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The Charism and Identity of Religious Life

Michael J. Buckley, S.J.

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Prenote: The limitations imposed by the nature of this conference do not allow for anything more than a fragmentary set of reflections upon a topic of such critical importance to the understanding of religious life. This paper, then, can do no more than attempt three of the many tasks which fall under so general a title: (1) To sketch something of the development of the magisterium's teaching on this subject; (2) to indicate some of the problems which this teaching entails; and (3) to suggest a manner in which these problems might be understood and moved towards resolution. The paper proposes the following three theses: (1) The fundamental identity of religious life must be grasped in terms of charism; (2) This understanding of religious life as charismatic raises profound problems that touch every aspect of its reality; (3) The office of the hierarchy is to discern an authentic charism from its counterfeit, while the exercise of this office is subject to the very real danger that excessive legalism will quench the Spirit.

One theme that contemporary philosophy and modern hermeneutics have insisted upon is this: Words have an effect like architecture. With architecture, you build the buildings, and then the buildings you live in build you. Similarly with language, you introduce terms into a discussion,

and the language you admit either expands your perception of the issues or it hopelessly limits it. The concern of the early Fathers and Councils about language was not trivial: language forms our perception of reality. If our words are careless or precise, exaggerated or discriminating, we will have that kind of discussion. Even more, we will have that kind of perception of the very reality we are attempting to understand. Few contemporary Church leaders realized this better than Pope Paul VI. He was painstaking, even scrupulous, in his selection of words. And it was this pope who introduced the vocabulary: “the charism of religious life” and “the charisms of the founders [of religious communities] who were raised up by God within his Church.”¹ (ET II) The Second Vatican Council prepared for this stage of theological development, but Paul VI brought it into articulation and existence.

Charism and Religious Life

Lumen Gentium, in its critical second chapter, had spoken of the charisms given by the Spirit for the renewal and building of the Church (12). *Lumen Gentium*, had distinguished the hierarchical gifts from the charismatic gifts (4, 7, 12). But *Lumen Gentium* never applied its doctrine on charism explicitly to religious life, though much of the theology of the gifts is contained in its sixth chapter, the section that deals with religious life in the Church. Similarly, *Perfectae Caritatis* contains many of these same elements and even adds an essential note missing from the previous Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, namely, that the origins of religious life lie with “*Spiritu Sancto afflante* (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit)” (1). But the word “charism” does not occur. It was Paul VI who took the Church’s general teachings about charism and the charismatic and applied them repeatedly during his pontificate to religious life. And the documents and the *allocutiones* of the present pontificate have continued this application. This usage of the more recent popes, however, has not gone unchallenged. Very recently, some have objected to the use of this term on two grounds: the word, “charism,” is very difficult to define, and the Code of Canon Law does not include this term.

Nevertheless, the present pope did use the term—and he did so specifically in his Letter to the American Bishops, charging them to “encourage the religious, their institutes and associations to live fully the mystery of the redemption, in union with the whole Church and *according to the specific charism of their religious life*” (LTTR #3). The American bishops cannot step over this term: it frames the perspective on their mandate. It occurs three times in that same section of the papal letter, specifying both the nature of religious life as a “proper ecclesial charism” and reminding the

bishops that “in the local churches the discernment of the *exercise* of these charisms is authenticated by the bishops in union with the successor of Peter. This work is a truly important aspect of your episcopal ministry” (ibid).

Furthermore: This charge to the American bishops is not an isolated phenomenon. *Mutuae Relationes* places the most critical responsibility of religious superiors precisely in this same terminology which others have found so dangerous: “Religious superiors have a grave duty, *their foremost responsibility in fact*, to assure the fidelity of the members to the *charism of the Founder* by fostering the renewal prescribed by the Council and required by the times” (14c). The documents of the magisterium speak either of the charism of religious life in general or of the charism of a particular form of religious life. But two things should be noted in either case: First, when they speak about charism, they are speaking about what is fundamental to its identity. Second, this fidelity to charism involves change together with stability, a change demanded either by the conciliar documents or by the needs of the time.

What does “charism” mean, then, and why is the papal use of it so illuminative of the identity of religious life?

The classic description of charism is given in the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (12b): “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 as he wills (1 Co 12:11), he also distributes *special graces* among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts, he makes them *fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church*, as it is written, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for the common good’ (1 Co 12:7). Whether *these charisms* be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church. . . . Those *who have charge over the Church should judge* the genuineness and proper use of these gifts through their office, *not indeed to extinguish the Spirit*, but to *test all things and hold fast* to what is good” (1 Th 5:12, 19-21).

