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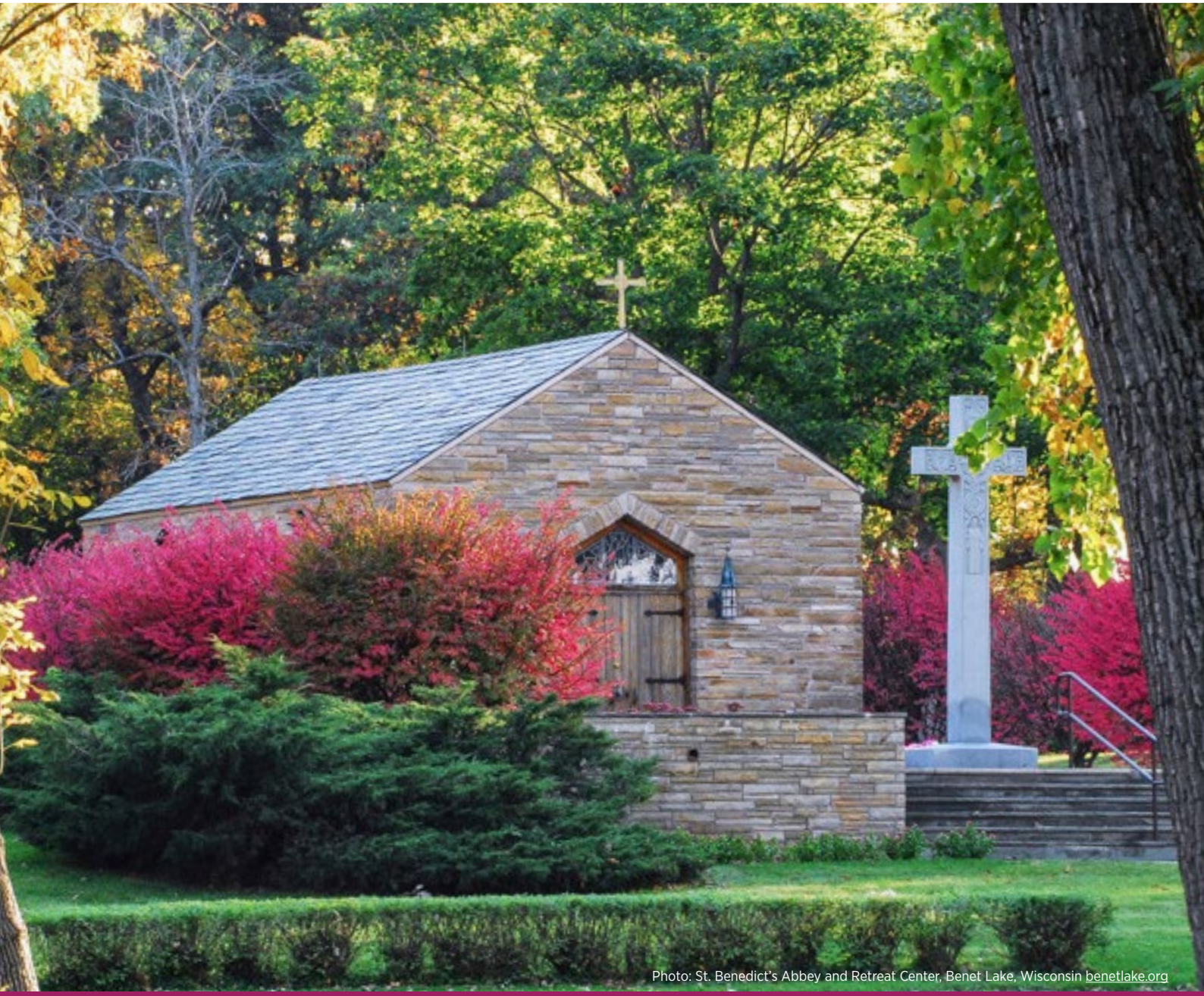


Photo: St. Benedict's Abbey and Retreat Center, Benet Lake, Wisconsin benetlake.org

The Religious Formation Conference (RFC) is a national Roman Catholic organization serving religious institutes of women and men with programs and services for those in the ministry of initial and lifelong formation, and general congregational membership.

