

ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANCIENT CHARISMS

• Antonio Maria Sicari •

“There can be no ‘refoundation of the religious life’ that does not begin with a new proclamation . . . based on the anthropology revealed by the evangelical counsels.”

Within the Church we find many kinds of services, functions, ministries, and ways of stirring up Christian life. Think of the “ecclesial movements,” with their missionary thrust, whose development has been a major novelty in not a few Churches. When they enter humbly into the life of the local Churches and are cordially welcomed by bishops and priests into their dioceses and parishes, the movements are a true gift of God for the new evangelization and for missionary activity in the full sense. I recommend, then, that they be defended and utilized in order to give new vigor, especially among the young, to Christian life and to evangelization, with due respect for pluralism in their modes of association and self-expression.¹

Pope John Paul II’s judgment of the “new movements in the Church,” which occurs in an encyclical (*Redemptoris Missio*) devoted to the Church’s missionary task, is but the most authoritative among a

¹John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 72.

whole host of similar judgments, pronounced more *en passant*, that one could gather from other contexts.

It is not enough, however, simply to record this judgment. It is crucial to point out that there is a theology undergirding the Pope's conviction that the movements are "one of the most important fruits of the springtime of the Church foretold by the Second Vatican Council."²

We need to realize, then, that the movements are an "ecclesiological novelty." They are attempts to enact, in an especially clear and organic way, an *ecclesiology of communion* (by means of "the concurrence of diverse, but complementary vocations, walks of life, ministries, charisms, and tasks"³) and to order this communion of believers dynamically towards the *one mission* of the Church and the needs of the new evangelization. The development of the ecclesial movements reflects a further aspect, however: they are strictly bound up with "a providential rediscovery of the charismatic dimension of the Church," in the conviction that "the institutional and the charismatic are equally essential aspects of the Church's constitution and work together, in different ways, to build up the Church's life, to foster its renewal, and to promote the sanctification of the people of God."⁴

But, as the Church learns to assimilate and do justice to the novelty of the movements, other new developments are emerging that demand equal attention.

If, in and through the movements, there has indeed been a "rediscovery of the charismatic dimension," what does this mean for all the orders, institutes, and congregations, both ancient and modern, that are also *founded upon charisms*?

The fact of the matter is that, in past centuries, "the Church's charismatic dimension" was expressed almost totally in the consecrated life. This state of affairs forces us to grapple with an urgent question: "can a religious institute evolve harmoniously, without trauma or rupture, towards the form of today's ecclesial movements?"

²"Message to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements," 29 May 1998.

³John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 20.

⁴John Paul II, "Discorso in occasione dell'Incontro con i Movimenti Ecclesiali e le Nuove Comunità," 30 May 1998.

Even better: isn't this the path that orders, institutes, and congregations should enter upon in order to "fit" better into the living fabric of communion and mission that is the Church?

1. A long-standing ecclesiological imbalance

An attentive examination of the current state of affairs in the consecrated life quickly shows where the primary core of the question lies. On the one hand, the Church is insistently calling *all the faithful* to recover an awareness of *communion* and *mission*. On the other hand, the faithful—including *consecrated people*—have for centuries been entangled in a vision of the Church as a hierarchical pyramid. Within this pyramid, the different "states of life" have understood and defined themselves in comparison with and, in a certain sense, in opposition to, one another.

The inevitable result has been—even where intentions have been good—a sort of "ecclesiological restriction" of the charisms and their efficacy that has lasted down to our own day.

The tendency was for the charisms—even in cases where the Spirit gave them to laypeople—to become quickly enclosed in the consecrated life. The charisms generated the consecrated life from within (by virtue of the obvious harmony between charisms and Gospel radicalism). But they also became encased in it.

And the layfolk, who at the beginning would "catch" the charism and join together in an ecclesial base movement, tended to become a kind of halo around the consecrated, who reflected the charism back to the laity. Even then, the "contagion" would spread only rarely to the formation and mission of laypeople. It mostly confined itself almost completely to whatever particular "*spirituality*" it managed to produce.

The upshot, in other words, was an unequal distribution of charisms within the body of the Church. This situation reflected the inequality in the understanding of the relations among states of life and vocations in the Church. This inequality presupposes an ecclesiology of "*orders*," understood in terms of hierarchies and ecclesial "classes,"

wherein different forms of life jostle to find space, to define, organize, and protect themselves.⁵

If we limit ourselves to the major three-way division that was firmly fixed already at the beginning of the middle ages—*ordo laicalis*, *ordo monasticus*, *ordo clericus*—we see to what extent these “orders” were fitted into a hierarchy, even though each one could boast of a certain pre-eminence over the others.

This tendency to self-defense and self-aggrandizement was the last remaining echo of the equal dignity of all Christians. I do not intend to retrace this long history, with its many serpentine turns and its many lessons. One thing, however, is clear: the word “*ordo*,” like the reality to which it refers, bears the imprint of the cultural and theological paradigm wherein it was born so many centuries ago. It needs to be rethought within the context of the ecclesiology set forth by the Second Vatican Council.

