

## **Transmission of the charism: a major challenge for Catholic education**

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In a recent address to Catholic educators in the USA (Washington DC, April 2008), Pope Benedict XVI spoke of founders and foundresses of religious orders who 'with great tenacity and foresight, laid the foundations of what is today a remarkable network of parochial schools contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation'. This article will attempt to explore the extent to which it is possible to maintain such founding charisms in an era marked by a steep decline in the number of religious in schools. It will begin with a discussion of the term charism. The article will then go on to articulate the nature of the Salesian charism as an exemplar, before investigating the extent to which it is possible to maintain such distinctive charisms in the current demographical context of the Catholic Church highlighted recently in the latest Vatican document on Catholic education.

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### **The origin and nature of charism**

The word charism derives from the Greek word *χάρισμα* (tr. charisma) meaning gift. In the context of the use of the term in common parlance, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* cites a theological and a specific use of the term, the latter with reference to the related word 'charisma'. With reference to theological usage, the dictionary defines charism as a free gift or favour specifically vouchsafed by God, a grace or talent. The dictionary then goes on to cite a series of references to the term ranging in date from 1620 to 1920. In the context of the specific use of the term 'charisma' in the context of late modernity, references are almost entirely cited from the work of Max Weber or translations of his work by others. The term is defined as 'a gift or power of leadership or authority' to which is added 'hence the capacity to inspire devotion or enthusiasm'. The relevance of both definitions to this article will unfold, in particular the references to grace and talent and to the capacity to inspire devotion and enthusiasm.

### **'Charis' (grace) and 'charisma' (charism)**

While an extensive discussion of the biblical and theological background is beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to note that from a theological point of view the concept of *χάρισμα* derives from the grace of God given to all believers by virtue of their baptism. The term *χαρις* (tr. Charis meaning 'grace') is found extensively in the writings of St Paul, occurring 24 times in the Letter to the Romans alone

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(Cranfield 1977, 71). The sense of undeserved gift or love for the undeserving dominates Pauline usage, for example in Romans:

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:7)

Cranfield suggests that in this passage the message of the Gospel is summed up in the one word *χάρις* which 'characteristically denotes God's undeserved love revealed in Christ' (Cranfield 1977, 71). In other words God's grace is independent of achievement of any kind.<sup>1</sup>

The Second Vatican Council did not devote any document to the nature of grace. The council made a deliberate effort to avoid abstractions and technicalities around the subject. 'Grace', therefore, tends to be used in an active sense in the context of the mission of the Church. By implication grace constitutes the sharing in the divine life by all Christians originating at baptism.<sup>2</sup> The nature of this grace also reflects Edward Schillebeeckx's (1964) notion of Christ as the sacrament of encounter with God. Baptism is the moment in which the Christian is called to that encounter, mirroring the first disciples' encounter with Jesus beside the lake. Schillebeeckx speaks of this encounter in terms of a fundamental grace offered by God through his Son as the fulfilment of His promise of salvation:

... the encounter between Jesus and his contemporaries was always on his part an offering of grace in a human form. For the love of the man Jesus is the human incarnation of the redeeming love of God: an advent of God's love in visible form. (Schillebeeckx 1964, 14)

Grace then is the universal gift (*χάρις*) of God through Christ to all the baptized as a result of which the Christian is called to share in the divine life of Christ, thereby linking fundamentally the nature of grace and vocation. A charism could be described as the realization in practice or the concretization of this universal gift. While the nature of grace is univocal, a charism can take on a variety of forms, reflected in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

I always thank God for you because of his *grace* (*χάρις*) given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual *gift* (*χάρισμα*) as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. (1 Corinthians 1:7)

Paul is, therefore, implying that gift is not synonymous with grace but is a result of it. A charism is the realisation in practice of grace, a gift which enables the believer to contribute to the common good. In Chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians Paul gives his fullest classification of charisms which includes 'first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration' (1 Corinthians 12: 27–28). Although there are a variety of gifts, they must, however, work together for the benefit of the community.<sup>3</sup>

### Charism in the context of leadership

Here in Chapter 12 Paul recognizes for the first time the integral connection between charism and the role of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, Paul also sees the interconnections between the concepts of 'charism', 'ministry' and 'work'. Indeed service and work are part of the inclusive nature of charism, 'abilities to *shape* actions for the good of the community' (Nardoni 1993, 72).

Now there are a variety of gifts (charisma) but the same Spirit; and there are a variety of services (diakonia) but also the same Lord; and there are varieties of working (ergemata) but it is the same God that inspires them all in everyone. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6)

In connecting gifts and Spirit and recognizing their interrelation with service and work, Paul is, firstly, reiterating the point that since all gifts have a common origin they should serve a common purpose. Secondly Paul is asserting that the common purpose is the promotion of solidarity among believers since the Spirit is the principle of community (koinonia), reflected in Paul's final greeting to the people of Corinth, namely, 'the fellowship (koinonia) of the Holy Spirit be with you'. Thirdly, in connecting charism and 'work' (energemata) Paul implies the concept of power since the word 'work' is used in other contexts to represent an active power or principle (see Romans 7: 5; 1 Thessalonians 2: 12). The purpose of such power is for the purpose of coordinating the gifts of the community for the common good.

