

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘SPIRIT’ AND ‘CHARISM OF A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

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ABSTRACT

The word ‘charism’ entered the Church vocabulary during the Second Vatican II sessions. It “appears fourteen different times in the documents but in no consistent way”¹. However, it was rarely used subsequent Church documents until the magisterial document Vita Consecrata (1996).

Charism and Spirit are words arbitrarily used by Consecrated Religious. Most Consecrated men and women fail to differentiate between the Charisms and the Apostolate of their congregation. “Charisms of an institute are gifts of the Spirit to and for the Church. Thus, they are too precious to be left to people who are careless of their inherent value or unmindful of their personal responsibility to embrace and live the practical consequences of the charism.”² Charism is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of a particular Religious Congregation. It is Charism that brings out the uniqueness of each Religious Congregation.

Charism is not limited to Religious Congregations. It is gift of the Holy Spirit received at baptism. However, the Founder/Foundress inspired by God through the Holy Spirit were able to respond to the challenges facing humanity of their times. They were “inspired to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church”³ and the society. The intention of this article is to explain Charism as the manifestation of Holy Spirit in relation to Religious Congregation and the importance of charisms in the foundation, progression and sustenance of a Religious Congregation.

INTRODUCTION

When Vatican Council II mandated all Religious Congregations to ‘go back to their root’ it was an invitation to identify their charisms and model their lives according to the *raison d’être* of their congregations. It was a call to identify the originating spirit, the charisms of their Founders, and the charism of their Institute; because “if there is a disconnect between charismatic mission and the work, the work would be an image of professionalism, of skill, but would remain devoid of real

¹ John C. Haughey. *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration*, in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 3.

² “Charism and Religious Life,” *Review for Religious* 52 (1993): 650-51.

³ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016) 60.

life, of love, of depth”⁴. Unfortunately, over fifty years after Vatican II made that call many Religious Congregations have not really understood what charisms are.

This same call was reiterated in Vita Consecrata, “there is the need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute.... This fidelity to the Founder and Foundresses is an inspiration which is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice”⁵.

When Religious male or female are asked, ‘what is your charism?’ One is not surprised to hear responses like: Our charism is education of the youth, especially the poor youth; our charism is taking care of the sick; our charism is running social centres. The list is endless. These responses show the ignorance of some Religious about what charism is, and misunderstanding between charism of a congregation and its apostolate/mission. Because, taking care of the poor, the weak, the sick, the prisoners are Christ’s injunctions to all Christians as the prerequisite to enter God’s Kingdom, (Mt. 25: 31-46).

This article therefore aims at looking at the meaning of ‘charism and spirit’ with regard to Religious Institute; it will look at stages of charism development; it will shed light on the role of ecclesia hierarchy in identifying genuine spirit and charism with regard to formation of a Religious Institutes and approval; finally the article will explore some of the impediments to charisms development.

1) WHAT IS CHARISM AND SPIRIT?

Charism is a neologism in the vocabulary of Consecrated Life. Although the word Charism originated from Vatican II, it gradually developed during the post-conciliar Church. The Latin word charisma (charismata in plural) appeared fourteen times in the sixteen documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council⁶. However, the term charism – or a form of it – would appear 86 times in the magisterial document Vita Consecrata⁷. This shows how the word charism and its usage have evolved over 50 years.

The Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology defines charisma as “a supernatural or actual grace which is given for the advancement of the mystical body of Christ and which comes from the Holy Spirit”⁸. Another definition by Francis A. Sullivan, while quoting A. Lemonnyer, author of the article on charism in the *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplement*, views ‘charisms are gifts of grace which equip people for the roles and ministries which they are to have in the body of Christ. Some of these gifts and ministries are extraordinary, but many are not; they are distributed widely among

⁴ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: Economy at the Service of Charism and Mission, Guidelines (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2018) para 23.

⁵ *The Consecrated Life*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996) para 36.

⁶ Lawrence Cada et al, *Shaping the Coming of Age of Religious Life* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 1979), 164.

⁷ Reginal Cruz, “HOLY SPIRIT AND RELIGIOUS CHARISM” (Lecture, Tangaza University College, Nairobi, January 22, 2019).

⁸ *Bauer Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer, Vol.1.

the members of the body, as each member is intended to make some contribution to the life of the whole body”⁹.

