

A Charism Received for Missioning Towards Others

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You probably are aware that the concepts of charism and prophetism which you have been exploring these past months are in fact relational concepts. Understanding them as such leads us to a process of decentering ourselves, to inhabit the world in a more just manner.

In a Christian regime, the relational character of charism is obvious. Charism is a gift, a grace of divine origin. This gift does not belong to us; it is received from another. Today, we often speak of “the self-made man” – he who builds himself up and whose success and achievements result from his actions, decisions, and efforts. In that sense, a charismatic person has a power of fascination. However, in a Christian regime, we recognize that we owe our character to others, and we are not deemed “charismatic” solely from the sum of our performances; charism is not based on merit, and is not the result of efforts, exercise, or training. Charism is a gift, and nothing is stranger to that notion than to qualify it possessively as “**my** charism” or “**our** charism”, as if we owned it. Moreover, this spiritual gift, “donated” by another, must act in us, have an effect, and transform us. It must work within us, and be felt in our flesh, and in the “flesh” of our institutions. Otherwise, we would not be able to speak of the charism of our congregation. It is given to edify, or it is useless.

The most important passage in Scripture about charisms is found in the First letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 12, where the term charism is used five times, a reflection that Paul concludes with the hymn of charity (chapter 13). The charism we receive immediately turns us towards others. *But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way* (1 Co 12:31). Charism is a gift from God for the sake of service to others. In this generous reflection on the spiritual gifts (chapters 12 to 14), whose summit is the exposition of the outstanding gift of love, Paul repeats that they are given by the Spirit with the goal of upbuilding (to edify), and therefore can be ordered in a hierarchy.

The same reflection goes for prophetism. To be prophetic is not something like a personal property. In fact, no one can claim to be prophetic as if it were a career choice. To do so would make one a false prophet, as was the case of the prophets in the royal sanctuaries, “professional” prophets serving the interests of the king and supporting his power (we see this described in the book of Amos). One cannot be a prophet by trade, nor can one claim such a title. Consider the stories of prophetic vocations in the Old Testament. The prophet Amos says, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Am 7:14) – so he answered to those who wished to send him away, to prophesy far from the royal sanctuary of Bethel. In fact, Amos was not one of those “professional prophets” who earned a living from this trade, without providing much for the people. ... *and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’* (Am 7:15).

The prophetic vocation narratives of Isaiah (ch. 6) and Jeremy are along the same lines. The latter wants to escape and will only be a prophet despite himself:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, [...] "I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." (Jr 1:4-6)¹. This missioning which constitutes someone as a prophet defines the relational character of the prophetic being: God says "Go" and sends him to the people.

Just like charism, in a way, prophetism is received. We are prophets despite ourselves, against our own will. It is not something desired and cannot be ambited. One doesn't wish to become a prophet. It is God who works within the person called to be a prophet. So we see with the prophet Jeremy: *"I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* (Jr 1:5). It is God who is at work. No one goes to "prophetic school"! Jeremy says, *"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy"* (1:6). This echoes Moses who couldn't imagine speaking to Pharaoh or being gifted enough to do so, and therefore pleaded with God to send another (Exodus 4:10-13).

What of our congregations, then? Do we protest due to our insufficiency or our inability? Do we believe that we are incapable, or do we claim our status as prophets, putting forth our charism?

From I've read and heard of your reflections these past months, I gather this: the awareness of your vulnerability and your fragility, which corresponds to the same awareness of many of your foundresses and founders, also fragile persons, is helpful to us insofar as it allows us to rethink the question of charism and to renew our relationship to the Church and to the world, in a more just perspective. In doing so, we can determine a new starting point: not that of a charism belonging to us, that we can define, expose and offer, but that of a charism received anew, for the Church today, and for the world.

It is the same for mission. I take issue, more and more, with speeches that set forth "**our** mission". Today, with regards to the most classical theology, the term "mission" has been deviated from its initial meaning. The term has in fact been appropriated by administrative sciences and management and popularized, hence we find it in every organization's official documents. For this reason, we speak of the mission of a hospital or a university; the mission of this government Ministry or that cooperative; that organization or that company, etc. This successful reappropriation has led to pervert the original meaning or make it obsolete. Nowadays, "mission" means the tasks accomplished by someone, what they do and produce, the tasks they are entrusted with. The mission is therefore identified with the office or function one has. Mission is also equated with the goal assigned to a service or a company, the purpose we assign ourselves and express in a mission statement. It is the objective we strive to attain, and ultimately, the role we want to play.

According to etymology, and specifically the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*², the first meaning of the term mission, from the latin *missio*, past participle of the verb *mittere*, refers to the action of sending. The term was mostly used in the Navy or in commerce and designates the dispatching of the fleet for military or commercial

¹ See also Ezechiel, chapters 2 and 3.

