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CONFERENCE

Gifted *for* *the* Mission

An Introduction to Charisms



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Introduction

- 01 We find ourselves in a new era in which people who have never heard the Gospel, those who have rejected it, people with a nominal affiliation as well as those with a deep commitment to Christian faith all live together in a so-called 'secular society'. The 'mission field' today does not lie in another country, but in our own backyard – with our family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours.
- 02 Our Church possesses wonderful resources for taking up this mission, but our richest 'resource' is the Holy Spirit, who equips us to be 'Spirit-filled evangelisers' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 259).
- 03 The Holy Spirit animates our evangelising activities in many ways (especially when we proclaim the kerygma, or first declare the Good News of Jesus Christ's saving death and resurrection), but another important (if not yet so well known) way in which the Spirit

helps us to evangelise is through the distribution of *charisms*.¹

- 04 The purpose of this document is to introduce the concept of charisms and explain their significance for the task of evangelisation.

Charisms in the Scriptures

- 05 We learn about the charisms first from the Scriptures. The word charism simply means 'gift'. The word comes to us from St Paul, who used it to describe a certain type of gift that the Holy Spirit gives to us. St Paul provides several different lists of charisms (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Romans 12:6-8; see also Ephesians 4:7-12, and 1 Peter 4:8-11).
- 06 These lists include eye-catching charisms such as healing, miracles, words of knowledge, and speaking in tongues, but these are not the only charisms that St Paul mentions. He also

¹ "Evangelisation: Encounter, Discipleship, Mission", 2023
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b9wxmLRNQzJCyPiaqLxtb4cxKiYdZM8f/>

includes less dramatic gifts in these lists such as helps, encouragement, service, mercy and administration. We should not think that these lists are exhaustive (this is because the lists are not identical, indicating that St Paul did not think that these lists were comprehensive).

- 07 What St Paul does make clear in these passages is that:

The charisms are not simply human talents or skills but are 'manifestations of the Spirit' working in and through a person (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The Holy Spirit gives different charisms to each person as he wills (1 Corinthians 12:11, Romans 12:6).

While there are different gifts, they are all for the building up of the 'one Body', the Church (Romans 12:4-5, Ephesians 4:12).

- 08 They are gifts, and so they are not given according to our merits, nor are they a mark of personal holiness.

The charisms are ultimately at the service of love (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3).

While they are gifts from God to be received, we are also to "strive eagerly" for the charisms (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Distinguishing the Charisms from other Graces

- 09 Not all the gifts (or graces) the Holy Spirit gives us are charisms. When we think about the gifts the Holy Spirit gives us, we might first think of the seven gifts that we receive at Confirmation. We might also think of the graces we are given through the other sacraments. Less well-known than these



sacramental graces are the *charisms* – which are a *particular* gift that the Holy Spirit has also given to the Church.

- 10 Charisms are given to individuals *to assist others* to encounter Jesus Christ, to help them live as missionary disciples, and to transform society in the light of the Gospel. ‘My’ charisms are not for me; they are given to me *for the sake of others*.

Charisms in the Church’s Teaching and the Lives of the Saints

- 11 The Fathers of the Church taught that the charisms are given to us at baptism. One example (among many) comes from St Cyril of Jerusalem (4th century), speaking to those preparing for baptism:

“My final words, beloved ones, in this instruction are words of exhortation, urging all of you to prepare your souls for the reception of the heavenly charisms” (Catechetical Lecture 17.19).

- 12 The early bishops expected the charisms to be evident in the Church’s life and ministry.



Portrait of Caroline Chisholm, 1852 A.C. Hayter

Writing over one hundred years after the events recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, St Irenaeus writes:

“It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the Church throughout the whole world has received from God ... and which she exerts day by day for the benefit of the Gentiles” (Against the Heresies, 2.32).

- 13 Over the centuries, the expectation that *all* the baptised would exercise the charisms became somewhat muted, although Catholics have always recognised the presence of the charisms in the lives of the saints.
- 14 In relatively recent years we have seen some of the more extraordinary charisms in someone like St Padre Pio, who was renowned for his charisms of *healing* and *prophecy*.
- 15 St Mother Teresa of Kolkata demonstrated the charism of *mercy* in her ability to bring the love of Christ to all she met in the most difficult of life’s circumstances.
- 16 St Damien of Molokai also demonstrated *mercy* through his care for lepers as well as the charisms of *craftsmanship* and *music*: he built beautiful buildings and formed a choir for his community.
- 17 Here in Australia, we see in the life of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop evidence of the charisms of *teaching*, *mercy* and

administration, while Caroline Chisholm, who was a wife, mother and social worker likely utilised the charisms of *wisdom* and *administration* in settling over 11,000 people in colonial Australia.

