

THE CHARISMATIC NATURE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SISTERS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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As we know, it is only in the past three decades that there has been a greater consciousness of the charismatic element in the Church and that a more specific theology of charism has been developed. Central to this development is the view that the charismata, those special gifts or graces of the Holy Spirit, are given to build the community. According to Rahner (1974), charisms are not merely present in the Church, they are essential to its life and its revitalization. The charismatic action of the Spirit ushers the Church into the future. The emphasis on the charismatic nature of contemporary religious life dramatically reflects these newer understandings of charism. We recognize that the community's collective charism is key to its self-understanding and on-going renewal.

The *purpose* of this presentation is to provide a context for our reflection today on our founding charism--on how it has been experienced over the past 25 years, on its expression in this historical moment, and on its projection into the future. It seems appropriate, in this year of Jubilee, that we reflect on our SFCC charism as we have lived it and be sensitive to the action of the Spirit in our direction into the future. As community, we came into being at a critical period in the Church and in society. We are at a crucial point now in both the Church and society. It is a time when we are seeing our social supports for the poor and disadvantaged challenged, attacked, and even dismantled. Jubilee provides us with an opportunity to look at the past and tell our corporate story, for the past is context for the future. However, many communities celebrate the past but seem, at times, to forget that it is the path to the future. I will briefly review the theological and sociological base of the charismatic nature of religious community--how charism is defined and how the various types of charisms related to religious community are differentiated. Before concluding, I will suggest a simple framework which may help in considering our SFCC charism, and its socio-theological and spiritual bases. My goal is to provide a prelude to the deeper probing of this central dynamic of our lives as SFCC by our sister speakers and all of us together. The material I will present here is based primarily on research, including empirical research which Ann Patrick Conrad, SFCC and I conducted on a number of religious communities and in interviews with experts in this area.

The *specific use* of the term charism in relation to religious congregations, as we know, is a trend in the post-conciliar Church. Although the term, as such, was not used in relation to religious communities in the Vatican II documents, the ground was laid there for later theological development (Rahner, 1974). Significantly, the Second Vatican Council and subsequent developments may be said

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to mark a paradigm shift in the identity of religious communities--a shift from an emphasis on status, a juridical category, to charism as a primary classification. The former stress on religious life as a life of perfection for the sanctification of one's soul has yielded to religious life as charism--a gift of the Spirit for *building the Kingdom*.

The term was first used by Pope Paul VI, although it was referred to as "vision" and "spirit" in the Vatican documents. This represents a radical shift from viewing religious life primarily as a canonical reality to a charismatic reality. The founding charism gives the religious community the dynamism which defines it and provides the organic force for its continual revitalization and change (Buckley, 1985).

The documents of Pope John Paul II on religious life have furthered our understanding of the charism of a religious community and precisely state that the charism is an experience of the Spirit which gives a distinctive character to the community. Both the writings of Paul VI and John Paul II further define religious charism as a living reality which springs from the Spirit and causes the Community to continually confront questions of growth and change, even radical change. Importantly, the charismatic element is not opposed to the institutional but rather informs it and is the source of its creative energy.

Types of Charisms

Many distinguish the various types of charisms of a religious community. The literature reflects a five-fold classification: *the personal charism of the founder or founding group; the collective charism of the community; the charism of the vowed life; the charism or call to community; and, the ensemble of charisms of the individual members*. These distinctions seem central to our self-understanding as Sisters For Christian Community.

Charism Broadly Defined

Stated simply, the charism is a gift of the Spirit to be shared with others. It is a special grace for service, given to anyone of the faithful, as an enabling gift for a special ministry within the Church. In the Pauline sense, it is a manifestation of God's presence among us, a power which is operative at the intersection of the Word and the world. This speaks to its dynamism and empowerment by the Spirit. It may be said to be the contemplation of the Word--the way we see Jesus. For us, it is how we, as SFCC, see Jesus and, importantly, how this vision is brought to bear on concrete reality.

