

The Church: Institutions and Charisms

AS ARCHBISHOP RYLKO EXPLAINS, THE CHURCH SEES THE NEED TODAY FOR A THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTION ON THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE GIFTS THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT CONTINUES TO POUR OUT SO ABUNDANTLY...

The “ecclesial maturity” that John Paul II has wished for the movements and new communities supposes, from their side, a permanent deepening of their own identity and requires that they repeatedly ask themselves: ‘who are we in the Church today?’. Reflecting in this way is a humble effort to better understand God’s plan in this precise moment of the history of salvation, and it is a way of giving a reply that is always more generous and adapted, in the service of the Church’s mission.

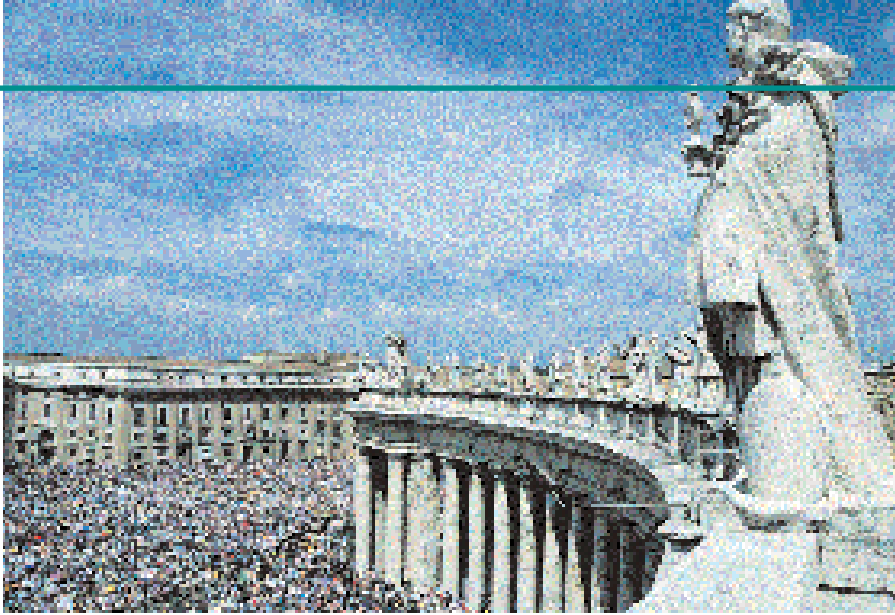
I would like to dwell briefly with you on the ‘genius of this place’ where our Symposium is taking place: Assisi, the city of Saint Francis. In his time, the Church was in a quite considerable crisis. In a dream, Pope Innocent III saw the Lateran Basilica, the Pope’s cathedral, falling down and some unknown person trying to hold it up. The Pope associated this strange vision with the ‘Poverello’ in Assisi. Cardinal Ratzinger comments this episode saying: “He (Innocent III), the great politician, in this unknown figure so apart from politics but living the Gospel in a radical way, recognised the strength capable of giving to the Church what his own political prowess could not provide. Beyond all questions of political capability or administrative strategy, the Church needed to renew itself charismatically from within, to rekindle the flame of faith”. We might say that this is a

classic example of the structural relationship between institution and charism in the life of the Church, and of their profound symbiosis, so particularly visible when the Church is faced with times of challenge. Cardinal Ratzinger continues: “Today, as in other times, the Church continues to hope that where, through habit or routine, things are seen to be getting worn out and there is a risk of the ship sinking, the Holy Spirit brings forth a renewal. A renewal that no one had planned, but that is encouraged by people enlightened by grace and who allow the Gospel to bear fruit. Francis was one such man...”

.... The Church is a people gathered together by the Father, thanks to the Son, in the Holy Spirit (cf. Lumen Gentium) . In this Trinitarian context, Vatican Council II particularly highlighted the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. “The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). In them he prays and bears witness to their adoptive sonship (cf. Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15-16 and 26). Guiding the Church in the way of all truth (cf. Jn. 16:13) and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, he bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and he adorns her with his fruits (cf. Eph. 4:11-12; 1Cor. 12:4; Gal.

5:22)”. We should first of all note that the Council, as this essential text shows, considers the hierarchy of charisms, that flow from that single source who is the Holy Spirit, as itself being a charism. The whole Church, in fact, is charismatic. This is something extremely important.