Let us, then, apply ourselves to this rethinking.

As everyone knows, the protagonist of Vatican II’s ecclesiology is the *christifidelis*, the baptized believer who possesses an eminent dignity, a vocation to holiness, “rights and duties,” gifts and tasks, and an indispensable place in the communion and mission of the Church.⁶

If the *christifidelis* is to have all of these things, the following points need to be highlighted and applied once and for all:

(1) The “*ecclesiology of communion*,” in which the primary thing is not that there is a hierarchy among the vocations and states of life in the Church, but that they are “*ordered to one another*,” for mutual, complementary service, and that they are inter-dependent.⁷

(2) The “*ecclesiology of mission*,” in which all vocations and states of life in the Church must flow together into the one mission of the Church, each with its specific contribution and distinctive gift.⁸

Let us now pose a few questions to the old “*ecclesiology of orders*”:

⁵It was customary to speak at one time of the *ordo eremiticus*, *ordo monasticus*, *ordo canonicus*, *ordo clericorum*, *ordo laicalis*—all of which were aware of the need for a certain “*concordia ordinum* [harmony of orders]” Within each group, there was further space for other subgroups that also merited the same title of “*ordo*.”

⁶*Christifideles Laici*, 55.

⁷*Ibid.* Also see 18-20 and 61.

⁸*Ibid.*, 32-44.

How can a “religious order”⁹ enact—in and around itself—a true “ecclesiology of communion” as long as it continues to *keep for itself* the charism that gave it birth, but that is not exclusive to the consecrated?¹⁰

In what way could a “religious order” bid farewell, both within itself and in relation to the rest of the Church, the hierarchical ordination of vocations and states of life, all the while maintaining both the respect due to different vocations and a vigorous, cohesive communion with them *on the basis of one and the same charism*? What changes would be involved?

How would a “religious order” bid farewell to the hierarchical ordination of vocations and states of life while giving life to a missionary co-operation born from a solidarity in communion based on a shared charism?

In my opinion, a genuine enactment of the ecclesiology contained in the Second Vatican Council would require the most radical *refoundation* both of the consecrated life as a whole and of individual institutes of consecrated life. In order to understand how high the stakes are, all we need to do is to ponder the sort of relationship between consecrated people and laymen practiced by the great religious orders.

If we consider how they are structured even today, we notice the continuing influence of the old three-way partition into a first, second, and third order. The terminological changes—where there have been any—have been of negligible importance.

In the ancient religious families, the so-called secular or lay order, the successor of the older third orders, sometimes involves tens of thousands of laypeople who are recognized as an official part of the respective order. Still more tens of thousands of laypeople are gathered under various headings, all with distinctive structures and formation programs, and all more or less inspired by the same charism, even though they tend to receive no more than a general, condescending recognition.

⁹I refer here to “religious orders” because their internal organization and the terminology used to describe them make the question we are trying to answer easier to grasp. However, the reflections apply equally well to the religious institutes and congregations.

¹⁰We may take it as a sufficient demonstration of this fact that, in the case of many institutes, there were solely *laity* at the origin of their charism.

There is a glaring disproportion between consecrated people and layfolk within the same order. This disproportion decisively favors the laypeople in terms of sheer numbers. Needless to say, there is a potentially rich source of vocations, gifts, and personal histories here.

But, notwithstanding numerous efforts and a significant outlay of energy, the laity still remain negligible. In fact: Even if we hear talk of a “*shared charism*,” the participation of the lay faithful in the charism is still bound to a practical dependence upon the consecrated members of the order. Indeed, many consecrated people take it upon themselves to watch over and test the lay members’ participation in the charism in order to safeguard it against possible corruptions and to protect what they claim to be the *unity* of the *charismatic family*.

Care for the vocational identity of the lay faithful seems to be limited to declarations of principle, to exhortations that they should refrain from trying to be “*religious in the world*,” but should try to “*incarnate the charism in their lay context*.” But this exhortation threatens to become meaningless because of the tutelage to which the laypeople are subject. At the same time, their specific formation is sporadic and disorganized.

An adequate “lay translation of the charism” is still a dream. Indeed, here and there we even find the idea that laypeople do not need the spirituality of the institute—the *charism!*—but only a vague, ill-defined “*common spirituality*.”

The participation of lay members in the life of the order and in its decisions is reduced to a symbolic representation. Nor can it be otherwise: after all, what is at stake is precisely the life of the *order*, which, for centuries, has expressed itself almost exclusively in terms of the consecrated life.

Consequently, there are clearly defined structures and entities for the consecrated. But, when it comes to the laity, such structures are either non-existent or ineffective.

Even in the case of proposals for new forms of common formation and of sharing in charism and mission between the consecrated and the lay, the point of view remains that of the (first) *order*, which extends to include the laity.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is an original impasse here, inasmuch as *the order, or institute, considers itself the true bearer of the charism, while regarding the laity as an appendage, however vast*. Does all of this mean that we must dismantle the orders? Not at all. It

does mean, however, that we need to rethink how the orders and institutes have appropriated their charisms.