There are references to the use of the term charism in the context of leadership in the earliest Apostolic Fathers.<sup>4</sup> Moving forwards in the context of the history of the Church, Thomas Aquinas' (c.1227-1274 CE) treatise on the gift of religious life to the Church is placed at the conclusion of his exposition of the role of the virtues in Christian living and focuses on growth in virtue and its concomitant ability to inspire others. At the beginning of his exposition of the nature of the virtues, Thomas cites St Paul's reference to the gift of fellowship (koinonia) resulting from the grace of God revealed in His communication of His Son, Christ Jesus. Thomas insists that the essence of this self-communication is charity and that religious life was instituted primarily so that Christians could strive for the 'perfection of charity' which, it could be argued, resonates with the theme of singleness of purpose which dominates the latter part of the Sermon on the Mount. In speaking of 'the sound eye' (Matthew 6: 22)<sup>5</sup> and in urging his disciples to 'be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5: 48)<sup>6</sup> Jesus is exhorting them to reflect in their lives a singleness of purpose encapsulated in the analogy of the 'narrow gate' (Matthew 7: 13-14). Thomas here suggests that the religious must reflect in his/her person the theological virtue of charity:

The religious state was instituted chiefly that we might obtain perfection by means of certain exercises, whereby the obstacles to perfect charity are removed. By the removal of the obstacles of perfect charity, much more are the occasions of sin cut off, for sin destroys charity altogether. (The Summa Theologica 1920: second part of the second part, 189: 4)

By maintaining an integral link between growth in virtue and the seeking of perfection, it could be argued that Thomas is focusing on personhood and implies that membership of a religious order will encourage others to follow his/her way of life by example as opposed to any notion of inducement which he rules out explicitly later in the same section of the Summa Theologica (1920). This notion of inspiring

others is central to the reflections of Max Weber on charisma, influential insofar as he was aware of the significance of the ability of founders of religious orders to inspire discipleship and promote social action in support of the common good.

### **Charismatic leadership – the contribution of Max Weber**

The most widely quoted definition of the term charisma in late modernity is found in the writings of the German sociologist Max Weber. Weber's writing is particularly significant in the context of the contemporaneous emergence of religious orders dedicated to teaching and the significance of the charism of individual founders in its power to inspire followers or disciples, thereby enabling such orders to contribute significantly to mass education – a sociological term referring to a state-run educational system, usually free, that aims to ensure that all children in society have at least a basic education, originating in late modernity. In his seminal definition, Weber suggests that charisma should be applied to:

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader'. (Weber 1968a, Vol. 1: 241)

Weber goes on to claim that such leadership inspires 'devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him' (Weber 1968a, Vol. 1: 215). To the extent that this definition refers to exceptional sanctity, it suggests that Weber, a convinced Calvinist, is aware implicitly of the connection between his notion of charismatic leadership and the Pauline notion of charism. The concept of exemplary character, a person exhibiting virtues worthy of emulation, also resonates with the Pauline notion of modelling one's life on himself and, by definition, on Christ referred to previously. Similarly the background of the word heroism in the Greek classics as the willingness to sacrifice the self for the greater good resonates further with the integral connection in the Pauline literature between charism and the common good.

In articulating the exemplary nature of charismatic leadership, Weber contrasts such leadership with the more traditional, hierarchical paradigm by claiming that charismatic leadership does not depend on positional authority for its legitimacy but rather on the personal integrity of the leader. Such integrity will be reflected in the giftedness of the particular leader which will, in turn, inspire allegiance and commitment from disciples. Weber (1991) sees an integral connection between the nature of the leader's gifts and his specific mission. He suggests therefore that the charismatic claims of any leader break down 'if his mission is not recognised by those to whom he feels he has been sent' (1991, 246–247).

In emphasising the gratuitous nature of charismatic leadership, Weber (1968b) cites the example of St Francis of Assisi who 'shunned the possession of money and pecuniary income' (1968b, 21). Weber contrasts the focus on mission and the inner determination of the charismatic leader such as Francis, with the focus on career advancement and pecuniary rewards found within the hierarchical paradigm. In fact Weber also cites the example of the members of religious orders such as the Jesuits

who refrain from owning property. Weber's emphasis on the 'other worldly' nature of charismatic leaders and their followers, resonates with the liminal nature of the mission of religious orders and the interstitial nature of liminality articulated by Turner (1969).<sup>7</sup> Weber insists that, in order to do justice to their mission, charismatic leaders and their disciples, 'must stand outside the ties of this world ... as well as outside the routine obligations of family life' (Weber 1991, 248).

