

A Reflection in light of *Evangelii Gaudium*

Charisms and Consecrated Life Today

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In the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, we find four defined principles promoting social coexistence and the building up of a people for whom differences are integrated into shared initiatives. These four principles proposed here are a way to interpret consecrated life in today's Church. They serve as starting points for reflection, opening up new and promising horizons. The author is a professor at the Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life 'Claretianum,' the Lateran Pontifical University (both in Rome), and coordinator of the 'Abba School' Interdisciplinary Studies Center.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, considered by many a blueprint for his pontificate, Pope Francis lays out a particular vision of the Church. In a section of its fourth chapter containing later applications, I believe four principles are present here that are useful for understanding the place of charisms in the Church, even if these section paragraphs (222-237) do not specifically mention the charismatic reality as such.

Time is greater than space

Let's start from the first, which is "Time is greater than space" (nos. 222 – 225). It's enough to look back at the Church's history and at Christian society to confirm the fact that those men and women who were recipients of charisms, together with their followers, were "initiating processes rather than possessing spaces" (223). They opened new pathways for contemplation and for a deepening of evangelical life, evangelization, and a more profound practice of charity; they reawakened the consciences of individuals and of peoples, allowing for the gradual discovery of the interior life and enlightenment of society itself. Dialogue with other cultures and religions continually expanded the boundaries of spiritual experiences. Even monks professing the "*stabilitas loci*" [stability of place] had no intention to "occupy spaces." Their remaining "stable in one place" served to set in motion the world around them, and ongoing waves of migration continually widened faith's horizons. In their readiness to journey anywhere, they gave witness to the itinerant nature of the Church, whose lasting city is not here on this earth, but rather is a search for the One that is to come (cf *Heb 13:14*). Thus "time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return" (223). The major charismatic movements "generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events" (223).

The gratuitous nature of every charism, precisely because it is freely given, makes it unpredictable, and thus impossible to program. For this reason, we can say that an individual charism is not linked to a "space," nor contained within a structure. Like the Holy Spirit, who gave it life, a charism manifests itself however, whenever and wherever it wills (cf. *Jn* 3, 8). This gift of the Spirit is bestowed at the appropriate time, according to an imponderable and superior logic, for the good of the Church, to awaken her and keep her awake. In *Evangelii Gaudium* we read: "The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church (LG 12). They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the center which is Christ and then channeled into an evangelizing impulse" (n. 130). The fact that charisms manifest themselves as historical and dynamic experiences gives them flexibility and allows for the possibility of further development.

I believe this understanding of charism expresses its ecclesial nature, and allows us to intuit challenges for inclusion within the local Church and in diocesan pastoral programs. This is not only, or primarily, a juridical issue or one of distribution of "spaces" and expertise, even though this is something to keep in mind. Nor is it only a relationship between Bishops and Major Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated life, as indicated in *Mutuae Relationes*, which dates back to 1978 and is currently under revision. It is the recognition of the ecclesial mission of charisms, which ask to be welcomed as gifts capable of keeping the Church constantly moving ahead, convinced that "time is greater than space."

Unity prevails over conflict

In explaining this second affirmation (nos. 226 - 230), the Pope refers repeatedly to charisms: "It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful. [...] Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization. Diversity must always be reconciled with the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can enkindle diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity. When we, for our part, aspire to diversity, we become self-enclosed, exclusive and divisive; similarly, whenever we attempt to create unity on the basis of our human calculations, we end up imposing a monolithic uniformity" (nos. 130 - 131).

The principle that "unity prevails over conflict" may be applied to many areas, beginning from religious communities and even entire institutions. For the vast majority, for example, one major challenge centers around the intercultural aspect. Their numbers demonstrate a geographical shift, mainly toward Africa and Asia, and are giving rise to a new, dynamic equilibrium. By virtue of members' different cultural backgrounds, the boundaries between cultures typically enters into the inner life of communities themselves, regardless of geographical location. It is a challenge which asks one to acknowledge one's own worldview in order to welcome the view of another and allow oneself to be enriched by it. It's a challenge that can become an opportunity, one able to forge new pathways as the whole of society faces ongoing challenges related to global migration.

However, the most profound challenge, and opportunity, is another kind of "intercultural" reality: that of communion among the charisms. For too long, each one lived within their own world, preoccupied by internal problems or individual apostolic and vocational ministries,

formation programs, and overall management concerns. In the last decade or so, fruitful dialogue between Superior Generals, also at the local level, has resulted in greater information sharing and joint strategic initiatives. For example, one noteworthy experience is that of collaborative novitiates, even if these initiatives have remained within a relatively limited setting. Unity needs to be rediscovered as a value in its own right, and expanded on every level. Indeed, it is the first theological characteristic of the Church upon which her Holiness and Catholicity depend, and to which her Apostolicity aims. As the Apostle Paul strongly affirmed, a charism is given in function of unity. Consecrated Life, in as much as it is charismatic, is imbued with unity. Each of its forms is born from the Spirit, from the one source, and lives for the building up of the one Body of Christ, flowing into the sea of the 'final unity', when all shall be recapitulated in Christ.

For more than twenty years, *Charisms in Unity*, the magazine inspired by Chiara Lubich and her charism of unity, has done its best to promote a communion between charisms, beginning from their deepest roots. In this way, as Chiara once said, "Love can circulate between diverse Orders. There is need to value, understand, and love one another in a similar manner to the Persons of the Holy Trinity. They are in relationship and bound together through the Holy Spirit, because each one is an expression of God, of the Holy Spirit." We hope this new magazine, *Ekklesia*, will continue to do this, and to extend this communion among all members of the Church, so that unity, as Pope Francis said: "becomes a way of making history" (n. 228), without any form of syncretism or absorption of one by another, with the "conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity" (n. 230).

