

Vatican Two and the Renewal of the Church

2. Charisms and the Charismatic Element in the Church

Charisms in the teaching of Vatican Two

At Vatican Two, in *Lumen Gentium* charisms enter into the official Catholic understanding of the Church. Charism is a biblical term meaning gifts and endowments freely given by God to any Christian for the good of the Church. “Allotting his [the Holy Spirit’s] gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 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 profit’ (1 Cor. 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.” (LG, 12).

This passage can be seen in conjunction with the teaching on the Laity that emphasises their dignity and responsibility as baptised Christians. We find a further teaching in the Decree on Lay People in the Life of the Church: “From the reception of these charisms, even the most ordinary ones, there arises for each of the faithful the right and the duty of exercising them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the development of the Church, of exercising them in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who ‘breathes where he wills’ (Jn 3: 8), and at the same time in communion with his brothers in Christ, and with his pastors especially.” (AA, 3).

The teaching on the charisms that the Holy Spirit pours out at all levels within the Church is another decisive step away from a clericalist view of the Church and her ministry. It is significant that the major advocate of charisms at the Council was Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium, who had been a champion of the lay apostolate for many years and who was later to play a leading role in the Catholic charismatic renewal. It is interesting that the post-synodal document on the Laity *Christifideles Laici* (1988) when it indicates the richness and variety of the charisms cites the list given in 1 Cor. 12: 7 – 10 including gifts of healing, prophecy, etc (CL, 24).

Since the Council, the religious orders and congregations in the Church have come to speak of the “charism” of their founders/foundresses. The Council had spoken of the renewal of religious life as “a constant return to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of the institutes, and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our times” (PC, 2). The second of these three elements is what many are calling their distinctive charism, related soon after to “the spirit and aims of each founder” (2b). In 1998, at the World Congress of the New Ecclesial Movements, John Paul II also spoke of the “charisms” of these new movements in the Church, saying: “The fact that a charism gives life to a movement is the fruit of a

mysterious attraction which the founder exercises on all those who allow themselves to become involved in his or her spiritual experience.”

The many religious families and new ecclesial movements in the communion of the Catholic Church certainly reflect the multiform character of the Spirit’s gifts. But it is important to note that both the language of LG and of the biblical references to charisms refer to the Holy Spirit enriching and empowering individual Christians, but always in the context of the body of the Church and its upbuilding (cf esp 1 Corinthians 12).

The Council’s language of “rights and duties” of lay people to exercise their charisms and the emphasis on “the freedom of the Spirit”, both in the conferring of charisms and in their exercise, presents us with a different vision of the role of the ordained ministry. Often the clergy have understood their role as one of control, but this teaching shifts the responsibility to one of discernment. Later in LG in the chapter on the Laity, the Council says that it is the responsibility of the pastors to “recognize the contribution [of the laity] and charisms” (LG, para. 31).

The teaching on charisms brings out the contribution of all church members to the mission of the Church. During the pre-Vatican Two encouragement of the lay apostolate, it was taught that the role of the laity is found in the secular world, in contrast to the role of clergy and religious which is exercised in the Church. This understanding is also expressed in *Lumen Gentium*: “But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will.” (LG, 31). This is further developed in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People: “Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order.” (AA, 7). In many ways, this understanding of the role of the laity underpins *Gaudium et Spes* in its more detailed treatment of the relationship of the Church to the world, and its addressing specific areas of human activity in the world and in society.

But the teaching on charisms introduces an aspect of the laity that is less “secular”. Here the role of the laity is not just to engage “in temporal affairs” but is “for the renewal and building up of the Church”. This tension between the role of the laity in the world and the role of the laity in the Church requires more theological reflection. This tension has become more marked since the Council with the growth of the new ecclesial movements. The recognition of charisms among the laity helps to guard against the danger of affirming the laity’s role in the world in a way that makes a dichotomy: world (sphere of the laity), Church (sphere of the clergy).

The Church is both Institutional and Charismatic

In 1998, when John Paul II called the new movements and communities to gather in Rome to celebrate the feast of Pentecost together, he made a remarkable statement. He said that the Holy Spirit “radically changes people and history. This was the unforgettable experience of the Second Vatican Council, during which, guided by the

same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as being essential to her identity.” This statement was prefigured by the Holy Father’s words in his encyclical on the Holy Spirit: the Second Vatican Council “was in a special way an ‘ecclesiological’ Council: a Council on the theme of the Church. At the same time, the teaching of the Council is essentially ‘pneumatological’: it is permeated by the truth about the Holy Spirit, as the soul of the Church.” (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 26). The rediscovery of the role of the Holy Spirit is impossible without rediscovering the necessary place of the charisms.

The Church has both an institutional and a charismatic dimension. One of the leading canonists today, Fr Libero Gerosa of Lugano, has written about the distinction between the Institution and the Constitution of the Church. He writes: “In the Church the Institution consists substantially of the juridico-structural developments taken on during history whether of the common priesthood or of the ministerial priesthood; the Constitution, in contrast, is not a fixed entity, because beyond Word and Sacrament it must take account of a third primary element: Charism.”

Theologically, there is an analogy between the institutional and the charismatic on the one hand and the divine missions of the Son and the Spirit on the other hand. These are not totally separate, but neither can they be reduced to each other. There always remains a distinction, though a distinction in essential relationship. **The institutional aspect of the Church is more directly related to the Son**, and flows from his earthly ministry (calling of Peter and the Twelve, institution of the eucharist, etc). **The charismatic aspect of the Church is more directly related to the Holy Spirit**, and comes from the Spirit poured out by the risen and ascended Lord (see Eph. 4: 10 – 11).

A profound renewal of the Church is impossible without a rediscovery of the charisms, which are the most visible sign of the mission of the Spirit and of the charismatic dimension in the Constitution of the Church.

Practical Applications of these insights:

- Relationship between Religious (& New Ecclesial Movements) and the basic structure of dioceses and parishes
- Relationship between Sacraments and Charisms
- Relationship between the Traditional and the New
- Relationship between the Teacher and the Prophet