For Weber, charismatic leadership was dependent critically on the support of disciples for its effectiveness, disciples who were lost in complete devotion to the extraordinary qualities of the leader (Weber 1991, 249). Such devotion should, automatically, lead to self-sacrifice on the part of the discipleship which, for Weber, was the greatest virtue in contrast to selfishness which he regarded as the greatest vice. The disciple should also experience the charisma of the leader as 'lived vitality' as opposed to what Weber would describe as routinization (see Lindholm 1990). Such a lived vitality is particularly significant in the context of maintaining the original inspiration of the charism since there is a danger that charismatic leadership 'may be said to exist only in the process of originating' (Weber 1991, 54). Weber then goes on to explore the difficulties in what could be termed succession planning.

Weber's work on the nature of charismatic leadership has been developed by a number of scholars including Bruce Malina (1996) who highlights the counter-cultural nature of Weberian charismatic leadership, suggesting that such leadership emerges in situations of crisis and derives from the successful calling into question of existing cultural values and institutions. Ann Ruth Willner (1984) revisits the core characteristics of charismatic leadership as articulated by Weber and includes the unconditional following of and emotional commitment to the leader by disciples. She goes on to highlight the significance of the community dynamic which must exist between leader and disciples (Willner 1984, 202–203).

Recent studies of charismatic leadership have focused on its transformational nature, thereby resonating with the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership found in current literature. This distinction reflects Weber's contrast between the bureaucratic and charismatic leadership typologies with transformational leadership focusing on the empowerment of followers or the community and on articulating the particular vision. The charismatic leader will, therefore, demonstrate the ability to share his/her vision with the community, build up trust in the vision and create a genuine commitment to it, echoing Anthony Bryk's concept of 'adult solidarity around the mission' (Bryk, Lee and Holland 1993). Jay A. Conger (1989) speaks of this process of building up a community of commitment as the creating of a special emotional bond between the leader and the group of followers, resonating with Jesus' call to his first disciples 'to be with him' (Mark 3: 14).

## **Charismatic leadership – St John Bosco and the nature of the Salesian charism**

### ***Introduction***

The Salesian charism originated out of a situation of crisis,<sup>8</sup> thereby resonating with one Weberian characteristic (see Bosco 1989, 10). St John Bosco was born at the time of a major political and economic revolution throughout Europe. While the philosophies of the enlightenment were beginning to be hugely influential, there

was limited access to even elementary education. In the context of those deprived of any form of education, Bosco's contribution is recognized, alongside other significant figures, by the Congregation for Catholic Education:

The girls from poor families that were taught by the Ursuline nuns in the 15th Century, the boys that Saint Joseph of Calasanz saw running and shouting through the streets of Rome, those that De la Salle came across in the villages of France, or those that were offered shelter by Don Bosco, can be found again among those who have lost all sense of meaning in life and lack any type of inspiring ideal, those to whom no values are proposed. (Congregation for Catholic Education 1998, no. 15)

That the Salesians originated through the agency of divine providence, reflecting the Pauline notion of charism as an undeserved gift and resonant with a second Weberian characteristic (Lemoyne 1989, *MB III*: 236–237), was a firm conviction in the mind of the founder, a conviction shared also by his first disciples.<sup>9</sup> The conviction regarding the divinely inspired nature of Bosco's charism expressed by the founder and his disciples was also articulated by Pope Paul VI who spoke of Bosco's ability to 'turn his boys into Christians, not simply into men, that is he made them men who were rich in humanity but richer still with the divine life' (McPake 1978, 50). He then went on to speak of the seminal aim of Bosco's educational philosophy, to form 'honest citizens and Good Christians' (1978, 50), in essence a holistic approach to education. The Pope concludes by referring to the Bosco's enthusiasm and readiness for any sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

Pope John Paul II, in a letter addressed to the Superior General of the Salesians, speaks of Bosco as:

a man of varied and unceasing activity who offered the most effective teaching with his life, so much so that he was already considered, by his contemporaries, to be an eminent educator. The few pages, which he dedicated to presenting his pedagogical experience, acquire their full meaning only when confronted with the totality of the long and rich experience acquired living among the young people. (Juvenum Patris 1988, 9)

In each case the references to Bosco's educational philosophy emphasise self-sacrifice with Pope Paul VI focusing on the holistic approach to education and Pope John Paul II reflecting on the sacramental nature of Bosco's presence among young people.

### **'Presence'**

St John Bosco's educational philosophy is referred to as 'the Preventive System'. Far from being a pejorative term, Bosco's use of the term reflects its Latin derivation. The word 'praevenire' conveys the sense of 'to go beforehand', 'to support right from the start', 'to foresee' and 'to provide'. These notions, which could be summed up by the word proactive, are encapsulated in the word *presence*.

