

Introduction

We believe that God has a plan for our life. We also believe that if God calls us to a particular vocation he will provide us with the gifts to fulfill that call.

We often experience some difficulty in discerning God's plan for us. There are a number of ways by which we can discern how we are called and gifted by God for a particular mission in the world. Prayer is central to this and the closer we are to God the clearer will be our sense of mission and our ability to identify the clues through which we can discover his plan for our lives.

Discernment

One of the key things we can learn is to discern our spiritual gifts or charisms. By discerning our charisms we receive some very concrete clues about our vocation in life. We discover how God had equipped us for that *call* or *vocation*.

If there is a call there will be a gift and if there is a gift there will be a call. Indeed, every baptised Christian is called and gifted for a unique vocation. This does not mean 'state-in-life vocations' such as priesthood, marriage or consecrated life but a primary vocation received in baptism that will actually shape the whole of our Christian life. It will also shape how we might live out a state-in-life vocation.

Every baptised Christian has a vocation. There is therefore no shortage of vocations in this sense but there is a great need for discernment of one's particular vocation.

Discerning charisms enables us to become more effective channels of God's goodness to those around us. By knowing and exercising our charisms we can seek out situations where God calls us to stand - in his presence - and serve him by being a channel of his love to others.

The word charism, meaning 'gift' comes from the Greek '*charis*' which gives us the related words 'eucharist' (thanksgiving), 'grace' and 'charity'.

Charisms refer to gifts of the Holy Spirit which have been with the Church since apostolic times. St Paul teaches that all Christians receive charisms at baptism.¹ St Thomas Aquinas also teaches that each baptised Christian is given at least one gift.² Some Christians receive more spectacular charisms such as healing, prophecy and tongues but most of us receive less spectacular gifts such as teaching, mercy, service, administration, amongst many others. Most Christians exercise their charisms in quiet, inconspicuous but marvelous ways. Discipleship and the exercise of charisms are normative for Christians.

St Paul and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

St Paul sees charisms as essential to Christian life and to the building up of the Christian community. His writings suggest that the charisms ought to become evident after baptism. For St Paul, this is the norm.

In his letters, St Paul has a number of lists of charisms³ such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, teaching. He also suggests a hierarchy of charisms⁴ and describes some of their functions. For St Paul, charisms are also related to our participation in the Body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul writes that 'in one spirit we were baptised into the one body'. The gifts of the Spirit are given to individuals through their baptism into the Body of Christ, and, just as the Body is made up of different and complementary parts, so too are the gifts of the Spirit given to the members of the Body varied and complementary. No two baptised Christians will exercise the same gifts in the same way. They will be different for each person according to their circumstances.

Many of the Church Fathers, and later St Thomas Aquinas wrote in considerable detail about the existence and significance of charisms.⁵ The first discussion of charisms to take place at an Ecumenical Council was in the midst of a discussion on the apostolic mission of the laity at the Second Vatican Council. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity states:

Indeed, everyone should diligently prepare himself for the Apostolate, this preparation being the more urgent in adulthood. For the advance of age brings with it a more open mind, enabling each person to detect more readily the talents with which God has enriched his soul and to exercise more effectively those charisms which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on him for the good of his brethren.⁶

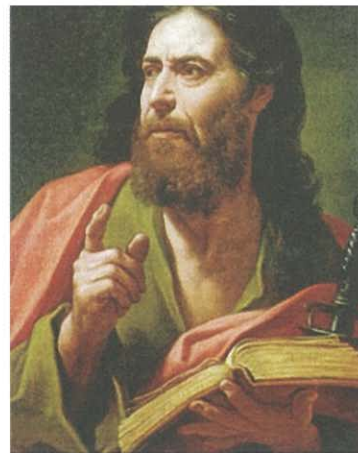
Baptism and Confirmation

It is through baptism and confirmation that we are called and gifted. We are cleansed of original sin and sealed by the Holy Spirit. We are anointed for mission. These sacraments confer two types of grace – sanctifying grace and gratuitous graces.

Many can still recite the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that they learnt in preparation for Confirmation: wisdom, knowledge, courage (fortitude) understanding, right judgment (counsel), piety, and fear of the Lord. These are given to us for our own sake in order to make us holy and conformed to Christ. They are given for us to keep. St Thomas Aquinas refers to these as gifts of sanctifying grace. ➤



The other gifts, or charisms, are also bestowed on us in baptism and confirmation. They are given to us for the sake of others. They are given to us to give away because they are the means by which God's providence, love and care reach our neighbour.



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The other gifts, or charisms, are also bestowed on us in baptism and confirmation. They are given to us *for the sake of others*. They are given to us to give away because they are the means by which God's providence, love and care reach our neighbour. St Thomas refers to them as gratuitous graces. They are given to a member of the Body of Christ to empower him or her to build up the Church and to witness to Christ in the world.⁷

Supernatural gifts

A charism is a supernatural gift. Charisms are supernaturally empowered ways in which God's mercy, love, healing, truth, beauty and provision will reach others through us. Charisms, unlike skills or talents can never be kept to ourselves or used deliberately for evil.⁸

The best way of illustrating the supernatural effects of charisms is to look at the lives of the saints. We do not have to look too far back in history if we use the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. Most Christians are moved to compassion by the sight of a starving child or an emaciated old person, and they might make a donation to one or other worthy cause, but Mother Teresa's gift of mercy was extraordinary in every way. She was able to reach out to the whole world with her example and to millions both personally and through the work of the Missionaries of Charity. She was able to identify that gift and allow the Holy Spirit to work through offering her life in service.

