

THE GRACE OF VOCATION AND CHARISMS IN THE CHURCH

Toni Witwer

FROM THE SPIRITUAL POINT OF VIEW, professed religious life has grown out of the vital desire of Christians to live their faith in Jesus Christ in the most radical and decisive way possible. Hence, in its deepest essence, religious life is not to be looked on as a third ‘state’, between clerics and laypeople,¹ but rather as a particular formation, through which Christians seek to take their baptismal calling seriously, as unconditionally as possible. The expression of this unconditionality is voluntary commitment to the evangelical counsels. So, while the Church does not consider religious life as a ‘state of the Church’, it certainly raises this form of life to a distinctive canonical and vowed ‘state in the Church’.²

The Second Vatican Council emphasizes the equal value of everyone’s vocation, explaining the general call to holiness³ and making clear the common priesthood of the faithful, which invites them ‘to present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God’.⁴ Despite this fundamental equality of value there are differences of degree—and, with regard to the hierarchical priesthood, even important differences—between the vocations.⁵ A specific religious vocation or the particular charism of a community does not distinguish them from

¹ See *Lumen gentium*, 43: Christians from both ‘states’ are called to religious life.

² See *Lumen gentium*, 45: ‘The Church not only raises the religious profession to the dignity of a canonical state by her approval, but even manifests that this profession is a state consecrated to God by the liturgical setting of that profession’.

³ See *Lumen gentium*, 39–42.

⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 10.

⁵ See *Lumen gentium*, 10: ‘Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.’

Christian discipleship in general in their essence, but it may do so in their symbolic clarity through lifelong commitment to the evangelical counsels.

What is spoken of, on the one hand, as ‘grace of vocation’ and, on the other, as ‘charisms in the Church’ expresses the particular tension in which religious life finds itself, and which it must constantly face to keep its vitality. Here I want to clarify the nature of this tension, which is spiritually fruitful both for the religious orders and for the Church, by looking more closely at both of these concepts.

The Grace of Vocation

In his address when he visited the synagogue at Cologne, Benedict XVI said: ‘With St Paul, Christians are convinced that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29)’.⁶ Here the Pope is not only speaking of what remains ‘indelible’⁷ in each of God’s dealings with human beings, but also reminding us of the essential complementarity between grace and vocation: each vocation is unearned grace and gift, and the grace experienced makes itself known as call—as vocation.

Each of God’s actions in the sacraments leaves behind it indelible traces, and thereby brings about what we call a ‘state’: the ‘state of baptism’ and the ‘state of ordination’ are not human creations but the fruit of God’s action. Through baptism, whether we live it as vocation or not, we are and we remain Christian; likewise a priest may be unfaithful to his priestly vocation, but cannot undo the priestly character received through the sacrament of ordination.

But God’s irrevocable action can easily promote an attitude whereby people delude themselves on the grounds of their special election, and therefore make no more real effort in their relationship with God. And because they think they ‘possess’ this relationship and rely overconfidently on their ‘state’, they lose the inner experience of God’s closeness and presence more and more. In other words: consciousness of one’s own ‘state’ easily leads to arrogance and hubris, so that the person in question trades on his or her state, but does not really live it as vocation.

⁶ See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050819_cologne-synagogue_en.html.

⁷ Compare *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, n.1272, ‘Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (character) of his belonging to Christ’.

Spiritual vitality depends on the extent to which a person's state is not only kept in mind, but also seen and lived as vocation. Only as lived vocation does it lead to a deeper relationship with God and so become a real response from the person to God's call. Here something of the nature of the professed religious state and its meaning for the Church can be recognised more clearly. Through the symbolism of lived vocation, religious life should and can make clear what it is to which God fundamentally wants to invite and empower



us through the two states in the Church given by the sacraments of baptism and ordination: to be people who respond more and more by their love to the love they receive from God.