These two views reflected in the discussion on the paragraph on “the charisms of the faithful”¹⁰ at Vatican II proceedings. In the final analysis, the definition presented by Cardinal Suenens was accepted. For Suenens, charisms are no “peripheral or accidental phenomena in the life of the Church. Charisms are of vital importance for the building up of the mystical body. We should never think that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are exclusively and principally in these phenomena which are rather extraordinary and uncommon. Charisms are not privilege of a few; every Christian, educated or simple, has his gift in his daily life. ... Does not each and every one of us here know of laymen and laywomen in his own diocese who are truly called by God? They are endowed by the Spirit with various charisms in the fields of Catechetical, evangelization, apostolic action in all its ramifications, in social work and charitable activity... without these charisms, the ecclesiastical ministry would be impoverished and sterile”¹¹.

From the submission of Cardinal Suenens, charisms are special gifts of the Holy Spirit, opened to be received by all members of the Church, to be used for the growth, development and sanctity of the mystical body of Jesus Christ. These gifts could be used in the fields of Catechetical, Evangelization, Apostolic actions, Social Works and Charitable activities. Francis Sullivan defines charism in line with the documents of Vatican II. According to him, “a charism can be described as a grace-given capacity and willingness for some kind of service that contributes to the renewal and up building of the Church”¹². Charisms enable people to do ordinary things extraordinarily well.

Before His ascension into heaven, Jesus gave the last command to His disciples, to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. He concluded by saying, “and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt.28:20). How Jesus would remain with the disciples is not clear. Charism is the surprising fulfilment of this promise of Jesus. It could be seen as the ‘how’ Jesus remains with His Church. Charisms are “a special variety of gifts dispensed through the Holy Spirit in Church and world, as indeed, for the common good”¹³. For as St. Paul says: “whoever speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but whoever prophesies builds up the Church” (1Cor. 14:4).

The surprising fulfilment of this promise of Jesus is clearly indicated in charisms. Charisms emerge among people not only in the Church but also in the society. In other word, “the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not confined exclusively to ecclesial institutions or to ecclesially affiliated persons”¹⁴. Charisms are found where there are human needs, human suffering. When a particular society seems to be at the edge of total collapse, total destruction owing to faming, epidemics, human inhumanity, the Holy Spirit stirs in the heart of someone to respond. “If in fact it seems that

⁹ Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Eugene, Orleans: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 10.

¹⁰ *Schema Constitutionis De Ecclesia* (1963), n. 24; *Acta Synodalia Concilii Vaticani II*, vol. 2, pars 1, p. 259-60

¹¹ Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, “*The Charismatic Dimension of the Church*,” In *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. Y. Congar, H. Kung, D.O’Hanlon, (London/New York, 1964), 214-217.

¹² Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Eugene, Orleans: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 13.

¹³ Doris Donnelly, *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration, in Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), ix

¹⁴ Ibid. ix.

human needs are unattended and that forces of evil and destruction are winning the way, we are invited, with renewed confidence in that promise of Jesus to be with us, to look harder and to be willing to find charisms often enough in the least likely places and among the least likely carriers”¹⁵.

Another surprise is that charisms are individuated without being individualistic. They are unique gifts given for the common good, they are never private possession, but for the up building of others. “Expect to find them where an instinct towards civility prevails, in conflict situations. Expect to see them where the mood is reconciling in the middle of discord and struggle. Expect to see them where some person is willing to sacrifice a personal agenda for the sake of the bigger picture. Expect them where someone surrenders plenty so that all may have some”¹⁶. This is exactly what St. Paul talks about “the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7) and reiterated by *Lumen Gentium*, No.4

2) CHARISM IN RELATION TO RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

Charisms within the context of Consecrated Life refer to a set of phenomena within every religious Institute that indicates three things:

- a) The transcendent origin of the Institute
- b) The uniqueness of the Institute distinguishing it from other Institutes/Societies
- c) The deeper agenda of the Holy Spirit for giving birth to the Institute

These three significant points provide the *raison d’être* of the group within the Church as well as the wider society. They provide the most important reason for the existence of the congregation. Unfortunately, the term ‘charism’ has been misunderstood and misused by many religious Men and Women. As Anthony succinctly puts it, “The term charism has been widely used, but not always with finesse. It has become a lazy and an irritating word, a catch-all term which hardly bears scrutiny.... If imprecise and inaccurate claims are made about charisms and their power, then a serious injustice is being done to individuals and to the Church”¹⁷.

The particular way a Religious Institute is situated amidst the ‘People of God’ originated from the action of the Holy Spirit through charismatic men and women: Founders and Foundresses and their initial members. The charisms of an Institute emerged from the movement of the Holy Spirit and are gifts for the whole Church, to transform the Church and the society. This is the view of Rene Laurentin, “Charisms are free gifts of the Holy Spirit intended for the building of the Church, the Body of Christ”¹⁸.

