

Charisms: What are they? Who are they for? What does the Church teach?

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Rediscovering the Charismatic Dimension: Recent Magisterial Teaching

Pope John Paul II stated that one of the most significant contributions of the Second Vatican Council was the “rediscovery” of the “charismatic dimension” of the Church.

During the feast of Pentecost, in 1998, the Pope asked representatives of all the renewal movements of the Church to join with him to celebrate this feast. Over 500,000 people from more than 50 different movements came. What the Pope did was to gather together the teaching of Scripture and Vatican II, on the charismatic gifts of the Spirit and proclaim them with urgency and passion. He begins:

“The Church’s self-awareness (is) based on the certainty that Jesus Christ is alive, is working in the present and changes life...With the Second Vatican Council, the Comforter recently gave the Church ...a renewed Pentecost, instilling a new and unforeseen dynamism.

Whenever the Spirit intervenes, he leaves people astonished. He brings about events of amazing newness; he radically changes persons and history. This was the unforgettable experience of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council during which, under the guidance of the same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as one of her constitutive elements: ‘It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank...He makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church” (*Lumen gentium*, n.12).”

With these words Pope John Paul II honestly acknowledged what many theologians, scripture scholars and church historians had demonstrated in their studies, that the charismatic workings of the Holy Spirit are an essential and complementary reality to the working of the Spirit in the sacramental and hierarchical dimensions of the Church’s existence. The pope also honestly acknowledged that the charismatic dimension, important as it was, was nevertheless in a way forgotten, or overshadowed by perhaps a too exclusive emphasis on the sacramental and hierarchical, and it required a special action of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council to bring the Church back to an awareness of the importance of this “constitutive” dimension.

The Pope in his speech went on to make this explicit: “The institutional and charismatic aspects are co-essential as it were to the Church’s constitution. They contribute, although differently, to the life, renewal and sanctification of God’s People. It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church’s charismatic dimension that before and after the Council, a remarkable pattern of growth has been established for ecclesial movements and new communities...You present here, are the tangible proof of this ‘outpouring’ of the Spirit.”

Benedict XVI in one of the first initiatives of his pontificate convened a similar gathering of the movements in the Church in 2006 and reaffirmed the teaching of John Paul II, quoting his remarks on this occasion.

John Paul II, as does Benedict XVI, cites the foundational document of Vatican II, the Constitution on the Church, 12 (*Lumen gentium*) as the basis for this teaching. The background to this particular text is of significance. There was a debate among the Council fathers about whether the Church still needed the “charismatic dimension” and in particular, the charismatic gifts, today, or whether they were intended just for the early Church to help her get established. The argument went that these workings of the Spirit were needed to help get the Church going but now that we had sacraments and hierarchy they were no longer needed. This argument did not carry the day, as there is no basis in Scripture for believing that this important dimension is only needed for a while. In fact the scripture witnesses to just the opposite; the charismatic gifts are an important accompaniment to the preaching of the gospel and the health of the internal life of the Church. The Council fathers voted overwhelmingly to affirm this truth and accept the text that John Paul II cites.

This Conciliar affirmation of the importance of the charismatic dimension was a way of affirming a dynamic vision of lay participation in the life of the Church and is closely linked to the important affirmations of the “universal call to holiness” and the “universal call to mission.”

Biblical Foundations

While John Paul II quoted the Council text as a basis for his teaching, the Council text itself cites the Bible as the foundation of its teaching. What is the Biblical teaching about the “charismatic dimension” and “charisms?”

The particular text that the Council cites is 1 Cor. 12:11.

“But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.”

The “all of these” that this text references are mentioned in the previous verses:

“Now in regard to spiritual gifts (charisms), brothers, I do not want you to be unaware...To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another

gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues.” (1 Cor. 12: 1, 7-10)

But this isn't the only list of charisms that we find in the New Testament. There are also lists in Romans 12, 1 Peter 4, and Ephesians 4. We only have space to look at one of these additional lists and it will be the one in Romans 12.

