

“GENERATING TRACES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD”

7. Charism

by Luigi Giussani*

Toils and fears have prevailed during the past month, not only for those who are being forced to distance learning, but also for those who have been able to go back to school. “Normality” is now a vague memory. In order to experience these difficulties overwhelming everyone’s character, psychology, affectivity and mind, all the good advice, the many moral demands and abstract truths we keep hearing repeated—and that with little success we keep repeating ourselves as if to be self-persuaded—are not enough. We need a particular character, mentality, psychology and affectivity to persuade us deep inside ourselves, creating an affinity, a communion and an immediacy that can let us face the toils of each day by making our relationship with Christ more familiar and close. This is charism: a way God chose to reach us and tell us He is there and wants to be with us. How did we happen to experience all this now that we are forced to go to the heart of things?

In order to make this possible, we propose to continue the work until the end of February on Chapter 2, paragraph 9. The persuasive way in which the Holy Spirit intervenes in history—charism (pp. 78–85), from the book by L. Giussani–S. Alberto–J. Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010.

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<http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gskontributi/>
in the section “School of Community”.

9. THE PERSUASIVE WAY IN WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT INTERVENES IN HISTORY—CHARISM

It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that establishes and determines for each of us the concrete dwelling place in the Church, a human companionship that makes the journey to destiny more persuasive.¹⁴⁴ This gift of God’s charity makes faith possible, that awareness of the presence of what began as a Fact in history two thousand years ago.

For the Event happens today according to a specific form of time and space that enables us to face it in a certain way and makes it more understandable, more persuasive, and more educationally effective. This characteristic intervention of the Spirit of Christ, which pro- »

¹⁴⁴ See L. Giussani, “Communion and Liberation: an exemplary method of education and a Christian anthropology,” in *Alla ricerca del volto umano. Contributo ad una antropologia* (Milano: Jaca Book 1984), 87–103.

* Source: L. Giussani - S. Alberto - J. Prades,
Generating Traces in the History of the World,
McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2010, pp. 78-85.

» vokes the Event existentially in a time and space, is called a "charism." In order that the Church, made up of men whom Christ has taken hold of and made part of his Body in Baptism, be an operatively effective reality in the world, men have to become aware of what has happened, aware of the encounter that Christ has had with them, and operate on the basis of that awareness.

Cardinal Ratzinger has observed that "the faith is a heartfelt obedience to that form of teaching to which we have been entrusted."¹⁴⁵ In His infinite imagination, in His infinite freedom and mobility, the Spirit of God can bring into being a thousand charisms, a thousand ways for man to partake in Christ.¹⁴⁶ A charism is precisely the mode of time, of space, of character, of temperament, and the psychological, affective, intellectual way with which the Lord becomes event for me, and for others in this same way. This way is communicated from me to others, so that between me and *these* people there is an affinity that is not there with everyone else; a stronger, more specific bond of fraternity. This is how Christ remains present amongst us every day, till the end of the world,¹⁴⁷ within the historical circumstances that the Mystery of the Father establishes, and through which He has us acknowledge and love His presence.¹⁴⁸

The phenomenon of the Movements in the Church, of all the Movements in the Church, is, as John Paul II observed, the self-awareness that arises in the Church's own sphere.¹⁴⁹ For, just as mankind lives in every home that love animates and beautifies, that the breath of this love warms every day, so the Movements make the Church a living home, alive, warm, full of light and word, of affectivity, of explanation, of answer. These are that unity of companionships created by the charisms, by these gifts given by the Spirit to those He chooses, not because of the persons' value, but to bring about His plan, the plan the Father has for the world, that plan that has a historical name—Jesus Christ.

The Spirit of the Lord chooses temperaments that have characteristics more alive with commitment, emotion, and communication of their own experience to others. So a charism vivifies the Church and is at the service of the whole life of the Church. By its nature, every charism, in virtue of its specific identity, is open to recognize all other charisms. Each of the historical modes with which the Spirit puts men in relationship with the Event of Christ is always a "particular," a particular mode of time and space, of temperament, of character. But it is a particular that renders one capable of the whole. The charism exists as a function of the creation of a complete people; in other words, all-embracing and catholic. As we shall see below, all-embracing and catholic are the ultimate frontiers of the idea of a people.

We could use an image: we could say that the charism is like a window through which you see space in its entirety. The proof of a true charism is that it opens you to everything, it doesn't close you in. So someone would be wrong to say, "We are here to build our Movement, not the Church." We must rather say, "We are here to build the Church according to the thrust the Spirit has given us that we call the Movement, in obedience; in other words, in listening to and adhering to the work of the Spirit of Christ that the Church's authority makes its own."

