

## Reflections on the Challenge of *Charismatic Associations* by Dom Bernardo Olivera – 1995

In various places where our Order exists today, we see persons or groups who want to share our charism in one way or another. In certain places, this is evident by the presence of rooms or houses set aside for groups (often of young people). There are also groups of benefactors who organize to help some community. Finally there is no lack of requests for a kind of association in view of some form of oblate program.

These facts, which are relatively new for our Order, coincide with the upsurge of lay people in the life of the Church. In several countries, lay movements have changed the concept and vision of the Church itself. The recent Code of Canon Law has "canonized" the desire of lay people to share the life and spirituality of religious institutes. According to Canon 303, each institute can establish a type of association with lay people.

How should we interpret these facts? What is the Lord trying to tell us through this sign of the times which certainly seems like a sign from God?

These questions pertain to the service of the Abbot General, since the Constitutions say that the Abbot General "is the watchful guardian of the Order's patrimony, ensuring its growth" (CST.82.1).

### 1. Communion of Charisms

The theology of the Church as a communion offers a basis for an appropriate link between unity and pluralism in the Church. In the Church-Communion, states of life are linked together, in such a way that they complement one another. Even if their deep meaning is common to all, each has its original and unmistakable profile. At the same time they exist within a mutual relationship of service.

The plural unity of the Church is not limited to the different states of life, but is expressed more richly by the pluri-formity of charisms and the communion among them. Every vocation or form of authentic Christian life is a life in the Spirit and, for that reason, a charismatic reality.

In receiving the Holy Spirit, we have all received the "higher charism" of charity (1 Cor 12:31). Besides, everyone in the Body of Christ fulfills a service or a function, and it is the Spirit that renders him or her apt for this service or function. Because of this every Christian is charismatic:

"Each one has received from God his or her own gift, one this kind, the next something different" (1 Cor 7:7). "The particular manifestation of the Spirit granted to each one is to be used for the general good" (1 Cor 12:7). "On each one of us God's favor has been bestowed in whatever way Christ allotted it" (Eph 4:7).

"Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards, responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others" (1 Pet 4:10).

Consequently, Scripture teaches us to consider our capacities, abilities and professions in all their depth: as gifts to be used for building up the community (Cf. Eph 4:12). Vatican Council II, taking up

this doctrine of the apostle Paul, tells us that: "Whether these charisms be extraordinary or more simple and widespread, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church. Extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly desired, nor is it from them that the fruits of apostolic works are to be presumptuously expected. Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts. Their office is not to extinguish the Spirit, but to test everything and retain what is good" (Lumen Gentium 12; cf. Ad Gentes 28, Apostolicam Actuositatem 3).

John Paul II in the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* (ns 24) takes up and amplifies this teaching from the Council: "The Holy Spirit, in entrusting the different ministries to the Church-Communion, enriches it with other gifts and particular impulses, called charisms. These can take the most diverse forms, either as expressions of the absolute freedom of the Spirit who grants them, or as responses to the multiple exigencies of Church history. [...] Extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which have, directly or indirectly, an ecclesial usefulness, for the edification of the Church, for the good of human persons and for the needs of the world. Also, in our day, we can see the expansion of various charisms among the lay faithful, men and women. They are given to a determined person, but they can be shared by others so that they are maintained through time as a living and precious heritage which engenders a particular spiritual affinity among many persons."

When we were baptized and confirmed, we were consecrated by the Holy Spirit, for a mission in the Church through the charisms which the same Spirit granted us. This charismatic aptitude for mission takes different forms:

- A personal and non-transferable charismatic gift: the case of individual gifts such as that of religious founders.
- A double charismatic gift: the case of gifts shared in marriage.
- A collective charismatic gift: the case of institutes of consecrated life, of spiritual movements in the Church and other types of Christian associations. The collective or shared charism implies a specific mode of being, a specific mission and spirituality, a style of life and structure at the service of ecclesial communion and mission.

Participation in a collective charism facilitates the formation of the members of a determined group, produces a better cohesion of this same group, forms a more solid identity, gives the sense of belonging to a spiritual family, is a source of creativity and strength for responding eagerly to the signs of the times.

