

CHARISM OF FOUNDERS IN TIMES OF RE-FOUNDATION

In post-Vita Consecrata times

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A JOURNEY OF AWARENESS

At five years since the publication of the apostolic exhortation Vita Consecrata and at the dawn of the third millennium of Christianity, I think we can observe realistically and joyfully how a journey by now completed has brought us to a deeper and more shared awareness of the charismatic significance of consecrated life in the Church.

Beginning with the new awareness that happened during Vatican Council II, moving through the "tormented" post-conciliar time, along subsequent theological studies, we arrived at the Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata, the document that permits us to gather up a true historical and theological route with objectivity. It leads us to state on solid grounds, that consecrated life... in the multiplicity of its expressions...is an authentic charism, that is, a gift of the Holy Trinity for the good of the Church and of the world.

In this framework of reflection we can pick up, almost as logical consequence of the charismatic identity of the consecrated life, a growing interest for the study of the specific charism of the founders. In these thirty years (almost forty!) we started off from sporadic hints and reached the most systematic formulations around that reality, difficult to describe and even more so to define. The Church magisterium offered interesting points of reference.

In this regard the document Vita Consecrata seems significant to us; besides offering important elements of content, it uses a sober and clarifying terminology relating to founders.

These "theological certainties", if read in a superficial or a-critical way, could still arouse some ambiguity. If on the one hand they give us a certain security in referring to the identity and mission of founders, on the other hand, they could leave us "satisfied" with the theoretical information received and lead us toward new shores perhaps more practical and urgent, as though we had by now said all we had to say and knew how to say about founders.

It is certainly negative to remain fixed in a past that we've reached, but it is equally harmful to hold on to the present or extend ourselves in an obsessive way toward the future, all signs of insecurity. I think that our founders are "living beings" and therefore can re-enter into an objective re-reading of the past, present and future of our foundations normally and authoritatively. This means that the journey of serious historical and theological research is not concluded and must continue, keeping in step with the pastoral realizations of today, giving these the consistency and solidity necessary in order not to exchange God's design for our Institutes with a subjective, albeit collective, creativity.

Based on these brief premises, and without pretending to draw a balance on the situation and offer helpful formulae for the future, I would like to take a summary look on what the charism of founders can suggest to us in these, which we call "times of refoundation."

I wanted to give this summary glance an apparently simplistic, "curious" title: I speak of a "Pauline route". In fact, it strikes me curious that "three great men called Paul" are almost the "milestones" on the journey of our study of charisms, in general and of the charism of founders, in particular.

· Paul of Tarsus, faces and clarifies in his letters the fascinating and hot topic of charisms. After the effervescence for a charismatic reality in the early Church (with different modes in the Greek Church and the Latin one) times of silence are experienced, or times of varied and debated interpretations on charisms. The theological problem will be taken up again in a deeper way during

Vatican Council II.

- Regarding the charism of those who were called to found new religious families in the Church, it was "another Paul", this time Paul VI, who introduced the term charism of founders on the magisterial level.

- At the end of the second millennium of Christianity and almost as an opening to the present third millennium, the document that we are explicitly commemorating, *Vita Consecrata*, makes continual reference to founders and foundresses, and bears the signature of another Paul: John Paul II.

Certainly this division into periods doesn't follow symmetrical stages in history, but is meant to point out those "indispensable" references, meaningful for our topic.

Paul of Tarsus: "There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit:" (1 Cor 12:4)

[In the Italian Sister uses: "There are varieties of charisms, but one alone is the Spirit."]

