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**HARISM**

The theological dynamic of “charism” is one way of describing how a person may be graced by God to receive the Gospel and to respond to it in a distinctive and efficacious way. The origins of the term are found in the Pauline texts of the New Testament in the word *charis* (χρις) meaning “gift” or “grace”: different people receive particular gifts from the Spirit for the purpose of building up and renewing the Church (e.g. Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:7-16).

The contemporary understanding that is usually regarded as definitive is that of *Lumen Gentium*:

God 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 upbuilding of the Church. Whether these charisms be very remarkable or 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. (#12)

It has been this Pauline understanding of charism which has influenced the emerging thinking of the Church as the term has become more commonly employed over recent decades. This has been a recognition of a wide diversity and richness by which people can come to know God and to be involved in Christian ministry as a loving response to God (*Lumen Gentium*:4,32,41; *Gaudium et Spes*:29; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*:3; *Evangelica Testificato*:11; *Redemptionis Donum*:15; *Christifideles Laici*:20; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*:45). Pope John Paul II presented it this way:

The Holy Spirit, while bestowing diverse ministries in the Church communion, enriches it still further with particular gifts or promptings of grace called *charisms*. They can take a great variety of forms both as a manifestation of the absolute freedom of the Spirit who abundantly supplies them, and as a response to the varied needs of the Church in history.

The essence of a charism is that it is sourced first of all in a profound spiritual experience. When this speaks compellingly to others and proves to be an especially effective means of giving effect to the Gospel, then it can evolve into a “spirituality” – a way of Christian discipleship that can be articulated, taught, and embraced by a group of people of different times and circumstances. It continues to develop and to speak convincingly, leading people to be captured by the timeless Gospel of Jesus by offering them what might called a "do-able discipleship" – a way of Christian living that suits their culture, their needs, and their context. People who are attracted to such a spirituality may be described as “spiritual family”[[1]](#footnote-1) as they form community with one another, and share in a distinctive realisation of God’s mission together.

The most enduring spiritualities are those that are not time-limited or root-bound in ways that restrict their growth or hinder new forms of expression. Indeed one of the great blessings of our time is that, in response to the Second Vatican Council's reclamation of the responsibility of all Christians to share fully in God's mission, many of the rich spiritualities of the Church have moved beyond the limits of their original religious order to be embraced more deeply by lay people, and indeed young people. The Church places great hope in such spiritual families[[2]](#footnote-2). The Marists are one of these.

The Church has always been revitalised by movements, by inspired and inspiring people. The most effective spiritual families work first on this inspirational level; people are attracted to join them intuitively, and they find in them ways to nurture their personal faith, to develop their sense of Christian community, and to sharing in the mission of God in the Church. They provide ways of incarnating Christ-life into time, place and ministry, and into the hearts of people. As a founding charism moves over time to become a charismic tradition lived out in a spiritual family, it develops a wealth of accumulated wisdom and resources into which others can tap, to learn from those who have walked and are walking the same spiritual path. It gives people a story to enter, a group to which to belong, a mission or work to share with others. It provides them with a literature to read, songs to sing, an accessible language and symbols to use, and saints from whom to draw inspiration. While not ends in themselves, they do often provide powerful means to receive and to promote the gospel of Jesus, a way into Christian discipleship.

Founding charisms, and the charismic traditions which grow from them, are thus ways of giving the Christian faith a context in the real world: in actual people, in time and place. Indeed, the Christian faith is essentially incarnational. They are dynamic phenomena, adapting and renewing according to time and circumstance, as the Spirit continues to enliven the spiritual families founded on them. *Vita Consecrata* used the term “creative fidelity” to capture the sense in which a group which has its source in such a charism needs not only to be faithful to its founding time, but also to read and respond to the signs of the present time (#37). An imperative of today’s Church is the emergence of an understanding of the People of God as *communio*, and with it a more inclusive approach to ministry. It is to this contemporary development which contemporary Marists are called to respond.

1. The term is the one used by the Congregation for Catholic Education in this context. See *Educating Together in the Catholic School*, #28-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)