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ROOT, SHOOT, AND FRUIT: FROM MISSIO DEI TO MISSION TODAY

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...the donor of all gifts is God...

THE ROOTS OF CHARISM

The currency of the word *charism* (and its derivatives *charismatic* and *charisma*) has become seriously devalued in our times. *Charism* is now commonly attributed to “celebrities” or “personalities”, and sometimes beauty or even notoriety (*charism*) are deemed sufficient qualifications for celebrity status. It is also quite commonplace for national or multinational corporations, not to mention religious institutions of every stripe, to claim a special and distinctive *charism*. But what does this really mean? Does it really amount to anything substantial or particular?

The word *charism* is Greek and may be translated as “favor” or “grace.” In the Vulgate, St. Jerome translated it as *donum/dona* (gift/gifts), except in 1 Cor 12:31 where he simply retained the Greek word. There, St. Paul is calling the community to “be ambitious for the higher gifts [*charismata*].” In Christian (particularly Pauline) theology, the word has a long and distinguished history. But this is not the place for a theological exploration; my intention is to seek *applications* of the term to the Spiritan corporate identity, and to the actual living out of that identity in the lives of individuals.

It is critically important that we remember that the author or donor of all gifts is God: the subject of every *charism*, therefore, is the God who reaches out, embraces, and shares God’s gifts with whomsoever God wills. Early in the third century, Tertullian visualized the Trinity as root, shoot and fruit¹: Father/Creator as root, Jesus/the Christ as shoot, and Spirit/Advocate as fruit. Consistent with this metaphor, we can say that all those gifted with *charism* are continuing to bear Godly fruit in their lives. Spiritans in particular should be aware that a *charism* in the biblical, theological sense is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is not an initiative of an individual, and it exists for the benefit of a wider community.

Between St. Paul and Vatican II, however, the word was scarcely used. Having re-appropriated it, the Council used it fourteen times in the final documents. But, since then, *charism* has been attributed to at least the following: founders of religious institutes, religious life itself, communities, and even individuals. It is also understood both as *gift* and as *call*. In short, *charism* has become an exceedingly flexible, if not bewildering, term.

Meanwhile, sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) had written extensively on *charism* as a sociological phenomenon. He was particularly interested in the relationship between the individual and the community, and between constraint and freedom. He defined *charism* as

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he (*sic*) is set apart from ordinary men (*sic*) and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional 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.²

Weber's instinct so far is not at odds with the biblical meaning of *charism*. He then proceeds to elaborate, showing that the *charism* (sociologically speaking) of the founder of a new social institution has the power to magnetize a small group of followers who recognize his (or her) authority, usually by a communal discernment of his (or her) insights and aspirations as "inspired." They will be enkindled with the fire he has struck, and their initial fervor will lead them to attempt the impossible. And this, of course, remains consistent with most people's reading of the *charismatic* qualities found in des Places or Libermann.

A question that has always challenged me personally, however, is how we authentically discern just how a founder's *charism* is to be carried into times, places, and cultures that are quite different from those experienced by the founder. In other words, how do the descendants of Claude Poullart des Places or Francis Libermann live in a way that is essentially faithful to their ancestors, yet very different in its expression? How can we be loyal yet different, consistent yet creative, faithful yet path-breaking?

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Throughout history, flora of various kinds have been successfully transported and transplanted into a variety of soils. Some have withered, while others have thrived; but an apple remains recognizable as such, whether it is a *Washington Red*, a *Golden Delicious* or a *Granny Smith*. How then can Spiritans, and the authentic Spiritan *charism*, thrive in places and circumstances so very different from those of their founders? I turn now to a more personal odyssey.

THE FRUITS OF CHARISM

"The poor and most abandoned souls" has never been a phrase that really resonated with me, even though the spirit and sentiments behind it are extremely significant. As my own Spiritan life has

unfolded, so has my awareness of other lives and other possibilities. It was initially surprising to discover how many other religious communities, of women and men, espoused the very same motto, and even used the same words.³ So what is special about the Spiritans? And there was a further discomfort: I was never able to dissociate “souls” from actual people. In order to identify more than simply “the poor and most abandoned,” it would always be necessary for me to personalize them.