The meaning of religious life for the Church lies in the symbolic quality of this lived response to God's acts of grace. It points thereby to the nature of every vocation and, precisely in this way, becomes a significant 'state in the Church' without being a distinct state in the strict sense. It is a vowed state, not only through liturgical celebration but also, and above all, because religious, through their lifelong readiness to give themselves, dedicate their whole lives to God.⁸ And it is a 'canonical state' through the approbation with which the Church not only confirms an institute at a particular time, but also offers its charism to other baptized people as a specific form of Christian discipleship, as a possible way of living their vocation. This exemplary function that religious have makes them appear in the eyes of many Christians as

⁸ See also the emphasis on 'consecrated life' in *Vita consecrata* (*Vita consecrata*, 1), while *Lumen gentium*, 45, speaks of the 'consecrated state'.

people who are called in a special way—though religious themselves know that they do not have any advantage over other Christians but, like them, depend entirely on God's grace for their spiritual vitality.

The Understanding of Vocation

The extent to which vocation can really be experienced as God's grace and gift depends essentially on the way it is understood or lived. Against the background of the biblical calling-stories much that is understood by vocation can seem clear, but in actual life all kinds of misunderstandings occur, which once more reduce vocation, in a negative way, to a matter of belonging to a state.

The attempt to take one's life in hand⁹ and to carry out one's plans is very much alive in today's society, and it can easily reduce vocation to a one-off experience or a once-and-for-all decision rather than a lifelong process. If people enter an order with this attitude, their lives will be dominated by the demands they have to meet in their chosen religious state. Although they may give up a great deal and live an outwardly ascetical life, they will not stop looking out for their own interests even in their search for perfection. In general, when this is the case, they will always experience religious life as something burdensome, or even too demanding, and hardly as a grace that they need and for which they are thankful in their heart of hearts.

As long as the apostles, after their first answer to Jesus' call, were stuck in the temptation to feel that they were the lords of their vocation—that is, until the passion—their vocation was often a burden to them, which made them doubt as they went along and finally drove them into flight or denial. The painful experience of their failure and the experience of the love of the risen Lord, who still gave them his full trust, enabled them for the first time, step by step, to see their vocation in a new light: they recognised that calling by God is the deepest expression of God's love and trust in us, with which God invites us to accept that love and so to become messengers of it. They recognised that it is not enough to offer God a row of external works in answer to the call, but that they should become 'answers' with their whole lives¹⁰—to

⁹ See Matthew 10: 39.

¹⁰ See in *Vita consecrata* the emphasis throughout on 'complete self-giving': 'The primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission' (*Vita consecrata*, 65).

be available for God, so that God might make use of them as instruments.

Hence vocation, all through life, is never something self-contained, nor something that can be reduced just to belonging to a state. Vocation is, rather, a living relationship, which has interiorly formed our life up to now, but which only remains alive to the extent that it is sought and experienced afresh every moment, which means that the readiness is there not to seek for self, but to give one's own life for God and for others. As a living relationship vocation remains essentially the same, but it will constantly show itself outwardly in new and different ways according to the situation. It is a mystery for people, which constantly brings new surprises.

Where vocation is not reduced to a state, but seen rather as living relationship with God, the unpredictability bound up with every relationship through the overall unpredictability of human life shows itself more clearly. To the extent that we struggle against this unpredictability, and try to plan our own lives, we will discover in many ways that the complete self-determination we seek is impossible, and will feel more and more like victims of circumstances. This will only strengthen our anxiety about our own lives, and therefore our defensiveness, making a real valuation of life more and more difficult.¹¹ The more, on the other hand, we are able to enter with full trust into vocation as lived relationship with God, the more we not only experience vocation as grace and gift, but also find deeper and deeper thankfulness and joy in our lives in all the specificity with which they confront us and challenge us to answer. God's call is fundamentally the invitation to lose one's own life for God's sake, and in that way to win it in truth; vocation lived as relationship sets us free from care about our own life, and so enables us to place it more and more at the service of God and of other people.