This precisely is the *raison d’être* of Consecrated Life in the Church. “The Consecrated Life is a gift which the Father has given to the Church by means of the Spirit so that, in faithfulness to the Gospel, the most characteristic traits of the life of His Son Jesus, the Chaste, Poor and

¹⁵ Ibid. ix

¹⁶ Ibid. ix.

¹⁷ Anthony Gittins, *Sows’ Ears and Silk Purses: The Limitations of Charisms and Community*” Review for Religious 43 (1984): 706-713.

¹⁸ Rene Laurentin, Charism: Terminological Precision, in *Charisms In The Church*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan, (New York: The Seabury Press, 19780), 8.

Obedient One (cf. Mt.8:20; phil. 2:8), and the unfathomable riches of His mystery (cf. Eph 3:8), might be present in the world and might draw everyone towards the Kingdom of God”¹⁹.

The Founders were graced with creativity and contagious capacity; “they felt the Spirit of Jesus possessing them and, like Jesus, they identified with the Father’s plan. From there, they were able to sense the great spiritual and missionary needs of the Church and society of their time and place”²⁰. This is clearly stated in The Rule of The Brothers of Christian Schools, “Deeply moved by the human and spiritual distress of the children of artisans and of the poor, and in response to the call of God, John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers made a lifelong commitment to God to provide these children with human and Christian education, and so extend the glory of God on earth”²¹.

This did not happen overnight, it took time, courage, divine wisdom and prayer on the part of the Founders. After discovering what the Holy Spirit was calling them to **be** to the Church and the society of their times, the Founders had to wait for the gifts to mature, “one step leading to another”²². This is called Charismatic maturity.

When a Religious congregation has no charism there will be confusion about identity. They don’t have characteristic foundation but a functioning tradition. Functional tradition exhibits particular apostolate that a Religious Congregation is established to address in the pastoral need of a diocese. Hence you see a Religious congregation jumping from one apostolate to another. ‘Whichever work available in your diocese we can do, just grant us permission to come’.

CHARISMATIC MATURITY

Maturity could be seen as an attribute that can be subjectively interpreted and measured by different observers. There is no objective and permanent measurement for maturity. However, according to Cruz, maturity suggests a “developmental process which entails strong awareness of self, purpose, place in society, and limitations, as well as the capacity to adapt to historical and cultural changes while remaining established in one’s root”²³. Maturity is a valued standard, even if it is an attribute that does not develop in just a single day – let alone a year or even more. Maturity is also a goal whose development, despite every sincere and concerted effort, can never be total and one which can also deteriorate if it is not pursued intentionally.

Charismatic maturity is the gradual unfolding of the Holy Spirit’s particular agenda for giving birth to a particular Religious Congregation. It matures gradually from the individual

¹⁹ “*The Consecrated Life and Its Role In The Church and In The World*”, par.1.

²⁰ Jose Maria Arnaiz et al, *How To Understand and Present Religious Life Today in the Church and in the World*, in “*Consecrated Life Today: Charisms in the Church for the World*”, (Middlegreen, Slough: ST. PAULS, 1993), 208.

²¹ *The Rule of The Brothers of Christian Schools*, article 1, (Rome-2015), 17.

²² Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Illinois: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), 168.

²³ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016), 60.

Founder to the founding members (if there is any) and then to all successive members. Charismatic maturity is the process through which subsequent members are provoked to move beyond the Institutional hubris and spiritual languidness which have incapacitated the congregation's prophetic purpose. A situation that makes some Religious Congregations to live on past glory. Charismatic maturity is ongoing, it is a state that each professed member of the congregation helps to realize and develop. But if the foundation is not properly laid during the initial formation, particularly the novitiate, it may never grow to maturity in the individual member.

3) FIVE LEVELS OF CHARISMS DEVELOPMENT

The teachings of the Church since Vatican II point to five charisms operating in religious congregations. Knowledge about them and how they operate are essential in understanding how these charisms bring about the maturity of our congregations and our life as consecrated persons:

- a) The Personal Charisms of each Consecrated Member [*religiosis charismata propria*]
- b) The Originating Charism [*primigenium charisma; charisma pristinum*]
- c) The Charism of the Founder [*charisma fundatoris*]
- d) The Founding Charism [*foundationis charisma; fundanscharisma*]
- e) The Charism of the Institute [*istituti charisma*] ²⁴

a) PERSONAL CHARISMS

“The Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank through which He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks advantageous for the renewal of the Church.... These charisms, whether they be the more simple and widely diffused or the most outstanding, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation”²⁵. These charisms unfold gradually and their fullness is revealed as the Christian matures. What is gracious in human person are those things that communicate True, Good, and Beauty in the light of the Gospel. Charism is the key to a person's understanding of his call. This is what Saint Paul refers to “There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone”, (1Cor. 12:4-6).