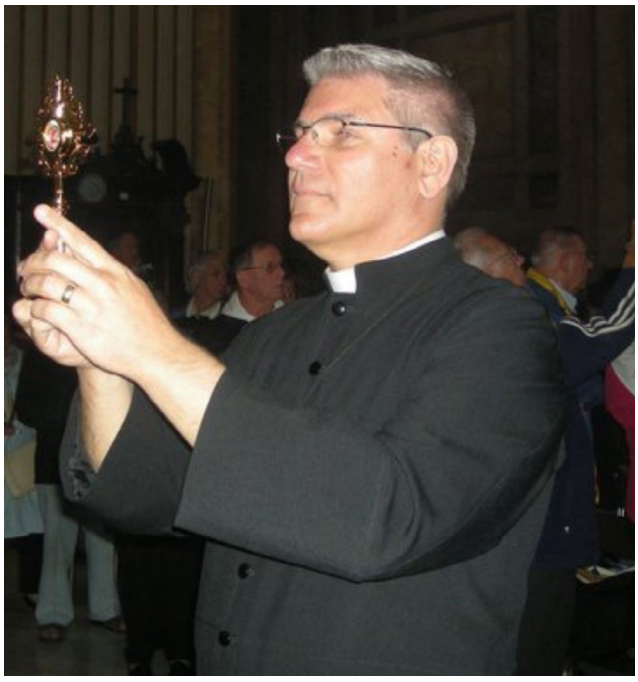
Charism: The Gift that Keeps on Giving

By Sister Ellen Dauwer, SC

Keynote given at the Religious Brothers Conference assembly in July 2024

What is the charism of religious life? Is there a charism (common charism) of religious life? In our attempts to answer, I believe that we sometimes use what I call a "reductionist" method: one that seeks to find something common among our congregations' charisms. It is like finding the least common denominator.

In this article, based on a recent keynote address I shared at the annual assembly of the Religious Brothers Conference, I would like to turn these attempts to discern the charism of religious life on their head by taking a more top-down approach rather than a bottom-up, "reductionist" one. In doing so we will begin with a long loving look at prophecy, followed by an exploration of charism. Then I will bring these two together to reflect on the charism of prophetic witness of religious life in charism families.



Br. Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

Religious Life as a Prophetic Life Form in the Church

What does it mean to be a prophet? Who are the prophets of the past and of the present? How might we describe them?

While there are not enough pages in this publication to describe fully who a prophet is and what a prophet does, I would like to use three key descriptors for this exploration. First, a prophet is called by God. Prophets who were self-designated were called "false prophets" in the Old Testament. A prophet never chooses this role, but rather is called by God, sometimes in a singular, dramatic fashion; other times the call might gradually evolve over time. Second, a prophet is integrally a part of his/her people or society. He/she does not live alone in the desert or on an island, but rather is fully integrated into his/her time and place. This implies also that the prophet is cognizant of the needs of his/her society, painfully aware of them. Finally, a prophet interprets the current reality in light of God's dream for the people. He/she sees the needs of society, is well familiar with God's dream (or the Reign of God), and points to the gaps between the two.

Let's use these three descriptors and apply them first to some prophets of the Old and New Testaments. Moses is often considered the greatest of all prophets. We are familiar with his call story as recounted in Exodus 3 in which God speaks to Moses through a burning bush. While he did not grow up among his own people, his identification with them is first manifested in his murder of an Egyptian who mistreated a Hebrew slave (Ex 2:11-12). He recognizes the slavery of his people and is

Prophets are good listeners; they listen deeply to the voice of God. They are also see-ers who read closely the signs of the times. They bring what they hear and see together and focus the Word of God in their time and place, responding to unmet needs, often in innovative ways.

called to lead them to freedom and to faithfulness to God's covenant.