From this text we can affirm that the term “charism” includes the following notes:

- (1) The origin of every charism is the Holy Spirit—not the hierarchy nor human structures.
- (2) Its impetus is distinguished from the action of the Spirit in the sacraments and in the habitual ministrations of the Church’s ministers.
- (3) Charism is by its nature a special grace, given to anyone of the faithful as an enabling gift for a specific ministry within the Body of Christ.

(4) Its purpose is the renewal and the development of the Church.

(5) The authenticity of a charism is to be tested and judged by the hierarchy—and the allusions to St. Paul’s negative prohibition not to extinguish the Spirit indicates the danger that a charism can be destroyed by the bad judgment of the very ones who are to judge and support it.

Lumen Gentium and *Perfectae Caritatis* made two other significant contributions to the development of the identity of religious life as a charism. (1) Neither document discusses religious life in the juridical language of *status* or “the state of perfection to be acquired.” Neither document uses the technical expression, “*status perfectionis acquirendae*”; while the word *status* is used six times in *Lumen Gentium* VI and only once in *Perfectae Caritatis*, it never becomes the principal or governing category. *Status* is recognized as a canonical term, but not given the position of being the organizing perspective through which religious life is understood. The history of the title of *Perfectae Caritatis* indicates how progressive and deliberate that exclusion was made. It is not that *status* could not be profitably used: its heritage can be traced from Pseudo-Dionysius’ *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, to the profound treatment of Saint Thomas—distinguishing *officium*, *status*, and *gradus*—to *Provida Mater* of Pius XII. But the concept of *status* over these centuries has increasingly become static, and a fundamental juridical category.² Vatican II, by refusing to subsume religious life under this juridical heading as its primary category, was clearing the way for the further theological developments of Paul VI. These documents from the Council provided many of the elements in their description of religious life which would allow *Evangelica Testificatio* to bring them together under the general rubric of charism.

What the Church witnessed in *Evangelica Testificatio*, then, is a conscious and radical shift—to be very precise, a categorical shift: from religious life classified primarily as a canonical reality, one whose forms are set and understood fundamentally in terms of juridical, even constitutional, structures, to a charismatic reality, whose forms and constitutions themselves are judged by the classic signs of the Spirit and by the manner in which its members are configured to the life of Christ.

Both charism and law are obviously necessary. Religious life is not a variation of antinomianism. But the question is what is categorical. And Paul VI has said that the fundamental category is charismatic: *Charism* has been given a priority over *status*.³

What the deliberate choice of the term “charism” asserts is that religious life is directly dependent upon the Spirit, both for its origins and for its continually new forms. As Paul VI put it: “The charism of the religious

life, far from being an impulse ‘born of flesh and blood,’ or one derived from a mentality which conforms itself to the modern world, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the Church” (ET 11). The various forms of religious life are derived from the charisms of the founders of these religious communities who were raised up by God through this gift of the Spirit. This charism of the founder does two things: It gives each religious community that dynamism which defines it—often called its particular spirit—and it provides for the future a “certain constancy of orientation” that allows for a continual revitalization and change in external forms (ET 12).⁴ The development of a religious community, as opposed to its decline, lies with the organic growth of its original and defining charism.

Mutuae Relationes expanded this teaching, insisting with bishops that “they are entrusted with the duty of caring for religious charisms, all the more so because the very indivisibility of their pastoral ministry makes them responsible for perfecting the entire flock” (9c). Here the charism of the founder is stated precisely as “‘an experience of the Spirit,’ transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, *deepened* and *constantly developed* by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually *in the process of growth*” (11). It is this experience of the Spirit that gives the distinctive character to their religious community: “This distinctive character also involves a particular style of sanctification and of apostolate, which creates its particular tradition with the result that one can readily perceive its objective elements” (11).

Implications and Difficulties

Now, for rather pragmatic Americans, this discussion of charism seems sound enough, but hardly earth-shattering—hardly important enough to wonder whether it is or is not in the Code. But it is the implications that are found threatening, implications which *Mutuae Relationes* is at pains to point out: “Every authentic charism implies a certain element of (1) genuine originality and of (2) special initiative for the spiritual life of the Church. In its surroundings, it may appear troublesome and may even cause difficulties, since it is not always and immediately easy to recognize it as coming from the Spirit” (12).