²⁴ Ibid., 62-64.

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

Personal Charisms have four fundamental elements:

- ❖ They are gracious gifts gratuitously given by God to the faithful.²⁶ All who belong to the People of God –be they laypeople, diocesan priests, or consecrated persons –are entrusted with charisms. Thus, consecrated persons do not have charisms because they professed vows; rather, the Holy Spirit entrusts charisms to them and all the baptized by virtue of baptism.
- ❖ Second, it is important to state that the fundamental character of charisms is graciousness. All that we have come from the fusion of:[1]the grace of the Holy Spirit and [2] our genealogy, i.e. the cultural and historical realities we acquire because of the place, time and accident of our birth. However, not everything in our genealogy is gracious. We understand graciousness as those characters and traits we possess which reflect God because they communicated what are true, good, and beautiful in the light of the Gospel. Some of what we have are false, evil, and ugly –take for example tribalism – and, thus, should not be numbered among our personal charisms²⁷.
- ❖ Third, “charism” is spoken of in the plural, never in the singular. This implies that one individual can be the receiver of a variety of charisms. While some of these charisms are particular talents that are unique to an individual, most of the charisms we possess are actually ‘ordinary’. Charisms are not only the extraordinary talents that people possess. Charisms and talents are not the same, “While gifts of grace and natural talents are both gifts of God, they are different kinds of gifts that come to us in different ways. We inherit our talents from our parents; we do not inherit grace”²⁸. As John Haughey says, “A Charism is often a power of God’s Spirit imbues human beings with that enables them to do better what nature or training or praxis has first equipped them to do, thus enhancing what is already there”²⁹.
- ❖ Lastly, it would be a mistake to understand charisms the way gifts are generally understood. A gift in most cultures is something that is given by one person to another for the receiver to personally keep and enjoy. Charisms are more than that. Whether they are “the more simple and widely diffused or the most outstanding,”³⁰ charisms are not for the benefit of their receivers. All the members of the faithful are called to discover, accept, nurture and share these gifts –whether they are ordinary or extraordinary –to

²⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, 2a. 172, 3-4 and 178, 1; 3a, 7.

²⁷ Bernard William, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 39.

²⁸ Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Eugene, Orleans: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 14.

²⁹ John C. Haughey, *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration, in Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 2.

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*

the Church for the sake of its renewal. In gift, *you can have your cake and eat it; but in charism, you have your cake but you must share it for the growth of the Church and society.* “Most of God’s graces are given for the sake of those receiving them. But charisms are different insofar as they are God’s way of building up families, communities, parishes, the Church”³¹.

b) ORIGINATING CHARISM

The Originating Charism is that action of the Holy Spirit which He communicated in the form of *inspiration* to founding individuals so that the suffering and indifferent in their societies may experience his ineffable compassion for the world. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always.... This Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn. 14:15-16; 26-27).

Originating Charism is that call to a person to *be* the presence of the Holy Spirit in a troubled society/Church. It is the direct action of the Holy Spirit. The compassion of the Holy Spirit heals the indifferences in the world. But the Holy Spirit needs the intervention of human being to carry out His action. Each Founder is motivated by the sign of his/her time. However, the Holy Spirit that motivated him/her is not limited to the sign of a particular epoch in human history. The Originating Charism also reveals the *deeper agenda* of the Holy Spirit for giving birth to the institute that may not be fully understood by the founder but an *agenda* that their disciples are called to deepen and constantly develop. It is openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit by subsequent disciples that leads to diversification of mission/apostolate of the Congregation, while still remain faithful to the originating charisms.

c) CHARISM OF THE FOUNDER

When the action of the Holy Spirit is in motion, human agency is needed for this action to be manifested. For this to happen however, the Holy Spirit at one point in the life of human person, will manifest himself either in ordinary or extra-ordinary way to the person. The Holy Spirit can inspire anyone. The person is able to recognize and respond to situation that looks ambiguous, which other people may not notice or willing to respond to.