Hosea is another prophet of the Old Testament, one of the 12 minor prophets. He lived in the 8th century BCE in the Northern Kingdom of Israel until its fall in 721 BCE. While his call story is not explicitly recounted in the writing attributed to him, his God-given task is to shed light on the idolatry and false worship of his people and to bring them to faithful relationship with God. This is the role of most of the Old Testament prophets: to call the people to faithfulness to the covenant that God made with them.

Jesus, too, is called a prophet. He lived in first century CE Palestine under Roman occupation, in the Herodian kingdom of the Roman empire. At his baptism, Jesus heard the voice of God proclaim, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:17). From this moment of call, Jesus embarked on his ministry in which he called people to a change of heart, spoke of and shared the inclusive love of God, reached out to those at the margins of society, and preached the reign of God.

Anna and Simeon are favorite figures of mine in the New Testament. Anna is described as a prophetess from the Tribe of Asher, a widow of 84 years who engaged in prayer and fasting and never left the Temple. She proclaimed God's dream for all as she "spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem." (Lk 2:38) Simeon was a just and devout old man from Jerusalem who was promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Christ of God. His beautiful canticle, that we often sing in Evening Prayer, speaks of God's dream for all people (both Jews and Gentiles). (Lk 2: 29-32)

Moses, Hosea, Jesus, and Anna and Simeon clearly fit the threefold description of prophet that I proposed above. What about founders of our congregations? Might they be prophets? My guess is that most of us do not call them as such, though we might describe their lives and words as prophetic. Let's look at a few, and see if they might rightly be called prophets.

My congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, uses an adapted version of the rule of St. Vincent de Paul. Vincent (1581-1660), a peasant from southern France, later lived in Paris at a time of war, disease, and poverty. In 1617, he experienced God's call through ministering at the bedside of a peasant. With a continual focus on "what must be done," he strove to meet the needs of the poor and to reform the clergy. He founded the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians), the Ladies of Charity, and many charitable organizations. Working alongside him was St. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), who was born to a prominent family in northern France. Her moment of illumination came at Pentecost, 1623 when she was reassured that she would make vows and be in a small community. After her husband died, she met Vincent de Paul. She served the sick and poor in their homes, established the Hotel Dieu in Paris, and founded the Daughters of Charity. Together, Vincent and Louise were instrumental in breaking free from the monastic form of religious life and laying foundations for the apostolic era.

St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917), whose life and mission has become popularized through the recent movie, Cabrini, was born in northern Italy. Poor health prevented her from entering religious life. Not to be deterred, she founded the Missionary Sisters of the