From a *psycho-sociological perspective*, a charism is a **special dimension of the self**. It is naturally within the person and spontaneous in its expression. It is a personal gift. A genuine charism is that which is naturally inherent within the person. It is questionable that it can be transmitted in its original form; however, others can be inspired by it. The sociological sense of the term is close to its use in the Gospel.

Charisms Related to Religious Community

The *charism of the founder or founding group* has been referred to as the vision or inspiration, the original empowerment, which called the founder or founding group to form the community. Broadly, the *charism of the religious community*, referred to as *the corporate or collective charism*, is a gift given to the Church by God. It is the vision or unique characteristic inherent in the community in response to the inspiration of the founder or foundress. As such, it is a permeating spirit which characterizes and gives shape to all aspects of the life of the community. It is at once a broad and a deep way to interpret the Gospel or a specific dimension of the Gospel. According to Pope Paul VI, the charism of the founding person/s is the radical action of the Holy Spirit in the person/s. The charism of the community, then, is the *particularization of this action of the Spirit in a specific group*. In other words, it is the group's interpretation and expression of this vision which develops over time. It may change in external form (for example, in the works of the community) but not in its essence. Its spirit is not time-bound but is universal and reflects permanent values that influence all aspects of life and ministry. The collective charism, then, is the way God is imaged by the group and how the group is transformed by this image. The charisms of religious communities today are incarnational, reflecting a desire to share God's presence in the world. It is Christian service in the context of the spirit of the religious community.

The search for the community's vision is not unlike the trend that is occurring in the professions--in medicine, social work, nursing, and others--to identify and define more clearly the core value or central values inherent in the mission of the profession. There is an increasing recognition that the value orientation of the profession drives the works of the profession as well as its knowledge and skill base. It gives direction to the types of services offered and to the models of practice (the theories, methodologies, and techniques) used in providing its services and accomplishing its mission or purpose.

One may also speak of the *charism to live community*, the spiritual bonding that unites each member in Christ. The *charism or call to live the evangelical councils*, refers to that form of discipleship or consecration that involves the vowed life. *The personal charisms of the members* are those individual gifts through which the mission of the community is expressed. It is through this constellation of gifts and talents that the ministries of the community, informed by the corporate charism, are effected.

Some interesting distinctions also have been made by theologians in reference to the non-canonical nature of our community. It has been stated clearly that in the *theological sense* we are a religious community although we have not sought canonical status. We are bonded together and share a corporate vision, a charism. We are a moral community with a theological base that defines us as a religious community. The charismatic element is the dynamic that informs our community, our relationships with one another and with others as well as our collegial structures. Thus, even though not canonical, we are a religious community. This particular form, in this time, helps us to express our vision and implement our mission.

Transmission of the Charism

Importantly, the community charism is given by the Spirit to be shared in ministry and spirituality. This is effected through collaboration with the laity. The charism should bind the community more closely with the people of God. Since the charism is a dynamic reality, a source of life and activity which is given to be shared, it cannot be limited or contained. The very nature of religious life requires that it be witnessed and communicated.

A Framework to Study the Corporate Charism--A Developmental-Contextual Model

Since the charism is a *primary element* of a religious group, if not *the primary element* or core value or set of values, serious study has been attempted by many communities to distinguish the elements which were essential to the founding vision from those which were historically conditioned by the cultural milieu of the Church and society at the time. Clarification of the charism is seen as central to the group's continuation in the present and its extension into the future. In the studies that we have done on religious communities, we have conducted attitudinal surveys as a base for organizational planning. We soon found that the systematic study of the charism became a major aspect of this work. It helped us not only in developing the study instrument, a questionnaire, but also helped the sisters to discern the historical and contemporary expression of their charism. We have formulated a *developmental-contextual model* to examine the founding charism in not only its historical expression but its contemporary interpretation. This framework may be helpful as we proceed in thinking about our lived experience of 25 years. The components of the model are generic and familiar to you, I'm sure, but it may be useful to consider them at this time.

