

## "...The Gifts of Each which Belong to All."<sup>1</sup>

This article on congregational charisms in an evangelizing Church is the fruit of my reading and reflection upon the papal document *Evangelii Gaudium*. The initial impulse to view this document through the lens of the charisms of religious institutes may have come from the frequent occurrence of the word 'joy' in the initial pages, calling to mind my own congregational charism captured in the phrase 'to give joyful witness to love' in article 1 of our Constitutions.

The thought of viewing the document through this lens certainly did not arise because any section of *Evangelii Gaudium* specifically addresses institutes of consecrated life or their charisms. Rather, *Evangelii Gaudium* is about the witness of the whole Church to the Gospel, the contemporary challenges to this mission, and the joy that should characterize bearers of the Good News, so its message is for all members of the Church.

Consecrated women and men get passing mention in article 78, along with other 'agents of evangelization' whose witness is deemed to be diminished by 'heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and cooling fervor'. There is also a reference to the scarcity of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in article 107. There are no other specific references to consecrated life. This comment on the scarcity of reference to the consecrated life is not intended to downplay the relevance of the document for religious. Indeed, it has much relevance for us in our contemporary culture and world.

To employ an image from the internet, I found within *Evangelii Gaudium* the link to consecrated life in the section titled 'Charisms at the Service of a Communion which Evangelizes', comprising articles 130 and 131. In article 130 we read:

"The Holy Spirit enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms...They are not safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather, they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church... A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God's holy and faithful people for the good of all."

This notion of charism is likely not new too many of us; it is the basis of our understanding of charism.

### The Giftedness of our Charisms

However, it occurred to me that if religious congregations and their individual members intentionally approached this document from the perspective of the giftedness of their particular charisms, the evangelizing mission of the Church could be greatly enhanced.

A renewed appreciation of our particular charisms could be the center of energy from which we can take this inspiring and substantial document to heart. We understand charism and how it functions among us and in mission. We have the potential to be mentors for those not in religious life who are discerning their gifts for the mission of the Church. We have charisms that relate to some of the contemporary challenges presented in the document, and are already addressing some of these issues, moved by our charisms to do so.

### Charisms and Contemporary Challenges

Following are a few examples to elaborate this latter point. One of the large challenges named is inclusion of the poor in society. Many religious congregations have mission to the poor at the core of their charisms or articulated in mission statements, which include working toward systemic change to improve the situation of those living in poverty. Federations of congregations with similar charisms, such as the Vincentian family, are working collaboratively to effect systemic change.

Other congregations have a strong presence in higher education, another area the document highlights for evangelizing presence. (EG 132-134) Articles 169 to 173 emphasize the need for personal and spiritual accompaniment of persons, yet another domain where the religious orders or individual religious

have particular charisms. This is not an exhaustive list, but a sampling of arenas where congregational charisms are, or could be offered in the service of an evangelizing Church in transformation.

Might *Evangelii Gaudium* with the challenges and hope it conveys, be a moment for institutes of consecrated life to revisit and revitalize their charisms, for the greater service of our Church and the world? We are currently marking the Year of Consecrated Life, which could be an opportune time to read and contemplate *Evangelii Gaudium* in light of our unique congregational charisms. "Awaken the world with the passion of your charisms and your mission..." said Pope Francis when he announced the Year of Consecrated Life.

In an attempt to focus on charism, I have barely touched on the inspirational component of the document, which is one of the rewards of reading it. As one writer on the document states: "To describe *Evangelii Gaudium* as an inspiring document would be true, but...a more appropriate response, for individuals and communities, would be continual prayerful reflection on the text."<sup>2</sup> I would add reflection that leads to sound action for mission.

Questions for Reflection:

Considering our congregation's charism:

1. How do I treasure the charism?
2. How does it contribute to the mission of the Church?
3. What is the locus (local, national, international, systemic) in which this gift/charism could be active in light of *Evangelii Gaudium*?
4. What contribution are we capable of in our present circumstances as a congregation?

Keep in mind the fundraising slogan, which Pope Francis would likely endorse: 'No gift is too small'.

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<sup>1</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, Article 99, in the section entitled 'No to Warring Among Ourselves'. The full sentence reads: "Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in **the gifts of each which belong to all.**" The phrase captures the place of charisms in the life of the whole body.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lennan, "Evangelii Gaudium: The Good News from Pope Francis" in *Compass* 48:1(Autumn2014):8.