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“The poor” and “the most abandoned” are abstractions, categories; but there really is no such thing as “the poor” *in the abstract*. God does not make abstractions, or generic creatures: God’s creation is always specific, and every human person is individuated and identifiable by name. In order, therefore, to be really committed to the poor and most abandoned people, we must endeavor to know them by name, to identify and relate to them in a personal way.⁴ This, of course, epitomizes the ministry of Jesus, and his warning that we must be very careful to reach out to “the least” in such a way that we actually relate to them and their needs (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Both Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann exemplified this in palpable ways; and this, as I understand it, is the real core of the Spiritan *charism*. But it remains for each and all of us Spiritans to absorb and reapply this spirit, whoever and wherever we may be.

My reflections here, however, are only partly about my own stumbling efforts to live the *charism*. No less important for me is the conviction that mission is always a two-way street. That is to say, what we call “mission in reverse” is a critical component of every authentic missionary experience, and any authentic missionary *charism* must therefore exemplify how it can and should be lived. “Mission in reverse”⁵ is about the ways in which those who profess to bring the good news are also recipients of that same good news; about the ways in which we evangelizers are ourselves evangelized and converted. The days are long gone, one hopes, when missionaries thought they were bringing God to Godless people, or that they were the givers and the people were simply the recipients. Such half-truths are highly dangerous, though they were a powerful idiom of a former age. By now we should have discovered how God’s Spirit lives in others’ lives, and how much we ourselves have to learn and receive from others, lest preaching to others we should ourselves be condemned (cf. 1 Cor 9:27).

“EACH ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND” (Gen 1:11)

After ordination, I was sent to the University of Edinburgh to study Anthropology and Linguistics, spending a total of nearly six years there. How was I to live the Spiritan *charism* in such an

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academic – and “swinging sixties” -- environment? The Catholic Students’ Union ran a crèche on a Saturday afternoon for children suffering from *spina bifida* or born with the devastating effects of the thalidomide drug. All these children demanded full-time care from their parents, and these Saturday afternoons were, for most parents, the only respite in their week. For the children, they were a time of excitement and unpredictable forms of entertainment. And for me they were a respite from more academic pursuits; they were also a first lesson in “mission in reverse,” for I not only learned to love those children deeply but I learned to be loved in turn by them. In a very informal way, I found myself enabled to live the Spiritan *charism*, for these children were both “poor” and “abandoned” in some fashion. But they were never just “souls”: lacking limbs or bladder control, they were radically embodied, incarnate, and in need of constant physical as well as emotional attention.

A number of years later I got to “the missions”, as we then referred to overseas postings. Now, I thought, it should be significantly easier to live the Spiritan *charism*. To Sierra Leone I took some of the implicit theology and clericalism I had learned in England, and all of my own immaturity, arrogance, and myopia. T.S.Eliot spoke for many when he said: “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” After thirty years I still cringe at certain memories, and am keenly aware of having so often missed the meaning and failed to be enriched by the possibilities of mission in reverse. It is surely ironic that – specifically in “the missions” – the Spiritan *charism* failed to bear as much fruit in me as it should have done. Maybe that is why all of us have experiences and memories: so that we can still learn before it is too late.

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profound epiphany.*

For more than twenty years now, my Spiritan life has been lived in Chicago. The first nine of those years were spent in the context of the Spiritan formation community. By then I was the only “survivor” of the initial group: everyone had been ordained, or left, or been reappointed. But I had discovered a new place where the Spiritan *charism* could flourish: among some of the most “poor and abandoned” people in the richest nation on earth. It was, for me, a new and profound epiphany.

In 1984 I began to work with Edwina Gateley who had founded the *Volunteer Missionary Movement (VMM)* with headquarters in London Colney, in the very same neighborhood at the senior scholasticate in Radlett (London) where I had been formation director. Edwina had started a house for women trying to escape prostitution and was looking for an appropriate male presence. I spent several days and nights each week at *Genesis House*. But I also wandered the streets and volunteered overnight at a shelter.

