in a specific and limited context, it journeys with the Church, becomes universalized, is enriched with the encounter with new vocations and new cultures.

C. *An authentic humanizing prospect under the light of the Gospel*

Inasmuch as every charism is rooted in Christ, it is not possible that in the Founders and in their proposal of spirituality a humanizing dimension should be wanting, that is, a synthesis of the principle of the Incarnation that offers in the charism the possibility of equilibrating the values of a new humanity in the light of Christ.

Normally in charisms and in Founders, there is a concrete attention to persons and to life in its day-to-day aspects, in its growth and its difficulties. Every charism must be capable of generating a new man according to the measure of Christ. A criterion of discernment of the solidity and strength of charism is its capacity to render concreteness to spiritual values and to transform them into style of life, interior and exterior, communitarian and apostolic.

An authentic charism cannot, in its project and in its pedagogy, leave on the margins the fundamental aspects of human life under the light of the Gospel and having as a model the figure of Christ in its holy humanity.

D. *Marian dimension*

I cannot but refer, although briefly, to this dimension that I firmly believe in. It is not just a matter of affirming that the devotion to the Virgin Mary occupies or must occupy an important place in every charismatic spirituality of the Church. It has something to do with something more substantial: by the measure whereby Mary is model of the Church and in her all vocations, in her we see all charisms realized and as if “ecclesialized”, if it is true that the Church has an intimately Marian profile (Von Balthazar).

It is a matter of underlining the aspect of the presence and the exemplarity of Mary in every charism, not only with the recognition of her patronage and with expressions of a personal and communitarian devotion, but also with a subjective, that is, interior dimension, capable of shaping the sentiments and the attitudes proper to consecration and mission according to the original prospect of what we call charism. In this living experience is rooted the authentically Marian dimension of a spirituality proposed by a Founder.

IV. Charism and spirituality

It is suitable that first let us try to answer a question: do all Institutes possess their own spirituality? Here is the answer of Fr. Federico Ruiz who has dealt explicitly with the subject: “Understanding spirituality in the strict sense as an original personal and communitarian experience, defined as attitude and practices of integral Christian life, including the reflection and the doctrinal elaboration, then, I do not believe that every Institute has a complete, original and distinct spirituality.”

It is an affirmation that corresponds to the facts as they appear from an analysis that could be done regarding the spirituality of an Institute. *A priori* one can think that there cannot exist so many

syntheses of spirituality or so many Christian spiritualities as many as there are religious Institutes in the Church. But this is not a problem of identity, as if the lack of a spirituality of one's own should mean lack of true Christianity. In fact:

- a) It is not necessary that every charism should develop an elaborate doctrinal synthesis. Some charisms arose as graces of life and of action, as response to specific needs, and in that line they have created a style of life. From such graces they live and are nourished, aiding themselves with elements of Christian life and of common spirituality.
- b) There are then charisms that have in the initial grace a greater originality, a richer experience and a more complete doctrinal elaboration. It is the case of Institutes that have had as Founder a great spiritual author.
- c) In other cases, we have a kind of charismatic constellation around a great spirituality. It is thus that spiritual families or great movements are born in the Church.

Charism and spirituality, in the sense that every charism must have its own and original spirituality, do not coincide. What appears necessary, instead, is that every charism, since its first vision, offers a synthesis of Christian and ecclesial spirituality, accentuating here and there what is more proper to it in the style of being, of living and of working that it offers.

With this fundamental clarification granted, it is nonetheless necessary that every charism possesses, for its own vitality and for its own mission, these conditions:

1° A coherent and valid synthesis of the great principles of Christian spirituality

Without pretending that every charism had its own spirituality, a school of spirituality in the Church, it is absolutely necessary that the spiritual dimension of the consecrated life offers all those elements that are indispensable in the light of dogmatic theology, with their necessary repercussion in spiritual theology, after having taken into consideration that it is important that every spirituality, every charism could be defined by secure, theological and dogmatic elements of Christian being and living, more than by peripheral or partial accentuations. A spirituality is much richer the more it has, as point of reference, the great mysteries of Christian faith, those that give strength and originality to living in Christ and through the Church.

What spirituality considers and requires from its point of view is the dimension of experience that ought not be confused with sentiment or with a vibrant participation; it must concern instead a correspondence between dogmatic or theological contents of spirituality, or of a spirituality, and the object sense of its structures and, on the other hand, with the real conscience and the real motivations with which they live these principles or values. If coherence and authenticity are wanting, a reality affirmed in its principles is not enough. It is because of this that spirituality demands its dimension of experience, of assimilation and of progressive journey. It needs also an authentic spiritual pedagogy and a style of life that incarnates and creates a constant awareness of values. Aside from a great spirituality in the heritage of an institute, the forging of saints is difficult due to lack of coherence and incarnation.