The nature of Salesian presence is summed up by St John Bosco by the Italian word '*amorevolezza*', a word used by him to express the key element of the Salesian style of relating to young people. It is generally considered to be untranslatable and is usually rendered by 'loving kindness' ('*bonta*' in Italian). Martin McPake (1978) agrees with Guy Avanzini (1993) in emphasising that Bosco had in mind 'love that is seen, that is felt, that is experienced' (McPake 1978, 114; see also Avanzini 1993, 297–306). This certainly seems to be the essential meaning drawn out in Don Bosco's

celebrated 'Letter from Rome' of 1884 when he reminds Salesians around the world to hold fast to the original spirit. He uses the word '*amorevolezza*' 27 times in that letter and, in a major study of the significance of the '*preventive system*', the American Salesian Arthur Lenti (1989) states that Bosco had in mind:

mature, impartial, spiritual, generous, selfless self-sacrificing love. It is the love enjoined by Jesus. More simply, Don Bosco would say that the educator should love the youngsters in the same way that good Christian parents should love their children. (Lenti 1989, 7)

In a more recent attempt to define the word, Cardinal Pio Laghi, a Salesian past pupil, speaking in San Francisco on the Feast of St John Bosco 1997, writes:

It is a daily attitude, which is neither simply human love nor only supernatural charity; it expresses a complex reality which implies, on the part of the educator, openness, appropriate behaviour ... capacity for dialogue, readiness to confront sacrifice, and hard work in carrying out one's mission.<sup>11</sup>

Far from being a superficial concept, then, kindness in the Salesian context is rooted in the love of Jesus spoken of in the Gospels and in the writings of St Paul. In fact another term used consistently by Don Bosco was 'pastoral love', reflecting the love of the 'Good Shepherd' in John 10. The fact that 'pastoral love young and alive is at the heart of our spirit' (Salesian Congregation 1972, 42) places Bosco very much at one with St Francis de Sales<sup>12</sup> for whom the capacity to love was the kernel of all vocation. '*Amorevolezza*' echoes the 'amour' of Francis and, for Bosco, was the fourth vow of the Salesians, reminding us of St Paul's words to the Colossians:

You are God's race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed with sincere compassion, in kindness and in humility. (St Paul 3:12)

For St John Bosco, the first principle of pastoral care was presence. Like the picture painted in the '*Good Shepherd*', the Salesian educator knows his pupils, goes before them and, like the father in the story of the '*Prodigal Son*' (Luke 15), is prepared to make the first move. Far from being simply passive watchfulness, the presence-assistance advocated by St John Bosco reflected the optimistic humanism both of himself and that of Francis de Sales. As Bosco's biographer Fr John Lemoyne puts it:

Just as there is no barren, fertile land which cannot be made fertile through patient effort, so it is with a person's heart. No matter how barren or restive it may be at first, it will sooner or later bring forth good fruit.... The first duty of the animator is to find that responsive chord in the young person's heart. (Lemoyne 1989, *MB III*: 236-237)

A further feature of Don Bosco's pastoral initiative is also worthy of note in that it reflects the response made by the first disciples to the call of Jesus. In the account of the call of the first four disciples (Mark 1:16-20) the dominant Greek word is *αφεντες* (*aphentes*) translated in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) '*they left*' and denoting a radical departure, an urgent response. In his apostolic initiative enshrined in the work of the Oratories, Don Bosco was drawn to act by the urgent needs of the young and the impossibility of waiting any longer.

For Bosco, contact with young people in the classroom and other formal situations alone does not suffice. The educator must establish an abiding presence

with young people. He must seek to be in touch with young people in all possible situations of the school day and beyond, especially in activities that allow the educator to associate with young people not simply in the role of a teacher but as a brother or friend. In the *'Letter from Rome'*, Don Bosco writes:

By being loved in the things they like, through their teachers taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to those things too which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial. In this way they will learn to do these things also with love. (Salesian Congregation 1972, 271)

Such active, dynamic presence, of its nature, takes its inspiration from the Gospel in terms of the self-sacrifice involved, reminding us again of the Good Shepherd who 'lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10:11) The tireless zeal demanded by such an abiding presence among young people also echoes Jesus' three-fold criteria for discipleship: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Don Bosco's reference to Jesus 'making himself little with the little ones' indicates a further, perhaps deeper, way in which presence is an imitation of Christ. In his letter to the Philippians, St Paul speaks of Jesus who

though being in the nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing (εκενωσεν – tr. ekenosen), taking the very nature of a servant. (St Paul 2:6–7)

Reminding us of Francis de Sales' reference to God disregarding himself (McPake 1978, 137), Bosco's 'becoming little with the little ones' involved the animator, by definition, in divesting himself of the vestiges of authoritarianism which marked the traditional standpoint of the teacher of the day. At a human level, 'meeting the students on their own turf' (Lenti 1989, 6) involves taking a risk by letting go of the 'safety valve' inherent in the traditional teacher–student relationship. By being familiarly present to young people, as opposed to maintaining an institutional superior–inferior style of imposition, the assistant reflects the 'ekenosen', the self-emptying, of Christ himself. Don Bosco, then, interprets the entry into young people's recreation as an act of loving condescension, going beyond mere utilitarianism or paternalism. It involved adults leaving the lofty heights of their 'power over' or even 'power on behalf of' positions in order to engage in a genuine sharing of the bread of life. This engaging familiarity reflects the 'I–Thou' relationship spoken of by Martin Buber:

Every human person looks bashfully yet longingly in the eyes of another for the yes that allows him to be. It is from one human person to another that the heavenly bread of self-being is passed. (Buber 1974, 75)

The building up of these dynamic relations contributed to creating a distinctive atmosphere. In *Don Bosco's Option for Youth and his Educational Approach*, Luciano Pazzaglia (1993), a Professor at the Catholic University of Milan, speaks of Don Bosco's desire to create within a school 'the serene environment of a family'. He then goes on to comment that the familial relationships developed between educators and students would 'diminish the inevitable tensions between superiors and subjects and allow the latter to achieve their full growth as persons (Pazzaglia 1993, 289).