It is precisely from within this pneumatological ecclesiology that the Council’s renewed doctrine on the charisms as such, flows. In Lumen Gentium we read as follows: “It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the People, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church. As it is written, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for the profit of all’ (1 Cor. 12:7). Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church”. In teaching this the Council took away the suspicions and doubts that had hung over the charisms, marking a turning point that meant not only an openness to,



Pentecost 1998: ecclesial movements and new communities gathered on Saint Peter's Square, at the invitation of John Paul II.

but also a decisive valorisation of the charismatic dimension of the Church. This also marked a clear return to the authentic biblical doctrine on the gifts of the Spirit, with regards to which the ecclesial community reaffirmed its attention and its trust.

In this way, discussion on the charisms went from the level of the highest mystical experience – I mean something extraordinary – to the level of ordinary Christian life, and for lay people in particular. This is a process in which the ecclesial movements and new communities, particularly Catholic Charismatic Renewal, have an important role.

In his Magisterium and in his pastoral practice, John Paul II has reserved a special place for Vatican Council II's doctrine on the charismatic dimension of the Church. He underlines the different ways in which "the development of the ecclesial community does not depend merely on the institution of ministries and sacraments, but also on the unexpected and free gifts of the Spirit, who in his work goes beyond ordinary channels. The charism of each person should be respected and encouraged for the good of the Body" .

The decisive moment in the recognition of the gifts of the Spirit is the verification of their authenticity... The Council gives an important indication on this point: "Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts, through their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good (cf. 1 Th. 5:12 and 19-21) . To facilitate the verification of charismatic gifts, be it by Church authorities or in the spiritual direction of persons and communities, the

Pope has defined four fundamental criteria:

- Being in accordance with the faith of the Church in Jesus Christ (1 Co. 12:3). A gift of the Holy Spirit cannot be contrary to the faith that this same Spirit inspires to the Church as a whole.

- The presence of the 'fruits of the Spirit': love, joy, peace (Gal. 5:22). If a charism provokes disquiet and confusion this means that either it is not authentic or it is being lived in an inappropriate way. In the same way, without love even the most extraordinary charisms are not of the slightest use.

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John Paul II

- Being in harmony with Church authority and accepting the decisions it makes. Someone authentically charismatic can be recognised by his true openness to the Pastors of the Church. A charism cannot provoke rebellion or a breakdown in unity.

- The use of charisms in the Church as community should take place according to the rule "that everything happen for the building up of the Church"(1 Co. 14:26).

Charisms are welcomed when they

contribute constructively to the life of the community: a life of communion with God and fraternal communion. According to the Pope, the gift of prophecy is particularly given for 'the building up of the Church', destined to promote the development or even the reform of the ecclesial community (Ecclesia semper reformanda). In this perspective, healthy criticism, inspired by the desire to move forward in truth and love, is not opposed to the principle of unity and communion.

In this process of discerning charisms, time is a determining factor. It is not rare that we forget how much the best way of verifying a gift is the history of the gift itself. One recognises a tree by its fruits. It is up to the person who has the responsibility of making a decision to recognise, as Luigi Sartori says: "the need to trust, to give freedom the space it requires, to avoid hasty decisions that might suffocate or extinguish gifts, using as pretext the need to guarantee their authenticity" .

The Pope never ceases to state, in different ways, that the movements are a gift of the Spirit and a reason for hope, both for the Church and the world. On this point he has no hesitation in speaking of the 'co-essentiality between the institutional and charismatic dimensions'. John Paul II affirms that the charismatic dimension is not an accessory or decorative element but that it is strictly linked to the institutional dimension, and that it is a structural element of the Church's identity.

"There is no opposition between charism and institution, because it is the same Spirit who animates the Church, through a multitude of charisms. Spiritual gifts are also useful in exercising ministries...in this sense we can say that the Church is a community of charisms" .

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(extracts from a paper given at a Symposium in Assisi, March 2004, on "The Participation of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities in the Mission of the Church", organised by the Emmanuel Community).

¹ J.Ratzinger, *God and the World, Being Christian in the Third Millennium*, 2001.

² *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, no.4*

³ *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, no.12*

⁴ *John Paul II, Catechesi all'udienza generale, La traccia 6(1992) p.819*

⁵ *Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, no.12*

⁶ *John Paul II, Catechesi all'udienza generale, La traccia 6(1992) p.820*

⁷ L. Sartori, "Carisimi", in G. Barbaglio – S. Dianich (editors), *Nuovo dizionario di Teologia*, San Paolo, 1998, p.119

⁸ *John Paul II, To the cardinals and prelates of the Roman Curia, Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, X, 3 (1987), p.1483*