This approach involves an analysis of the charism within the *context of the founding phase*--the socio-political-religious culture of the time--as well as its development and reformulation over time. Clearly the charism is not static. It should lead the community to incarnate Christ more fully in changing times. For example, a number of the communities which we studied were formed during the latter 18th and 19th centuries. A monarchical governmental system and a hierarchical authority were dominant then. Paternalistic attitudes and a philanthropic orientation toward the poor rather than authentic gospel charity and social justice were prevalent. From the philosophical perspective, there was the rise of empiricism and secularism and a muting of the spiritual and non-material. In the Age of the Enlightenment, there was a growing emphasis on rationalism, human rights, and liberty. In art, music, and literature the baroque prevailed. An ornate art and dress and an affected language predominated. In reaction, Vincent de Paul, Frances de Sales, the Jesuits and others urged simple and direct language. In the Church this was a time of intense religious ferment and renewal and concern for spiritual growth, and apostolic and charitable works. The virtues of simplicity and humility were emphasized.

In this climate, religious communities were undergoing radical change, referred to by many commentators as a paradigm shift. New forms of communities emerged--active or apostolic communities attempting to develop an incarnational spirituality. They struggled to respond to the changing socio-spiritual needs. Although the cloistered and monastic religious orders held a preferred

status in the Church and paternalistic attitudes toward women prevailed, the distinct trend toward apostolic religious life was surfacing. Communities actually founded by women "needed to be legitimized" by a priest, the bishop founder or the founding couple (e.g., Vincent de Paul, Francis de Sales). For years, this form of community struggled for acceptance and for its own expression in spirituality and organization--sharply paralleling the historical status of women.

A similar paradigm shift began with the call of the Second Vatican Council to religious communities for renewal. The climate of the time, the turmoil in religious communities as they sought their charismatic identity and its expression in contemporary society certainly influenced the founding of SFCC. I think we need to consider this context as we interpret our charism for today.

The overarching theme identifies that aspect, that value, which seemed to dominate the charismatic beginnings and which was reflected in both the spirituality and ministries of the community. It provided both grounding and context for the founding mission.

Central themes refers to the characteristic pattern or tracings, often subtle, which ran through the early period of the development of the community and often through its history. These tracings were implicit in the style of the community. Central themes are often sustained over the history of the community whereas the core elements may shift with change in the Church and society.

In our group discussions, unity--that all may be one--seemed to emerge as an overarching theme. Another dominant theme was freedom, not "freedom from" but "freedom for"--for responsible action, for ministry. At other times, collegiality surfaced strongly. A future orientation, a participation in the development of religious life, seems to be a patterning evident in the community from our founding and over time. We need to reflect on these themes, our Profile, and our experience over these 25 years to discern our overarching theme, or value, and those related themes that are inherent in our vision, our corporate or collective charism.

Core elements refers to the main elements or explicit aspects of the work and organizational style of the founding group. These external aspects were a part of the mission of the early group. For example, Nano Nagle, in founding the Presentation Sisters started a system of Catholic education but the grounding for this was social justice and social development, the vehicle through which the Faith would be sustained in Ireland and the Irish people would gain their rightful social status in their society.

A core element in our community's founding phase might be the bridge concept--the work of our sisters to provide a bridge, a safe place, for sisters who left their congregations. This was a turbulent time in religious congregations and this function provided space for these sisters to re-organize their lives. It provided the opportunity to discern the movement and direction of the Spirit in the events that they had experienced. Our Sisters offered material, emotional, and spiritual support. Is the bridge concept relevant now? If so, how do we interpret it for today?

This framework, however expressed, may be helpful to us as we reflect on our lived experience over these years. We will want to look back and identify the overarching and central themes inherent in our founding--those dimensions of the Gospel that do not change over time and the core elements, those external elements which were core at the time of our founding but which have changed in response to the social, political, and spiritual needs of our time.

Conclusion

Since the charism is an essential element of religious life, it is clearly our task to capture more precisely and with greater clarity our charismatic identity and its various expressions throughout the life cycle of our community. This is what we are about in this time of Jubilee. Hopefully this will bring us to a deeper and richer understanding of the vision that has been given to us as community as we seek to extend the gift of SFCC into the future.

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