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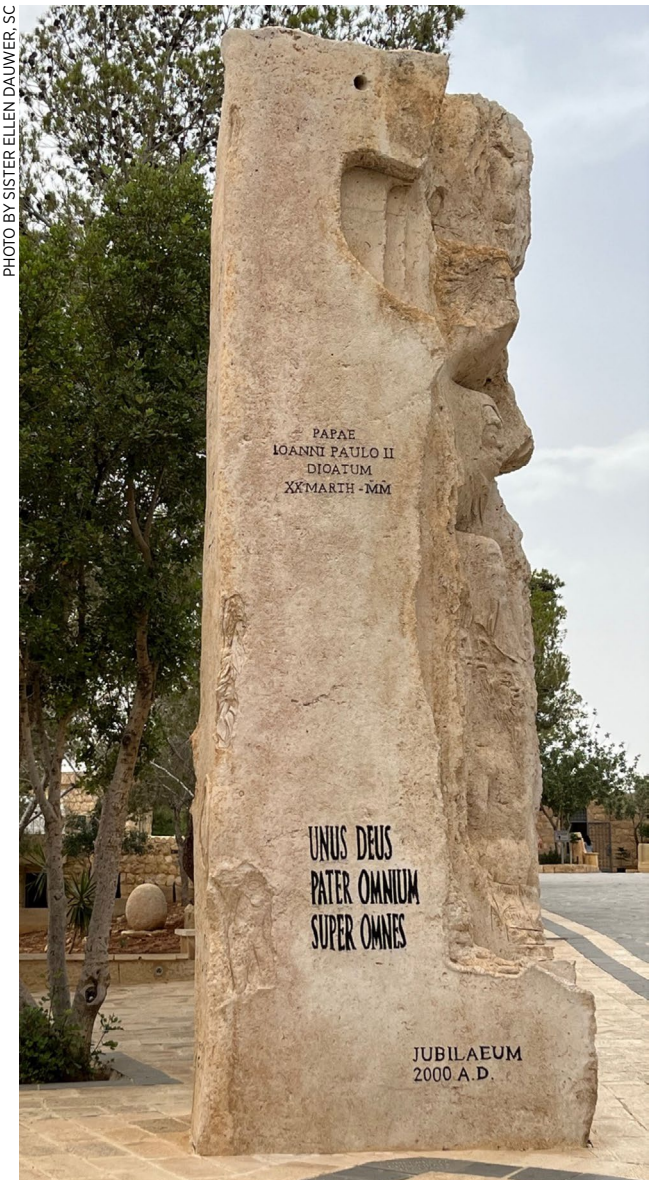


At Mt. Nemo in Jordan, where Moses viewed the promised land from a distance.

Sacred Heart of Jesus to care for orphans as well as serve educational needs. Sent by the Pope to minister to Italian immigrants in New York, she eventually established 67 missionary institutes throughout the United States.

A final example is St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the founder of my congregation, who was born in 1774 in New York City shortly before the American Revolution. Established within New York society, she helped to found the Society of the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. She responded to the call of God within her and converted to Catholicism in 1803 following the death of her husband. Continuing to discern God's will, she founded the first American congregation of women in Emmitsburg, Maryland, to address the unmet educational needs of Catholics, both rich and poor. She also established the first orphanage in Philadelphia in 1814. Three years later, she sent sisters to New York, her native city, to establish an orphanage there.

Consider the founder(s) of your congregation. What was his/her story of call? How was he/she embedded in the society of the time and place? How did he/she respond to the needs of society in light of God's dream for all? Might all these founders, those described above, and all we each bring to mind, be considered prophets?

Pope Francis describes a prophet as one who "...helps others read the present under the action of the Holy Spirit...who helps to understand God's plans and conform to them. In other words, the prophet is the one who shows Jesus to others, who bears witness to him, who helps live today and build the future according to his designs." (Angelus, July 2, 2023) For Pope Francis, a prophet is one "...demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth, and to proclaim how the Kingdom of God will be in its perfection." (Interview with Pope Francis, Sept. 21, 2013)

A prophetic life requires a life of prayer, freedom, and authenticity. Prayer is fundamental to hear the voice of God, converse (recall the conversations that Moses often had with God), and respond. Freedom enables the prophet to follow God's call without impediment. In religious life the vow of poverty frees one to see needs and respond. Finally, authenticity means a coherence between one's words and deeds; colloquially we say that one walks the walk and talks the talk.

We see these three characteristics of the prophet in Jesus who took extended time f or prayer, "had nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20), and had a close coherence between his words and deeds. I believe we can see the three in the lives of our founders as well: the importance of prayer in their lives, a freedom from attachments, and authenticity in their lives and messages.

Let's take the descriptions of *prophet* that we have used above, that clearly apply to figures in the Old and New Testaments as well as to our founders, and ask how they might apply to our congregations. First, we know well the primacy of prayer in the lives of our members both personally and communally. Second, we see the integral role of evangelical poverty in the vow of poverty in religious life. Third, there are many examples of individual and corporate witness that congregations demonstrate through sponsorship, corporate stands, and ministries.