Closer to home, Caroline Chisholm rescued thousands of young women from the streets of Sydney and found them meaningful work across the early colonies. She assisted in the settlement of thousands of poor families from England to a more prosperous life in colonial Australia through her work with the Family Colonisation Loan Society. She was also married and the mother of eight – six of whom attained adulthood. Her charism of wisdom enabled her to find solutions to contemporary social problems. In explaining her vocation she wrote:

I was impressed with the idea that God had, in a peculiar manner, fitted me for this work . . . On Easter Sunday I was able to make an offering of my gifts to the God who gave them . . . I felt my offering was accepted and God's blessing was on my work.⁹

Caroline had, through prayer and fasting during Lent, arrived at the idea that God had 'called' and 'gifted' her for the task at hand.

Charisms are also present in our own communities. There may be someone you know who has a charism of hospitality – who makes people feel welcome in their home, or workplace or parish. Or someone with the charism of encouragement to whom individuals turn in times of trouble. Or someone with the gift of administration whose involvement in any activity ensures that it runs smoothly.

The Called and Gifted Workshop which is one tool for spiritual gift discernment identifies twenty-four of the most common charisms. As described by Sherry Weddell, the author of the Workshop:

Charisms like evangelism and encouragement can powerfully move others to open their lives to Christ. Charisms like teaching and wisdom can help remove impediments to freely choosing personal faith and discipleship. Gifts of healing, intercessory prayer, and hospitality can enable the recipient to co-operate in Christ's redemptive work by healing others. And charisms of leadership, administration, mercy and giving enable the recipient to co-operate in Christ's redemptive work by healing society.¹⁰

Charisms grow as our relationship with Christ grows

Further evidence of the supernatural nature of charisms is that they always manifest *after* the point in our life where faith becomes more personal or they may manifest for the first time when we meet a person or situation where a particular gift is needed. Indeed, charisms tend to show up at the mysterious intersection where the Church and the world cry out to God in need and a disciple takes up his or her call to follow Jesus.¹¹ As we grow in our personal faith, spiritual expectancy, and hunger we may expect to see one or more of the charisms manifest themselves more evidently in our communities.

We can foster this personal faith through helping individuals to be thoroughly prepared to receive the sacraments fruitfully.¹² As St Thomas notes,

[Those] who approach Baptism . . . are not equally disposed to Baptism; for some approach hitherto with greater, some with less devotion. And therefore some receive a greater, some smaller share of the grace of newness; just as from the same fire, he receives more heat who approaches nearest to it, although the fire, as far as it is concerned, sends forth its heat equally to all.¹³ ➤

¹ 1Cor 12:7; 12: 8-11; 12: 28

² Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q111

³ 1Cor 12-14; Rom 12: 6-8; Heb 2:4

⁴ 1Cor 12:28

⁵ Weddell, Sherry Anne, *The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Resource Guide* (Colorado Springs: Siena Institute Press, 2003) 4-6

⁶ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 30

⁷ Weddell, Sherry, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012) 92

⁸ Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, 92

⁹ Chisholm, Caroline, *Female Immigration Considered* (Sydney: James Tegg, 1842), 2 located online at <http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/chilema.pdf>

¹⁰ Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, 93-4

¹¹ Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, 94

¹² For a detailed discussion of the need for intentionality and disposition in receiving sacraments see Chapter 4:

'Grace and the Great Quest' in Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, 97-123.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q68, a8



It is important to note as well that charisms, in and of themselves, do not make a person holier. Indeed, St Paul contrasts the charisms, which 'will pass away' with the theological virtue of love which will 'never end'.¹⁴ The purpose of charisms, as we have said, is to build up Christ's Body. Moreover, charisms and their *authenticity* are the subject of discernment; in this respect, the Second Vatican Council taught:

These charisms, whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church. Extraordinary gifts are not to be sought after, nor are the fruits of apostolic labor to be presumptuously expected from their use; but judgment as to their genuinity and proper use belongs to those who are appointed leaders in the Church, to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good (cf. 1 Thes. 5:12, 19-21).¹⁵

How do you know you are exercising a Charism?

There is a saying attributed to St Catherine of Siena: If you become who God intends you to be, you will set the world on fire.

In many ways this is a good standard for measuring the effectiveness of our discernment. In the 'Called and Gifted Workshop' there are three criteria. The first subjective the others objective: How does it feel? Does the charism achieve what it is meant to achieve? Is it recognised by others?

To begin with the first: there is an experience when exercising a charism where we feel that we were 'created for this'. Our actions flow easily and we are often surprised with the results. We know what to do next. It is accompanied by joy. *We are energised*. It is as though we have found our place. It is accompanied by a sense of fulfillment and we may be moved to prayer.