Every theology on charisms within Christianity has a perennial point of reference: the Pauline letters, especially the first letter to the community of the Church of Corinth. In this sense, Paul of Tarsus is the teacher in whose school we learn the concrete and pregnant meaning of the term, and of the charismatic reality in the nascent Church, and of the Church of all times. "... beginning with the middle of the '70's the ranks of those who turned to Pauline thought about charisms has grown, for the purpose of re-reading and re-interpreting theologically the spiritual and apostolic experience of founders, foundresses and their foundations. At the end of their research, some of those scholars reached this conclusion: to adequately describe the rich and multifaceted experience of the foundress and the community which took life from them, it is indispensable and enlightening to turn not only to this or that general or particular meaning of charism, but to the entire Pauline charismatic universe. In fact, various religious institutes have followed this direction in redefining, in a unified way, their identity in the Church and in the contemporary world. If for historical reasons the term charism lost its original meaning, in a certain sense compromising its existential implementation, it's not because of this that along the centuries persons and communities have received the gifts of God for the good of the whole Church. Contemporaneously with the Council and early post-Conciliar time (in a broad perspective we can talk about the '60-70's), we find the first courageous attempts for a theological in-depth study. They reveal the real existence and the theological nature of the charism, identified until now with the "spirit" of the founders, its historical importance, its hermeneutic meaning in regard to the Institute. A series of expressions coagulate around the term/reality "charism of founders", which, in a new light, pose the need for a real in-depth study. Authors are looking for the best expressions explaining their meaning.

Thus, we arrive at a document of the Church Magisterium, which besides being important in its content and splendid in its language, will test the wording and theological weight of charism of founders, will almost give the go-ahead to new studies, will be the apostolic exhortation of Paul VI *Evangelica Testificatio*.

Paul VI: "...the charism of your Founders raised up by God in his Church" (ET., 11)

This document, even in its nature as exhortation, brought consecrated life back, in a wave of the Holy Spirit, to its Gospel origins. "ET" represents a true point of arrival and point of departure for reflection on founders.

The acceptance and appreciation by the Magisterium of the charismatic identity of founders aroused great enthusiasm among theologians and not only among them; the '70's and '80's in fact, see religious institutes involved in the drawing up of new Constitutions and every religious

family, in its own way and different methods, went to draw from the historical sources, narratives and documents of the founders, in an attempt to bring out the distinctive charism of the foundation and the most meaningful connotations of their founders.

This was the great time of a blossoming of hypotheses and formulations which, in the effort to distinguish and clarify, reached subtleties that in some cases touch on confusion. Still, thanks to this great flowering of studies we arrived at understanding the importance of the topic and having some discernment criteria for: determining the authenticity of a charism, for determining the essential characteristics of a founder, and for undertaking a re-reading of the originating gift in the historical today.

At the end of the '70's the document *Mutuae Relationis*, drawn up by the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and by the Congregation for Bishops presents a description of the charism of founders, but does not exempt from further studies.

That description in fact, will give rise, in the '80's and '90's to an ever more mature reflection relating to: the gift that the founder receives for the foundation, for those aspects destined to be given over to members of the Institute, and for the specific gift with which that Institute is identified in the Church.

Publications and debates continued, in a certain sense accompanying the preparatory journey toward the first Synod on consecrated life, preceded by two preparatory documents: the *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum laboris*.

JOHN PAUL II: "fidelity to the founding charism" (VC 36)

In the introduction to the exhortation VC of John Paul II, we read "I am confident that the sons and daughters of the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, will receive this Exhortation with open hearts. At the same time, I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life..."

The importance of this document is evident if we think about the fact that the 1994 Synod was the first, in the history of the Church. The very nature of the document, an Exhortation, and its principal aim...consecrated life in its fundamental contents....were not intended to offer a specific theology of founding charisms. Still, from the contexts in which this topic is inserted and developed, from the terminology used, from the importance given it, we seem to notice a stimulus for further reflections and not the signaling of an absolutely firm closure to the topic.