² Alain Rey (ed.), *Le Robert, Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris, 1992, vol. 2.

purposes. It is this secular meaning which Christians used to understand God's action: the Father send the Son and the Holy Spirit. This same sole meaning is found in the *Summa Theologica*, in the 13th century. The term is used in question 43 about "the missions of the divine persons" and in question 112 about the angels' mission. In both cases, what is at stake is the relationship created between the person who is missioned and the one who sends them. The awareness of being sent by the Father is so crucial for Jesus that he refers to himself as being sent by God. This is especially manifest in the gospel according to John, but also present in the three other gospels. Sent by God, Jesus in turn sends the disciples. Also, since he is sent, he is destined to encounter those to whom he is sent. There is no mission (no sending) without a prior relationship and a relationship ahead.

The extension of the meaning of the term mission and the diminishment of its original meaning came to be during the 17th century³, and the consequence was the disappearance of the relational character of the term. What is set forth, first and foremost, is no longer the action of an extroverted God, hearing the cries of humanity, seeing the misery of His people, and their *cry on account of their taskmasters* (Ex 3:7). This relational God knows the sufferings of His people and commits himself to freeing them, by sending His servant, Moses, rather than being passive and unmoved.

If mission now represents a task that I can accomplish, a role that is mine or a goal I pursue, instead of the action of another who sends me, then that focuses on me as the center, rather than God being the active subject of the mission. The action is transferred from He who sends to the person who is missioned. In this modern perspective, the emphasis is on ME who has a mission and becomes the primary subject and center focus. A displacement is observed: the active subject who missioned/sent was, initially, God; now the one who is sent is the center of action, and God is relegated behind-the-scenes. On top of that, the idea of "going out" and moving for mission is also diminished. We end up displaying "the mission of our congregation" while thinking that "our" mission can be decided by the general chapter, instead of receiving our mission while trembling... This is the result of putting ourselves in the center as subjects of the action and initiative.

During Vatican II, after a lengthy reflection on missiology, a choice was deliberately made to come back to the original meaning of the word mission. The *schema* on missions, as elaborated by the central preparatory commission was initially titled *De Missionibus*, but underwent a significant change in title, and was finally called *De activitate missionali Ecclesiae*. This change came to be in May 1964. Only in May 1965 did the classical theological perspective return to the forefront. Hence, chapter 1 of *Ad gentes* unfolds the missionary movement in this manner: no. 1 titled *Propositum Patris* (God's design) is followed by nos. 2 and 3, respectively titled *Missio filii* and *Missio Spiritus Sancti*, the mission (sending) of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Following that, it would have been expected to title no. 4 as *Missio Ecclesiae*, but that wasn't the case. It is titled *Ecclesia a Christo missa* (the Church sent by Christ). So, the term *missio* is reserved for the missioning, by the Father, of the Son and the Spirit, highlighting the fact that God "comes out of Himself". As for the Church, the passive form defines it: She is

³ According to the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (p. 1253), the modern values attributed to the term mission appeared during the 17th century, in the context of international politics, referring to a task entrusted to a person (1656) and to the action of accomplishing a task, with or without travelling to do so. Since 1831, *mission* has also come to mean "raison d'être", the function of something.

sent by someone else and receives (from Him) Her destination and mandate. Generally speaking (albeit a few exceptions), the *Ad Gentes* decree reserves the term *missio* for God's action of missioning, while talking about the "missionary activity" of the Church (*activitas missionalis*) on 14 occasions; its "missionary action" (*actio missionalis*) on six occasions, and its "missionary works" (*opus missionale*) on 12 occasions. This shows that *Ad gentes* uses the expression *missio Ecclesiae* in an exceptional manner, thereby conforming in this usage to that of the New Testament, that never speaks of the mission of the Church nor of the mission of the Twelve, or the disciples. In verses where the term mission appears (translated as such), the original Greek is "sent", like in Mt 10:5; Ac 13:4 and 22:5, or 2 Co 2:16.

Taking this into account, the Church (and a religious congregation), insofar as it wishes to inhabit the world in a just perspective, must understand itself at the heart of this relationship with God, who so loved the world that He sent His Son to humanity (Jn 3:16). As for us, we are simply of service to this relationship. Our existence is founded in this love of God for humanity: it constitutes us and sends us forth. This relationship is the right starting point. We must not, for that reason, start with "our mission", but rather with God's missioning to the world. If we want to speak of ourselves, we can only do so, in reference to the Bible, to acknowledge our weakness, our fear, our fragilities, our vulnerability, our incapacity, our old age.

Also helpful in shedding light on these considerations is revisiting the history of your foundresses and founders. There weren't many heroes in their lot. They were fragile and sickly persons. To be a prophet means to be taken "from following the flock", as it went for Moses, David and a few others. Elisha was not a prophet either, but a ploughman, yet he was recruited by Elijah to be a prophet (1 Kg 19:19), just like Amos who was a herdsman (Am 7:14). This is what it means: let yourself be seized, where you are, and led elsewhere, against your will, despite your resistance, your refusal and your incapacity. This is the meaning of "returning to your founders" and to the biblical tradition.