Collective charisms, as gifts of the Spirit, are a dynamic impulse which continually develop in harmony with the Body of Christ which is in constant growth. They are entrusted to human groups to be lived and interpreted, to be made fruitful and witnessed to in the service of ecclesial communion in the different cultural contexts of today's world.

Some of these collective charisms are shared, as a gift of the Spirit, by persons belonging to different states of life. From this comes their embodiment in forms of secular, priestly and religious life.

Every institute of consecrated life, priestly association, missionary regrouping, movement in the Church...has at its foundation a collective charism, which is an experience of the Father, by a free gift of the Spirit, to build up and serve the Body of Christ (cf. Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio* 11-12; *SCRIS, Mutuae Relationes* 12). The signs which characterize a true charism of a new foundation are the following:

- Contribution of something new to the spiritual life of the Church.
- Particular effectiveness which can even become an occasion of conflict.
- Constant verification of fidelity to the Lord and docility to the Spirit.
- Prudent attention to the signs of the times and diverse circumstances.
- A sense of belonging to the Church.
- Personal submission to the hierarchy.
- Daring in one's initiatives, constancy in commitment and humility in trials and contradiction.
- There is no authentic charism and innovation without interior suffering and the cross (Cf. *SCRIS, Mutuae Relationes* 12). This collective charism, as a founding charism or charism of the founders, is called "to be constantly lived, conserved, deepened and developed in harmony with the Body of Christ which is in constant growth" (Cf. *SCRIS, Mutuae Relationes* 11).

Collective charisms, besides being shared, can be lived and considered as charisms open to new forms of presence and expression in different historical circumstances.

Finally it should be understood that it is not the founder who communicates the charism to those who associate themselves with him or her. Only the Holy Spirit is the author of charisms in the Church and it is the Spirit alone who communicates them. The group around the founder is born when a certain number of persons become aware of their own vocational grace upon meeting the founder. They join him or her in order to fulfill their particular call. It can be said that the founder mediates the charism through the spiritual harmony that is established between the founder and the others.

All the charisms, as numerous and varied as they are, are united in the single mission of the group. The different charisms find their identity in their mutual relationship within the center of communion and mission of the group.

## 2. The Cistercian Charism

The Cistercian charism "has its origin in that monastic tradition of evangelical life that found expression in the Rule for Monasteries of Saint Benedict of Nursia" (CST I). The founders of Citeaux gave this tradition a "particular form", certain aspects of which were strongly defended by the monasteries of the Strict Observance (CST I).

Our Constitutions, above all in the first part on the Patrimony, are a good presentation of our charism. However, it should be recognized that they do not exhaust the life and the manifestation of this same charism. In order to have a more complete picture, it would be necessary to consult and take into consideration the other members of the Cistercian Family.

## 3. Collective Charism: Can it be Shared and Open?

From what we have already seen above, it is clear that the Cistercian charism is a collective one. However, can we also consider it as a charism that is open to being shared by others? What does

Cistercian history teach in this regard? Can our charism be shared with lay persons in the world? Can it open itself to secular forms, that is to say, to a structure that is not monastic in the juridical sense of the word?

#### A. An Open Charism

Do the 900 years since the foundation of Citeaux allow us to say that the Cistercian charism is an open charism? That is to say: has the Cistercian charism known different forms in the course of history?

#### The Nuns

The founders of Citeaux did not want a feminine branch. They felt that the form of life they wanted to live was not made for women. But the apparition of feminine groups of nuns and their insistent request for incorporation, association and recognition, led the nascent Order to open itself to this possibility. It is thus that the feminine expression of the Order appeared, which in certain cases like that of the Cistercian nuns of Montreuil did not have much that was feminine about it. Hermann of Tournai speaks to us about these nuns with a certain astonishment:

"They rush with all their strength toward the Kingdom of God, impatient to vanquish not only the world but also their sex. They have embraced violently, freely and spontaneously, the Order of Citeaux which many strong young men do not dare to do. Renouncing linen clothing and furs, they earn their living by working assiduously with their hands in silence; not only spinning and knitting - works proper to women - but also cultivating the fields, cutting wood with hatchet and sickle, tearing up brambles and weeds, imitating the entire life of the monks of Clairvaux, showing by their life the truth of this word of the Lord: "Everything is possible to those who believe" (De Miraculis Sanctae Mariae Laudunensis, PL 156 col. 1001-1002).The Lay Brothers

