

**In this issue:** *What are charisms? An extensive teaching in ten points by Mary Healy (a part of her speech in our European conference in Warsaw, October 2015). We should not hesitate to ask for a charism because we think we are not worthy. Not for our personal benefit. Your charism is about the person the Lord wants to touch through you.*

## **Powerful tools for evangelization**

### *Paul's teaching on charisms*

Dr. Mary Healy

**There are no more powerful tools for evangelization than the charisms, gifts by which the Holy Spirit equips the Church and every Christian for our mission to be Christ's witnesses in the world. Yet how many are seeking to evangelize and live the Christian life without charisms! To evangelize without using charisms is like trying to push a car uphill.**

To use charisms effectively, it is important to learn what Scripture teaches about them. What are charisms? First, they are distinct from the *sanctifying gifts* of the Spirit, listed in Isaiah 11: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Catholic tradition holds that these gifts are given to every Christian at baptism and confirmation, for the purpose of making us holy (CCC 1831).

The *charismatic gifts* or charisms, in contrast, are distributed by the Spirit in different measures to different people. They are not primarily for personal sanctification but for building up the body of Christ. They are by definition gifts that are to be given away, gifts to be used for others. No one has all the charisms, precisely because we need one another, just as the organs in the human body cannot function without one another (1 Cor 12:17-21).

Charisms are also distinct from human talents. A charism is not a natural ability but a *supernatural* gift of the Holy Spirit. It either enables one to do what is humanly impossible (such as prophecy or healings) or elevates a natural endowment (such as teaching or hospitality) to a supernatural level of efficacy for building up the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 Paul lists some of the more obviously supernatural gifts such as healings, prophecy, and miracles. In

other passages he lists gifts that seem more ordinary but are no less important: service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, administration, and acts of mercy (Rom 12:7-8).

Paul gives an extensive teaching on charisms in 1 Corinthians 12-14, which can be summed up in ten points.

### **1) Charisms are manifestations of the Spirit.**

Charisms are “manifestations of the Spirit” (1 Cor 12:7) - that is, they make evident the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This means that every time you exercise a charism, God the Holy Spirit is operating through you. Charisms are not something you own or control; you cannot give a prophecy or heal someone whenever you feel like it. Rather, you are like a musical instrument on which the Holy Spirit plays according to his will and his timing. The more you are surrendered to him, the more freely he will play.

### **2) Every Christian receives one or more charisms.**

“To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor 12:7; cf. Eph 4:7). Every Christian has **an** indispensable role in building up the body of Christ, and every one is equipped by the Holy Spirit at baptism and confirmation with charisms in order to fulfill that role. There is no unemployment in the kingdom of God! Yet sadly, many Christians don’t exercise their charisms because many are not even aware that they have charisms.

### **3) Charisms are given freely.**

We are given charisms by the very fact of being baptized (1 Cor 12:13), not because we deserve them. Charisms are thus not a measure of holiness. Jesus said, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’” (Matt 7:22). This warning demonstrates that it is possible to exercise a charism and yet be far from God. Therefore we should never assume that a powerful charism such as healings or miracles is a measure of someone’s holiness. Even the high priest Caiaphas, who wished to put Jesus to death, prophesied (John 11:49-50). In Numbers, even a donkey sees a heavenly vision! (Num 22:23-33).

Therefore we should not hesitate to ask for a charism because we think we are not worthy. If God can speak through a donkey, he can use me. It is also true, however, that the more united we are with the Lord, the more freely the Holy Spirit will be able to operate through us.

#### **4) The purpose of a charism is to build up the body of Christ.**

Charisms are “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). A charism is a gift that is to be passed on to others; it is not for the personal benefit of the one who receives it. For example, Paul describes charisms used in a prayer gathering: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor 14:26). However, Paul does make an exception for the gift of tongues as a prayer-language: “he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (1 Cor 14:4).

#### **5) Charisms are efficacious for evangelization.**

Charisms are often signs by which God bears witness to the gospel (Heb 2:4). Paul experienced in his own life the power of supernatural charisms to touch people’s hearts and convince them of the truth of what he preached. His miracle wrought many conversions: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:18-19). Even in a prayer gathering, charisms can have a powerful effect on unbelievers: “if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:24-25).

#### **6) Charisms are to be eagerly desired.**

Paul says, “Strive eagerly for [or ‘be zealous for’] the greatest spiritual gifts” (1 Cor 12:31; cf. 1 Cor 14:1). We should not be reluctant to pray for, desire, and practice using charisms out of a false sense of humility. Since a charism is a gift to be given away, my charism is not about me. It is about the person the Lord wants to touch through me. “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Mt 7:7).

#### **7) All have a responsibility to exercise their charisms.**

Using the charisms we have been given is not optional. The world and the Church need them. Paul exhorts, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if

prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom 12:6-8). The First Letter of Peter gives similar advice: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Pet 4:10).

### **8) The role of leadership in the Church is to call forth charisms**

The role of leaders in the Church is not to do all the ministry but “*to equip the saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). Equipping the members of the Church for ministry includes teaching about charisms, discerning them, calling them forth, guiding them, correcting mistakes, and overseeing their harmonious interaction. Paul emphasizes that leaders are not to hinder charisms but foster them. “Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thes 5:19-22). “So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:39-40).

St. John Chrysostom adds, “The most basic task of a church leader is to discern the spiritual gifts of all those under his authority, and to encourage those gifts to be used to the full benefit of all. Only a person who can discern the gifts of others and can humbly rejoice at the flourishing of those gifts is fit to lead the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

### **9) Love is the “way.”**

At the center of Paul’s teaching on charisms is his great hymn to love (*agapē*) in 1 Corinthians 13. “Earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...” (1 Cor 12:31-13:1). This may seem to be a digression, but it actually provides the foundational principle on which to discern and pastor the exercise of charisms. Love is the measure; love is the aim of every use of a charism. It is not a question of choosing between charisms and love—rather, charisms are the tools of love.

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<sup>1</sup> John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964), 44.

## 10) Exercising charisms gives glory to God.

We who believe in Christ “have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12). Charisms give glory to God because they reveal his love and power at work in the world. “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another... whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 4:10-11).

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More: [EUCCRIL 204 on charisms](#)

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