In fact, don't let your starting point be the current state of your congregation, and don't let actuarial planning rule over you, as useful as those figures may be. These are not the starting points. Rather, it is what God wants to do amid humanity, in today's reality. Don't stop at yourself and don't put yourself in the center.

On the basis of Scripture, we can affirm that calls always emerge in particular contexts and are always finalized through a missioning. "Therefore, prophesy" (Ez 36:6). This call arises in a specific historical situation. We need to take up again the "reading of the signs of the times" to discern what is "labouring" in humanity today. The situation we need to read is not that of consecrated life in Canada. No. We need to review the current situation of women, men, children, and the state of culture and society to discern, with deep listening, the calls, the questions, the anxieties, etc. Your foundresses and founders perceived something in those signs of the times, and it set them in motion. Prophets were raised up during singular moments of the people's journey. Ezekiel during the Exile; Jeremy, Isaiah, Jonah, and others during a time of decadence, and so on. Their vocation is inseparable from a historical moment and situation. This is why we need to heed the "calls" of our times. If we remove the historical, social, political and religious contexts in which prophets emerge, we cannot understand their vocation and their prophetic character. If we know nothing of the people of Israel, we cannot speak of Moses. His calling is incomprehensible if detached from his missioning to free the sons

of Jacob. On this basis, I can affirm that “vocation” (calling), a term I prefer to “mission” in this case, or the charism that may lead to prophetism, is inseparable from social, political, and spiritual evolutions.

What are the important “calls” of our times? The answer to that question will have us discerning what our vocation is and will enable us to see more clearly to whom we are sent. In the Old Testament, all the callings are indissociable from a missioning. The order to “go”, go beyond yourself or beyond your community’s reality, is what constitutes the prophet. All our planning cannot create prophetism. Moreover, vocation, in the strict sense, is not addressed only to the conscience of an individual. It is equally destined to institutes and communities. We are not simply in the presence of individuals in whom grace has worked, outside of any sociohistorical considerations, but we are in the presence of individuals who are rooted in a people. This is the destination we are invited to go to, to leave our country for, to leave our home and *go to the land that I will show you* (Gn 12:1).

Exploring the history of the Church leads us to the same teachings as Scripture. With regards to the advent of institutes and religious congregations in Quebec (and elsewhere), the Gospel always encounters a specific social situation. What we have named “the charism” of an institute is in effect the particular spiritual intuition that led to expressing a commitment, in the form of works or a lifestyle, that actualize the following of Christ in a given historical circumstance. The “charism” is the crystallization, within a project or a commitment (works or lifestyle) of a spiritual intuition that allows for the Gospel to be understood anew, grasped both deeply and in a nutshell. It is a desire for salvation in an ecclesial and social situation that commands the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, and the grace offered by God as Saviour. Be it Marcelle Mallette, Émilie Tavernier, Virginie Fournier or Élisabeth Turgeon, to name only those examples, we always find, in their foundation, an important connection between their works and the lifestyle they assume, and a significant trait of the history of their times. They are so fully present to the anguish of their context – having experienced them firsthand, sometimes – that we can affirm that their life commitment and works perfectly espoused the spirit of their age. Grace worked through these women, in their time and place, to make them figures of the Gospel and manifestations of God’s redemption.

Just like the figure of Moses is indissociable from the story of Hebrew slavery in Egypt, or Ezekiel from the experience of exile, the figure of Virginie Fournier and her three original companions cannot be understood without reference to the rural experience and the exodus of French Canadians to the United States in the 19th century. The same goes for Marcelle Mallette, if she is dissociated from the middle of the 19th century and its misery, poverty, epidemics, etc. As for Élisabeth Turgeon, also of the 19th century, her life is connected with the southern coast of the St. Lawrence River and the establishment of new populations in the inland regions now known as the dioceses of Rimouski and de Gaspé. These women received a charism (a spiritual gift) to proclaim God’s salvation, despite themselves and their fragility.

We must therefore affirm that charism and prophetism are relative realities – that is, they are not primary realities. Consequently, we are asked first of all to be relational beings, to listen to God who calls and sends, and to listen to the needs and the distress of humanity. From there, charism and prophetism as second, relational realities will surprise us and impose themselves upon us, despite our fragility and resistance. The primary reality is to listen to God, calling us in a given situation, culture, society, world.

Then, we must receive and welcome the grace, charism, and gifts that God continues to offer today. God has not abandoned this humanity that cries out and whom He loves. To recognize His calling and His spiritual gifts to us is of much greater value than trying to devise our own charism.

We must be seized, laboured, and modeled by God. We must be like seismographs, recording the movements of the earth's layers, the social and cultural movements. Charism is the gift God offers to you in this situation – you who are vulnerable, who may desire to sit and stay, in the comfort and happiness of old age. May God expose you: if charism comes from the Spirit, then may the Spirit send you towards the high winds.

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