In this 'serene environment', religious education was architectonic. In other words, frequenting the sacraments together with the concomitant catechetical

instruction and devotional practices were not merely components of the educational process, but constituted the core purpose, giving coherence, relevance and purpose to every Salesian apostolic initiative. Resonating with his overall aim to constantly make connections between faith and life, Bosco always made sure that the Church or chapel was close to the playground, echoing the holistic approach of Don Bosco spoken of by Pope Paul VI which has already been noted. He wanted the sense of God's presence to be available in every situation and the door of the Church was never locked until very late in the day. He encouraged short visits into the silence of the chapel even during recreation or on the way to workshops or classes. Don Bosco wanted the young people to be aware that his whole approach revolved around the mystery of the Christian faith represented by the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle at the centre of the Church.

Bosco was convinced that adolescence constituted the critical 'moment' in personal formation, reminiscent of the significance of the Greek term *ἡγγικεν*<sup>13</sup> in the Gospel: '*The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near*' (Mark 1:15). The first Article of the Salesian Constitutions speaks of the mission of the Salesian society in terms of contributing to the salvation of young people, 'that part of society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise' (Salesian Congregation 1972, 19). Adolescence, then, was the time when a young person was most open to making a decisive commitment to the building up of the Kingdom. While the Salesian apostolate may vary according to time and circumstance, the mission is one and the same for everyone everywhere, the salvation of youth, particularly those on the margins who are 'most exposed to danger'. It is interesting to note the optimistic humanism of St Francis de Sales reflected in Bosco's reference to such young people being '*so rich in promise*'.

For Bosco, Salesian ethos consisted primarily in creating a happy and serene educational environment, described more recently by Sullivan as 'a hospitable space for learning' (Sullivan 2000, 185ff). The quality of relationships existing within any institution was, by definition, intrinsic to the whole process. Balance, however, between religious and human development, was also a central feature. Pazzaglia (1993) points out that, while religious formation remained the architectonic element, 'Bosco was careful not to neglect human and professional formation' (1993, 289).<sup>14</sup>

Two key features, then, of Don Bosco's system at the methodological level involved the creation of a familial atmosphere and empowerment, effectively involving the students in the educational process. Such empowerment could only take place through dialogue which many regard as *the* central component of the '*preventive system*'. Bosco was concerned with the transformation of the lives of *every* young person with whom he came into contact, resonating with 'the uniqueness of the individual', one of the key purposes of Catholic education elucidated by the Bishops' Conference in 1996 (Bishops' Conference of England & Wales 1996). Dialogue was the starting point which, for Bosco, could only take place if there was a genuine personal interest in each individual pupil, resonating with the '*intrusive interest*' which Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993, 141) found to be one of the characteristics of the '*inspirational ideology*' of American Catholic schools.

The significance of extra-curricular engagement in the life of a Catholic school was highlighted as *the* most significant legacy of St John Bosco's educational system by Cardinal Grocholewsky in a recent symposium on the Papal Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (Pope Benedict XVI 2005). Grocholewsky began his address by stating

clearly that academic formation risked being reduced to the acquisition of empirical knowledge and the scaffolding of competencies. In essence he was speaking about the challenges of contextual reductionism, a process of abstracting the scholarly and measurable performance indicators of a school from its own history and cultural formation, from its social and economic community setting and from its relation to wider society. He spoke, rather, of the need for a holistic approach to education, an approach canonised in Vatican documents on Catholic education.<sup>15</sup>

### **The maintenance of distinctive religious charisms in the current demographical context of the Catholic Church**

The exploration of the Salesian charism would suggest the following key elements:

1. Self-sacrifice on the part of the founders and their disciples, reflecting the radical nature of the commitment of Jesus' first disciples.
2. Creation of a family spirit.
3. A holistic approach to education with an emphasis on an 'intrusive interest' in students, primarily through the medium of extra-curricular activities.
4. The architectonic nature of religious formation.
5. Pastoral care, advocated by Bosco, is modelled on that of Jesus the Good Shepherd. The teacher is, in effect, a sign, or sacrament, of the presence of Christ among young people.

