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The Spirit and His Gifts

[Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio](#)



One of the achievements of [Vatican II](#) was a renewed appreciation of the Holy Spirit's activity in all aspects of Christian life. Though we Catholics typically think of the sacrament of confirmation when considering the work of the Holy Spirit, the Council makes clear that the Spirit is integrally involved in every sacrament. Indeed every sacramental celebration is called a "new Pentecost" in the Catechism of the Catholic

Church (par. 739)

But the Council made clear that the scope of Spirit's activity far exceeds the sacraments. It drew our attention to the charisms, the supernatural "gifts of grace" (the literal meaning of "charism") that we see operative throughout the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles.

In an open discussion on the council floor two widespread notions about the charisms were alluded to by various bishops. First was the idea that the supernatural charisms were a temporary gift to help the Church get going - a kind of divine push-start. Indeed this is the official doctrine of some Protestant churches. The second idea, more common in Catholic circles, is that the gifts of the Spirit survived the end of the apostolic era, but are in subsequent ages only for saints and mystics.

In a now famous speech, Cardinal Suenens, one of the four moderators of the Council, vigorously insisted that the Church today needs the charisms more than ever before and that they are for all Christians, not simply the spiritually elite. This opinion was later canonized by the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ([Lumen Gentium](#)) which in paragraph 12 teaches:



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“It is not only through the sacraments and the ministry of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people of God, leads and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts ‘according as he will,’ (quoting I Corinthians 12:11). He also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit, equipped 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. Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they ought to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church. Extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly desired, nor is it from them that the fruits of apostolic labours are to be presumptuously expected. 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.”

The upshot of all this is that the ordinary Christian life is a life lived supernaturally. The Holy Spirit is infinite; we can never be completely in possession of him. So in Baptism we receive the Spirit and his gifts and are strengthened in them through confirmation; but through all the other sacraments, in prayer, and in God’s Word the Spirit keeps coming, again and again, to further strengthen our foundation in him, to fill us with new gifts, to help us experience more of his gifts, and become more proficient in the exercise of those gifts.



Charisms are spiritual gifts meant for the upbuilding of the Church. Part of our problem is that we tend to limit them to the spectacular: the gifts of healing, say, or tongues and prophecy. These are in fact extremely important gifts and are given more generously than we sometimes think. But there are many other, much more apparently “ordinary” charisms that we typically overlook, and so fail to cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s attempt to make these gifts supernaturally fruitful in our lives. St Paul’s various lists of charisms (for example in I Cor 12-14 and in Romans 12:6-8) were never intended to be exhaustive. Any time God supernaturalises some natural gift, endowing it with the charm and power of the supernatural to build up the Church, the result is a charism. Sometimes charisms seem to fall from heaven, having no natural antecedent: it is not always health care professionals who receive the charism of healing. But most of the time, God takes a natural reality or talent and bestows a supernatural grace on it, transforming and elevating it.

Let us consider leadership, for example, which we see exercised naturally in politics, business, sports, indeed in all departments of life. The very first charism listed in Ephesians is that of apostle, which through the sacrament of orders is given to those consecrated bishops. The word bishop means overseer, illustrating that the apostolic charism is one of spiritual headship. This headship is not a matter of privilege or even one of monopolizing all initiative in service and

mission. Rather, it is more a gift of discerning and coordinating the charisms of the faithful who all collaborate together in the mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council makes clear that these charisms are not delegated to the faithful by the clergy; they are given to us directly by the Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation. We need no authorisation to begin using them; we should do so in submission to our pastors, but the initiative to begin using them is ours, not theirs.

Some rather ordinary charisms we see operative among the faithful are connected with states of life--marriage and the single life. St Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 says some will choose to marry and some will stay single, each receiving his own charism from God. There are natural and supernatural ways of being married and single. There are some who are deliberately single because of selfishness, because of an unwillingness to open their lives to another. That is not a charism. There are some who are married for purely natural reasons: marriage is a natural good ordered towards the natural blessings of companionship and children.