This is at once an ecclesiological and a historical question. Let us describe the problem with an image.

If we imagine the Church as a great tree, we readily see the trunk that sustains the whole growth and guess at the deep roots that nourish it. Then, raising our eyes, we see that the trunk divides into mighty branches, which are the states of life. From the branch of the consecrated life stem smaller branches that give rise to the various institutes.

The charism of each institute is obviously located where the institute begins to exist. If it reaches the laity, it can do so only through contact from branch to branch. This, at any rate, is how things stand within a certain traditional arrangement.

But let us try to “*refound*” our way of understanding and describing the Church.

The roots and the trunk remain in place. So, too, do the great branches of the states of life and the smaller branches that are the various vocations. But the “charismatic seeds” do not lie where the individual religious institutes begin; they lie rather where the trunk of the Church digs into the ground. They lie almost at root level. And, in fact, the Spirit gives them for the upbuilding of the Church.

They lie, in other words, deeper down than the differentiation into states of life and vocations. They are given to the faithful, marking them with a certain charismatic identity decided by the Spirit. With a certain “spiritual homeland” decided by the Spirit. Only afterwards will this “*primary identity*” be specified according to the different states of life.

On the other hand, in the different states of life, Christians—fully respectful of one another’s personal vocations and commitments—will acknowledge one another within a prior shared charismatic root.

Only then will words like “Carmelites,” “Franciscans,” “Jesuits,” and “Camillians” become nouns¹¹ descriptive of *christi-fideles* marked with a certain charism who await the Spirit’s designation of their personal vocation.

¹¹Today the term “Carmelite” is a noun when applied to the consecrated, but an adjective when applied to the laity. This linguistic difference reveals the problem we are attempting to lay out.

And we will see the end of the ecclesiology of orders, which keeps the laity, for purely ideological reasons, from full participation in the ancient charisms.

An undertaking of this sort would, of course, have to be respectful of the Tradition and of the historical responsibility that consecrated people have had for centuries—and will continue to have—for the safeguarding and transmission of the charism.

In other words: it is necessary to hold together *all* of the affirmations that we have made so far. We have already said that every state of life must be seen as having a “priority of service” over the others, a priority based on what each state is and means in the Church. Obviously, this affirmation bears not only on theological *principle*, but also on historical *fact*.

Thus, just as from the theological point of view the “consecrated” have the duty to serve the laity, giving them an example of radicality and holiness, from the historical point of view they have the right and the duty to perform this task by drawing on the whole patrimony that has been accumulated.

If the consecrated have had the good fortune to have lived, understood, incarnated, and assimilated a certain charism for many centuries (whereas the laity have been able to approach it only generically or more recently), it follows that the consecrated ought to offer the laity the *serviæ* of placing at their disposal the whole wealth of their experience with the charism. In this service—and it is, indeed, a *serviæ*!—the consecrated enjoy a certain primacy. In the same way, they have an ineliminable historical responsibility.

Nonetheless, the charism should remain where it is supposed to be. The charism is a gift whereby the Spirit *marks certain of the baptized*, makes them fall in love with Christ *in a special way*, *gathers* them in a spiritual homeland, assigns them particular tasks for the building up of the Church, and educates them with the *pedagogical persuasiveness* that characterizes the charism.

Moreover, everyone must stand “theologically” where he is called vocationally. The charism must never contradict a vocation to any one of the states of life. Everything that has been said about the need for a prudent inculturation of the spiritual heritage of the orders and about the necessity of placing the ancient charisms where they can respond to the challenges of the world is true and urgent. But, while the urgency remains, we must proceed in an orderly fashion, according to the following steps:

It will be necessary to bring the consecrated and the lay face to face on the basis of their common baptismal dignity as *christifideles*.

Next, we must reread the charism *in light of this vis-à-vis*, without denying vocational differences, while ensuring that the encounter goes to the roots of our being as Christians and, so, as humans.

This will require allowing both the consecrated and the lay to assimilate the charism into the very core of their baptismal identity. They must be permitted to receive the charism from the Holy Spirit as the gift of “*a unique way of belonging to Christ and his Church*,” a “*way as unique as a romance*.” They must be aware, at the same time, that this does not reduce to *generality*, but rather elevates to *totality*.

The final step will be to require that all bear missionary fruit from the charism in their respective “state of life”: the *laity* in terms of their own “secular character” and of their responsibility for earthly things, and the *consecrated* in terms of their own character as immediate witnesses of Christ’s charity in the world. Without the correct ecclesiological context, any attempt to refound the consecrated life or to reposition the charisms will quickly collapse.

2. New ecclesiological paradigms

The image of the tree, the branches, and the roots that we sketched above to describe the new repositioning of the charisms may be suggestive, but it does not fully capture the dramatic complexity of the task before us. Nevertheless, attention to the signs of the times may be of decisive assistance. Now, “signs of the times” is meant here in a very specific way: the point is to identify the ones that best convey the Church’s capacity to regenerate itself.