While each element is significant it might be argued that the sacrificial nature of the commitment made by religious, which is at the heart of the Salesian charism, was instrumental in the development of the Catholic educational system in England, particularly in the sense that such total self-giving was a critical force in giving it sacramental power. Such commitment is integral to several of the other elements, particularly with regard to the promotion of extra-curricular activities and the fostering of solidarity around the school mission. Gerald Grace (2002), for example, is in no doubt that religious orders maintain a significant formative influence on English Catholic schools and that the transmission of distinctive religious charisms is essential in order to maintain the dynamism of the educational mission. Thomas Groome, from the perspective of the USA, is equally insistent on the sacramental power of religious, reflected in his suggestion that 'if the foundation charisms [of religious institutions] cannot be broken open among teaching colleagues, there will be no alternative but to call it [the Catholic educational project] off' (Groome 2001).

The literature is replete with studies<sup>16</sup> focusing upon the extent to which it is possible to maintain distinctive religious charisms in the current demographical situation of the Catholic Church. Steven Shafran SDB (1994), for example, conducted a study which set out to determine the extent of the practice of the Salesian educational system in the 12 Salesian high schools in the USA.<sup>17</sup> Following extensive quantitative and qualitative analysis he concluded that, while the Salesian charism<sup>18</sup> was strongly perceived by both students and educators, it would be necessary to introduce an organized training programme and to create a new written resource on the Salesian educational methodology in order to maintain its abiding influence. From the perspective of a female religious order, Mary Jane Herb IHM (1997) carried out a similar study of schools in the USA sponsored by her order, the

Congregation of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Her recommendations resonate with those of Shafran, albeit couched in more general terms. Herb maintains that, while the distinctive charism exerts some influence on the sponsored schools, the schools need to find ways of maintaining a relationship with the Congregation in the future. She then goes on to strongly recommend that 'the challenge for religious congregations is to find ways that the sponsored institutions can be a vehicle for the prophetic witness of the congregation within the cultural context of contemporary society' (Herb 1997).

From an English perspective, several Masters theses have explored the extent to which religious charisms remain influential in Catholic schools (see Atherton and Grace (1999) for a complete list). The author has completed one such study (Lydon 2002) and has continued at doctoral level to explore certain elements of it more extensively. In the original study, an extensive critical retrieval of the Salesian charism was combined with in-depth interviews with headteachers of schools for which the Salesians acted as trustees. It could be argued that interviews do not afford the same degree of objectivity as that afforded by quantitative research, for example the extensive use of questionnaires in Shafran's (1994) study. Richard Pring (2000), however, argues persuasively that the suggested polarity between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of objective findings is mistaken.

My argument is that the opposition (not the distinction) between quantitative and qualitative research is mistaken. The 'naïve realism' attributed to those who espouse the more quantitative methodology is not justified. How we conceive the world could be different and is, indeed, different from social group to social group. Such 'social constructions' are constantly reconstructed as new experiences forcing us to reshape how we understand things. Hence, the need for that interpretive and hermeneutic tradition in which we seek to understand the world from the perspective of the participants, or to understand a set of ideas from the evolving tradition of which they are a part. (Pring 2000, 55)

Semi-structured interviews were, therefore, engaged with three headteachers, one of whom was a Salesian priest while the others were firmly rooted in the evolving Salesian tradition. The three headteachers agreed that the work of the Salesian Pastoral Support Team, set up by the Salesian Congregation, was particularly effective at the level of revisiting the Salesian charism, thereby revitalising its awareness among teachers and the school community in general. Such instruments of transmission<sup>19</sup> have become commonplace among religious orders since the implications of the decline in the numbers of religious in schools was first recognised.<sup>20</sup> The headteachers were attracted to the nature of the programmes, for example an annual inservice weekend open to all Salesian schools, since they reflected the paradigm of collaborative ministry, canonised in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

This paradigm, in marked contrast to a hierarchical or paternalistic paradigm, is characterised by dialogue and reflection, resonating with a key theme in the Vatican document on the mission of religious in schools (Congregation for Catholic Education 2002). This document insists that transmission of charisms does depend on the effectiveness of the essential dialogue between religious and their lay successors. In this context the use of the term 'charismatic circularity' (Congregation for Catholic Education 2002, no. 13) is illuminating. Resonating with Professor John Sullivan's phrase 'reciprocity and mutuality' (Sullivan 2001) it implies that the

charism will be enriched to the extent that those handing on the tradition are open to receiving from those who have encountered, or are encountering, it. Examples abound of models of effectively 'handing on the baton' (see Sharkey 1997) while there also accounts of situations when such transmission has encountered obstacles (see Orchard 2002).

These programmes of formation were considered by the headteachers interviewed to be important in the context of maintaining the Salesian dimension. Two, however, were convinced that the presence in schools of teaching colleagues committed to living out the Salesian charism, particularly members of the religious order,<sup>21</sup> gave far greater impetus insofar as they constituted an embodiment of the charism enabling it to be passed on in the lives of the teachers themselves. These headteachers insisted that teachers gain a far greater degree of understanding by following examples of best practice, Salesian or lay, who themselves are committed to living the ethos. In this regard he felt no compunction in asking them, both at interview and later, to indicate ways in which they could contribute to the distinctiveness of the school. They also emphasised the value of informal conversations with staff with regard to Salesian ways of working.