In my opinion VC contributes very important elements about the founding charism. I indicate the following, among others:

- VC situates every founding charism, at its beginning, in the most profound context and in its truest orientation: the Trinitarian orientation (n. 36, in this regard is of an incomparable profundity and also beauty.)
- It is from the founding charism that the "subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute" derives. (n. 36) That is, its spirituality (the "modus vivendi" of each Institute), the specific ecclesial mission, the individual works in which the mission is concretized, so that the charism will not be able to be defined by the works, but these are the visibility of the charism.
- It is the founding charism that generates "the most authentic tradition of the Institute, as present in its Rule, Constitutions and Statutes." (n. 36)
- VC refers contemporaneously, but explicitly to founders and foundresses (this is wording that moves through the whole document). Certainly it does not limit itself to their typological characteristics and does not look at the person of co-founders or co-foundresses. In the document, the founder/foundress is always to be referred to the community of the origins and not to individual persons.

“CHARISMATIC ARS VIVENDI”

As I observed in the introduction to these reflections, in the “post-Vita Consecrata” period we can pick out (and accept with discernment and realism) an emerging tendency for the problem of the lived present and future of religious institutes. A certain terminological and thematic stability on the founding charism and individual founders displaces, in a certain sense, the overall directional tendencies. We cannot be unaware that we find very few historical, biographical or spiritual publications on the persons of founders and foundresses of individual institutes, fruit of scholarly research but also of young religious writing master’s or doctoral theses.

Still, the general tendency, especially in Europe and in the area of traditional institutions, is toward the re-vitalization of the institutes. The terminology is diverse and abundant (with the risk of falling into nominalism).

In fact, we cannot deny that at this time we still notice some discomfort, sign that not everything has arrived after the discover and new understanding of the originating charism. Fabio Ciardi writes: “We have studied and deepened religious life in all its anthropological, psychological, sociological, theological and spiritual components. And still we often do not know how to actualize (implement) what we have understood. We notice almost a dichotomy between intellectual understanding and our lived experience. Barbara Fiand denounces the bogging down in interminable sessions for identifying objectives, writing statements, planning strategies. Commissions of experts produce innumerable studies, which absorb a lot of time and rarely lead to the renewal of the institute that they are aimed at.” Some (institutes and persons) are tired of definitions and programming; they almost pose for themselves the Hamlettian dilemma: “To be or not to be,” which in other words might sound like “To refound or to die.” A well-intended refoundation goes back to the Gospel experienced (lived) in its originating charism and not only to the today of the institute. This is what Ciardi means to express speaking of “radical renewal” rather than re-foundation.

New terms, therefore, new suggestions, new efforts during the post-Vita consecrata.

While foundations are happening in new and ancient Christian contexts, traditional institutes are aiming to “re-found.” One wonders, however, if this occurs as an urging of the Spirit in face of new times or as fear in face of a possible historical death.

Regarding death of institutes, a phenomenon that is natural to every historical reality, José RO-VIRA writes: “It is necessary...to learn the “charismatic ars moriendi” that is, to know how to die,... The problem, in fact, is not to die, but whether the hour has really arrived. The problem is not “natural death” but “suicide.” That is, if the institute has or has not carried to term the historical mission entrusted to it by the Spirit.”

It is necessary, however, also to know how to live, to learn the “charismatic ars vivendi.” Regarding this, P. ARNAIZ states: “There is a revitalizing force that we must discover and direct.” Because it is hidden (know how to discover) and offered to our human possibilities (know how to direct), the operation is real (actually exists) delicate and demanding. The experience of these recent years teaches us that our efforts, though well planned, at inculturation, new redimensioning of forces and works, restructuring or redesign of presences and provinces, the approach of a globalized and technicalized world, the search for some areas of solidarity, the effort to be qualified professionally, the formation and vocation ministry planning, the promotion of meetings, conventions and congresses at all levels, are not sufficient. Everything would be void if there were not the humble and continual search for that “revitalizing force” which must “discover and direct.”

The “charismatic ars vivendi” therefore consists in a continual consonance with the living and vivifying Spirit of God, the only life-giving principle of human history.