The question of the charism is crucial, because it is the factor that makes belonging to Christ easier existentially; in other words, it is the evidence of the Event present today, »

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Presentation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in "L'Osservatore Romano," 20 January 1993, 5.

¹⁴⁶ See John 3:8.

¹⁴⁷ See Matthew 28:20.

¹⁴⁸ See L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way, Vol. 3, Charity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2009), 81–5.

¹⁴⁹ See John Paul II, *Be the teachers of Christian culture*, to the priests of Communion and Liberation, 12 September 1985. See also John Paul II, *The Importance of Charisms in the Church*, Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, Rome, 30 May 1998.

» inasmuch as it moves us. In this sense the charism introduces us to dogma as a whole. If the charism is the mode with which the Spirit of Christ makes us perceive His exceptional Presence, then it gives us the power to adhere to it with simplicity and affection. It is living the charism that throws light on the objective content of dogma. If you merely study dogmas abstractly, you don't learn them, and above all they have no existential effect on your life. Dogmas are learned and lived in the encounter with and in following the Church, according to the educationally persuasive and existentially compelling accent of the charism. The charism is therefore the mode with which the Spirit makes the perception of dogma, the perception of the content of the Event as a whole easier, more conscious and fruitful.

In the Church, born of the Spirit of Christ, died and risen, ontologically everything is a charism. The first charism is the Institution, because this is the instrument of the presence of the Spirit of Christ who acts and communicates Himself in the Magisterium and in the Sacraments. But to avoid Magisterium and Sacraments being understood as isolated parts of the unity and the totality of the Christian experience, that is to say reduced to the individualistic measure of the single person, they have to be lived according to the logic and dynamics of communion, which is the very nature of the Church. Then these substantial, institutional charisms are perceived for what they are, through the existentiality of the particular charism, given by the Spirit in function of the overall experience of the Church.

This dynamic is moreover the answer to a temptation particularly widespread in the Church today, according to which the involvement of laypeople in the mission of the Church is perceived as a democratically felt participation in a "power" reductively conceived according to worldly categories.

The question of the relationship between charism and institution therefore appears crucial; this highlights the fact that the two terms are not mutually extrinsic.¹⁵⁰ Every charism regenerates the Church everywhere, it regenerates the institution everywhere, obeying ultimately what guarantees the particular charism itself – Grace, Sacrament, Magisterium. If the particular charism is the terminal through which the Spirit of God is transmitted and through which the acknowledgment of His Event becomes possible today, then the charism of the institution is such because it is the sphere of the life of this terminal. To deny the novelty of a particular charism means to stifle the institution's vitality. On the other hand, the *raison d'être* of a particular charism is justified only in relationship to the whole. John Paul II expresses the nature of the relationship between charism and institution in terms of *co-essentiality*. "In the Church, the institutional aspect and the charismatic aspect ... are co-essential and concur with life, with renewal, with sanctification, albeit in different ways and such that there is a mutual exchange, a mutual communion."¹⁵¹

A charism in action: responsibility of each one

"A moving example of this paternity of the Institution, referred to the history of the Movement of Communion and Liberation, is the figure of Pope Paul VI. The first time he called me, when he was still archbishop of Milan, was to offer me some observations. On that occasion he told me, 'I don't understand your ideas and your methods very well, but I see the fruits, and I tell you, go ahead like this.' Years later, in 1975, when seventeen thousand of us went to Rome, he called me to the door of St Peter's at the end of Mass, and the first »

¹⁵⁰ See John Paul II, *Be the teachers*.

¹⁵¹ See John Paul II, *Spread the joy of the encounter with Christ*, to the members of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Rocca di Papa, 14 March 1992.

» phrase was, 'Father Giussani, this is the way, go ahead like this.' Exactly the same as the first time."¹⁵²

We have to grow, to mature, and to act in the world according to the particular "form of teaching" with which the Lord has chosen to meet us. We have always to remember the two poles of the relationship that, in the Event created by God, is brought about between us and Him. On one hand, He has us enter into the great people of the mysterious body of Christ, the heir of His chosen people; on the other hand, He touches us according to a determined originality taken up by the Spirit, according to a particular form, according to a particular charism. We experience the whole people of God better, the more we are faithful to our charism, as it were, to our personality imbued by the Spirit, to the personal makeup that God has given us, inasmuch as it is completely taken up in His eternal plan. To draw back from the "form of teaching to which we have been entrusted" is the first step towards tiredness, boredom, confusion, distraction, and even despair.