The phenomenon of the new *ecclesial movements* is still somewhat controversial. But more than once John Paul II has pronounced authoritatively in favor of the movements. He has based this judgment, in part, on their missionary dynamism—which is undeniable—and has spoken of a “*rediscovery of the charismatic dimension*.”¹²

This fact seems to warrant two inferences.

¹²See the introductory note.

First: if the charismatic dimension has been “*rediscovered*,” it must be the case that it had been somewhat obscured in the course of the centuries, notwithstanding the fact that there were hundreds and hundreds of institutes founded on the most varied charisms.

The second: the orders and institutes founded on ancient charisms should have a special natural and supernatural interest in this “*rediscovery of the charismatic dimension of the Church’s constitution*.” They have every reason to take a sympathetic look at the ecclesiological paradigm offered by the new movements, in order to rediscover certain aspects of their own charismatic dimension.

Now, what is interesting in this new ecclesiological paradigm is the fact that the movements are just that, *ecclesial*. At the origin of their experience, there lies, in fact, a charism that can be given without distinction to all baptized believers—laymen, consecrated persons, and priests alike. But this charism gathers around itself a group that includes all states of life and vocations.

An ecclesial movement tends by its very nature to include laymen, priests, and consecrated people, all of them marked by the same original charism. In some sense, the movement generates *from within itself* vocations to the various states of life: everyone who receives such a vocation is thus *shaped simultaneously* by the charism that drew him into the larger group and by the state of life to which he feels called.

Obviously, there can be tensions that the Church will have to learn to resolve, both in charity and in canon law, but tensions themselves are positive.

The situation is theologically clear (despite the complex problems that arise) when the charism marks members of the faithful who then either remain laypeople (as happens in most cases) or move towards forms of consecration and/or ministry (also) inspired by their charism.

The situation is less clear when religious who are supposed to have a charism of their own become affiliated with a new movement. But *even this possibility*—with the proper caution—can be acceptable.¹³

The advantages of this model for the Church are evident:

(1) The first advantage is that the charism passes from the founder to the faithful before the choice of and/or belonging to a particular state of life.

¹³Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 56.

On the base level of the Church, then, is a *charismatically formed* laity that automatically generates, from within its own ranks, vocations to a special consecration marked by the same charism.

The fact that the movements almost have to *contain* the vocations to which they give birth, while the traditional institutes are hard pressed to find new members, explodes the idea that there is a “crisis of vocations.”

The truth is that there is no crisis of vocations, if by vocation we mean a response to the charismatic call of the Spirit. What is in crisis is the ability of the religious institutes to make the call of their charism heard.

This inability can be explained by the fact that the religious institutes, as they now exist, are not the consecrated flowering of a charism that has already convinced the faithful on the level of their baptismal vocation.

In a word, the institutes of consecrated life are suffering what might be called a “*charismatic inversion*”: the consecrated strain themselves to offer their charism to some rare Christian (in the hopes of awakening a new consecrated vocation), whereas there ought to be a broad base of baptized believers animated by a charism who then offer a host of different vocations.¹⁴

In the new movements, the consecrated members are the expression of the wide charismatic basis that makes up the movement itself as a broadly lay association.

These consecrated members live out the function of the consecrated in the Church—the radicalization of the following of Christ and of belonging to the Church—primarily in and for the “self-enactment of the Church” that is the movement itself.

This brings with it, to be sure, the danger of a narrowing of perspective, which should be checked and corrected when necessary.¹⁵ But it also has the advantage of a more concrete ecclesial incarnation.

We have the opposite situation today: those who enter the existing institutes of consecrated life in order to share in a certain charism—but without having first been convinced by and attracted to

¹⁴There are also many different possible forms of consecration based on the same charism.

¹⁵The danger would be that of dedicating oneself *solely* to the members and works of one’s own particular movement, *restricting* arbitrarily one’s service in the Church, or even one’s ministry (in the case of priests).

this charism as baptized believers—need to make a significant leap that, in the long run, can turn out to be quite dangerous.

(2) Another advantage is that of a specific apostolate.

All the institutes of consecrated life talk abundantly about their “specific apostolate” that, they say, has to be carried out in creative fidelity to their original charism.

The fact of the matter, however, is that this “specific apostolate”—in the concrete life of many religious—turns out to be very generic. The reason is often that there is no basic ecclesial context, already marked by a charism, that would need such an apostolate.

Think of the innumerable “apostolic works” (the so-called “priestly apostolate”) in which the relation between the consecrated and the lay is by nature episodic, superficial, and repetitive *ad infinitum*.

Or of the consecrated people stuck in jobs that normally belong to laypeople, but that are necessary for the very survival of their institute and the upkeep of its infrastructure—and this for lack of a laity already marked by a charism.

Or of the “apostolic tasks” that are so urgent and obsessively absorbing that—in many religious institutes—they end up undermining the very possibility of a common life and militate against any primacy (even a qualitative one) of the contemplative life. And this even when the original charism *essentially* requires such a primacy.