Our founders, who lived prophetic lives, were joined throughout the ages by many who were also called by God to this way of life. The congregations that they founded are prophetic and extend prophetic witness. This is the charism of religious life.

Prophetic Witness as the Charism of Religious Life

Let's explore more deeply the meaning of charism. The word derives from the Greek charisma that means gift or favor granted by God. Another meaning, often seen in the writings of Paul, is a spiritual gift that enables one to perform an office or function in the Church. Charism is a gift of the Spirit, given for the good of the community and its works, not to the individual. It often makes God present in bold and tangible ways.

Note that these descriptions need not only apply to religious congregations; charisms are given to the entire Church. We will be applying them to religious life but will also reach out broadly to charism families and other collaborators.

Other descriptions for charism include particular facets of the likeness of God, the energy of God, freedom, something new and fresh, and how the Kingdom of God will be in its perfection. Perhaps you have others to add.

Saint Paul provided some inspiring ways of understanding charism. His words were foundational for theologians at Vatican II

Religious congregations give corporate expression to the charism originally given by the Spirit to the founder(s).

who used them to uncover and develop this important gift and function in the Church.

"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to each of us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly." (Rom 12:6)

"And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." (Eph 4:11-12)

"Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord…But to teach one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor 12: 4-5, 7)

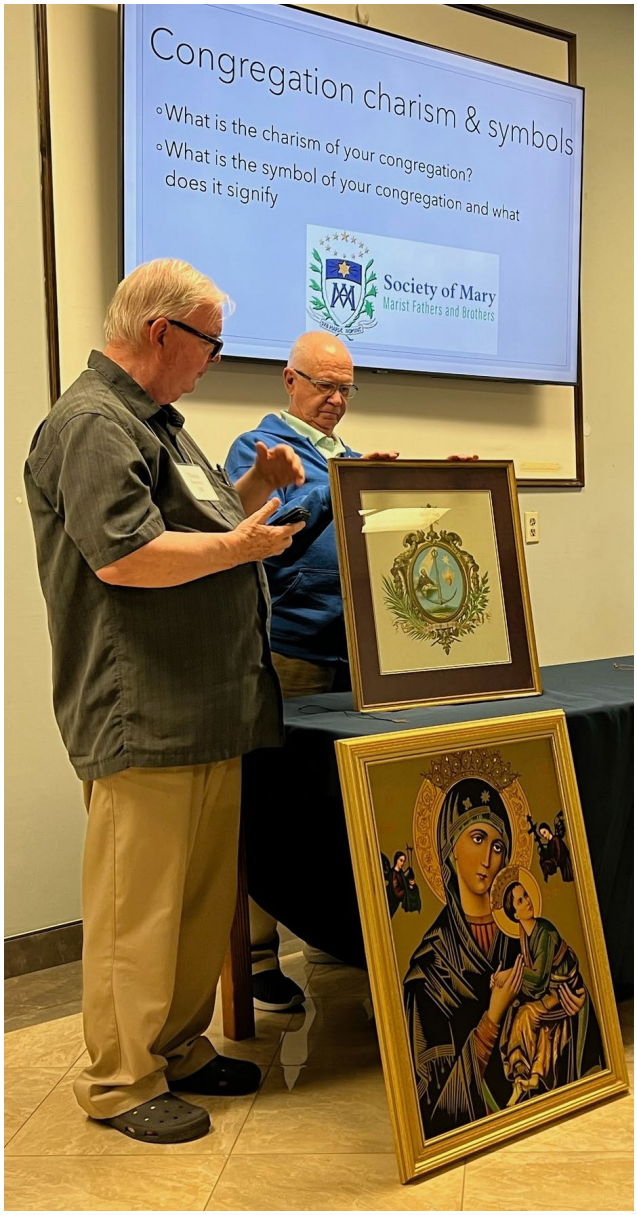
Note the references to the common good (good of the community), the variety of gifts, the responsibility to share gifts, the use of gifts for ministry, and the Spirit as the source.

