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Resource for the Sacrament of Confirmation

The Charisms Of The Holy Spirit For Service

Marcellino D'Ambrosio spoke at the 2003 Celebrate conference in the UK on the importance of the charisms of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Below is an article based on his talk on the Charisms which appeared in Good News, the official magazine of the English Catholic Charismatic Renewal. While this article is helpful for all Christians at all stages of development, it is especially valuable for those preparing for or teaching about the sacrament of confirmation.



The Catholic Church has always taught that the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit is 'standard equipment' for the normal Christian life. Yet many Catholics are totally unaware of this and other important aspects of the Church's rich tradition. The recovery of the Church's Tradition in all its fullness is exactly the programme embraced by the Second Vatican Council. No wonder the Council spoke so often of the Holy Spirit, his role, and his gifts.

Because the Holy Spirit is God, and therefore infinite, we can never be completely in possession of him - there is always more of Him to receive. A good example of this is the group of gifts that Scripture and Tradition call the 'charisms'. The word "charisms" means simply a "a gift of grace" (Charis is the Greek word for grace). Thomas Aquinas confirms what is evident from the way Paul speaks of these gifts in I Cor 12 and Eph 4:7-18 – the charisms are supernatural gifts given to an individual by the Holy Spirit for the service of others and the upbuilding of the entire Church.

There is a danger that we can limit the charisms to the more spectacular gifts mentioned in First Corinthians 12, which includes tongues, prophecy, healing, and miracles. But Paul often uses the word "charism" and in Ephesians 4:9-13 he talks about the roles of pastors, apostles, prophets and teachers all flowing from charisms. In Romans 12:6-8 he talks about some rather humble things which he considers as charisms too, such as works of mercy, which should be done cheerfully, and giving alms, which should be done generously.

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Grace builds on nature

As I was studying charism as a theology student, it became very clear to me that St Paul never intended to give an exhaustive list of charisms. The way I see it, any time God takes and supernaturalises some natural gift of a person, for the building up of the Church, we have a charism. Take the gift of music for example. When I was a teen, one of the most outrageous rock musicians in my home state was converted to Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. This young man, Jon Polce, developed a powerful ministry drawing people into the presence of the Lord through music. The Lord took his natural gift and transformed it and elevated it. As St Thomas Aquinas explains, grace builds on, transforms, and elevates nature. The natural and supernatural are not separate things but work together in harmony.



Charisms of marriage and hospitality



There are other gifts that work in this way, such as hospitality. Some people have an extraordinary gift of making people feel welcome, at home, and loved. When I was a seminarian, a Catholic family welcome me and several others from the seminary into their home for fellowship and relaxation each Friday evening. The experience of their home had a significant effect on my life. They welcomed us as if we were Christ and we were all built up in the spirit as a result. Hospitality flowed from their charism of marriage (see I Cor 7:7) which they regularly nourished and exercised. It was the first time I saw married life with Christ as the centre, lived out as a prophetic sign. Their life together was so radical and open to others that on feast days they could sometimes have up to 22 people around the table basking in the warmth of their home.

Celibacy too is a gift. Some choose the single life out of selfishness, but when the Spirit empowers someone to live a celebrate life for the sake of the gospel, this is a prophetic act flowing from a charismatic gift. The gift of celibacy is a silent proclamation that there is only one thing necessary (Lk 10:42). It also can free us to serve others and find our happiness, joy and freedom in the wider body of Christ.

Charism of headship

An official role that often we don't often connect with "charism" is that of the apostle. In the Catholic Church we believe that the apostolic anointing has been passed on down through the centuries from the apostles to our current bishops through the laying on of hands in the sacrament of episcopal ordination.

A document discovered earlier in the century, "The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus," provides us a fascinating outline of the life and liturgy of the Roman Church in the early third century. In it is a description of the consecration of a bishop in which there is a prayer for the new bishop to receive the "charism of headship". In Corinthians we learn that this is the charism that co-ordinates and orchestrates all the charisms of the faithful.

It also helps to discern, encourage, correct and nurture these gifts. This power and responsibility the bishop shares with those he ordains priests. Part of their pastoral role is to do the same on the parish level, to co-ordinate, test and encourage what is good and correct when things are not quite right, but doing so in a way that doesn't quench the spirit.

St Thomas Aquinas says that parents have a similar pastoral role of headship in their families, the domestic Church. The role of parents is to discern and pastor the gifts they see in their children, both natural and spiritual. With this office comes the promise of grace. And we should expect that God will give us prophetic words of wisdom and knowledge for our children so that we can give them supernatural guidance in discerning their own vocations.

Decision to activate a charism

It takes a decision, however, to activate a charism. There are many Catholics who have the sacrament of matrimony but don't draw water from this abundant font of grace. And there are many celibates who, forgetting to lean on the grace accompanying their call, suffer from a predictable lack of joy and power. To fail to unpack and fully utilize God's gifts is a serious matter. St. Matthew's parable of the talents and the scene of the last judgment (Mat 25:14ff) make this perfectly clear.

It is interesting in both these stories people are not condemned for committing positive infractions of God's law but rather for sins of omission, for failing to reach out and take action. Often we think that faith is a matter of being receptive and receiving what God has for us, but this yielding to God also means taking the initiative. God is not pleased with those who refuse to take risks. This is why the parable of the talents is so important.

