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RE-INVENTING THE SPIRITAN CHARISM FOR CONTEMPORARY MISSION

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Introduction

The basic teaching we have from the New Testament concerning *charism* comes mainly from the Pauline writings.¹ Paul regards *charism* as an effect of, and as a concrete materialization of God's grace. *Charism* is a particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to a person to be used for the good of all. In 1 Cor 12:8-10 Paul outlines some of these: to some the gift of utterance, to others faith, to others the gift of healing, to others the working of miracles, to others prophecy, and still to others the distinguishing of spirits, the speaking in tongues. There are still other gifts and services, but Paul emphasized that all these are actions of the Holy Spirit, to be received with humility and thanks and to be put to use for the good of the Church and of our brothers and sisters. *Charism*, in this understanding, has a strong social and communitarian underpinning.

In the context of religious life, before Vatican II there was only a lip service paid to the charism of founders; the tendency was to treat all institutes as more or less identical, and to differentiate apostolic institutes only by their "works".² Such was the situation when with Vatican II came a renewed understanding of the religious life as a particular state in the Church, the result of charismatic gifts that the Spirit bestowed on the founders. Without using the word *charism*, *Lumen Gentium* (45) and *Perfectae Caritatis* (2b), while outlining the principles of renewal of religious life, called on members to adhere to "the spirit of the founders," "their evangelical intentions," and their "examples of saintliness." The "spirit and aims of each founder" together with "each institute's sound traditions" constituted "the patrimony of an institute", which was to be faithfully preserved. It was only in Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, no.11, that the expression "charism of founders" appeared for the first time in a magisterial statement. Here the charism of founders is described as an "experience of the Spirit" which can be passed on to their followers so that they can model their lives on it and which produces a particular style of holiness and apostolate.

Our most recent Spiritan General Chapter (Torre d'Aguilha 2004) spoke about the necessity of "handing on" the Spiritan charism and challenged members thus: "that which began through the power of the Spirit with the founders must be received, followed and developed by each succeeding generation

in the different historical, social and cultural situations in which they find themselves ... to dare to take new initiatives and run certain risks – in fidelity to the grace that has been given us.”³ For the new generation of Spiritans to really understand what is involved in the challenge of creative fidelity to our charism, some critical issues need to be addressed. Can a charism be “recovered” or “handed on”? How can the Spiritan charism retain at the same time elements of sameness and difference?

In this article, I will try to present a radical way of explicating the phenomenon of charism which places a renewed stress on its social and communitarian dimensions, while not losing the spiritual and religious connotation given it in the New Testament. I will also suggest some ways of maintaining creative fidelity to our Spiritan charism.

The reflections of Bernard Lee, especially as presented in his article – “A socio-historical theology of charism”⁴ and his recent book *The Beating of Great Wings: A worldly spirituality for active, apostolic communities*⁵ (2004) will be very helpful in giving us a model that can be used in our continued effort at refounding our Spiritan charism.

Nature of Charism: “Deep Story” and charism

Drawing upon resources from both anthropology and sociology, Bernard Lee suggests that the popular understanding of charism is more effectively interpreted with two terms instead of one: *deep story* and *charism*. By “effectively interpreted” he means an interpretation that can help effect those conditions which may not guarantee charism, but without which it is most unlikely to make an appearance.

“Recovery of charism,” writes Lee, is an unnecessary burden – it cannot be done. “Charism is not a property. It is not a possession. It is not transferable, nor transmittable, and not controllable. Charism is a deeply historicized social phenomenon. It cannot be duplicated in any other time or place. Charism has never been a movable feast.”⁶ Whenever charism does occur in some historical tradition, Lee writes, it is re-invented in a new social and historical setting. That happens when “a community’s deep story speaks effective, felt words to the transformation of some of the world’s most pressing needs and aspirations.”⁷

A community does not possess a charism. It possesses what Lee calls a “deep story.” A community can rightly interpret its story as a gift from God. That story is a necessary condition for charism, but the story is not charism.⁸ What then is a community’s deep story?