Underlying all of these problems is the lack of a corresponding laity: not a laity enlisted as aides or substitutes, but a laity convinced and fascinated by one and the same original charism.¹⁶

The new movements are not a panacea that will solve all the problems of the religious life, but they are an ecclesiological model that can help us to understand how and where it is necessary to “refund” it.

¹⁶Many religious institutes, founded for the care of the sick or for the formation of youth, are dying out, not because they have lost their usefulness, but because their *charism*—which, by its nature, could also be offered to the laity (doctors, health workers, teachers, and so forth)—has remained the exclusive *property* of the consecrated and has not been opened to the laity in an appropriate form. The tendency has been to go no further than asking the laity for a certain limited collaboration or support. The charism to “see and cure the sick with the eyes and the hands of Christ” should be attractive to all the baptized who work in health care. Therefore, communication of this attraction should be *natural* between the consecrated and the laity who live in constant contact “for the same mission.”

3. The “co-essentiality” of the charismatic dimension

There is another serious question that must be asked before we can go any further.

The Second Vatican Council, we said, rediscovered the charismatic dimension of the Church. It has also become clear that the charismatic and institutional dimensions are co-essential. This forces us to ask, in all earnestness, the following question: what happened to this “dimension,” what happened to this “co-essentiality,” in all the centuries of Christian life that predated the Second Vatican Council?

One can respond, of course, that this dimension has never been lacking,¹⁷ and that the universality and persistent recurrence of the consecrated life in its various forms, and of the multitude of “*charisms of foundation*” underlying it, is proof that it has not.

This response has, to be sure, a certain calming effect, but it does not completely resolve the problem of the “co-essentiality” of the charismatic dimension: can we really say that the charismatic dimension is co-essential to the institutional dimension when it, the charismatic dimension, remains confined almost exclusively to a single state of life?

Certain historical factors explain why the *charismatic dimension* found a special harmony with, and *almost naturally poured itself into*, the consecrated life, where it could be sure of the radicality, vitality, organization, and much else that it needed. Just as there historical reasons for the fact that the lay state remained for centuries in a sort of tutelage, where it was almost excluded from any hope of “*perfection*.” We must conclude, however, that at long last the time has come to open this immense “*charismatic deposit*,” stored up for centuries solely in the consecrated state, to all the faithful and to all the states of life.

But this will have to be done on more than one level:

There will have to a first “*opening*” bearing on the consecrated life itself in general. The gift, or gifts, of the evangelical counsels will have to be offered to all the baptized faithful. This has to be done in a manner appropriate to each state of life, but it must really be done.

¹⁷On the contrary, it must be emphasized that a certain charismatic dimension is already inextricably present in the institutional dimension itself.

There will have to be a second “*opening*” that will give the laity access to the “charismatic homeland” of the consecrated¹⁸—which will require *that all (including the consecrated) enter into it in a new way*.

In fact, both the lay and the consecrated will *first* have to return together to the common foundation of baptism, in order to discover there the common elements of the charism;¹⁹ *then* they must move towards their respective vocations in such a way that the same charism illuminates the specificity of the states of life, the communion that links them, and the mission that awaits them.

This work would truly put into effect the *creative fidelity* that everyone desires and would lead us to a deeper understanding of the charism itself.

4. *The first task: a new context for the evangelical counsels*

Opening to all the faithful the age-old “charismatic deposit” that the Church has stored up in the bank of the consecrated life²⁰ is itself a delicate operation that must be carried out with great prudence and in an orderly fashion. And the first deposit that must be *opened* is the *evangelical counsels themselves*.

The texts of Vatican II do not use the word “charism” even once to refer to the religious life; they speak of it simply as “a divine gift that the Church has received from the Lord,”²¹ a gift founded, in turn, upon the “gift of the evangelical counsels.”²²

Nevertheless, even though the Council does not use the technical terminology of “charisms,” it habitually presents the religious state using the traditional Biblical texts concerning charisms: Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12.

¹⁸What is at stake, in fact, are so many “charismatic homelands.”

¹⁹We do not mean, of course, that the charism is received at Baptism or that it adds something to Baptism. Our point is simply that, when a baptized Christian receives a certain charism from the Holy Spirit, he also receives “a new awareness of his baptismal identity.” The charism gives a specific physiognomy to the vocation and mission that proceed from Baptism (John Paul II, 27 May 1998).

²⁰Here I apologize for the banal economic language, but I want to recall the responsibility that each has to *administer* wisely the gifts of God.

²¹*Lumen Gentium*, 7, 43.

²²*Ibid.*, 43.

It is the Spirit, the Council says, that raises up the religious state in the Church “with a marvelous variety of forms.” The Council also underscores that the founders of these forms acted “under the impulse of the Spirit.”²³

The tendency to speak of the religious life—today “consecrated life” is the preferred term—as a charism has prevailed since the Council. The idea that this charism is present in every institute as a living offer of the Spirit has gained even greater currency.