A few months after arriving in Chicago (and imagining I was really *en route* back to Africa), I took the funeral of a homeless woman, Josie Winn, who had frozen to death in a dumpster/skip outside McDonald's one bitter winter night. She had been kept at the city morgue for several weeks, because the ground was frozen and she was unclaimed. Finally, several of us managed to claim the body in order to give it a real burial, rather than have her buried alone in an unmarked grave – in *Potter's Field* on the edge of a cemetery. After the service, to which all the homeless people had been invited and to which more than a hundred came, we returned to the shelter for a well-prepared meal of fresh meat and vegetables. But there was insufficient cutlery, and I borrowed from someone else. As an immediate result, I contracted Hepatitis B, was quite unable to work (teaching theology) for months, and was eventually unfit to return to "the missions." The wheel had come full circle; yet again it had become necessary for me to rediscover how to live the Spiritan *charism*.

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For the past twenty-two years, homeless women of Chicago have ministered to me, and I to them, in a very informal way: I simply bring food, cook, and serve meals; they eagerly but graciously take and eat; we get to know each other personally and by name. It's a kind of eucharist. These women (the vast majority of whom, it so happens, are African-American) mediate "mission in reverse" in my life; I, in turn, attempt to live the Spiritan *charism* among these poor and abandoned women.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

And so what? How does this reflection converge with our founders and their *charism*? Listen to Libermann:

Our project consists in giving ourselves entirely to Our Lord for the salvation of the Black Peoples, being *those who are the most unfortunate*, the furthest removed from the means of salvation, and the *most neglected in the Church of God*.⁶

The commitments of the past must be confronted with the calls of the present...

Much more recently, the Enlarged General Council of the Spiritans averred that:

There is a constant need for the Congregation to rejuvenate itself. Our first criteria are our traditional ones: 'the poor and abandoned,' 'difficult situations,' 'works for which it is difficult to find personnel' ... A missionary Congregation has to *respond to the missionary challenges of the day* if it is to maintain its credibility. The commitments of the past must be confronted with *the calls of the present: from the poor who suffer injustice, ...*

from neglected minorities, from the victims of racism, from the refugee and migrants.⁷

Our *Spiritan Rule of Life* contains these sentiments:

We count the following as constitutive parts of our mission of evangelization: the ‘integral liberation’ of people, action for justice and peace, and participation in development. It follows that *we must make ourselves* ‘the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them’.⁸

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The face of mission has changed significantly in our own lifetime. There is no question of our abandoning the mission *ad gentes* or ceasing to cross national boundaries. But many of our African confreres are now being appointed to parts of the world formerly known as “Christendom” and not considered the home of the *gentes*; and many of the rest of us do not find ourselves living in societies or cultures that are totally unfamiliar to us. Yet each and all of us must embody the *Spiritan charism* wherever we may be. One of the propositions from the General Chapter at Maynooth (1998), is the following, which explicitly mentions (though rather generically, unfortunately) “the homeless” among others:

Each *Spiritan* will *look for opportunities for action within his grasp* in order to become the voice of the voiceless.⁹

This is an explicit and unequivocal challenge to every one of us. It is all the more pertinent in this time of overwork and even burnout, as another Enlarged General Council noted well:

Sometimes we become almost drugged by our work. ... We become so attached to our job that we identify ourselves with it and we cannot imagine us doing anything else. *But there are frontiers to be crossed, moments of generosity to be lived*¹⁰

If there was a tendency in the past, to evangelize primarily by *proclamation*, there has surely always been an imperative to evangelize through less formal and more immediate ways, as Jesus also did. Pope Paul VI stated this very clearly:

Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness.¹¹

Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness.

Enough said.

CONCLUSION

There are many strong statements, both in our own *Spiritan* documents and in the Church’s *magisterium*, that should challenge

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and encourage us to greater faithfulness to the Spiritan *charism*. If I may be permitted three suggestions, however, they would be these: first, in the literature on *charism* there is still much that we Spiritans could harvest and employ; second, we need to attend more seriously to “mission in reverse”; and third, the word “missional” may be particularly helpful in the lives of many Spiritans.