But in this great companionship in which God has placed us with His Event the best among men are not found. "We are no better than our Fathers," said a song of Father Cocagnac.¹⁵³ Even if God is able to raise up children of Abraham from stones,¹⁵⁴ it is not the best amongst men who are part of this companionship; precisely for this reason, what remains clear is the miracle of the Lord's communication that has happened in our life. We are not better than others. St Paul recalled it well in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Consider your own call, brothers. There are not many of you who were wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in God's presence. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, whoever boasts, let him boast of the Lord."¹⁵⁵ Low and despised, that's what we are. But we can boast of the Lord, not of our own merit but His. So let's pay attention to what St James says, "Speak and act like people who must be judged according to the law of freedom, because there will be judgment without mercy for those who have not used mercy themselves; mercy triumphs over judgment."¹⁵⁶

The essence of the charism of Communion and Liberation can be summed up in the announcement—full of enthusiasm and awe—that God has become man, and that this Man is present in a "sign" of single-heartedness, of communion, of community, of a people in unity. Only in God made man, only in His presence and, therefore, only in some way through the form of His presence, can man be man and mankind be human. This is the source of morality and mission.

Everyone bears responsibility for the charism he has encountered. Everyone is the cause of the decline or increase of the charism, is terrain upon which the charism is wasted or bears fruit. It is a very serious matter for each one to become aware of this responsibility, as urgency, as loyalty and faithfulness. To obscure or diminish this responsibility means to obscure and diminish the intensity of the effect that the history of our charism has on the Church of God and on society.

Each person gives a personal identification, a personal version of the charism to which we »

¹⁵² See L. Giussani, "Il 'potere' del laico, cioè del cristiano," in *Un avvenimento di vita cioè una storia* (Roma: Edit-II Sabato 1993), 53.

¹⁵³ A.M. Cocagnac, "Chant de pénitence," in the Songbook of Communion and Liberation.

¹⁵⁴ See Matthew 3:9.

¹⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:26–31.

¹⁵⁶ James 2:12–13.

» have been called and to which we belong. Inevitably the more one becomes responsible, the more the charism passes through one's temperament, through that vocation irreducible to any other, that is, one's person. The person of each one of us has its concreteness, its own mentality, its own temperament, its own life circumstances, and above all its own movement of freedom.

So the charism takes up diverse and approximate inflections according to each one's generosity. The approximation is measured by one's generosity, where capacity, temperament, personal taste, etc., are combined (one could do what one likes with the charism and its history; reduce it, paralyze it, stress certain aspects at the expense of others, bend it to one's own taste and advantage, or even abandon it out of negligence, or obstinacy, or superficiality).

The charism rises or falls according to each one's generosity. This is the law of generosity, to give your life for the work of an Other. Everyone, in his every action, every one of his days, in all his imaginings, in all his resolutions, in everything he does, must be concerned with comparing his criteria with the charism, just as it emerged at the origins of our common history. Comparison with the charism, just as we have received it, tends to correct the singularity of the version, of the translation; it is continuous correction and reawakening. Methodologically, morally, and pedagogically this comparison must therefore be our greatest concern.¹⁵⁷ Otherwise the charism becomes a pretext and a cue for what we want; it covers up and justifies what we want. To limit this temptation common to everyone, we must make it our normal behaviour to compare ourselves with the charism as correction and as a continually re-awakened ideal. This comparison must become a habit, a virtue. This is our virtue: the comparison with the charism in its originality through the fleeting things that God uses. Here again we meet the importance of the ephemeral. For now, the comparison is with the person with whom everything began. This person can be dissolved, but the texts left behind and the uninterrupted succession—if God wills—of the people indicated as the reference point, as true interpretation of what happened, become the instrument for correction and for reawakening; they become the instrument for morality. The line of references indicated is the most living thing in the present, because a text alone can be interpreted wrongly. It is difficult to interpret it wrongly, but it can happen.

Giving one's life for the work of an Other always implies a link between the word "Other" and something historical, concrete, tangible, describable, photographable, with a name and a surname. Without this historical factor our pride imposes itself. This is certainly ephemeral, but in the worst sense of the word.

Giving one's life for the work of an Other, not abstractly, is to say something that has a precise historical reference. For us it means that all that we do, our whole life, is for the increase of the charism we have been given to participate in, which has its chronology and a face that can be described; it indicates names and surnames and, at the origin, has one name and one surname.

If giving one's life for the work of an Other does not have a precise reference point, then its historicity fades away, its concreteness is lost; you no longer give your life for the work of an Other, but for your own interpretation of it, for your own personal taste, for your own profit or for your own point of view.

To speak of a charism without historicity is not to speak of a Catholic charism.

¹⁵⁷ L. Giussani, *Is It Possible to Live This Way*, Vol. 3, 81–5.