One of the most recent magisterial documents uses the following language: “the charism of the religious life in a given institute is a living grace that must be received and lived in often unprecedented conditions.”²⁴

It is important to notice the rapid declension that this formula conceals: from the idea that “the religious life is a gift of the Spirit” (a charism in the broad sense), we pass to the “charism of the religious life in a given institute,” which, moreover, is supposed to be a “living grace” that it is therefore necessary to receive constantly and embody in ever new forms.

But the “religious life” as such already poses the ecclesiological problems that we mentioned above. There is no doubt that the religious life does embody in the Church—and in a coherent structure—the charismatic aspect that the Pope has called “constitutive and so to say co-essential.” But here too we have to face the problem of the relationship between the consecrated life and the lay life.

The (apparently obvious) question is the following: is the charism that *gives birth* to the consecrated life located *at the origin* of the consecrated life?

Although it may seem strange to say so, our answer is No. What we should rather say is that the charism that gives birth to the consecrated life is located at the very origins of the Christian life. At bottom, the question we are asking here is analogous to the more ancient, oft-recurrent question as to whether or not the evangelical counsels are binding on all Christians.

The question may be formulated thus: If it is true that *all* Christians are called to love Christ the Lord “always more,” how can there exist a “more” to which *not all* of them are called? How is it that not all Christians are called to the observance of the evangelical

²³*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

²⁴*Potissimum Institutioni* (1990), 67.

counsels that recommend precisely this “*more*”? If, after all, Jesus really left us, through his deeds and words, *counsels* that help us live closer to him, how can a Christian who loves him (any Christian) remain content merely with following the commandments? Isn’t there a danger of losing the novelty that arises from encountering Christ—an encounter that consists of love, of dialogue, of suggestions, of maturation, of an ongoing “more” that all those who love and feel loved desire?²⁵

Now, it is not enough to treat this as a question of ideals (which is usually resolved by offering the laity the chance to live the “*spirit* of the counsels”). We must see it as a question of ecclesiology.

If we want to address the question in terms of the ecclesiology of communion, then we have to show that the entire Church is already impregnated with the same charism that then gives birth to the religious and/or consecrated life. *This*, then, is the charism of the evangelical counsels, counsels that Vatican II explicitly called a “divine gift,” *donum divinum*.²⁶

The Church’s most recent magisterial teaching speaks explicitly of this charismatic sharing between the laity and the consecrated in the following terms:

The exemplary holiness of the consecrated will introduce the laity into the direct experience of the evangelical counsels, encouraging them to live and to bear witness to the spirit of the beatitudes in order to transform the world according to God’s heart.²⁷

Although the language is still traditional, and the weight of the distinction lies on the “*spirit*” of the counsels and the beatitudes, the document is novel in underscoring the need for laypeople to have a certain “*direct experience*” of this “*spirit*.” This calls our attention to the consequent need to avoid giving terms like “spirit,” “spirituality,” or “spiritual life” a disembodied meaning.

²⁵Cf. Antonio Maria Sicari, *Ci ha chiamati amici. Laici e consigli evangelici* (Milan: Jaca Books, 2001). The entire volume is dedicated to explaining and illustrating pedagogically this question, only briefly touched upon here.

²⁶*Lumen Gentium*, 43.

²⁷*Vita Consecrata*, 55.

In Christianity, the “*spiritual*” is always tied to a concrete belonging to Christ the Lord, and to “all that is his”—that is, everything, since everything is his.

Baptism, then, introduces every Christian into a state of “new life.” In this new state, the law governing the believer’s relation to Christ is not merely a duty or a command, but a friendship that offers and asks “*always more*.” Only thus can the believer realistically aspire to holiness, that is, to the perfection of charity.

From this point of view, we can therefore say that “the Christian state of life” is as such, and for all, a “state of evangelical counsel,” in the sense that the law governing Christianity is that of dialogue with Christ in friendship, a dialogue that finds expression through “counsels,” “suggestions,” and a “generous search for what is better, for the ‘more.’”

But it must also be pointed out that the numerous “friendly counsels” that Jesus addresses to Christians always tend in the direction of the “three counsels of virginity, poverty, and obedience,” even when the Christian is not called to the consecrated life. What interest, then, do laypeople have in these three values?

Before giving rise to the *consecrated state* and taking specific shape in it, *virginity, poverty, and obedience* are the foundation of what Christianity has to say about the human being. The pairs of concepts that we use, in a dissociated fashion, to distinguish the states of life—virginity or sponsality, poverty or wealth, obedience or freedom—are dissociated because man has fallen prey to sin and has undone the unity of God’s original plan. But “at the beginning” of the creation these pairs *together* described God’s conception of man as:

virginal, that is, totally in need of His love alone, and yet at the same time *spousal*, that is, capable of communion with the other;

poor, that is, wholly open to receive, and yet also “rich,” because filled with gifts, starting with his very existence “from nothing”;

obedient, that is, totally engaged in listening to the Word that calls him into existence and establishes the meaning of this existence, and yet also totally free, because bound only by the love that gives its “*consent*.”