“For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality (Rom 12: 4-13)

In this text, as in the 1 Cor. 12 text the context for the explanation of the charisms is in understanding the Church as a “body” with different members, all playing different roles, all essential for the overall well-being of the body. Sometimes the statement is made that Paul clearly says that love is more important than the charisms, and that is certainly true. The beautiful hymn to love in 1 Cor. 13 is sandwiched between 2 chapters that contain important teaching on the charisms. But Paul is not presenting a “cafeteria approach to Christianity.” He isn't pitting charisms and charity against each other. As a matter of fact he sees the acceptance and exercise of spiritual gifts as, precisely, an important way of loving. He summarizes his teaching like this: “Pursue love, but strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” (1 Cor. 14: 1) It's not a matter of either or, but both and. Love is certainly primary – more important than charisms if you will – but the charisms are given by the Spirit to help us to love and serve in specific ways that are important for the well being of the Church. Paul's advice is to “make love our aim” and to eagerly pursue the spiritual gifts.

We see the same harmony between love, holiness and the faithful exercise of charisms in the passage from Romans cited above. Charisms aren't isolated gifts but are interwoven with the life of love, service, and mission which characterizes the very nature of the church. This is why John Paul II calls the charismatic dimension and the institutional dimension “co-essential” to the Church's constitution. It's not either Sacraments and Hierarchy or charisms; it's both. Both are essential to the healthy function of Church life and when these elements are not in right relationship with each other the Church is weakened.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reflects the Biblical, Conciliar and Papal teaching in its numerous mentions of charisms.

“Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men and to the needs of the world.” (CCC 799)

“Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them, and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.” (CCC 800)

What are charisms?

Before we go any further we need to understand better what charisms are. Charisms are not just “natural abilities” but gifts distributed by the Spirit to each person as He wills. Charisms often build on and work with our natural personalities and abilities, but not always.

This is clearly the case in the more obvious “supernatural” gifts such as healing or miracles. When someone who has been given the charism of healing prays with people who are sick many more get well than when people without that particular gift pray for the sick. We all should pray for the sick but some who pray for the sick have a special gift of healing working through them. The action of the Holy Spirit is also present in the less obviously supernatural charisms.

We are grateful for all our preachers and teachers but some seem to have a special “gift” that is not only the fruit of human eloquence or diligent study but brings with it a sense of God’s presence and has a particular ability to help us recognize that the Lord is present and speaking to us in the preaching or teaching. Sometimes we call this exercise of the Word “anointed.” The charism of “prophecy” in the broad sense or the charism of teaching is then at work. Prophecy in this sense isn’t about particular predictions, although this may happen occasionally as well. It’s rather about Spirit-inspired speaking of God’s Word that causes the heart of the hearers to “burn” similar to what the disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced when Jesus explained the Scriptures to them.

The same is true with the gift of encouragement or exhortation. We are grateful for “positive personalities” that lift up relationships but there are certain people who seem to have a particular gift for speaking the right word at the right time, words of encouragement, that lift us up in a special way, so that we may experience the impartation of grace, peace, or hope that we need.

The same is true with the gift of “generous giving.” We are grateful for all those who give generously to support the work of the Church and its ministries – and we all should be doing this - but there are certain among us who God has gifted to be able to make money and in being able to discern what, where, when and to whom to give it, in a

way that is truly remarkable. Some have a “gift/charism” of giving generously, the right amount at the right time to the right recipient.

It also seems clear from the scripture that each member of the body is given some charism or charisms, that each member of the body has a call or vocation, to use the gifts they are given to build up the body and help carry out the church’s mission. It also seems clear that none of the scriptural lists of charisms we have cited intend to be comprehensive in listing the possible charisms. They are rather indicative of the rich diversity of gifts that the Holy Spirit gives, not all of which are listed or perhaps ever could be.

There has been a lot of attention given to the call for the laity to “fully, actively and consciously” participate in the Liturgy, but attention also needs to be given to the need for lay people to recognize the gift(s) that they are being given by the Spirit that they have a responsibility to exercise, in love, for the good of the Church.

Witness of the Tradition

The teaching of the contemporary magisterium is not only supported by the clear biblical teaching but illumined by the early tradition of the Church. A great deal of helpful scholarship has been done which illumines the experience of the Spirit and the charisms in the first centuries of the Church.¹

Tertullian, in his *On Baptism*, written in the early third century, addresses the newly baptized who are about to enter the area where all will celebrate the Eucharist: “Therefore, you blessed ones, for whom the grace of God is waiting, when you come up from the most sacred bath of the new birth, when you spread out your hands for the first time in your mother’s house (the church) with your brethren, ask your Father, ask your Lord, for the special gift of his inheritance, the distribution of charisms, which form an additional, underlying feature (of baptism). ‘Ask,’ he says ‘and you shall receive.’ In fact, you have sought and it has been added to you.”