The literature I am thinking of is the sociological corpus that derives from and is indebted to Max Weber. To give but one quotation: talking of the revolutionary, prophetic, and transformative possibilities in what he calls *charisma*, Weber says it may be generated from both within a person or a community and from beyond:

The equally revolutionary force ... works from without, by altering the situations of action *Charisma* may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born of suffering, conflict, or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central system of attitudes and directions of action with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems and structures of the ‘world’.¹²

In contemporary theological language, *charism* would thus manifest itself both in a sensitive reading of the signs of the times (external challenge that galvanizes a truly *charismatic* response), and in certain persons or even communities that, through suffering and sanctity, continue to be converted to the world we live in now (internal dynamics that create new responses to changing circumstances).

...the future of mission is collaborative ministry at every possible level.

“Mission in reverse” emphasizes the way in which every evangelizer is evangelized or called to conversion in the process of sharing the Good News. But there are few indications of “mission in reverse” in the statements we have seen. Yet the future of mission is *collaborative ministry* at every possible level. Gustavo Gutiérrez said, “the poor are not our problem: we are theirs.” Unless we are much more attentive to our own contributions – whether crude or subtle – to the social problems of the world we live in, we will continue to resist our own conversion. If we *ask* people what they need (as Jesus asked Bartimeus [Mk 10:51]), rather than simply *tell* them what we intend to do for them, then we will be effectively practicing “mission in reverse.” The single most important agenda item in contemporary mission theology is interreligious *dialogue*; and dialogue changes both parties. “Mission in reverse” may heal some of the wounds inadvertently inflicted on those we have

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wanted to serve; it may even help to save the contemporary world from itself.

“Missional” is a word of recent coinage, but one with helpful applications. It identifies something common to all mature Christianity and every mature Christian. “Missionary” was a word that served to polarize members of the Christian family. It also smacked of elitism. But, as Vatican II reminded us, we are all supposed to be missionary by our baptism, though we cannot and should not all spend our lives overseas. Therefore, “missionary” must mean something other than its former connotations embraced. Hence the word “missional,” coined to express the Christian commitment to a life turned inside out rather than outside in, everted rather than inverted, exocentric rather than endocentric. Whoever we are, and whether or not we find ourselves far from home or continents away, we are all called to be missional in this sense.

Des Places and Libermann did not leave their native land; but they expressed the Spiritan *charism* in the only way any *charism* can be expressed: missionally. Everything we have, we receive. Everything is gift. Our responsibility is, first, to receive the gift, the *charism* bestowed on us by God’s Spirit through the Congregation and its founders; second, to foster and cherish it so that it shapes our lives; and third, to pass it on: to recycle it – and our lives -- for the benefit of others, especially the poor and the most abandoned people we encounter. And we will do this, by God’s grace, until God’s Kingdom comes.

Footnotes

¹ Still, as Tertullian did not speak English, he cannot have fabricated such a clever set of rhyming words as these.

² Max Weber, “The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization.” In *Max Weber: On Charisma and Institution Building*. S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968:48.

³ Daniel Comboni (MCCJ) and Eugene de Mazenod (OMI) are only two examples.

⁴ Psychotherapist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl: “To love you must *encounter*; it is the only way” (my emphasis). He is quite correct, as Jesus, the Incarnate One of God, exemplifies.

⁵ A classic text is Claude Marie Barbour’s “Seeking Justice and *Shalom* in the City.” *International Review of Mission* 73, 1984:303-309.

⁶ Memorandum to Mgr Cadolini, 27 March, 1840. Emphasis is mine.

⁷ EGC Carcavellos, 1982. I/D 32. This, incidentally, is a perfectly adequate profile of the homeless poor.

⁸ *SRL*, 14. Again, the emphasis is mine.

⁹ Maynooth, 2.19. My emphasis.

¹⁰ EGC Dakar, 1995, 4.2.3.

¹¹ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21 (1975),

¹² Max Weber, *op. cit.*, 53-4.