No one has ever doubted that the lay brothers have shared the Cistercian charism since the beginning. However, the lay brothers were not monks and very often they did not live within the monastery. There is no doubt that the presence of the lay brothers was an enrichment of our charism and in no way an impoverishment of it. Thus with the lay brothers there appeared very early in our history a new form of our charism. The same can be said about the "family brothers" who were present in our monasteries from the beginning.

The text of the Exordium Parvum on the lay brothers is well known: "They thus decided, with the permission of their bishop, to receive lay brothers, who would keep their beards and be treated like themselves during their life and at their death, with the exception of not having the status of monks" (Exordium Parvum 15:10). In one of the Statutes of the first General Chapters, we read:

"The work of the granges ought to be done by the lay brothers and day laborers. With the permission of the Bishops, we receive lay brothers, as family brothers and as coadjutors, under our care in the same way as the monks, and we consider them as brothers and sharers of our goods, both spiritual

and material, just like the monks" (So called Collection of 1134; Canivez I:14; cf. Chapter 20 at the end of the Summa Carta Caritatis).The Military Orders

In a certain manner, with the advent of the military Orders, another Cistercian face appeared. The "spirit" that animated the Knights of the Temple was not foreign to the charism of Citeaux: if Citeaux had given the "New Monastery", the Templars were thus, according to St. Bernard, the "New Combatants Militia", that is, a new form of monasticism and a new form of knighthood.

This is even more true of the Order of Calatrava. In 1164, Abbot Gilbert of Citeaux and the co-abbots meeting in General Chapter, in response to Don Garcia, head of Calatrava, wrote thus:

"As for what you have humbly asked, i.e.: to have a share in the communion of goods of our Order, we willingly consent, not just as though you were family brothers, but as real brothers."The Chapter of 1164 left in the hands of the Abbot of Scala Dei, with the counsel of his filiations in Spain, the task of determining the "form of life" that should be observed in the Order of Calatrava (Bullarium Ordinis Militiae de Calatrava, Madrid, A. Maren, 1761, pp. 3-4). Later in 1187, Calatrava will be fully incorporated into Citeaux as a filiation of Morimond.

In practice, the knights of Calatrava were never Cistercian monks in the strict sense. One could say that they constituted a third class of persons, together with the monks and the lay brothers. It should be noted that Pope Eugene IV, in 1440, substituted the vow of chastity for the vow of conjugal chastity in particular cases.

### The Cistercian Family

There exist at present, three great branches on the Cistercian tree. Using another image, we could speak of the Cistercian Family composed of: the Order of Citeaux (OC), the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (OCSO) and the autonomous Congregation of St. Bernard, associated to the OCSO. To these three groups, we could also add the Order of Bernardine Nuns of Esquermes and the Bernardines of Oudenaarde. Can we doubt the Cistercian identity of certain of these communities just because they are engaged in teaching or in other forms of the apostolate compatible with monastic life?

In conclusion, our long history shows us that the Cistercian charism was open to different forms along the way. Our charism has thus been an open charism and, in a certain sense, a shared charism. It is also true that the various forms that our charism has known have been and are still monastic forms, with the exception of the military Orders and the lay brothers, from a canonical point of view.B. A Shared Charism

Is it possible to conceive of the Cistercian charism as a charism shared with lay persons in the world, thus making room for a secular Cistercian form?

Let us say, first of all, that our charism, like all charisms, is a gift of the Spirit to build up the Church as the Body of Christ. No one possesses the Cistercian charism as private property. Our charism

basically belongs to the Church. The Spirit can share it with whomever He wants, in whatever measure and in whatever form.

We Cistercians have given an historical monastic form to this particular gift of the Spirit. This monastic form is an integral part of the original charism from the beginning. However, that does not prevent the charism from being shared with the lay brothers, the family brothers and the knights of the military Orders, as we have seen.