Charism of the founder “refers to an extraordinary charism, inherent in every founder, which enabled them to recognize the desires of the Holy Spirit, accept His irruption in their lives and to perceive, live, and reveal the Spirit’s inspiration to them”³². The charism of the

³¹ John C. Haughey, *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration, in Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 2.

³² Rene Laurentin, Charism: Terminological Precision, in *Charisms In The Church*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan, (New York: The Seabury Press, 19780), 9.

founder is how a founder experienced the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and how he/she responds to the call of Holy Spirit to an invitation to *BE*. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is first of all to *be*, a call to be the presence of Jesus in that particular place and time. Pope Francis puts this succinctly, “our founders and foundresses shared in Jesus’ own compassion when He saw the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. Like Jesus, ... so our founders and foundresses sought in different ways to be at the service of all those to whom the Spirit sent them”³³.

Charism like vocation, is a response to needs of a particular society at a particular time in human history. Charisms, as John Neafsey explains, “are found in the place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet, on the holy ground where our heart’s desire comes together with what the world most needs from us”³⁴ through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The suffering of the world touched the heart of a Founder, and such heart was able to go out towards the world; and the Founder was never the same again.

However, the founder cannot fully comprehend the agenda of the Holy Spirit because his/her comprehension is affected by the social and religious views of the time – while the Holy Spirit’s agenda goes above these views. The charism of the founder is a reference point for the congregation, because it is the ‘raison d’etre’ i.e the ‘essence’ of the congregation. The charism becomes unquenchable fire in the heart of the founder. The charism of the founder also entails a founder’s realization that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit could be best realized in a life form that entails the practice of celibacy, asceticism, and contemplation – the three constants of Consecrated Life³⁵.

Charism sears into the deepest marrow of the founder and becomes life-consuming. Probably this is what Jesus meant when He told Peter that “when you were young you went where you would. But when you are old another (the Spirit) will tie you fast and carry you off against your will”(Jn 21:18). “All charisms are a person’s way of glorifying God but, it seems, some are so all consuming that one can die acting on the energies it takes to exercise them”³⁶.

The Founders are so possessed by the Holy Spirit that sometimes they acted as if they had lost their senses. They kept their stand and conviction, even in the face of strong oppositions from within the Church and outside of the Church. No doubt, the charism has an altruistic character, sometimes going so far as to laying down one’s life for the sake of the others.

³³ Pope Francis, *Witnesses of Joy: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 10

³⁴ John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: A Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 1.

³⁵ Reginal Cruz, “*HOLY SPIRIT AND RELIGIOUS CHARISM*” (Lecture, Tangaza University College, Nairobi, January 22, 2019).

³⁶ John C. Haughey, *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration*, in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 3.

d) THE FOUNDING CHARISM

The *Founding Charism* refers to the interweaving of the personal charisms of the founder and the personal charisms of their first disciples. This collective sharing of personal charisms at the institute's founding moment not only brought its initial development but also the formation of its unique character and the earliest manifestation of its marks. The founding members not only believed in what the Holy Spirit inspired the founder to be, they also shared in it and incorporated their own personal charisms with the charisms of the founder. By so doing, they form a unique legacy for the congregation.

e) CHARISM OF THE INSTITUTE

The term Charism of the Institute refers to the aspects of *the charism of the founder* and *the founding charism* that linger through the institute's past and present. Altogether these aspects form the unique marks of the institute which would draw future members who will be called to live, safeguard, enrich and develop these marks through their personal charisms. "The Founder's charism, as shared and lived by the members of the community today is a mystery, as is anything which is dynamic and alive. It cannot be defined. It can only be described"³⁷.

The charism of a congregation develops through what is called 'Charismatic Note'. This is the response of an individual to the groaning sound of the Holy Spirit. It is the continuous and persistence of the originating charism and the charism of founder and the personal charisms of the first members of the Institute for starting the Congregation. The Institute/Congregation specific charismatic note will demand continuous attentiveness. Subsequent members, through their formation programmes, must learn to listen and adhere to this 'charismatic note'. Failure to do so will lead to the congregation losing its identity.

Here lies the indispensable role of novitiate in the formation process of all Religious Congregation. It is in the novitiate that 'new birth' takes place; it is there that the seed of the Congregation's charisms are planted, germinated, nurtured, and developed to maturity. It is in the novitiate that the young members grow to maturity to be able to continue the circle. The encouragement of Holy Father, Pope Francis to the young members of each Congregation is worth mentioning. "You are the present, since you are already taking an active part in the lives of your Institutes, offering all the freshness and generosity of your 'yes'. At the same time you are the future, for soon you will be called to take on roles of leadership in the life, formation, service and mission of your communities"³⁸.