The good health of a spirituality rests on the balance between the wealth of its objective values and the qualities of the concrete experience of those who live such values.

2° *An illumination that reaches communion with God, fraternal life, asceticism and apostolic service.*

In this perspective, some principles and values that characterize the evangelical experience cannot be wanting in the spiritual synthesis of a charism. Fr. Federico Ruiz remembers the following:

- 1) Mysticism: experience of God in Christ with its mediations.
- 2) Asceticism: option and projection of a coherent life, with its demands.
- 3) Community: communion with God, communion of life and of service.
- 4) Mission: sense of the universal Church and concrete apostolic service.
- 5) Form of life or style that unifies existence.

These factors constitute the central nucleus of a religious experience and of its spirituality. What matters more is to find the unifying center of everything to then establish the doses and proportion of the parts. The secret of the great charism lies precisely in this point. The Founders have received a special grace of the Spirit and they have worked during many years to define the exact dose and the combination of the various factors, defending it from exaggerations and from extremisms in whatever direction.

Unity therefore precedes from the unifying center of the charism and from the light that projects on each of the elements to the point of unifying them and to conferring dynamism on them.

3° *A coherent pedagogy for proposing and letting the values be assimilated*

Every charism needs pedagogical wisdom; every spirituality must transform itself into mystagogy: coherent, complete, progressive initiation of persons who receive the grace of that spirituality and are called to become servants of the gift of the Spirit to his Church.

A charism without pedagogy is reduced to theoretical affirmations. A danger that needs to be overcome today is to be satisfied with affirmations and formulations of principles of spirituality without the capacity of bring them to a coherent assimilation by persons. There is something worse: there might arise illusions and mirages, imbalances between the beauty of the principles and the precariousness of achievements.

The canonical affirmation that every Institute has its own *Ration Institutionis* is not enough. It is suitable that there ought to be an authentic updated pedagogical heritage capable of shaping persons and of offering them wisdom. Those who participate in the life of an Institute all need to have, aside from the enthusiasm of an identification, the experience and the joy of personal witnessing of him who knows, by experience, that life works, that the charism is real, that the message is incarnated in life. All this supposes, as in the best spiritual pedagogy:

- 1) The clear proposal of values and commitments.
- 2) The concrete sense of the incarnation of values into attitudes and style of life.
- 3) The coherent personalized awareness of the assimilation by the formators, with the indispensable mediator action.
- 4) The patient work of spiritual guidance and the prospect of a spiritual itinerary, through the paths of formation, with attention to the person starting from his freedom and with a great capacity of setting it before God, before the only Master Christ.

In the final analysis, it is the spiritual pedagogy with its fruits that guarantees the value of a spirituality and of a charism.

4° A capacity of Catholic dynamism of the charism in communion with the Church

A brief and last reflection to underline something already mentioned in more occasions.

Its projection towards the future, its dependence on the Spirit, its necessary communion with the Church corresponds to the essence of the charism. Communion with a journeying Church, a Church under the power of the Spirit. The Catholic dynamism I refer to is precisely the capacity of every Institute to journey with the whole Church, with all that is the Church” doctrine, life, communion, mission, universality. We can affirm what von Balthasar says: all is in the fragment, but the fragment is fecund and meaningful in the whole. From here come the attentive and watchful attitudes of communion with the Church of journeying with her, of constant rejuvenation under the action of the Spirit so that the seed might bring forth all its fruit, so that it may grow in extension, in depth, in dynamism of service.

Conclusion

We have made a summary exposition of some reflections regarding Spirituality and charism, from a general perspective. They are reflections that invite us to value charism and to bring it to realization starting from its more genuine essence with is that of spirituality: that Spirit that appears so much hidden and impersonal that it needs to be unveiled in its mystery.

Since its origin and along its development, the experience of charism brings with itself the seal of the Spirit. It is moved by the grace of the call in order to live by such charism in communion with the Founder and with the Founder’s family. It is the Spirit that makes it authentic by making it become a family’s real spiritual heritage. It is the Spirit who maintains it in communion and makes it dynamic in the mission of the Church.

The charism’s memory, the strength of its vitality, the wealth of its own spirituality or of a spirituality on which the charism projects a noontide light capable of letting all the elements of a new synthesis shine like gems, are motives for thanksgiving and are also commitments of adherence to something that is mysteriously born of the Spirit and is entrusted to its dynamism and to our fidelity.