Grace—Love of God as It Is Experienced

The interrelation between vocation and grace has now become clear: vocation lived as relationship with God, as self-giving to God, allows us to experience our vocation more and more deeply as a gift and grace of

¹¹ Here the self-destructive effect of the temptation to want to win in life shows itself perhaps most clearly: it also destroys the vocation cultivated simply as state.

God. At the same time it is precisely the experience of grace that first makes us inwardly really free to be truly dedicated and totally to live out our own vocation.

When Paul speaks of grace, of course he expresses first of all his own personal experience of God, but then he expresses also a deep certainty of faith, which grew out of that experience.¹² As a devout Jew he had been entrusted from his youth with what he expresses later in his letters by the word *charis*, grace. He believed in God the Father, who had graciously turned to him, who had granted mercy to God's chosen people, and who had remained faithful to them despite all their own infidelity. It was entrusted to him, but as long as he lacked real experience of this grace, until his conversion-experience, he remained trapped in himself and imprisoned in the temptation to try to save himself through his own works.

In Damascus this grace received a face and a name for him: it is 'the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord'.¹³ In this experience Paul came to understand that it was not so much he who sought God and defended faith in God, but rather that it was God who constantly sought him and wanted to meet him and come close to him through Jesus Christ. Through his interior dialogue with this experience, Paul's vocation and mission as apostle became increasingly clear to him,¹⁴ but so also did his own human unworthiness.¹⁵ The grace of which he began to speak constantly from then onwards is expressed in its true nature particularly in his proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord: Jesus Christ has become our grace—he has made himself into grace for us.¹⁶

So, for Paul, grace does not remain on the level, as it were, of anonymous gifts, that people ask for in their prayers and then receive from God's Spirit; it is the gift of relationship with Jesus Christ. This means that Paul does not, in the first instance, describe as grace those accidental gifts that a person desires out of concern for self. Rather he emphasizes the one thing that is really necessary, and that we are not able to produce for ourselves even through the greatest effort: the

¹² In the context of this article there is no question of giving a detailed analysis of the concept, but only of highlighting some aspects that are important in this connection.

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:28; with this confession, and the wish that this grace 'may be with you', he concludes this letter, the first that he wrote.

¹⁴ See the openings to his letters: Romans 1: 1, 1 Corinthians 1: 1, Galatians 1: 1, and so on.

¹⁵ See 1 Corinthians 15:9.

¹⁶ See Romans 5: 2: 'through whom we have obtained access to this grace', and Romans 5: 12, 21.

restoration of the relationship with God lost by sin. Grace is our salvation—which lies in the relationship with Jesus Christ. Compared with this redeeming and liberating grace all human efforts and deserts are made relative, because this relationship greatly surpasses everything else, which appears in contrast ‘loss and rubbish’.¹⁷

The human response to this grace can only be a grateful and trusting acceptance of the relationship offered by God. In this way a person answers God’s call, to become God’s ‘property’ again in freedom; no longer to live for self, but completely for God.¹⁸ When vocation is lived in this way, as Paul lived it, the love of Christ, once experienced, becomes more and more a certainty of faith that shapes a person’s life, opening it to new experiences of his love and deepening vocation still more.

A person gives this response to God’s grace in baptism, acknowledging that he or she has recognised God’s love and wishes to believe in it.¹⁹ Accordingly vocation, as a human response, means the readiness to live out of the recognised love of God; but the resolve to do this also depends in turn on the depth of experience of this love.



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¹⁷ See Philippians 3: 7–11.

¹⁸ See Galatians 2: 19–20: ‘through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.’

¹⁹ See 1 John 4: 16: ‘we have known and believe the love that God has for us’. The encyclical *Deus caritas est* calls this word of John ‘a kind of summary of the Christian life’ (1).