Concretely and pragmatically, charism implies that religious life will always involve something that the Church has not seen before—or at least seen in this way. Because of its novelty and its presence as an unforeseen impetus within the Church, charism may well mean the presence of the “troublesome,” and the presence of new difficulties and challenges to the Church. Call religious life a charism, and you have already said the Church expects to be continually challenged in many ways, and the hierarchy is

bound by God to the difficult and nuanced discernment of the authenticity of these challenges. Unlike *status*, whose structures can be determined adequately by law, charism presages the new, the creative, and the troublesome. This has formed the history of religious orders over the centuries, and for the United States it has been the history of religious communities of men and women since Vatican II.

An Example: During this time, a radically new articulation of the religious life for women has come into consciousness and acceptance: many women are assuming both ministerial roles within the Church hitherto reserved for men and have adopted small and flexible community styles which have made these new missions possible. Women religious no longer necessarily dress in the same identical fashion, nor do they assume collective tasks independent of their particular orientations, skills, and experienced vocations. What is emerging in many religious orders is a thoroughly contemporary woman, as competent as her contemporaries in her accomplishments and in her extensive acquaintance with the issues and experiences of her times. This does not mean that either the initial spirit or the sound traditions of her order have been rejected. This may, of course, have occurred in some cases, but it has not been the rule.

What this new order means is that many American religious communities of women have transposed their heritage into a modern idiom. This neither discredits nor invalidates other forms of religious life and the charism of older forms of religious expression, any more than the active communities of the nineteenth century were a rejection of Benedictine monasticism or of the clerks regular. But it does mean that something new is here. These religious communities of women have begun, perhaps for the first time in the Church, a synthesis of religious consecration and an inculturation into the forms of contemporary life—a synthesis made in service to their mission.

If one looks at previous external customs or previous regulations or even some of the current mandates being stretched in the name of this growth—that is, if one looks at religious life primarily as legal *status*, one can wonder at this phenomenon and question whether we are dealing with decline or infidelity. On the other hand, if one sees religious life primarily as *charism*, a charism that needs constitutions and laws for its objectification and constancy of orientation, but not as the exhaustive or adequate statement of its nature, then one might wonder if we are not witnessing a new impetus of the Spirit within the Church.

Could it be the case that at a time in which women are assuming directive and leadership roles within all forms of contemporary culture, the Spirit of God is raising up within the Church renewed or new charismatic communities, religious who will be just as individually characterized and

just as culturally coordinate as their contemporaries and impelled to this new inculturation by the very charism of their founders? If so, we may be witnessing a movement which will carry an importance to the Church similar to that of the rise of the mendicants in the thirteenth century. Quite new—perhaps radically new—but of enormous importance to the future of the Church. But how is one to judge this?

Another Example: Repeatedly Religious and Human Promotion encourages religious to be “enterprising in their undertakings and initiatives” because this is “in keeping with the charismatic and prophetic nature of religious life itself” (27; See 4a and 24). Placing the prophetic together with the charismatic and then asserting this hendiadys as characteristic of the nature of religious life, constitutes a significant challenge. Fidelity to the charism of religious life, then, could well involve religious in those activities which have alienated many people in the Church from them: speaking out about the morality of American intervention in Latin America, writing about discrimination even within the Church, demanding fair hiring practices in local business, far ranging discussions within their national conferences of areas of injustice and oppression.

Indeed, this document foresees precisely such a development: “Conferences of religious, because of their more immediate knowledge of ecclesial and social conditions, are in a better position to identify the problems of different countries and continents. Through an exchange of experiences and study meetings, they could, in collaboration with the episcopal conferences and respecting the various charisms, find solutions and means more in harmony with the hopes for integral human promotion” (35). When religious bring these subjects continually to the fore in their discussions and in their activities, and when they ask for episcopal collaboration in the exploration and elimination of these evils, are we not dealing with something that issues from the very nature of religious life as a charism—even when this elicits irritation from good Catholics or results in picket-lines, protests, and imprisonment? How are the bishops to judge whether this is of God, however much it disturb expectations and social concord?

Discernment, Not Repression

These two examples raise the same question, as would many more that could be cited: How can one judge growth or decline? How can the hierarchy judge authentic charism, even authentic prophetic action—when *Mutuae Relationes* (19) taught that “a responsiveness rich in creative initiative is eminently compatible with the charismatic nature of the religious life”? How can one test the Spirit, not quench it?