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Every religious institute, writes Lee, has its deep story. Another writer, Stephen Crites,⁹ calls it a “sacred” story. Sacred, not because it is inherently religious, but because it creates the life we live. A Constitution or a Rule of Life is a community’s attempt to articulate the deep story as effectively as it can. The Church’s attempt after Vatican II to tell its story in a catechism, just like the catechism that came after the Council of Trent, is an attempt at a deep story. To ask members of a religious community to name the principal features of their community’s life is to engage them in a form of story telling. When they do that they tell particular versions of the deep story. But the deep stories themselves, Lee warns, are not easily susceptible to being told. They can only be disclosed in the particular stories that are formed out of them (these particular or “mundane” stories are really the only ways a deep story makes its appearance in the world). The deep story is “more expansive, more elusive, more supple, than any particular story can tell”.¹⁰

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The spirituality of any religious community is a version of the deep story. No one, Lee observes, can effectively describe a community’s spirituality. Some texts are particularly disclosive and these are usually the classics of the tradition. For us Spiritans, phrases like – “evangelical availability,” “practical union,” “paratus ad omnia”, “cor unum et anima una,” etc., are part of the deep components of our spirituality, but they can’t tell our deep story once and for all.

Our deep stories, too, are subject to evolution but, says Lee, not through feasibility studies and strategic planning. When there are foundational cultural shifts, the Church reinterprets reality and so do religious orders. This is evolution time for the deep story. The religious orders which do not accomplish this pass out of existence. Lee notes that 76% of all men’s orders founded before 1500 no longer exist.¹¹

Charism...names an effective connection between a deep story and a contemporary social situation.

In the critical years since Vatican II, too often “charism” has been used to name a community’s deep story but, Lee says, that is insufficient. “Charism” rather names “an effective connection between a deep story and a contemporary social situation”. The deep story is validated as charism by those who experience hope and healing when a deep story has gone to work effectively and noticeably. No religious order can, on its own, claim charism. That is a judgment conferred by “others” who have experienced it as good news.¹²

The earlier efforts in the sociology of religion to characterize charism focused upon the characteristics of a person experienced as charismatic. Max Weber¹³ typifies this approach to charism.

Weber's understanding has had a considerable influence in religious literature and has influenced the usage of charisma in the context of religious life. We have tended to treat our founders, Lee observes, as people with exceptional qualities that commanded a following, but have paid too little attention to the constitutive role of their social situation in what we are naming charisma. In other words, we have tended to take a Weberian approach to charisma as personal qualities in the founding person, and then treated those qualities as transferable to a social structure – the religious institution. The charisma is then a time-less possession that can be reincarnated in age after age.¹⁴

Peter Worsley¹⁵, an empirical social scientist, challenges the Weberian sense of charisma and proposes a radically socialized and fully historicized alternative. Instead of asking “what are the characteristics of a charismatic person?” the question shifts to an inquiry into “what is going on in some social context when charisma is attributed to someone?” What is the phenomenon? Weber said charisma names the personal qualities of a remarkable kind of leader. Worsley says, rather, that charisma names a social relationship. It names something that transpires between a person and a group (followers). This is Worsley's interactionist model. He insists that charisma names as well the particularities of a social situation that make this special relationship possible – not inevitable, but possible.¹⁶

When the foundress or founder begins to make life together with followers, they create a style among themselves. They generate a spirit within which their faith life is lived. There is power in what they are up to, and it is supported by wide appeal. It may probably run into fierce opposition as well. These first members of a religious community are starting a story. A narrative structure is taking shape. Out of their life together patterns form. Then structures emerge. The underlying human concerns that are addressed are understood with such generalizations that the narrative is immensely supple. Thus, the narrative structure is causally related to the historical particularities of the charismatic time of founding. The deep story can be transmitted, but its moment of charisma can only be reinvented.¹⁷

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Lee is trying to name two distinguishable but related realities. The first is a community's deep story. The deep story is a possession, an inheritance, and is rightly interpreted as God's gift to the Church. But whether that story comes alive in any age depends upon whether it can mediate redemption for the cry of the age. The deep story emerges as charisma when it is able to rise to the occasion, and when the occasion – which is the contemporary world in all