From a more objective perspective: Does the charism achieve what it is meant to achieve? If we have teaching do people learn? If we have encouragement do people leave with a sense of comfort or hope? If we have intercessory prayer are our prayers for others answered?

This is measured through affirmation from others: the third criterion. It may be direct affirmation where someone with a gift of music receives praise for their performance. People listening to the music may comment that they are uplifted and joyful. But it may be indirect: you find yourself in situations where people easily tell you their problems and seek comfort from your word or presence. They may not tell you directly, but keep seeking you out to share a cup of tea – and their difficulties. If so, you may have a charism of encouragement.

Where do I exercise my charisms?

You exercise your charisms wherever you life takes you: in your home, in your work, amongst your friends,

through your social and sporting involvements, and even in your parish. However, if you are not specifically called to priesthood or religious life, you will also exercise your charisms in the world.

As baptised Catholics, we are called to actively participate in the Church's mission to the world. In particular, it is the laity who are entrusted with applying the faith in the world by healing and transforming its people, culture and structures with the Gospel so that they foster all that is truly human and thereby help to fulfill God's plan.

It seems a difficult undertaking but the laity can achieve this through fidelity to Christ and his Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit and through exercising their charisms.¹⁶

Conclusion

Charisms are wonderful gifts from God. Whilst it is true that some Christians do receive more spectacular 'extraordinary' charisms such as miracles and prophecy, most of us will find ourselves bestowed with gifts that are less than spectacular but which all build up the Body of Christ. As we grow closer to God, we will be more able to discern what our gifts are and the wonderful plan that he has for each of us to fulfill. ■INFORM

¹⁴ 1 Cor 13: 8

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 12

¹⁶ Weddell, Sherry Anne, *Called and Gifted Workshop*, The Lay Office (module)

Questions

1. What role do the charisms play in the discernment of our personal vocation?
2. What does St Paul teach about the relationship between the charisms and the Body of Christ?
3. How do the charisms differ from the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit?
4. Have you ever thought about the charisms that you have been given? What steps can you take to identify them?

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The Catherine of Siena Institute has a number of resources that assist Catholics to discern their charisms, including the Called and Gifted Workshop. Further information about programs and resources available in Australia can be obtained by contacting Clara Geoghegan at following email: clara@siena.org. Information regarding the Catherine of Siena Institute is available at: www.siena.org.

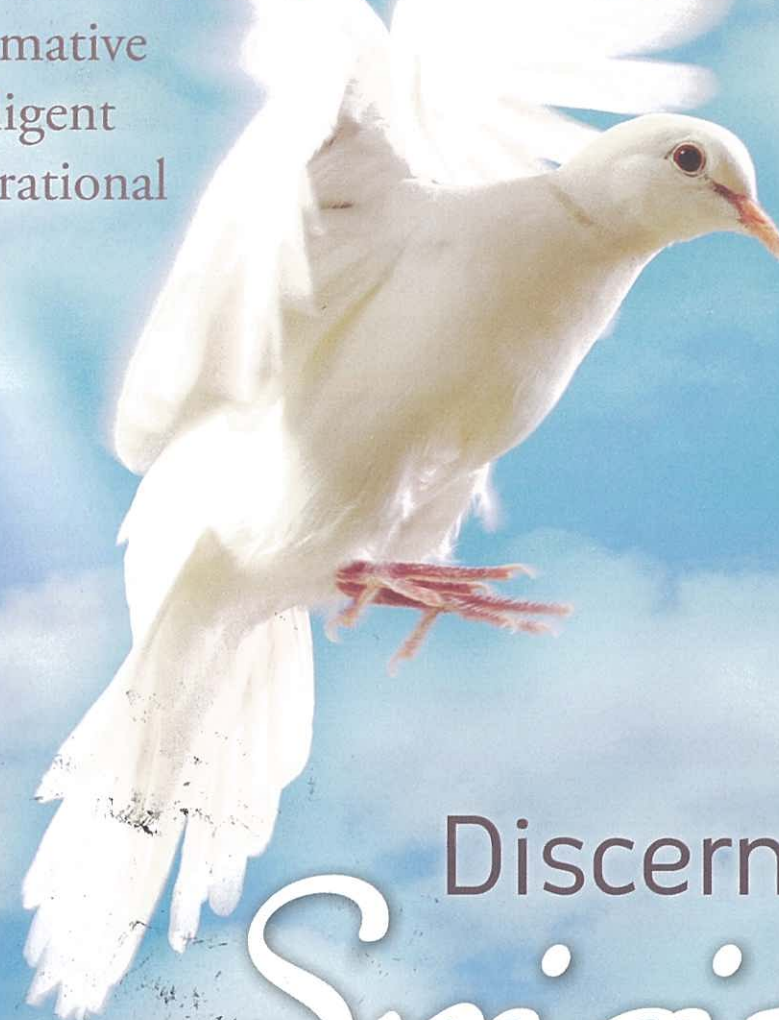


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