Can the fact that lay people of today feel drawn by the Cistercian charism and recognize themselves in it be understood as a sign that the Spirit wants to share it with them so that the Cistercian charism receive a secular form at this moment of our history?

If the answer to this question is affirmative, a whole series of questions arises: Is there place for mutual recognition and complementarity? Can we speak of mutual charismatic association? Is it true that identity exists only in relationship? What do we have to share that is of value? What are the principal dangers that all this entails?

#### 4. Tentative Answers

It is not for me alone to answer the questions raised here. The answers must be found in a common search, in the light of the Holy Spirit, and in an atmosphere of discernment of what the Lord of History is saying today to his Church.

Nevertheless, in order to encourage this search, while remaining open to different and even contrary opinions, allow me to give a preview here of several elements contained in any reply.

##### A. A Charism Shared with Lay People?

The monastic nature of our Order (CST 2) does not prevent several elements of its spirituality (CST 3) from being shared with lay people in the world. In fact, the Rule of St. Benedict was followed for centuries by oblates who lived outside of the monasteries. Various monasteries of the Order of Citeaux belonging to different Congregations have lay oblates living in the world.

Separation from the world (CST 29), a particular characteristic of our monastic life, should not make us forget that, as members of the Church, our monastic life has "an authentic secular dimension" which sinks its roots in the mystery of the Word Incarnate. It is certain that all the members of the Church participate in its secular dimension, but in different ways. The "secular character" of the lay faithful is different and complementary to the secular dimension of monks and nuns (Christifideles laici 15).

Our monastic zeal for "the growth of the Kingdom of God and the salvation of the whole human race" (CST 31) also includes "the restoration of the entire temporal order" (Christifideles laici 15). Our hidden apostolic fruitfulness (CST 3:4) finds a profound harmony with and is completed by the vocation of the faithful laity "called by God to work as it were from within for the sanctification of the world, as a leaven, by the exercise of their particular tasks [...]" (Christifideles laici 15).

Our mission to announce the Gospel by our contemplative presence (CST 68.1) is not exclusive and does not exclude others. On the contrary, it allows for the complementarity of the contemplative presence of lay people immersed in the heart of the world. The particular mission of our charism is not exhausted by our own way of living it. The involvement of the laity in our charism and mission will make its reality and usefulness more evident.

In practice, the mystery of the Church-communion implies an exchange of spiritual gifts at the service of the new evangelization.

Consequently, responding to the question about sharing our charism, I believe that the fact that lay people today feel attracted to the Cistercian charism and recognize themselves in it, can be understood as a sign that the Spirit also desires to share it with them, so that the charism receives an added secular form at this moment of our history.

#### B. Mutual Recognition?

In the course of history, lay persons associated in different ways to religious institutes kept a certain relationship of dependence on them. This has changed recently. In numerous cases, the request of lay people to participate in the charism of an institute has come from the fact that they feel actually in possession of the charism. It would seem that the experience of Peter in the house of Cornelius is repeating itself, though on another level: "Could anyone refuse the water of baptism to these people, now that they have received the Holy Spirit? [...] I realized then that God was giving them the identical gift he gave to us...and who was I to stand in God's way?" (Acts 10:47; 11:17).

Something similar is happening among us. In our case, when the Order is recognized as historically in possession of the Cistercian charism and is questioned about its presence, we must make a discernment on the similarity and authenticity of the charism received by our lay interlocutors.

This also implies an openness on our part to allow ourselves to be discerned concerning the fidelity of our lives to our Constitutions. this discernment also concerns our response to contemporary challenges and the signs of the times.

In the two ways just indicated, it seems to me that we can speak of a mutual charismatic recognition: being recognized, we recognize others in order to be recognized again.

#### C. A Charismatic Association?

Since the VIIth century, monasticism has been influenced by a certain style of lay life growing up around it, which led to the "monastic family", in a broad sense. One can say the same about the Canons Regular and the Mendicants. We know that around the Mendicants were born the second orders (that is, the consecrated life for women), the institution of penitents and the third orders for the laity.