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its concreteness- rises in turn to meet it. When they meet publicly, the world knows it. At that moment redemption has a face and charism is afoot.¹⁸ Charism, then, “is a public adjudication about the salvific presence of God’s power in the relationship between a community and its larger world.”¹⁹

A community that can re-invent its charism has to be a community of memory and one that stays tenderly in touch with its historic forms and its historic dreams. Lee calls a community of memory one that studies its documents, researches its spirituality, celebrates its jubilees, asks absolution for its sins, and enjoys its stories. Above all, it must be a community of hope and one of interpretation.²⁰

Spiritan Deep Story

The model we are proposing here for a better interpretation of charism tells us that every religious community has a deep story, which is a necessary condition for charism. Principal features of a religious community’s life are particular versions of the deep story. Let me, at this juncture, mention a few of what I consider core elements of the Spiritan deep story before suggesting some conditions that might favor a re-invention of our founding charism.

The story of Claude-François Poullart des Places is at the very foundation of our Spiritan history. To train the poor to evangelize the poor – this was the vision that seized him and set his heart on fire. The miserable little chimney-boys of Paris were the first social group that attracted his attention. Later he realized that some of his friends at college were as badly off as these poor boys that climbed chimneys to earn a living and help their families. He made a radical Gospel choice in favor of the most neglected in the Church of his day. The miserable situation of many poor scholars was “one of the deepest wounds in the Church of France” at that time.²¹

The strength of Poullart’s foundation, Koren writes, did not lie in its organization, but in what he calls its charism. All graduates of his seminary became known as Spiritans, but they had no other religious commitment than their ordination, and their common bond was the way they viewed their priesthood. “Being a priest was for them an evangelical availability in obedience to the Spirit for the service of the poor and abandoned in voluntary personal poverty.”²² This was the “spirit”, the driving force that possessed the followers of Poullart, that made them ready and available to serve the poor wherever the needs were most urgent, be it in remote countryside parishes in France, teaching in a college or seminary, or crossing the seas to work in the colonies. That spirit

of the early Spiritans still challenges us today to think afresh in every age and circumstance what it means to be available for the poor.

The story of Francis Libermann is also central to the Spiritan deep story. Born and raised in the Jewish ghetto of Saverne in Alsace, he knew the lot of the oppressed and was sensitive to the needs of the poor. His story is that of a convert to Christianity, a suffering servant in whose life God intervened unexpectedly. Nothing happened the way he had foreseen. He succeeded, however, in making total obedience to the Holy Spirit the guiding principle of his own life and he wanted others to do so also. When he heard the cry of the poor and oppressed, especially those of the recently liberated black slaves, ringing in his ears through the stories of his friends LeVasseur and Tisserant, he felt called to get involved and do something about it. This was the genesis of the “Work for the Blacks” that took members of Libermann’s missionary band of the Holy Heart of Mary to Haiti, Reunion, Mauritius, and to West Africa. Libermann and Poullart des Places were driven by the same “spirit” to be available for the urgent needs of the poor and oppressed.

The Spiritan deep story continued to manifest itself in the missionary witness of our ancestors like Blessed Jacques Laval, Blessed Daniel Brottier, Bishop Shanahan, Bishop Godfrey Okoye, Bishop Anthony Nwedo and hundreds of other Spiritans (including our lay associates) whose stories have not been told but who, listening to the same Spirit, placed their lives unreservedly at the service of God and humanity, responding to the critical needs of their time.

Re-inventing the Spiritan charism

I would like us to see the fusion of Libermann’s missionary society of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Spiritans of Poullart des Places in 1848, as recommended by Propaganda Fide, as a typical example of a re-invention of an already existing charism. Poullart and Libermann had two different faces but one spirit – sameness and difference. The Dominican Roger Tillard made a distinction between what he calls a “foundation charism” and a “founder’s charism”, which fits very well the relationship between our two founders:

“Someone has the inspiration of a ‘foundation’ and receives from the Spirit the graces needed to realize it. But this inspiration does not necessarily come from a private spiritual vision, from a great mystical perception one wishes others to share. Very often, on the contrary, it is simply question of noting a need to be met,