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367) writes of the experience of the charisms: “We begin to have insight into the mysteries of faith, we are able to prophesy and to speak with wisdom. We become steadfast in hope and receive the gifts of healing. . .

These gifts enter us as a gentle rain. Little by little they bear abundant fruit.”

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-387) also speaks of the charisms in his baptismal lectures: “Great, omnipotent and admirable is the Holy Spirit in the charisms.” He notes that “all the laity” have charisms.

Following St. Paul’s exhortation to especially seek to prophesy, Cyril declares: “Let each one prepare oneself to receive the heavenly gift (of prophecy),” and “God grant that you may be worthy of the charism of prophecy.”

¹ Fr. George Montague and Fr. Killian McDonnell have written a major work tracing the biblical and historical experience of the Spirit in relationship to the sacraments of Christian initiation. Their major work is: *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 1991). They have written a much shorter, popular summary of their work from which the citations in this article are taken: *Fanning the Flame: What does Baptism in the Holy Spirit Have to Do with Christian Initiation?* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), commenting on the Syrian liturgy in Antioch notes that the charisms were manifested in connection with the baptismal liturgy and mentions specifically, wisdom, healing, speaking in tongues, prophesy, and other “wonderful works.” He notes even that “every church had many who prophesied.”

Montague and McDonnell sum up their research with a striking summary.

“Thus, from Carthage in North Africa, Poitiers in Gaul, Jerusalem in Palestine, from Caesarea in Cappadocia, from Constantinople, and from Antioch, Apamea, Mabbug, and Cyrrhus in Syria, we have witnesses to the reception of the charisms within the rite of initiation. These are representatives of Latin, Greek, and Syria liturgical traditions. From Antioch, Apamea, Mabbug, and Cyrrhus in Syria we have testimony to a later experiential appropriation of the graces of baptism conferred in infancy.”²

Chrysostom though, writing in the 5th century, makes the sobering observation that “the charisms are long gone...The present church is like a woman who has fallen from her former prosperous days. In many respects she retains only the tokens of that ancient prosperity.”³

Why, by the fifth century, in at least major portions of the Church, did the church only retain “tokens” of her previous charismatic prosperity? Was it because persecution had ceased and it was expected that everyone be a Christian? Were the standards for admitting new Christians lowered? Was the preparation no longer carefully carried out? Did the Montanist heretics give the charisms a bad name?

The Montanist heresy illustrates the wisdom of the scripture and church’s teaching about the importance of charisms being subject to the discernment of pastoral authority, not to extinguish the Spirit but to test it, holding on to what is sound. (1 Thes 5:19-21)

“It is in this sense that the discernment of charisms is always necessary. No charism is exempt from being referred and submitted to the Church’s shepherds...so that all the diverse and complementary charisms work together ‘for the common good.’” (CCC 801)

Whatever the reasons that led to the decline as the life of the Church went on the charisms became mainly associated with the lives of especially holy people, saints, and the charisms are regularly seen in the lives of saints throughout the centuries.

As John Paul II, and now Benedict XVI, continues to lead the proper interpretation and implementation of Vatican II, they both have stressed the importance of rediscovering the **universal** call to holiness and the **universal** call to evangelization. The “rediscovery” of the charismatic dimension of the Church unfolds in this context.

John Paul II especially never tired of saying that holiness is for everyone, and that evangelization is for everyone. It isn’t just for special people – saints or missionaries – but that all of us are called to be saints and missionaries.⁴

This is the rediscovery of a biblical and traditional truth that truly has potential to bring an extraordinary “new springtime” to a Church that desperately needs one.

² *Fanning the Flame*, pp. 20-21.

³ All citations are taken from and the original references contained in pp. 16-18 of *Fanning the Flame*.

⁴ “The *universal call to holiness* is closely linked to the *universal call to mission*. Every member of the faithful is called to holiness and to mission.” John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990. VIII, 90.

John Paul II makes clear that it is very important that this remarkable “rediscovery” of the charismatic dimension of the Church’s constitution be responded to with attention and gratitude

He continues to cry out from the Father’s house: “Today, I would like to cry out to all of you gathered here in St. Peter’s Square and to all Christians: Open yourselves docilely to the gifts of the Spirit! Accept gratefully and obediently the charisms which the Spirit never ceases to bestow on us!”⁵

May it be so!

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⁵ (*L’Observatore Romano*, English Language Edition, June 3, 1998; **This is the day the Lord has made!** Holy Father holds historic meeting with ecclesial movements and new communities; pp. 1-2.)