More recently, various kinds of groups have appeared of religious Congregations and Societies of Apostolic life who are nourished by the spirit and who participate in their mission. These groups have received a wide variety of names: collaborators, partners, associates, affiliates, colleagues, ....

Today, in the context of renewal of the laity and new lay movements, one finds the phenomenon of lay people who, individually or in groups, search for a kind of link with institutes of consecrated life. It seems to me that it is correct and acceptable to give the name of charismatic association to this phenomenon. The theology of the Church as a living communion, in which all vocational charisms are of the same origin and have the same end, is the adequate frame of reference which justifies this name.

Perhaps in a few years, it will be out of style to speak of charismatic associations. The Spirit breathes where he wills, but his work is always a work of communion. Will we see the day when we will speak of "charismatic communion" to refer to the communion between monks/nuns and lay people in the same charism?

#### D. Is Identity in Relationship?

In the light of all the above, it is clear that today it is neither valid nor appropriate to define vocational identity from a static and closed perspective. Identity in the different ways of life within the People of God emerges from the dialectic process of Church life. The distinction of each charism is established in a context of convergence-divergence, communion-separation.

Consequently, I do not hesitate to affirm the following: our Cistercian identity is a reality that allows us to identify ourselves by what distinguishes us within a dynamic of relationships and not of juxtapositions and exclusions.

A clearly defined identity will keep monks from playing at being seculars and these latter from playing at being monks. It will respect the vocations and ways of life proper to each.

#### E. What can we share?

The question is a valid one. In general, it seems to me that a start in answering this question should keep in mind the following components of our charism:

- The following of Jesus: those aspects of the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, which are given to us as the foundation and the model to follow according to our charism.
- Insertion into the Church: a specific way of life, of identification with the Church and of being at the service of the local Churches.
- A concrete spirituality and mission: which when shared permit the formation of a single religious family.

To arrive at this triple and fundamental objective, we should help the lay people drawn by our charism to do a secular re-reading of this charism. An initial confrontation with our Constitutions can help in this regard. The Cistercian spiritual Masters teach everyone to find counsels and directives for the spiritual life in the Rule of St. Benedict. The Benedictine Rule offers a rich doctrine on humility, obedience, silence and the fear and love of God. Our Fathers also developed many aspects of life in

the Spirit which are hardly found in St. Benedict, for example: the doctrine of the image and likeness of God, the necessity of self-knowledge to come to the knowledge of God, the journey of the soul toward God, the doctrine on love of the brothers/sisters and of God, the mystical experience,....

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote "with the aim of building up" (SC 27.1). We can ask ourselves: build up what and whom? The answer seems to me to be this: to build up the Christian and Cistercian life, in the cloister and outside the cloister.

We thus have much to offer and to share. And also to receive: the experience of our charism as lived by the laity is called to enrich the monastic experience of this same charism. Also, as Christifideles Laici 61 says so well:

"In their turn, the faithful laity themselves can and should help priests and religious in their spiritual and pastoral path."F. What are the Dangers?

In the face of danger there are only two possibilities: to flee or to confront. The first is already a defeat, the second can be an opportunity for victory. I am aware that the success of charismatic associations is a gift which is difficult to obtain. It seems to me that the three principal problems to solve are:

- In the order of connection with the Order: how to establish and organize an adequate link and equality.
- In the order of identities: how to safeguard the indispensable differences and autonomies.
- In the order of formation: how to establish formation programs without falling into an apostolic activity foreign to our life.Indeed, it is not easy to establish connections that unite without merging. Quite the contrary, they should unite by differentiating, as true love does. Neither is it easy to form people effectively without a serious formation program.

In spite of the risks, I think it is important to be open to the possible creation of charismatic associations with seculars or with lay people consecrated as individuals or as groups. In the last analysis it is a question of discerning all this and retaining what is good.

In order to discern, we need to have criteria. For what concerns the local monastic community, I suggest the following criteria:

- A clear monastic identity, assimilated and lived, with a certain ability to communicate this identity.
- Intensity of life in the Spirit which can stimulate and encourage lay people to live the Cistercian charism without damaging their own secular vocation.
- The capacity to help discover and guide new ways of bringing to life the Cistercian charism in the heart of society.

Bernardo Olivera