Saint John Paul II had earlier on admonished Religious in Latin America to promote and maintain the "same generosity and self-sacrifice which guided your founders must now inspire you, their

³⁷ John Carroll Futurel, "Discovering the Founder's Charism", *The Way Supplement* 14 (1971): 64-65.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Witnesses of Joy: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, (Nairobi:Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 12-13.

spiritual children, to keep alive the charisms which, by the power of the same Spirit who awakened them, are constantly being enriched and adapted, while losing none of their unique character”³⁹.

4) RECOGNITION OF CHARISMS BY ECCLESIAL HIERARCHY

“The wind blows where it wills, you can hear the sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn.3:8). Though the Church is ‘divine’, it is also ‘human’. And human beings are prone to error in judgement.

Where there is power without order, there is turmoil, division, and chaos. And where there is order without power, there is indifference, conformism and lifelessness. “The charisms functioning independently of the structures of the institution would be chaos, while the institution without the charisms would be monotonous, uniform, lifeless. So each needs the other”⁴⁰.

“Charisms remind the Church what kind of an institution it is, how dependent it is on the unpredictable wind of the Spirit to blow where it would, when it would and whether it would. The Church’s laws must be careful to create the conditions of possibility for the Spirit to function as It would”⁴¹, because “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2Cor.3:17). And so, since the Spirit moves where it wills, the gifts of the Spirit are also given to whoever it wishes. Such gifts, though diverse, must be coordinated and used for only one purpose: love and unity of the Body of Christ.

Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit freely distributed, many are recognized, received, and lived out by the baptized Christians; and so, there is no need for regulation. However, when “a gift presents itself as a ‘founding’ or ‘originating’ charism, it requires a specific recognition”⁴² by the ecclesia hierarchy.

The reason for this recognition is of four folds:

- ❖ So that the richness of the gifts can be easily identified and articulated and made know to the faithful within limited time.
- ❖ So that the Church authority can ascertain the authenticity and genuineness of the charism. This is a difficult task.
- ❖ So that the Pastor can inform the faithful about the new development in his diocese. Because the faithful have “the right to be informed by their pastors about the

³⁹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter to the Religious of Latin America on the occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Evangelization of the New World* *Los caminos del Evangelio* (29 June 1990), 26.

⁴⁰ John C. Haughey, *Charisms: An Ecclesiological Exploration*, in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris Donnelly, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 5.

⁴² *Congregation For the Doctrine of The Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church*, (15 May 2016), para17.

authenticity of charisms and the trustworthiness of those who present themselves as recipients thereof⁴³.

- ❖ So that the ecclesia authorities can “bear in mind the unforeseeable nature of the charisms inspired by the Holy Spirit and evaluate them according to the rule of faith with the intention of building up the Church”⁴⁴.

What criteria does the Church use in discerning charismatic gifts? The criteria are meant to help in identifying the authentically ecclesial nature of the charisms. The reason for foundation of a Religious Institute are enumerated in the letter to all the Bishops, written in 1996. They are:

1. *Holiness*: Religious vocation is a call to deepening the universal holiness. Therefore, “every entity that is born from sharing in an authentic charism must always be at the service of holiness in the church and, therefore, of the increase of charity and an authentic movement towards the perfection of love”⁴⁵.
2. *Commitment to Spreading the Gospel*: Every vocation is a fulfillment of the command of Jesus: “Go ye therefore, to all nations” (Mt. 28:19-20). Genuine charism is geared towards evangelization. Authentic charism forms an integral part of the body of Christ and it is channeled to her evangelizing impulse. This is evidence “by conformity to and participation in the Church’s apostolic goals” and show “a missionary zeal which will increase their effectiveness as participants in a re-evangelization”⁴⁶.
3. *Profession of the Catholic Faith*: Every charismatic entity must be a place of education in the faith in its fullness “embracing and proclaiming the truth about Christ, the Church and humanity, in obedience to the Church’s Magisterium, as the Church interprets it”⁴⁷. Keeping and proclaiming the Catholic Faith in truth and in totality is an evidence of authentic charism.
4. *Witness to a real communion with the whole Church*: This requires a “filial relationship to the Pope, in total adherence to the belief that he is the perpetual and visible center of unity of the universal Church, and with the local bishop, ‘the visible principle and foundation of unity’ in the particular Church”⁴⁸. This implies a “loyal readiness to embrace the doctrinal teachings and pastoral initiatives”, as well as “a readiness to participate in programs and Church activities at the local, national and international levels; a commitment to catechesis and a capacity for teaching and forming Christians”⁴⁹.
5. *Recognition of and esteem for the reciprocal complementarity of other charismatic elements in the Church*: From this arises a readiness for reciprocal cooperation. Truly: “A

⁴³ John Paul II, *Catechesis* (9 March 1994), 6: *Insegnamenti* (17/1/1994), 641.