These observations reflect the Pauline emphasis on the power of modelling, also reflected in the work of Weber, referred to previously (see pp. 48–49 of this article). The conviction of these headteachers – that models of a distinctive charism constitute a more effective means of transmission as opposed to programmes of formation or the commissioning of new publications – is reflected in more recent research by the author exploring the concept of teaching as a vocation (Lydon 2008). This research consists essentially in a dialogue between historical and contemporary perspectives around the concept of vocation on the one hand and, on the other, the sense of vocation evidenced in the lives of contemporary practitioners. One of the key themes to emerge from the interviews to date focuses on the extent of the influence of a particular teacher, usually a member of a religious order, on the vocational journey of the particular teacher.

In the context of the transmission of religious charisms the key question centres on Herb's (1997) reference to creatively maintaining the prophetic witness of religious in the current era,<sup>22</sup> which will prove to be increasingly difficult as the number of religious in schools continues to decline. If, as the research of this author suggests, modelling or emulation constitutes the most effective means of maintaining a distinctive charism, transmission of the charism to lay people takes on a greater urgency. From a sociology of religion perspective, when speaking about the survival of religious communities, Peter Berger (1990) uses the term 'plausibility structures' to indicate the critical infrastructure or social base which forms the basis of a particular community and without which the community could no longer maintain legitimation. Berger explained the term by insisting that 'the reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real for them' (Berger 1990, 46).

Applying Berger's analysis to the Salesian charism, the plausibility structures equate to Salesian religious and, since they are now few in number, the maintenance of the charism can no longer be taken for granted. The implementation of programmes of formation has been referred to earlier. This article has, however, articulated at length the efficacy of modeling or emulation, reflected both in the

literature and in the qualitative research. If there are no longer religious present in schools in the future to provide a living embodiment of the charism, then responsibility for it will revert to those lay teachers who have been influenced by working with religious in the past. Taking this model on a stage further, the encouragement of senior pupils to model *their* lives on inspirational teachers and engage in the Salesian educational mission in the future may constitute a creative way of maintaining the charism. In this way they would be living out a values-based message which could also be regarded as a measurable feature of the impact of the Salesian mission.

Encouraging or inspiring students to engage in the educational mission of a religious order does not constitute an innovation but can be traced to the practice of the Jesuits who, according to Pierre Janelle, placed a great deal of emphasis on the recruitment of teachers and encouraged senior students 'to follow the tradition and habits of their teachers so as to avoid any break in the continuity of school-life' (Janelle 1949, 125). While some might suggest that this process would have been relatively simple in the context of the schools of the counter-Reformation period, the most recent articulation of the characteristics of Jesuit education is replete with reference to preparation for active life commitment in the service of the Church as it seeks to serve society (see Duminuco 2000, 161–216).

In conclusion it could be argued that such an initiative is no more than an imitation of the way in which the apostolic tradition was handed on in the early Church. The principal way in which Jesus taught people was by his own life, reflected in his call to the first disciples to 'follow me' (Matthew 4:9), an expression that conveys a strong sense of imitation in the rabbinic language of discipleship (Hill 1972). The Gospel writers are also keen to point out that the disciples did indeed emulate Jesus, the word 'aphentes' as has been pointed out, indicating a zealous imitation (see p. 51 of this article). The theme of imitation is taken up in the Acts of the Apostles, the Semitic expression 'in his name' indicating someone who stands in the place of another as fully representative of him (Grassi 1973). Joseph Grassi goes on to assert that the handing of the apostolic tradition was not primarily about passing on of information but 'a lived tradition passed on in the very lives of the teachers themselves' (Grassi 1973, 77). The passing on of the Salesian charism from teachers steeped in its reality to a future generation may yet be an effective means of maintaining this distinctive religious charism.

## Notes

1. See Corinthians 12:1 and the reference to fleshly wisdom.
2. cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* n. 7. Footnotes 51 and 52 refer to 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and Romans 6:15 respectively.
3. See 1 Corinthians 12:7 and Paul's reference to a variety of gifts 'for the common good'
4. There are references to the use of the term charism in the context of leadership in the earliest Apostolic Fathers. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–110 CE) speaks of the charism of authority in the context of the local Bishop, emphasising strongly the notion of collegiality in the context of the mutual relationship between the faithful, the presbyterate and the Bishop. Ignatius goes on to claim that the leadership style of the Bishops and presbyters should model that of Christ and the apostles (Ignatius of Antioch: *Epistle to the Ephesians* Section 4 in Lightfoot (1974, 64–72).
5. The Greek word is derived from the Hebrew root TAM meaning 'singleness of purpose'.
6. The Greek word 'teleios' reflects the notion of purpose.