Paul's experience makes the vitality of his faith understandable, a vitality which not only enabled him to confess Jesus as the Lord with great inner certainty and to proclaim him as Son of God made man,²⁰ but also to reach a deep understanding of the Cross as the wisdom of God.²¹

Anyone who has, like Paul, experienced the grace of this love, and who understands that Jesus Christ, through his incarnation and his death on the cross, has shared our life and so goes on his way with us, will have less and less anxiety about self, and will therefore be ready to share his life and follow his way. The experience of the grace of Jesus Christ will, in this way, become the following of Christ. It enables the growth of the desire and readiness to be conformed more and more to Christ,²² to be formed and penetrated by his love and to be capable of dedication to the service of other people. It gives inner freedom and enables us to accept life in its singular concreteness with gratitude and prove ourselves to be servants of God in everything.²³

Summing up, it can be said that the expression 'grace of vocation' makes it clear that vocation does not mean primarily an external way of life, but rather the human response to the lived experience of God's love. It is a response that we must give afresh at every moment of life, since vocation is a matter of lived relationship with God. And to the extent that we are open to God's love, we experience this call to be an instrument of that love not as an imposition but rather as an expression of God's trust and love, and therefore as a gift that makes our life inwardly free and enables us truly to live life to the full. In this way grace leaves indelible traces in people—and the more so, the more that they accept it in gratitude and freedom and seek to live out of this grace and to respond to it as vocation.

Charisms in the Church

Jesus begins his proclamation with the words 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near', and he teaches his disciples to pray 'Your kingdom come'.²⁴ He makes it clear that the vocations of

²⁰ See Romans 10:9 and Romans 8:3.

²¹ See 1 Corinthians 1: 18–2:9.

²² See Philippians 2: 5–11; Romans 8: 29: '... predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son'.

²³ See 2 Corinthians 6: 4–10.

²⁴ Mark 1: 15 and Luke 11: 2.

individuals are not the focus, but that it is God's will to make them into 'one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness'.²⁵ The individual's vocation, then, is always at the service of the people, at the service of the Church.

Just as Paul uses the expression 'charism'—'gift of grace'—in various contexts and it has various meanings for him, so the modern usage of this word has changed considerably since Vatican II.²⁶ Since it is not possible to go into all its meanings here, I shall limit myself chiefly to the way the word is used to describe the specific uniqueness of a particular institute of consecrated life, what is considered as the charism of the institute in question, going back to the founder.

The Charism as 'Way of Proceeding'

In its concern for the spiritual renewal of the Church, Vatican II clearly highlighted God's presence and constant activity within it: the Church is not merely a human institution, but the sacrament of salvation, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.²⁷ It is the particular work of the Holy Spirit to 'teach you everything, and remind you of all that [Jesus has] said to you',²⁸ which means that the Spirit leads us to knowledge of God's love and to the following of Christ.

Paul emphasizes love as the highest gift, and calls it the first among the fruits of the Spirit.²⁹ The Holy Spirit gives us love in a twofold way: on the one hand the Spirit enables us to experience God's love, and on the other the Spirit teaches us to live love ourselves. In this sense the charism of a religious congregation is to be understood as a gift through which God instructs us as to how we can and should live love in a specific way.

I want to make this easier to understand with an example. A mother who wants to teach her children how to love other people will teach them simple, definite ways of showing courtesy, of feeling trust,

²⁵ *Lumen gentium*, 9.

²⁶ See in this connection: A. Vanhoye, 'Il problema biblico dei "carismi" dopo il Vaticano II', in René Latourelle, *Vaticano II: bilancio e prospettive venticinque anni dopo (1962–1987)* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1987), volume 1, 389–413; M. Ruiz Jurado, 'Vita consacrata e charisma dei fondatori', in Latourelle, *Vaticano II*, volume 2, 1063–1083; and see also M. Esther Posada, 'Costituzioni: attenzione carismatiche', *Sequela Christi*, 2006/2, 193–203.