Realities are more important than ideas

The third affirmation (nos. 231 - 233) reminds us that "it is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric." Consecrated Life is not immune to this; it is often tempted to speak to a glorious past or produce doctrinal documents, without truly "living" the present with proclaimed evangelical intensity. The need for a kind of bourgeois life and social status, quests for Institutional efficiency, and personal autonomy, can all jeopardize God's primacy, resulting in an ensuing loss of meaning. If the roots of a tree are cut, it will wither and die. Since Consecrated Life is born from the Gospel, it must necessarily be nurtured by this same Gospel or risk a relentless march towards extinction.

Many aspects of the traditional spiritual journey are being seriously challenged by modern day thought, with its new cultural frameworks and new anthropology. People are searching for a "new asceticism" which takes into account the positive vision of created reality and of its corporeality, one with greater respect for the human person and the fostering of sincere human relationships, and one at the service of the poor. There is need for a "new mysticism," one which allows us to find God in creation, in our brothers and sisters, and along the paths of history. Although constantly tempted to go back to methods from the past, we need to courageously and creatively move forward, attentive to the winds of the Spirit that renew all things. Even classical elements of spirituality need rethinking in order, above all, to adopt a more ecclesial and communitarian vision of Christian life: One of moving forward together on our spiritual journey, of sharing fruits of the Word lived out, of fraternal correction, and an ongoing renewal in this communitarian way of life, etc. The idea of a whole community of saints, by virtue of Jesus, The Saint, alive in their midst, will offer new models of sanctity.

The principle that "realities are more important than ideas" opens further considerations. Pope Francis wrote that "it helps us to see that the Church's history is a history of salvation, to be

mindful of those saints who inculturated the Gospel in the life of our peoples and to reap the fruits of the Church's rich bimillennial tradition, without pretending to come up with a system of thought detached from this treasury, as if we wanted to reinvent the Gospel. At the same time, this principle impels us to put the Word into practice, to perform works of justice and charity which make that word fruitful. Not to put the Word into practice, not to make it reality, is to build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness and Gnosticism" (n. 233).

The charismatic past lives on in the consciousness of men and women religious. The history of this glorious past, however, must not be reduced to sterile accolades. On the contrary, it should give rise to burning questions.: Today, do we still have the same capacity to risk, to abandon once-valid formulas, which are now obsolete, in order to explore new pathways? Can we move away from long cultivated landscapes and venture into new territories? A charism's dynamic power can be forced into hibernation by ongoing tensions, top-heavy structures, worn out routines, and a holding on to the *status quo*. When this happens, charisms weaken and become ineffective, and the fire of the Spirit is watered down.

Lastly, the principle that "realities are more important than ideas" pushes us toward a more incarnated "spiritual" life capable of touching the "flesh of Christ" in the poor. Historically, religious life has given witness to what it means to be close to a people, close to the common person. It was monks who taught lay persons how to pray when the latter frequented their places of worship; they saw these priests, brothers, and religious play with their youth and children at youth centers, teach in schools, minister in parishes, and dedicate themselves to evangelization and countless charitable initiatives. They shared their life experience through Third Orders, Confraternities, and in a myriad of associations of all types that flourished around the Religious Families.

Today, this need is being expressed in new and greater ways. We are seeing age-old Third Orders blossoming again; moreover, we're witnessing the birth of new forms of association. Some laity want to participate in projects and initiatives carried out by consecrated persons; they want to share in the ideals of their Founders and adopt them as their own. They are attracted by a particular way of following Jesus, and to those evangelical words still alive today, thanks to a given charism. They want to move from being a mission's focus to becoming its protagonist. Many houses and hearts need to open wide to new kinds of sharing and communion. It is, after all, the only way to discover a charism's full potential in its totality. Recent dialogues between consecrated and lay persons, focused on these "charismatic families", hold much promise.

The whole is greater than the part

The fourth principle (nos. 234 - 237) helps us to think on a wider scale, to "pay attention to the global, so as to avoid narrowness and banality," to "be challenged by novelty and to appreciate the beauty which God bestows beyond their borders" with the conviction that "the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts." We need to keep our feet on the ground, well rooted in our own locales, "working on a small scale, in our own neighborhood, but with a larger perspective."

The conviction that "the whole is greater than the part" has multiple applications. To my mind, one of these is an invitation to challenge ourselves -- or run the risk of a withering death instead -- before the new doors opening for an all-encompassing dialogue. It is a dialogue to which the entire Church is being called today.

This aspect, too, is historically well-rooted in Religious Life. Awareness of the calling to build unity can be seen even in early monasticism. Looking back, we find an ongoing commitment by both older and more recently founded orders to establish dialogue with the major Asian religions. Franciscan Oderic of Pordenone, Jesuit Matteo Ricci, and in the last century, Merton, Le Sax, and Griffiths, are only some of the better-known religious who were part of a vast current within Religious Life. Many monks and religious have been among the most passionate protagonists even of ecumenical movements. It would be enough to recall the "invisible monastery" of Paul Couturier, the spiritual story of Trappist Sister Gabriella, as well as the founding of monasteries and religious families in the Anglican and Evangelical Churches. St John Paul II wrote: "The consecrated life, by the very fact that it promotes the value of fraternal life, provides a privileged experience of dialogue" (VC 74). Indeed, the title of the last chapter of his Apostolic Letter *Vita Consecrata* "Engaged in dialogue with everyone", is significant in this regard.

Consecrated Life will develop new interior vigor in the measure in which it is faithful to its deepest calling and open to communion with other Christian denominations, other religions, and with men and women of good will. By giving itself, and putting itself, in the service of unity, Consecrated Life will recover its freshness and true identity, and will grow and develop along those new horizons for which the Spirit is guiding the entire Church.