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the discovery of a void nothing is filling. And, in the light of the Gospel, one feels compelled to incarnate the precept of charity into that situation. Then one gathers men or women inflamed with love of the Gospel and gives them a rule The 'foundation' shines forth more than the person who gave rise to it ... The grace of this 'inspired' person ... will have been to allow a group to appear that the church or society needed."²³

But for Libermann and his followers, the charism of Poullart des Places may not have survived to this day. The Spiritan Congregation, renewing itself ceaselessly and answering new needs, owes to itself today to answer the needs of the Church of our time, in fidelity to Poullart's charism. This movement is always a refoundation.²⁴ Libermann himself may have seen the event of the fusion in the same manner: "When the Holy Spirit inspires a work, he hardly ever gives its development from the start, but only as occasion offers. Nevertheless, all the time the development was contained in the principle by which he led him in whom he inspired the work, and there is a certain connection running through all that diversity."²⁵

The "certain connection running through all that diversity" that we see in Spiritan mission today is what we are calling the Spiritan deep story, which expresses itself powerfully in our core spirituality of "evangelical availability in voluntary poverty for the service of the poor and abandoned". As long as we authentically strive to live by this spirituality, I believe we are on the road to re-invention of our Spiritan charism in our different socio-cultural situations.

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This challenge is well-captured in an earlier Spiritan document as follows: "To be a Spiritan is to be open, available to the Spirit, wherever it carries us ... Our Congregation will flourish as long as we do not attempt to harness that wind for our own ends. Perhaps it will direct us to Macedonia when we had planned on Asia Minor; or to the house of Cornelius when we thought we should not frequent it lest holy things be soiled in that contact. This was the Spirit which moved us in the first instance to the poorest works of the dioceses of France, then to the Indians in Acadia, the slaves in Guyana, the blacks of Senegambia and elsewhere."²⁶

Footnotes

- ¹ In the NT the term *charism* occurs seventeen times; fourteen times in Paul (mainly in 1Cor 1 and 12; Rom 1; 5 and 12). The three non-Pauline references are: 1Tim 4:14; 2Tim 1:6; 1Pet 4:10
- ² Enid Williamson, "The Notion of Charism in the Religious Life", *Studia Canonica*, no.1 (1985), 108.
- ³ General Chapter, Torre d'Aguilha, Portugal, 2004, 1.2.
- ⁴ Bernard J. Lee, "A socio-historical theology of charism" *Review for Religious*, vol. 48, no. 1, (Jan/Feb. 1989), 124 – 135.
- ⁵ Bernard J. Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings: a worldly spirituality for active, apostolic communities* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004).
- ⁶ Bernard Lee, "A socio-historical theology of charism", 124.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 125.
- ⁹ Stephen Crites, "The narrative quality of experience", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 39, (1971), 295. Bernard Lee was greatly influenced by the reflections of Crites. According to Crites, "sacred" stories seem to be allusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully told, because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the tellers. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of a people to be directly told – they form consciousness rather than being objects of which it is directly aware.
- ¹⁰ Bernard Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings*, 21.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 127.
- ¹² Bernard Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings*, 12.
- ¹³ See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. (New York: Free Press, 1947) and *The Sociology of Religion*. (Boston, Beacon Press, 1964).
- ¹⁴ Bernard Lee, "A socio-historical theology of charism", 128-129.
- ¹⁵ See Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A study of "Cargo" cults in Melanesia*. (New York, Schocken, 1968).
- ¹⁶ See Bernard Lee, "A socio-historical theology of charism", 129.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 131.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Bernard Lee, "A socio-historical theology of charism", 128.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 132.
- ²¹ Spiritan Information / Documentation, no. 20, Jan. 1979
- ²² Henry J. Koren, *Essays on Spiritan Charism and on Spiritan History*. (Bethel Park, PA, Spiritus Press, 1990), 48-49.
- ²³ J.M.R. Tillard, "The Dynamism of Foundations" *Vocations*, no. 295, July 1981.
- ²⁴ Maurice Gobeil, "A Life-experience under the Breath of the Spirit" *Spiritans Today*, no. 4, (1985), 48.
- ²⁵ *Notes et Documents*, vol.12, 133-134, March 23, 1850.
- ²⁶ Spiritan Information / Documentation no. 20, (Jan. 1979), 3.