Religious congregations give corporate expression to the charism originally given by the Spirit to the founder(s). This treasure has been beautifully described in various ways: as the deep story of a congregation, as the life and energy of God that pulses through a group. For their part, members are responsible to steward the charism, handing it down to new generations, often reinterpreting it through changing times and needs. Stewarding, I venture to say, can sometimes be understood as holding close for safe keeping, but I believe it calls us to hold our charisms without grasping, with open hands and outstretched arms.

While charism is part of the language of the Church today, it was seldom used prior to

Vatican II. Religious life was often described as a "state of perfection" with a focus on apostolic works. Charisms were viewed as extraordinary and rare gifts. It was Cardinal Suenens and others who opened up St. Paul's use of charisma, thus taking it down from its pedestal and developing new ways of understanding it as gift given broadly to the whole Church.

In *Lumen Gentium* we hear of the variety of gifts, given by the Spirit, for the purpose of ministry and for the good of all: "It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God... but, 'allotting his graces to everyone as He wills' He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: 'The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit.' These charisms, whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church." (LG 12)



Sharing charism symbols

In addition to describing charism broadly for all people, Vatican II also applied it specifically to religious life and clarified its role in the Church: "From the point of view of the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church, the religious state of life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states. But, rather, the faithful of Christ are called by God from both of these states of life so that they might enjoy this particular gift in the life of the Church and thus each in one's own way, may be of some advantage to the salvific mission of the Church." (LG 43) The document continues: "...the spiritual life of these people should then be devoted to the welfare of the whole Church...to implant and strengthen the Kingdom of Christ in souls and to extend that Kingdom to every clime. This duty is to be undertaken to the extent of their capacities and in keeping with the proper type of their own vocation. This can be realized through prayer or active works of the apostolate. It is for this reason that the Church preserves and fosters the special character of her various religious institutes." (LG 44)

In *Evangelica Testificatio,* the apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Paul in 1971 on the renewal of religious life according to the teachings of Vatican II, its charismatic nature is more fully described: "Only in this way will you be able to reawaken hearts to truth and to divine love in accordance with the charisms of your founders who were raised up by God within His Church. Thus the Council rightly insists on the obligation of religious to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their

There is much we have in common as religious: vows, ministry, community, and prayer; each with its own forms of expression. Intercongregationality does not mean a boiling down or reduction of charisms into a generic one. Rather, it is a complementarity of gifts from the same Spirit for a common purpose in the Church: prophetic witness. Might this be our call to the future: to discern together what we hold in common, the call that we embody in our lives and in our works?

evangelical intentions and to the example of their sanctity. In this it finds one of the principles for the present renewal and one of the most secure criteria for judging what each institute should undertake. In reality, the charism of the religious life, far from being an impulse born of flesh and blood or one derived from a mentality which conforms itself to the modern world, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work within the Church." (ET 11)

The work of renewal of religious life referred to in the above passage had begun a decade of two prior to Vatican II, initiated by Pope Pius XII in the 1950s. It involved the return/rediscovery of the stories of founders and original charism, creation of stronger links between charism and the mission of the Church and its social teachings, greater engagement in the modern world, increased attention to professional education, modification of habits, and many other types of modernization and adaptation of religious life. Integral to renewal were special general chapters and rewriting of congregational documents.

To review before stepping ahead, we began by asking what a prophet is and what are key characteristics of a prophet. We saw examples in Old and New Testament prophets and then applied the descriptions to founders of religious congregations as well as to religious life broadly. We concluded that, while seldom described as such, founders clearly responded to God's call to bear prophetic witness and established congregations that continue their work, albeit in new centuries and in response to changing needs. We then looked more closely at this call and gift given to founders: charism, a term that sometimes eludes definition. We reflected on Paul's use of charisma and then examined the rediscovery of charism at Vatican II, both for the Church broadly and for religious life specifically. Let's now apply this concept of prophetic witness as the charism of religious life now and into the future.