Mutuae Relationes suggests three criteria by which this sifting of the

genuine from the inauthentic can be done (51):

First: Charism has “its special origin from the Spirit.” Consequently the leaders of the Church can legitimately expect that the signs which *Galatians* enumerates as present in authentic charismatic movement: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such there is no law” (Ga 5:22-23). If these are present, one has every reason to suspect that the claim upon our conscience is from God.

Secondly: “A profound ardor of love to be conformed to Christ in order to give witness to some aspect of his mystery.” When I read this, I had to wonder what the Holy See had in mind here, and I think it is this: Charism always effects a particular configuration to Christ. This is especially true in the mystery of his cross. Authentic charism will always be costly, will always entail an inescapable element of suffering and of the cross as one attempts to bring to the contemporary world or into the contemporary Church something that is truly of Christ. Authentic charism involves a willingness (albeit with a sinking feeling) to undergo, to endure as did Christ. A previous paragraph in this same document put it this way: “The true relation between genuine charism with its perspectives of newness and interior suffering, carries with it an unvarying history of the connection between charism and cross, which, above every motive that may justify misunderstandings, is supremely helpful in discerning the authenticity of a vocation” (12).

Finally: “A constructive love of the Church, which absolutely shrinks from causing any discord in her.” This does not mean that conflict can always be avoided, but that one spontaneously shrinks from causing it, that one does not revel in fights or get one’s sense of identity from party divisions and dissensions. Charism leads to the building up of the Church.

Charism always involves three factors: It is an enabling gift of the Spirit which so conforms the recipients to Christ that they will build the Church. *Mutuae Relationes* has touched upon each one of these. This set of three criteria does not mean that religious women or men will be without the faults and limitations of human beings, but it does mean that even in sinfulness these three religious attitudes will be basically present.⁵ Between the boldness of the new initiatives which the charismatic nature of religious institutes demands and the expectations of some members of the Church or of the hierarchy, there will be unavoidable moments of tension—tensions which are not resolved by eliminating either side of this dialectic: by quenching the Spirit or by disobedience to the hierarchy in the legitimate exercise of its leadership. Either would mean the destruction of the directive influence of the Spirit of God bringing the Church into this new age. It is possible for bishops (even culpably) to quench the Spirit, to fail to recognize

the charisms given by the Spirit; it is possible for religious to become incapable of serious self-criticism and to reject the need to submit the charism of their lives to the Church for its discernment. Either of these spells out a disintegration of religious life, and both are real possibilities. This is the reason that *Mutuae Relationes* adds the following addendum to its three criteria: “Moreover, the genuine figure of the founders entails men and women whose proven virtue (see LG 45) demonstrates a real docility both to the sacred hierarchy and to the following of that inspiration, which exists in them as a gift of the Spirit” (51).

But these dangers become somewhat mitigated if all the members of the Church come to understand what Paul VI brought to expression: that what is most profoundly at issue here—demanding prayer and discernment and those sufferings which go with any struggle to recognize the Spirit of God—is the radical identity of religious life as developing charism. The present pope has insisted in *Redemptionis Donum* that it is out of this that the apostolic presence of religious comes; the charism of every religious order becomes a charism for the different needs of the Church: “The apostolate is *always born* from *that particular gift* of your founders, which, *received from God and approved by the Church*, has become a *charism for the different needs of the Church and the world* at particular moments of history, and in its turn it is *extended and strengthened* in the life of the religious communities as one of the enduring elements of the Church’s life and apostolate” (15).

Both Paul VI and John Paul II indicate the dynamic nature of the charismatic: Fidelity to the charism of the founder will demand the changes indicated by the Council and required by the times (ET 12; MR 11). A static understanding of charism leads some to think that religious precisely in order to be faithful to their charism should remain just as they were before, even despite the Council, the magisterial documents, and the needs of the time. But charism is essentially a living reality, and like every living reality confronts continually the questions of growth or decline, of development or disintegration. External changes, even radical external changes, can mean either.