⁴⁴ *Congregation For the Doctrine of The Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church*, (15 May 2016), para17.

⁴⁵ Ibid para18, a.

⁴⁶ Ibid para 18, b

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Christifidels Laici*, (1989), 446-447.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 447.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 447-448.

sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God's holy and faithful people for the good of all. Something truly new brought about by the Spirit need not overshadow other gifts and spiritualities in making itself felt"⁵⁰.

6. *Acceptance of movements of trial in the discernment of charisms:* Because a charismatic gift may imply "a certain element of genuine originality and of special initiative for the spiritual life of the Church" and its surrounding "may appear troublesome", it follows that one criteria of authenticity manifests itself as "humility in bearing with adversities", such that: "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"⁵¹. Any tensions that may arise are a call to the practice of greater charity in view of the more profound ecclesial communion and unity that exists.
7. *Presence of spiritual fruits such as charity, joy, peace and a certain human maturity (cf. Gal.5:22):* The desire "to live the Church's life more intensely", a more intense desire of "listening to and meditating on the Word"⁵²; "the renewed appreciation for prayer, contemplation, liturgical and sacramental life, the reawakening of vocations to Christian marriage, the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life"⁵³.
8. *The social dimension of evangelization:* It is also necessary to recognize that, as a result of the impulse of charity, "the *kerygma* has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others"⁵⁴. Reference to the Social Doctrine of the Church is also a decisive factor. In particular, "our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members"⁵⁵. This cannot be lacking in authentic ecclesial entity.

5) IMPENDIMENTS TO UNDERSTANDING CHARISMS

Many consecrated persons in our days –even those with sufficient education –remain confounded about what charisms are. "The way the word [charism] is used is quite ambiguous and frequently a source of misunderstandings and errors. Often charism is identified with the specific ends of the institute –that is, its ministries –with the danger of overshadowing the significance of consecration for the institute and how consecration and ministries are related to each other. Other times, the word is intended to emphasize only the inspirational spiritual aspects [of the congregation], but making no reference to its history or its juridical system."⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Directive Note Mutuae Relationes*, (1978), 480-481.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (1976), 48.

⁵³ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Christifidels Laici*, (1989), 448.

⁵⁴ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, (2013), 1094.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1094, 1110-1111.

⁵⁶ Cardinal Vincenzo De Paolis, *La vita consacrata nella Chiesa* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2010), 207.

Many Religious Congregations misunderstand Charisms with Mission. Mission is understood to incorporate: (1) the people and places where the Holy Spirit bids the religious to bring the Good News; (2) what the congregation aspires to achieve once its members are in these places and in touch with these people; and (3) the ministries that are appropriate for the congregation to undertake in the light of the marks of the congregational charism. The impediments to the understanding of charisms among Religious Congregations could be:

1. OVERSIMPLIFICATION

Consecrated persons could be exaggeratedly self-confident about their knowledge of the charism of their congregation when, sadly, what they articulate is nothing more than a slogan or, as in many cases, a vision-mission statement. “It is also alarming that many consecrated persons are quite content with explaining the charism of their congregation through ‘sound bites’ -i.e., the reduction of discourses into trite, memorisable clichés in order to capture the interest of attention-deficit consumers who live in our fast-paced society”⁵⁷.

We fail to remember that, according to the teachings of the Church, “an authentic charism implies a certain element of genuine originality and of special initiative for the spiritual life of the Church”⁵⁸. Religious Congregations should bear in mind that charisms are not slogan like, Faith and Zeal; Dieu Le Veut; Live Jesus in Our Hearts; Work and Pray; In God We Trust; God is Our Shepherd. These could be termed ‘charismatic slogans’. Thus, a Religious Congregation that insists that its charism is “personal and intimate love for Jesus and service to the poor, cannot claim to be genuine originality, as every religious is supposed to have a personal and intimate love for Jesus and service to the poor”⁵⁹.

