

**THE CHARISM
OF TEACHING**

The term 'charism' has transcended its theological connotation in recent times, becoming a 'media-word', applied freely to notable talent in almost any sphere — politics, entertainment, sport etc. The present article recalls its scriptural origin and considers its significance with special reference to the teaching vocation.

The word "charisma" may have been coined by St. Paul himself. The addition of the suffix "-ma" to effect a slight change in the meaning of an existing word was not, it seems, unusual in the spoken usage of Paul's time. In this case, the classical word "charis", meaning "a favour", became "charisma", meaning "the result of a favour", taking on a further specific shade of meaning by the use to which Paul put it. Some commentators prefer to think that he took over the word for his own purposes from Hellenistic Greek, but the difficulty with this view is that only two examples of its use have been found in one of the two most important writers of the period, Philo, and none at all in the other, Josephus.

But, whatever its origin, it is very much Paul's own word. Of its total 16 occurrences in the New Testament (there are none in the Greek O.T.) 15 are in the Pauline corpus. The exception is in I Peter 4:10, a single coincidence which may have something to do with the acknowledged assistance in the composition of that letter of Paul's fellow-missionary, Silas. We have come to think of the word in the technical sense conveyed by its modern derivative "charism", but Paul's use of it shows that it could be applied to any of God's gifts freely bestowed, without merit on the part of the recipient and without recall on the part of the divine giver (Rom. 11:29).

THE PAULINE LISTS

It is, however, in its technical sense that the word is most characteristic of Paul and most frequently used by him. There are four lists of the charisms in his letters: two in I Corinthians (12:8-10 and 12:28), one in Romans (12:6-8) and one in Ephesians (4:11). Not all four lists contain the same charisms; it would be uncharacteristic of Paul's spontaneous manner if they did. When we compare the four lists, we notice that only two charisms appear in all four, namely prophecy and teaching. This coincidence cannot of itself be taken to mean that Paul considered these two charisms the most important ones, for that would raise a problem about the status of "apostles", named in only two of the lists. But it may be fair to infer that Paul thought of prophecy and teaching as being particularly representative of what he intended to convey by the word "charism".

AN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE?

The question of relative importance among the charisms is, in fact, one that is discussed by N.T. commentators. When Paul wrote in I Cor. 12:28: "And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues..." did he intend to establish an order of importance among the charisms? Some authorities (e.g. the German K.H. Rengstorf and the Englishman J. Ruef) would answer negatively; but the author of the standard commentary on I Corinthians, Père E.B. Allo, O.P., is categorical for the affirmative view: "God has established in his Church a strict order of function and dignity. The words 'first', 'second' and 'third' are to be understood as literally as possible; he who is 'first' is above him who is 'second', the 'second' above the 'third'..." (*Première Epître aux Corinthiens*, p. 333). A similar opinion is favoured by Rudolf Schnackenburg and by the authors of *The International Critical Commentary on I Corinthians*.

APOSTLES, PROPHETS AND TEACHERS

If we follow these latter authorities in opting for a hierarchical order in our interpretation of I Cor. 12:28, we note that those who were designated "apostles" in the early Church were ranked first. The primacy of apostleship, as a service to the community, was unchallengeable. This charism

corresponded most closely to that of Jesus' chosen Twelve. Paul, an apostle 'born out of due time', is the staunchest apologist for the role and its most eloquent panegyrist. He more than once lays vehement claim to the title for himself (as, for example, in the opening sentence of his letter to the Galatians) and, in II Cor. 3:1-6:10, he spells out what such a claim implies, what it is to be, by this charism, "ambassadors for Christ" and "fellow-workers with God".

Next in Paul's list come the prophets, those agents by whom the Holy Spirit declared God's will or revealed coming events to the Church. Their lineage went back to the great seers of the Old Testament. "He who prophesies," wrote Paul, "speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (I Cor. 14:3).

And, ranking only below those two noble charisms in Paul's list, comes that of the teachers. Needless to say, this charism was possessed and exercised in a supreme degree by the apostles, as is clearly shown throughout the Acts of the Apostles. But, as time went on, a specific teaching office began to emerge in the Church, evidence for which is supplied by the Pastoral Epistles and by the writings of the earliest Fathers. Our available space will not allow us to examine the way in which, in fact, the N.T. demonstrates the potent influence of the teaching charism in the early Church. But what we can touch upon is the relevance of this evidence for us today.

THE VATICAN COUNCIL'S RENEWAL OF THE CHARISMS

A succinct statement of that relevance is to be found in paragraph 12 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, where we read: "It is not only through the sacraments and official ministries that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues. Granting his gifts 'to each one as he chooses' (I Cor. 12:11) he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank, by which he makes them able and willing to undertake various tasks or services advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (I Cor. 12:7). These charisms, whether they be the more unusual or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church."

In another document, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), the Council Fathers declared that the Holy Spirit confers the charisms which enable the laity to carry out an apostolate in the Church (par. 3) and later, in the same document, that "teaching is a distinguished form of this apostolate" (par. 30). (It is worth recalling, also, that Cardinal Suenens, in his decisive intervention in favour of the Council's stressing the perennial value of the charisms for the Church, instanced the field of catechetics as his first example of the way these charisms are seen to be active today.) Yet again, in par. 8 of the Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), the contributions made by religious Institutes to the apostolate, including that of "teaching doctrine", are specifically related to the Pauline charisms listed in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12.

ST. DE LA SALLE'S ANTICIPATION OF THE COUNCIL'S TEACHING

It is impossible for anyone acquainted with the *Meditations* of St. John Baptist de La Salle, and particularly with his sixteen *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, not to be impressed by the way in which he anticipated this teaching of the Council on the renewal of the charisms in the Church. All four Pauline passages are quoted or alluded to in the Retreat Meditations, and their doctrine underlies our Saint's profound understanding of his disciples' ministry in the Church — and indeed the ministry of "all persons engaged in the education of youth", for the meditations were written for them as well as for the Brothers. One passage, in particular, explicitates this concept and may be quoted here as an appropriate conclusion to these brief considerations:

"Reflect on what St. Paul says, that God has established in the Church apostles, prophets and teachers, and you will be convinced that he has also established you in your ministry. The same saint gives you another expression of this when he says that there are different gifts, different ministries, and that to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good, that is, the good of the Church. To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the gift of faith is given by the same Spirit. You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion. But in calling you to this holy ministry, God demands that you fulfill it with an ardent zeal for their salvation..." (MTR 9,1, Tr. Loes).

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