Why are we often afraid to step out and exercise the charisms we have been given? Usually it is due to fear of making a mistake. What if we pray for someone and they don't get healed? What if we give a word of knowledge and it is not from the Holy Spirit? What if I give direction for my child and it proves to be the wrong direction?

We are going to mess up

As children, we often fell as we tried to learn to walk. Our grammar was terribly bad when we first started to talk. But we kept on talking and walking, coaxed by the smiles and encouragement of our parents. And we eventually got rather good at both.

This brings up the role of the pastors in helping us exercise the charisms. The Second Vatican Council makes plain that the charisms are not delegated to us by the clergy, but they are given directly by God through baptism and confirmation. We need no authorization to begin using them, but we do need to use them in submission to our pastors. And we will often need guidance, because we are not going to do things



perfectly from the beginning, just like learning to talk or to walk. Mess-ups are inevitable. There is no way to start exercising any of the charisms and not make mistakes.

The charisms can never be effectively exercised by those who are too afraid of failure to act and speak. This was part of Peter's greatness, why Christ called him the Rock. Peter wasn't afraid to make mistakes. At Caesarea Philippi (Mat 16:16) Jesus asked an important question. Peter was willing to speak out with a bold answer. Because of that he could be given the charism of truth that is the foundation of papal infallibility. But Jesus had to pastor Peter's charism, and correct Peter more than once. Peter fell again and again but he kept getting up and walking in his gift. He even had to be corrected after the Ascension by Paul (Galatians) 2:11) when his behavior didn't match his words.

Shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes

The fear of failure is paralyzing. The Church has often been denied the benefits of the charisms because of this fear. But we shouldn't be afraid to let people make mistakes. The only way to get good at anything is practice. The Holy Spirit wants working intimately with him through the charisms to become second nature to us. St Thomas calls this connatural, second nature, to live in the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. I know from my own life that if we open ourselves up just a little bit to his supernatural guidance and power, the Spirit can lead us and use us in ways we couldn't have imagined. When I was young I got terrible grades at school. I didn't care, however, because all I wanted was to be a professional rock musician. When I discovered a more personal relationship with Christ at age 16, I assumed my ministry would be music. But one day when I was praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament, I had the distinct impression that God was calling me to the seminary. I was stunned as I didn't think my grades would be good enough. But amazingly, not only was I accepted but was awarded a scholarship! And though feeling very inadequate and self-conscious, I decided to give it a try. I found myself graduating four years later at the top of the class and went on for a Ph.D in theology. Imagine how different my life would have been had I lost the battle with fear of failure.

Stepping out of comfort zone

Another time when I had to step out of my comfort zone and overcome my fear was when I was playing with the music ministry at a charismatic event some years ago. While standing on the stage and singing a song of healing, all of a sudden in my imagination I saw this kind of strange flash of the letter H. I suspected it was a word from the Lord but it was so incomplete that I was frightened to step out and do anything with it. You tend to think that when the Spirit is working you will feel really secure. But if you are waiting for that before you act, you probably never will. As I stepped out and spoke I found myself saying that someone was suffering from the disease of herpes, and that God wanted not only to heal them physically but also liberate them from the shame of sexual sin. He wanted the person to know beyond a doubt that He loved her and had forgiven her. Imagine how embarrassed I felt to say all this in front of hundreds of people as this disease is incurable and is a rather sensitive issue. I also up until then had not been gifted in the area of healing or words of knowledge. What a way to get started!

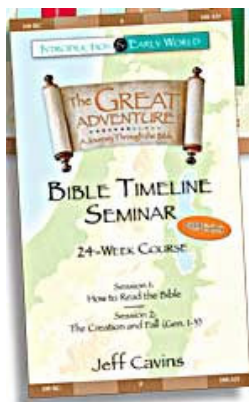
At the end of the evening, as we were packing up the sound equipment, a woman came up to me privately, insisted the word was for her, and thanked me profusely. I was actually scared to death that she would be disappointed when she wasn't healed, which shows how much faith I actually had. A year later my music group returned to do another concert for the same group of people and I found out that the woman had been symptom-free and liberated from shame since that night.

Repent of fear and pray for faith



My experience taught me that if we can't face our fear, we limit the work of the Spirit. And if the Spirit doesn't move, the Church won't be fed and built up. And that's really the message of Jesus – His most frequently repeated sentence in the four Gospels is "Fear Not!" This is one of the chief messages of John Paul II's pontificate as well. We need to repent of fear and pray for faith, courage, and boldness. We don't have to fear making mistakes because we are in our Father's house and have the Tradition and the authority of the Church's pastors to help pick us up when we fall. We are in a Church that has structure and boundaries and safeguards so that we can be free to step out and try to exercise our gifts. And those with the responsibility to exercise authority should do so confidently, to call forth the charisms, encourage them and pastor them so that as a Church we can confidently move forward together. The stakes are high. The charisms were "standard" equipment for 1st century Catholics as they met the challenge of proclaiming the gospel to a pagan world. We need to be equipped just as well as we undertake the re-evangelization of a world that has become no less pagan.

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