- 18 When we consider the charisms at work in the saints, we see that while the Church has not always employed the *language* of charisms throughout her history, the *reality* is that the Holy Spirit has never ceased to bestow its gifts upon the Church.
- 19 The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) recovered the language of the charisms, and clearly taught that the charisms are given to all of the faithful in baptism. The Constitution on the Church states that:
- 20 By the charisms the Holy Spirit makes the faithful “fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church ... 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” (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).



Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 800

Charisms Today: FAQ

1. How do I discover my charisms?

- 21 We need to *discern* the charisms that the Holy Spirit has given to us. The best way to discern a particular charism is to experiment with it.
- 22 The most important indication we possess a particular charism is that our exercise of the gift produces growth in the life and faith of *others*.
- 23 When we exercise a charism, we also experience an unusual sense of ‘flow’ and joy; it comes relatively easily to us. That’s because the Holy Spirit is working through us.
- 24 This discernment is also assisted by others. Sometimes people will give us feedback, either directly or indirectly, about the charisms that they believe are operating in us. In addition to this, church leaders also have a responsibility to foster the charisms, as well as discern their authenticity and appropriate use among the faithful (see *Lumen Gentium*, 12).

2. Can I ask for a charism?

- 25 Absolutely. St Paul encourages us to strive for the greater gifts, and Jesus exhorts us to ask the Father for the Holy Spirit and his gifts (Luke 11:9-10). You can be as specific in asking for charisms as you like. At the end of the day though, the Holy Spirit distributes the charisms as it wills, and it would be a mistake to pine for gifts you do not have, rather than to use the charisms that you have been given.

3. Do I really need to know my charisms? Isn’t it just a case of being open to the Holy Spirit at every moment?

- 26 There is no doubt that discovering one’s charisms is more of an art than a science (which is why it requires discernment), and the Holy Spirit certainly gives us the graces we need for a particular moment.
- 27 There is, however, a wonderful thing that happens when the members of a community (such as a parish or some other expression of Catholic community) know their gifts and are using them together for the sake of the mission. When this happens, people experience the Holy Spirit more directly and so encounter Jesus more vividly.
- 28 A parish consisting of members that know their charisms will bear much, much fruit!

4. How do I find out more about the charisms?

- 29 Prayerfully read and reflect upon the Scriptural passages referred to above.
- 30 You may also like to read the following:

Sherry Weddell, *Fruitful Discipleship: Living the Mission of Jesus in the Church and the World* (2017).

Randy Clark and Mary Healy, *The Spiritual Gifts Handbook: Using Your Gifts to Build the Kingdom* (2018).

Raniero Cantalamessa, *Come Creator Spirit: Meditations on the Veni Creator* (2009)



A Final Encouragement

- 31 Pope Francis encourages us to discover and use our charisms:

Each one of us should ask him/herself: “Is there a charism that the Lord has endowed me with, by the grace of his Spirit, and that my brothers and sisters in the Christian community have recognised and encouraged?”

And how do I act with regard to this gift: do I use it with generosity, placing it at the service of everyone, or do I overlook it and end up forgetting about it? (General Audience, Wednesday 1st October 2014).



FROM THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

Christians, individually and as part of ecclesial movements and associations, are called to bear fruit by sharing the gifts they have been given and to be witnesses to the Gospel. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

In the Christian community, all the Baptised are enriched with gifts to share, each according to his or her vocation and way or condition of life. The various ecclesial vocations are many, yet they express the one Baptismal call to holiness and mission. The variety of charisms, which originates in the freedom of the Holy Spirit, aims at unifying the ecclesial body of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 32) and promoting mission in different places and cultures (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 12). These gifts are not the exclusive property of those who receive and use them, nor are they intended solely for their personal benefit or for that of a group. Through an appropriate pastoral care for vocations, they are intended for the flourishing of the life of the Christian community and the development of society as a whole.

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Ngunnawal Country
GPO Box 368
CANBERRA ACT 2601
E: info@nce.catholic.org.au
www.catholic.au



CONTRIBUTORS

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference thanks those who contributed to the preparation of this statement.

Editor: Clara Geoghegan
Typesetting and design: Ryan Macalandag
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