2. DELUSION ABOUT GROWTH

Many consecrated persons gauge the maturity of their congregation in terms of growth in membership and the creation or acquisition of institutions such as schools, hospitals, clinics, social centers, hostels, retreat centers. Thus, they believe that the more of these institutions they have, the more they are sure that their congregation possesses charisms. “When we are not careful, we can easily misread membership, financial, and structural growth as signs of the maturity of the congregation.... After all, this is how the success of institutions like schools, hospitals, banks and others are measured”⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016), 74.

⁵⁸ *Mutuae Relationes*, 12

⁵⁹ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016), 76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

“Embrace the future with hope.... (But) this hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust, the One for whom ‘nothing is impossible.’ This is the hope which does not disappoint. It is the hope which enables consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future. It is to that future that we must always look, conscious that the Holy Spirit spurs us on so that he can still do great things with us. Do not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in your own strength”⁶¹.

There is need to differentiate between Religious Congregations and the institutions they possess. Religious Congregation is not an institution, it only operates through different institutions for the sake of the Kingdom. ‘Unfortunately, many of us in the Consecrated Life are unable to make a clear and conscious distinction between our respective congregations – which are founded on the sense of an authentic community (gemeinschaft) – and the institutions that develop or are attached to them (gesellschaft)’⁶².

3. *ANTIHISTORICISM*

Valorising history is not among the concerns of many contemporary consecrated persons. To them, “the history of the congregation is nothing more than trivial information required to be drilled on the minds of pre-novices and novices. After profession, there is no value in knowing them. In their conviction, the future of their congregation depends on a rejection of –if not a breaking away from –the past instead of on being rooted on the past or tapping its roots”⁶³.

It is the task of every congregation to continually expose its members to the founding narratives of the congregation. These stories should not be inculcated in members as mere historical trivia but as narratives that evoke each consecrated person’s affinity towards them. “Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging.... it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities. In this way we come to see how the charisms have been lived over the years, the creativity they have sparked, the difficulties they encountered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted”⁶⁴. This is the Holy Father’s way of providing a synthesis of the Church’s teaching on charisms and also elucidating the characters and factors involved in the maturation of charisms.

⁶¹ Pope Francis, *Witnesses of Joy: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 12.

⁶² Barbara Fiand, *Refocusing the Vision: Religious Life into the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 117-123.

⁶³ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016), 78.

⁶⁴ Pope Francis, *Witnesses of Joy: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 8

4. GENERICISM

Genericism is a belief “that what applies to one congregation can be applied to others. Thus, those who hold this view would say, for example, that how the vows are lived and understood by Sisters or Brothers in one congregation should also be taken by others. It is not uncommon to see consecrated persons who ascribe to two different spiritualities—that of their own congregation and that of another—at the same time, thus living ambiguous phenomenon of dual membership”⁶⁵, like bats, neither bird nor animal.

“Genericism reduces religious life to a colorless lowest-common-denominator” and “leads to wiping out the beauty and fruitfulness of the many and various charisms inspired by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁶ When the charism of a congregation has matured, its members are able to properly valorize the uniqueness in its *spirituality, life form, ecclesiality* and *mission*. Consequently, they will be able to weather the temptation to accommodate fleeting trends too easily and uncritically and humbly yet firmly assert that what is valued as good and acceptable in another congregation would necessarily find a place in theirs.⁶⁷

6) CONCLUSION

The author of this article tried to throw more light on spirit and charism as related to Religious Congregations. The evolvment of charism, its usage and abuse among Religious; its importance and what Religious should avoid so as to attain the fullness of the charisms of their congregation.

It is the belief of the author that the article will be of great help to Religious, Male and Female as they strive to identify, accept, nurture and share the charisms of their various congregation. Charisms bring out the uniqueness of each Religious Congregation, and differentiate one from another. Hence the importance of knowing and understanding the charisms of each congregation is imperative.

This is a call to renewal. A call to renewal is not a mere desire for novelty or acquisition of more apostolate. A call to renewal is rather a “responsible obedience to the creator Spirit, who ‘speaks through the prophets’, and to the promptings of the Church’s magisterium... This vision of the charism of consecrated life – is something originated by the Spirit, oriented to conformation to Christ, marked by a community based ecclesial profile and in dynamic development within the Church”⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa*, in *Consecrated Life in Africa Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2016), 81.

⁶⁶ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: *Fraternal Life in Community*, (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1994) para 46.

⁶⁷ Reginal Cruz, *Charismatic Maturity and its Impediments*, 83.

⁶⁸ Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: *Keep Watch* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2014), para 5.

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