To have a real and continual consonance with the Spirit who inspired the charism of our foun-

ders, far from any “spiritualism” and without meaning to offer easy “recipes,” I will highlight some indications that I summarize in the art of knowing how to listen. The science of listening, it seems to me, could bring us to know how to discover and to direct the revitalizing force of the Spirit in today’s story.

THE ART OF LISTENING

Almost by way of conclusion I will profile some “types of listening” that seem opportune to me for this topic.

- Listening in a silence that purifies ideas and words. In these decades we have discovered and accumulated many important and fruitful ideas about consecrated life in the variety of its charisms (see above, the Pauline route): We ought to let what is essential settle, and free ourselves from what is superfluous and from the multiplicity even if it is fascinating. Creating mental silence does not mean giving up thinking, but to let oneself be inhabited by the essence of things and not by their appearance. In addition we ought to bring about a purification from and of words, avoiding excess, the anguish of planning and participating frenetically (actively and passively) in a multiplicity of conferences, gatherings, which are meant to help us reflect, but if not conducted wisely, could deprive us of true ability to reflect. This “fasting” from ideas and words is not a renunciation of thought, but rather a recuperation of intellectual and vital strength.
- Theological listening to the charism. It is the silent listening to the charism in its theological density. That does not mean stoppage of formal and systematic study, but an active, serious, and persevering effort, done with amazement and gratitude for what God does and has done. It is the task of the person who listens to God and speaks with God the *teo-logos*. Theological study of the charism, also five or more years after VC, done with the necessary attitudes, will lead to new “theological certainties” which, if not dogmatic will be paradigmatic in relation to a practical revitalization.
- Listening to the historic origins. Far from making our founders say our words or imposing a predetermined outline on history, historical listening will reveal to us their personality and their experience with greater purity and truth. Free from pre-understandings, the fundamental values of the origins, even while signed by historical contexts a long way from ours, will be able to enrich and explain our present and future history.
- Listening to the life of every human person. What Bruno FORTE wrote about systematic theology seems to me valid in relation to the theology of charisms, today. “At the center of the village (globalized world) there is the silence of the Church and the noise of the market, the celebration of praise and the heavy hardness of cursing. That is the place of theology, humble servant of the Word pronounced for humanity and for our salvation.” It is a question of the subtle exercise of listening to life. A theology and a history of charisms in times of refoundation will not be able to remove itself from the burden of human living, and not only in a collective and communitarian way, but also personal. “To Globalize” Persons, that is, to consider them with common characteristics in an “*en masse*” view and give them “global” charismatic answers is contrary to the revitalization of the institute itself. For this reason we say to listen to each person, not the human person in a generic sense (we worked with that much through many interdisciplinary approaches, necessary work also.) I think that in stating the need for listening to every person, we must think above all of young people, whom someone wanted to call “men without vocation,” full of desire for freedom, unconscious seekers for a different quality of life. The whole vocation conversation, which cannot consist in more or less proselytizing publicity, must be projected here, in true listening, by adults among whom we put ourselves, consecrated persons, adults in the faith and experts in the mystery of the human heart.
- Shared Listening We will fall into a vicious circle if, to communicate to you our multiform lis-

tening (at least of the two aspects I've mentioned now), we should invent gatherings and conventions again. Rather it's a question of starting toward the future with a shared mentality and a shared will, in theory and in practice. This is the primary task of those in authority in an institute. There can be many autonomous and disconnected initiatives and activities, especially in large, structured institutes. Persons or staff busy with the theological study of the charism, in historical research, in ministry, in "ad gentes" mission, in multimedia communication, in the administration of a globalized economic world. Every "dicastery" or "department" or "sector" can function by itself without there being a shared arrangement/system, even though intentionally or by sector, all try and tend toward living the one charism for which we are responsible today.

It seems to me that General Chapters, General Administrations, the ongoing historical consciences of the Institute, are the first to be involved in promoting that shared listening, in order to be able to discover and direct (channel) the revitalizing power of the charism in times of refoundation and beyond.

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