Stability and change are not opposed; they are coordinate. You can only change what remains the same; as Gilson remarked many years ago, the only way you can keep the same fence is if you paint it often! Change is a necessity if the same thing is to continue. Charism involves both change and stability. There is no more reason *a priori* to expect that the contemporary religious woman will look like the nuns from the middle ages or the sisters from the nineteenth century than to expect that the contemporary Church simply copy the primitive Christian community. The sober assess-

ment of this change constitutes the continual discernment done in most religious communities. It is in a parallel ongoing discernment by the hierarchy that their own office will be accomplished. For the major function of the hierarchy here is not so often to discern the charism of a radically new community, but to recognize the development of a charism in terms of a Church and a world that is changing so rapidly. To be aware of the authentic presence of the developing charism within a religious community is to be conscious of its fundamental identity, found not in a static repetition of the past but in growth and continuity.

NOTES

¹The following abbreviations are used for documents of the magisterium to which reference is made in this article:

From Vatican II

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| LG | <i>Lumen Gentium:</i> | The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church |
| PC | <i>Perfectae Caritatis:</i> | The Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life |

From the Pontificate of Paul VI

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|---|
| ET | <i>Evangelica Testificatio:</i> | Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life |
| MR | <i>Mutuae Relationes:</i> | Directives for Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church, published by CRIS/CB |

From the Pontificate of John Paul II

- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| RHP | <i>Religious and Human Promotion</i> | CRIS |
| CDRL | <i>Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life</i> | CRIS |
| LTTR | <i>Letter of John Paul II to the Bishops of the United States. April 3, 1983</i> | |
| EE | <i>Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate</i> | |
| RD | <i>Redemptionis Donum:</i> | Apostolic Exhortation on Religious Consecration in the Light of the Mystery of Redemption |

²See Bernard Olivier, O.P., "Il carisma della vita religiosa nel Concilio e nei documenti post-conciliari," *Vita Consecrata* 17 (1981), pp. 329-331. Father Olivier agrees with the previous evaluation of J. M. Tillard that the development within the Council ran as follows: "From the idea of *religious state (stato religioso)*, thus from a perspective essentially static and juridical, from a consideration of the religious in their canonical

situation which characterizes them in contrast with the laity and clerics, one arrives at the evangelical and dynamic notion of *life* with everything which this implies about charity and human involvement" (ibid. pp. 329-330). See also the article by P. R. Regamey, O.P., under the title, "Carismi," *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*, edited by Guerrino Peliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, Vol. II, columns 299-315.

³This primacy of charism over legal description is classic in religious rules. Witness for example the "Preface" to the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*: "Although it must be the Supreme Wisdom and Goodness of God, our Creator and Lord, which will preserve, direct, and carry forward in his divine service this least Society of Jesus, just as he deigned to begin it; and although what helps most on our part toward this end must be, more than any exterior constitutions, the interior law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit writes and engraves upon hearts; nevertheless, since the gentle arrangement of Divine Providence requires cooperation from his creatures, and since too the Vicar of Christ our Lord has ordered this, and since the examples given by the saints and reason itself teach us so in our Lord, we think it necessary that constitutions should be written to aid us to proceed better, in conformity with our Institute, along the path of divine service on which we have entered" (*The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated and edited by George E. Ganss, S.J. [St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970]), "Preamble to the Constitutions," [#134].

⁴The last word has not been either said or assimilated in this development initiated by the Council and brought to terminological articulation by Paul VI—otherwise it would have been impossible for *Essential Elements* to claim that the doctrinal richness of the magisterial teachings over the past twenty years "has been distilled and reflected in the revised Code of Canon Law." (3) No external legal structure is adequate to a reality whose identity is primarily charism. Hence the papal letter to the American bishops modifies that claim substantially with the statement: "*Much of* this doctrinal richness has been distilled and reflected in the revised Code." (3) Beneath the papal claim and that of *Essential Elements* lies the fundamental difference between the understanding of religious life primarily as a charism of the Spirit or as a juridical *status*.

⁵*Mutuae Relationes* provides a more particularized list for the discernment of authentic charism. Though cited above, it deserves to be included in full: "The specific charismatic note of any institute demands, both of the founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding: fidelity to the Lord; docility to his Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times; the will to be part of the Church; the awareness of subordination to the sacred hierarchy; boldness of initiatives; constancy in the giving of self; humility in bearing with adversities. The true relation between genuine charism, with its perspectives of newness, and interior suffering, carries with it an unvarying history of the connection between charism and cross, which, above every motive that may justify misunderstandings is supremely helpful in discerning the authenticity of a vocation" (12).