Charism Families

A primary prophetic task is to point to the gaps between current reality and God's dream for the world. Prophets are focused on both the concrete needs of a particular time and place as well as on the Reign of God. This involves standing at the gap or the intersection between the two, often at the margins of society, places of greatest need. In these gaps and marginal spaces prophets ask what is needed to bring God's dream closer to reality. Often this alternative reality or dream is an innovative, creative, and fresh gift of the Spirit: an expression of charism.

Today, some decades following Vatican II, we have come to see that charism is generously bestowed by the Spirit on many. Founders of religious congregations were called to bear prophetic witness to the needs of people of their time and place. They were gifted by the Spirit for this task with a special gift, charism. They gathered others around them to break open the gift and to respond to overwhelming needs. Over the decades and centuries, thousands

have followed in their footsteps, reinterpreting the charism for changing times and needs. Often, they form a charism family.

Some founders started several congregations. Other times, multiple groups were formed that follow the same or adapted founding rule. These congregations may be joined together as a federation of both women's and men's congregations that share a rule and/or charism. Examples are the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Benedictines.

For decades religious congregations have collaborated with each other: in ministry, formation, retirement, social justice, and community.

Prior to the evolution of apostolic religious life, monastic orders shared their charism with laity to live it out in the world. This led to the formation of third orders and oblates, the roots of today's lay associates. They are non-vowed persons who share in the spirituality and mission of a religious congregation and express the charism through their life commitments and careers.

The core of a charism family, then, may include federations and extend to lay associates. These concentric circles of charism can reach more broadly to incorporate many other lay groups such as associations and volunteer groups. For example, the Vincentian Family (those who share in the charism of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac), consists of federations of religious orders as well as individual orders that follow the rule of St. Vincent including the Sisters and Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians), the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Ladies of Charity, the Miraculous Medal Association, the National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, the Missionary Cenacle Family, Vincentian universities, Vincentian Youth and Volunteers, and other groups and resources. If we include sponsor and cosponsor groups as well as ministry partners and other collaborators, the circles expand even more. The bottom line is that there are myriad ways to express and extend a charism. We discover over and over that the gift cannot be contained, for it is continually expanding to reach those in need.

Charism families, traditionally grouped around a shared founder or rule, may also be formed around a common spirituality or mission. For example, in the recent national gathering of religious brothers, those who shared a missionary identity found commonality when discussing charism in small groups. Congregations and their lay partners with particular devotion to the Sacred Heart, Precious Blood, or the Immaculate Heart of Mary are only some examples of existent or potential charism families. Creativity in the Spirit abounds with new possibilities!

For decades religious congregations have collaborated with each other: in ministry, formation, retirement, social justice, and community. I participated in intercommunity formation over 40 years ago. Increasingly these efforts are not mere side-by-side projects; they are the emergence of intercongregationality.

I venture to say that we have been faithful to the imperatives of Vatican II to rediscover our charisms and founding stories. We have done it well, despite the challenges, and have taught the following generations well. New members attest to this with their articulate descriptions of their congregational charisms and lively stories of their founders. Might we be called now to discern less about what differentiates us and more about what we share and have in common, without denying our unique gifts? Could this be one of the ways in which apostolic religious life will evolve in the future: a mutual discernment of the call and response to prophetic witness?

It is no coincidence that we ask these questions in a time of synodality in the Church, one that invites us to walk and journey together. Let us then, in synodal ways, continue to discern

what it means to live apostolic religious life together: to be attentive to the call of the Spirit, the needs of the people, and the signs of the times; to embrace and embody the call to prophetic witness as the charism of religious life; and to call all to live fully God's dream for the world.

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