7. Victor Turner (1969), a cultural anthropologist, building on the work of Arnold van Gennep (1960) used the term liminal in relation to rites of passage. The term liminal was borrowed by van Gennep from the Latin 'limen' meaning a boundary or threshold. Turner argues that, at a certain stage, a person is on the cusp of a threshold – see O'Murchu (1998) for a discussion on the nature of liminality in the context of religious life.
8. John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815 into an Italy which had just witnessed the rise and fall of Napoleon and which, like the rest of Europe, was in the midst of revolution, both political and economic. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Europe would witness the development of several new nation states, the first of which would be Italy.
9. Some words of St John Bosco leave no room for doubt: 'At least among ourselves we can surely say that other religious orders and congregations were certainly blessed in their early stages with inspiration, or with some vision or supernatural event right at their beginnings, but as a rule there was only one such fact or at most a few; the picture was very different in our case; it could be said that we never did anything without advance knowledge of the fact, or that the Congregation has never taken any step except as the result of some supernatural intervention ...' Don Bosco 2.2.1876 quoted in Lemoyne 1989, 69–70.
10. The seminal aim of the Salesian educational system permeates the primary and secondary Salesian sources. The phrase first appeared in St John Bosco's *Plan for the Regulation of the Oratory* in 1854 and was cited in Lemoyne 1989, *MB* II:46.
11. Cardinal Laghi, a former Papal Nuncio to the USA, was speaking at the centenary celebrations of Don Bosco's work in the USA.
12. The patronage of St Francis of Sales (1567–1622) is significant, highlighted by the fact that the Salesian society is named after him. In his 'Memoirs of the Oratory' Bosco speaks of his ministry depending on Francis' 'great calm and meekness in the conquest of souls'. He also makes reference to the need to 'imitate him in combating errors against religion, especially Protestantism, which was beginning to insinuate itself into our localities, and noticeably in the city of Turin.' See Bosco 1989, 141.
13. Transliterated '*ENGIKEN*'.
14. The importance of professional formation and vocational training is reflected in St John Bosco's Memorandum to the Italian Minister of Labour in 1977:
  - i. Many boys out of prison have learnt a trade – 'won their bread with honest work' – dissipated yet win their own bread.
  - ii. Many in danger of becoming delinquents have stopped giving trouble to other citizens and they are already on the way to becoming good citizens – difficult but may become reasonable and eventually win their own bread through honest work – become 'docile' (compliant).
  - iii. Others become virtuous artisans, teachers.
  - iv. Few occupy positions of leadership or in the Military.
  - v. Some hold positions in Universities, Law, Medicine and Engineering see Scritti (Writings) di S. Giovanni Bosco, XX, (1964), Rome, LAS: 145–149 – translated from the Italian. For a comprehensive discussion of St John Bosco's insistence on the importance of students 'earning bread with honest work' see Braido 1981.
15. See Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977), [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), n.31 'Precisely because the school endeavours to answer the needs of a society characterised by depersonalisation and a mass production mentality which so easily result from scientific and technological developments, it must develop into an authentically formational school, reducing such risks to a minimum.'
16. For a catalogue of doctoral dissertations from the USA on the topic see NCEA.
17. Shafran's sample included schools conducted by the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.
18. Shafran's preferred terminology is 'Salesian methodology and school culture'.
19. Grace, op.cit:238 lists examples of congregations which have organised programmes of formation for their successors as headteachers and teachers.

20. The marked decline in numbers of religious involved in the teaching apostolate was recognised for the first time in a Vatican document in 1982 with the publication by the Congregation for Catholic Education of *Lay Catholics in Schools Witnesses To Faith*, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). The Congregation made the point that the decline was not simply a consequence of a decline in the numbers presenting themselves for admission to the orders but was due in no small part to 'the erroneous opinion that a school is no longer an appropriate place for the Church's pastoral activity'.
21. From the outset in 1997 the Salesian Pastoral Support Team included a priest who spent a half-term working in each Salesian school. This innovative 'hands on' presence was regarded, in the context of maintaining the charism, as second only to the presence of Salesian religious on the actual teaching staff or in a chaplaincy role. This innovation proved, however, to be unsustainable.
22. Bernadette O'Keeffe notes that there were 155 religious teaching in Catholic schools in 1996 compared with 975 in 1980. See O'Keeffe (1999, 246). The latest Vatican document (Congregation for Catholic Education 2007), *Educating together in Catholic schools: A shared mission between consecrated persons and the lay faithful*, continues to focus on the value of programmes of formation. While emphasising the role of religious in the Church's educational mission, the document recognises that responsibility for such programmes in many parts of the world has been transferred to lay teachers. The dramatic change in demography in relation to the presence of religious in schools is highlighted in the press conference which introduced the document. While there were no figures in relation to the situation in the UK and no standard format is evident, it was reported that, in the USA, 86% of teachers in schools in 1950 were members of religious orders compared to 4.4% currently, while in Australia 0.9% of teachers currently are religious compared to 69% in 1969, representing a precipitous decline in terms of the presence of religious in schools. This decline mirrors, to an extent, the decline in numbers of religious generally. Taking one specific example, Salesians numbered 21,614 in 1967 compared with 15,893 in 2006 (Grogan 2007).

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