Careful theological analysis shows, then, that the evangelical counsels, while founding a particular state of life in the Church (the religious and/or consecrated state), touch even more originally the

very root of Christian anthropology: they describe how God imagined man “in the beginning,” hence, God’s original plan.

No one can seriously doubt that the foundation of the religious life lies in these three counsels. And yet: the time has come to understand that they are also the foundation of that “*revelation of man to himself*” that is an integral part of the Christian message.

They are, in fact, *counsels* that touch the most radical depths of human existence.²⁸ To discover this ‘radical depth’—even if only through a comparison of the states of life—concerns all believers and, indeed, all human beings. Moreover, with the passage of time we gradually learn that all human beings, sooner or later, are confronted with the definitive virginity, poverty, and obedience of their being.²⁹

Indeed, we can even add that the traditional evangelical counsels (of obedience, poverty, and virginity) describe not only basic Christian anthropology, but also eschatology. And they speak to us, not only of the fulfillment that awaits us after death, but also of the *definitiveness* that enables us to die virginally, poorly, and obediently.

When man reaches the end of his life, the question he will have to face, regardless of his vocation in this world, is whether or not he understood and realized his own “original image.” All of us will be judged on whether or not we truly succeeded in becoming *virgins* (by entrusting ourselves to the loving mercy of God our Father), *poor* (by emptying ourselves of this world and become available to receive infinite wealth), and *obedient* (by becoming ready to find our peace and our freedom in the will of God). These are questions whose understanding requires, not just theological development, but incarnation in life.³⁰

²⁸Learning to enter into the depths of one’s “I” and to “give everything” is a requirement of being a human “person”: man realizes himself only when he succeeds in possessing himself as a whole and in making a total and definitive gift of himself.

²⁹Cf. Sicari, *Ci ha chiamati amici*, 22.

³⁰This proposal might raise the following objection: is it not too difficult, too refined, too unsuitable to approach the laity with the “evangelical counsels,” when so many of them often lack even a basic formation? This criticism is valuable for two reasons: first, as an exhortation to those who would undertake lay “formation” to be attentive to *every need* facing the laity; second, as a reminder

It would seem, then, that there can be no “refoundation of the religious life” that does not begin with a new proclamation, a new evangelization, a new catechesis addressed to all Christians (and, indeed, to every human being who wishes to “understand himself”) and based on the anthropology revealed by the evangelical counsels.

After having reinserted the evangelical counsels into the basic anthropological and eschatological framework of the Church—the first and most *fundamental* refoundation—we can then ask the individual institutes of consecrated life to do the same with their “founding charism.”

There is a risk of derailing the needed refoundation by transferring the charism *immediately* and, so to say, laterally, *from* the consecrated *to* the laity without a prior reassimilation of the charism by the *christifidelis*, be he consecrated or lay.

If, as we have seen, the charism is how the Spirit makes us fall in love with Christ and, therefore, expresses the specific way in which he grafts us into the task of building up the Church, a believer who has been shaped and marked by the charism must be at the origin of the whole process.³¹

Otherwise, the experience of the “*lay associates*” will be ineffective, not only practically, but also from a strictly ecclesiological point of view. As we have seen, the new ecclesial movements are clearly and serenely displaying how to proceed with *order* in this business. On the other hand, the older movements that have given rise almost exclusively to orders or institutes or religious congregations have an urgent task vis-a-vis the laypeople who have “caught” their charism.

The consecrated, the very materiality of whose lives is shaped by the charism, cannot rest content with regarding the laity as collaborators in the apostolate or as “*spiritual*” receivers of the charism.

that they must gradually integrate all the aspects of Christian life into their formation program. But it also bears stressing that to approach the laity with the evangelical counsels is to approach them with “*the original structure of man whom Christ reveals to himself*.” The proposal of the counsels is *prior* to any further specification, and is meant to sustain the whole revelation of the Christian mystery.

³¹The new ecclesial movements show how this affirmation (the reception and living of the *charism* is basic Christian formation that precedes any further vocational specification) may be translated into the appropriate pedagogy.

First and foremost, the consecrated must discover and describe the substantial aspects of the charism that, so to say, constitute their way of being Christians: “*christifideles*.”

Let me explain. “Being consecrated” is not an addition to “being Christian.” Rather, it is the specific manner in which the Spirit asks “*this Christian*” to belong to Christ. In the same way, “being molded by a certain charism” is not an addition to “being consecrated.” Rather, it is the specific way in which the Holy Spirit asks this same Christian to “be consecrated” and, therefore, to “be Christian.”

Even when the charism has been for centuries the preserve of the consecrated, its primary nature exceeds the consecrated life, because it aims to touch and mold the Christian’s belonging, rooted in his baptism, to Christ and the Church. The charism is not juxtaposed to the spiritual identity common to all the faithful, but rather gives it a specific shape.

The charism granted to Francis of Assisi, to Ignatius of Loyola, to Camillus de Lellis, to Teresa of Avila, to John of the Cross, and to innumerable other founder-saints was expressed, of course, in their being, and their desire to be, consecrated. It also brought with it an irresistible urge towards virginity (since what was at stake was a particular way of falling in love with Christ). But it was not limited by nature to the consecrated life or even to virginity.