But Christian marriage and Christian celibacy entail more than this: they are gifts of the Spirit which build up the Body and cause Christians to find in them their joy, life and freedom. Embracing celibacy out of love for Christ is a gift of the Spirit. When the Spirit empowers someone to live a celibate life, it is a prophetic act. Some accept this gift primarily to be free to serve the wider body of Christ, to employ their celibacy in service. Some receive a more contemplative charism: their celibacy is a sign that spending one's life at the feet of Jesus, heeding his word, is the "one thing necessary" (Lk 10:42). Marriage, too, is such a special charism that it is a Sacrament, one of the seven especially privileged means of grace. It is a sign of a higher reality, a sign of the unbreakable bond between Christ and his Church.

Saint Thomas Aquinas describes the role of parents as analogous to that of bishop and priest: it is a pastoral role. The family, says the Second Vatican Council, is a domestic church. The role of the parent is to discern gifts and pastor those gifts in their children: not just the natural gifts - the ones we need to get a good occupation, to provide for ourselves and do well at school - but the supernatural charisms. Being a parent is an office in the Catholic Church, and that office carries with it the promise of grace. Yes, graces accompany with the sacrament of matrimony which equip parents to carry out the challenging responsibilities entrusted to them by God.

But even when children are not included among the blessings that flow from a particular marriage, that sacrament is still spiritually exceedingly fruitful. The

elderly couple that marries beyond childbearing years make a powerful statement to the whole world by living out the unbreakable bond of faithful love between Christ and the Church.

Another example of a seldom recognized charism would be the gift of hospitality. There are some people who have a way of making people feel welcome that is a powerful supernatural gift. I remember during my years in the seminary many evenings spent with a family who exercised a remarkable charism of hospitality. What was happening in their home was clearly supernatural. I and other guests in their home were welcomed as if we were Christ. Each year, this couple took time away together— not easy, having four children and limited resources - to renew their sacrament of marriage, a kind of annual honeymoon. Their marriage was a prophetic sign and one of its fruits was the charism of hospitality.

Many Catholics have entered into the sacrament of matrimony, but few draw water as frequently from their sacramental font of grace as this couple. In the same way, there are many who live the single life without realising the gift of the Holy Spirit that accompanies their noble calling.

Why is it that we, whether clergy or laity, so often fail to recognize and actualise our charisms, whether they be humble or more exalted?

The answer is provided by Matthew 25: the parable of the talents. The man who returned only one talent confesses that he buried it in the ground *out of fear*. The very next passage is the last judgement, where people are condemned not for committing positive infractions of God's law but rather for sins of omission - of failing to reach out and take action. When we were children we were given the capacity to walk and to talk, but we had to exercise the capacity. We got up and we fell down, and we got hurt. We started babbling and we started using bad grammar. So it is with charisms. There is no way to start exercising any of the charisms and not make mistakes. But the fear of making a mistake and looking foolish often paralyses us, causing us to leave the charisms we've received unwrapped and useless.



Part of the reason why Christ called Peter the Rock was that Peter was not afraid to make mistakes. Jesus gave the charism of headship to a pistol: Peter just shot off, often in entirely the wrong directions. Yet because he was willing to speak out and step out, Jesus could give him the charism of truth in which we recognize the basis for the doctrine of papal infallibility (Mat 16:17). Peter had to learn how to use his charism: he fell and fell again, and even betrayed Jesus, and had to be corrected - by Jesus at the end of John's Gospel and by Paul in Galatians. So, too, Pope John Paul II, who asks us to pray for him as a sinner constantly in need of conversion.

The good news is that in our Father's house we need not be afraid to make mistakes. If we refuse to confront the fear of failure, the Spirit cannot move us to maturity and fruitfulness. The most frequent command of Jesus in the Gospels is "do not be afraid!" This is because fear shuts out God. The antidote to fear is faith. The man with a talent could have gambled the money away, risked it on a high-interest investment and lost it, and would still have won the Father's favour. But his refusal to risk making a mistake provoked God's wrath.

Unlike money, the gifts of the Spirit are not finite: they are there for the asking; if we squander them or use them wrongly, the supply can be replenished at once. What is asked of us is not perfection, but rather the courage to step out in faith.

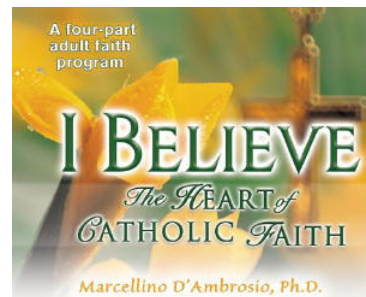
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I Believe - The Heart of Catholic Faith

by: Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.

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