I repeat: the point is not to reconstruct hypothetically a non-existent past, nor can we revisit the origins of each religious institute, much less of each charism. Nevertheless, we can demonstrate that, in many cases, the charism also touched “non-consecrated” people, whether laymen or priests, who, while remaining in their state of life, “shared” the charism in ways that were deeper and more all-encompassing than is usually imagined. They shared it, then, as an *impregnation* and *identification* of their own belonging to Christ, in profound communion with the consecrated.

We are not mistaken, in any case, in thinking *today* that many seeds could not develop *then* on account of the strict separation between the states of life. It is necessary to explore *today* new possibilities opened up the maturation of the Church’s consciousness since Vatican II.

To repeat: the charism, even when the Spirit grants it to consecrated people, can be lived and valued, *in its original nature*, by any simple believer who feels touched by it.

When a charism vivifies a group of consecrated people and assigns them an ecclesial identity, it is certainly able to spread to, and vivify, in the most diverse ways, those members of the faithful whom the Spirit gathers around the consecrated.

To “refound” or “relocate” a charism today would mean above all this: to reposition it where the different states of life can assimilate it—if the Spirit wishes to “attract” people to it—in the form that befits each person’s vocation. And, in the case of the lay faithful, it would require a particular attentiveness to a consistent theology of the laity.

The place where the laity live out their vocation is the *world*. The laity may occasionally frequent strictly churchly domains for purposes of liturgy or formation or some necessary collaboration, but the locus of their vocation is the world.

A charism that pulls the laity out the places that are specific to them—places determined by their family and their work—or distracted them from their tasks in the world—cultural, scientific, social, political, and the like—is a charism that has been wrongly assimilated.

For the same reason, a charism having a long *consecrated* tradition (woven together from experiences, modes of speaking, reflections, texts, and works all pertaining to the world of the religious) cannot be straightforwardly applied to the life of the laity.

The work that needs to be done is much more delicate. What is required is not so much that the consecrated share their charism with the laity as that *both* the consecrated *and* laypeople rethink and reexperience the charism at the more radical level where both are “baptized believers,” in order to make the charism overlap with the way in which the faithful fall in love with Christ and become passionately involved in building up the Church.

On this basis, *both* the laity *and* the consecrated will be able to savor and to enhance *charismatically* the “same communion” and the “same mission,” even though each will incarnate it in a specific state of life.

This requires, indeed, a real *refoundation*. It requires that all those involved in the charism (“*a particular way of falling in love with Christ and becoming passionately engaged in mission*”) re-think it simultaneously and from different points of view.

The consecrated must re-think it *for themselves*, in order to allow the gift of the Spirit to penetrate to the very roots of their baptism and of their humanity. They must also re-think it *together with*

the laity in order to transmit, correctly and richly, the spiritual patrimony that has already taken shape in their history. The laity must re-think it *for themselves*, in order to identify the “*secular form*” that they alone can find and savor. *The consecrated and the lay* must also re-think it together, in terms of their convergence in a single charismatic subjectivity³² and in an organic missionary passion.

In all of this, we must avoid haste and superficiality. The *consecrated*, who have held the charism in safekeeping for centuries, will have to assume a certain authority, especially at the beginning. It is probable that they will have to do so for a long time. And it will always be helpful if it is born from the intrinsic authority that the consecrated life has in the Church.

Rather than risk misunderstanding, let me repeat myself once more: the idea of a new charismatic subject that is composed neither simply of the consecrated nor simply of laypeople, but of *consecrated and lay faithful*, does not exclude, but rather requires, recognition of the authority that one state has with respect to the other on account of its theological nature and history.

Moreover, to speak of a “*single charismatic subjectivity*” is not to *rule out* the distinction between different juridical and organizational affiliations. It is rather to *include* a prudent concern for *organicity*.

Now, one can certainly imagine a number of ways in which the refoundation proposed here might be carried out. In my view, however, it would make the most sense, from an ecclesial perspective, for movements to form around the ancient charisms, just as there are movements that spontaneously gather around the new charisms today.

³²When this happens, there is often a fear in the religious institutes that their consecrated members will use these “new ways” as a pretext for withdrawing from the obedience they owe to their legitimate superiors and/or from membership in their community. The risks are certainly there, but if the matter proceeds from a sincere deepening of one’s own charism, each member will find more reasons for obedience and adherence to his state of life and its requirements. If he does not, it is because of an *infidelity* that takes the new as a pretext (just as it could take the old and habitual as a pretext as well). On the other hand, we must not forget that superiors, too, are duty bound in conscience not to “extinguish the Spirit.” This requires, at the very least, the ability to foster a prudent openness and trust towards the desire to welcome and spread “the living grace of the charism.”

Not in order passively to imitate the new, but to ensure that the ancient charisms, too, will be ecclesial, in the ordered communion of all the states of life.—*Translated by Adrian Walker.* G

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