²⁷ See especially *Lumen gentium*, 1 and 12.

²⁸ John 14: 26.

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians 12: 31 – 13: 13, or Galatians 5: 22.



and so on. That is, she will try to convey to her children ways not only to express love in the formulas they have learnt, but to use those formulas to deepen love and enliven it.

In a very similar way through the charism of an institute, its special grace, God offers it the specific way in which it is to keep itself open to God's love and to live that love. So the charism of an order corres-

ponds to its manner of proceeding, or the way of life that God gave it through its particular founder. But the charism can only shape the identity of the congregation and promote the unity of the community to the extent that this way of living really characterizes how the individual members live their vocation, and to the extent that they have actually come to know the congregation's charism as *their own* manner of proceeding and to look on it as their own personal way of life. The understanding of the charism and interior acceptance of it further form all missionary activities, and thereby the congregation's whole mission.

To understand the charism of an institute of consecrated life more deeply there is still something else to note. It concerns a form which aims to and ought to convey content—the love of God. Since the specific form in which the charism of the founder reveals itself is determined by that person's perception and the historical and social background of his or her life, each institute must constantly seek for its charism afresh, and thereby the particular way in which it is to live Jesus Christ's love. In this it has to adapt the spirit of its origins to 'the changed conditions of our time', as the Council requires in *Perfectae caritatis*.³⁰ This must happen, so that the essential content and the highest rule—love and witness to that love in the living out of

³⁰ *Perfectae caritatis*, 2.

discipleship—do not fall out of sight, since if this content were lost, nothing would remain of the charism but an outward, empty form.

In the Service of the Church

There is no need to emphasize further that ‘Consecrated Life ... is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit’,³¹ and that religious congregations make their contribution so that the Church is ‘prepared for the work of the ministry—the building up of the Body of Christ’.³² The question to be considered is in what way the charisms of religious congregations are significant for the Church, and therefore what is important and decisive for preventing this significance from being put at risk or lost to the Church.

The greatest service that institutes of consecrated life are able to offer to the Church lies in their inner spiritual vitality. For that reason the renewal of religious life was not merely a passing concern of Vatican II, but remains always a task of great importance for the Church’s life. This task is first of all for the good of the order itself, because greater clarity about its own identity helps it to deepen the joy and gratitude of its members for their characteristic way of following Christ, and thus also to safeguard the unity of the community. Only in this way can a congregation help individual members really to experience vocation as grace and to discover deep joy and inner gratitude for it. Lack of clarity about one’s own charism, on the other hand, creates insecurity, paralyzes the life of vocation, and is a factor in creating mere outward conformity, not authentic living of that vocation.

As specific ways in which Christian faith is lived and deepened, the charisms of the religious orders are also important in helping and orientating many other Christians. Through their life and manner of proceeding, religious show other Christians how they can live out their baptismal vocation. The variety of charisms not only makes clear to the faithful the variety of ways in which Christian discipleship can be expressed, but also encourages them to seek for their own particular personal vocation. Precisely because the charisms of religious orders, authentically lived, help others to deepen their faith and vocation, the

³¹ *Vita consecrata*, 1; similar statements are to be found in many other places in *Vita consecrata*.

³² *Perfectae caritatis*, 1.

Church must preserve the wealth of charisms as far as possible. But this ought not to become an occasion for false anxiety, because this wealth is given as a grace from God, and only entrusted to the Church as a treasure. For this reason the Church must also be constantly alert for new approaches that might develop into new movements. Here, however, the task and the office of testing charisms and discerning³³ them are important, for not every way leads to the goal of following Christ.

Through their respective charisms as recognisable outward forms of Christian discipleship the religious orders are clear and important signs in the life of the Church. The message conveyed by the orders through their way of life supports the Church in its service, and the Church promotes religious life through liturgical celebrations, and through the approbation given to it as a vowed and canonical state which is to serve the faithful as a help and guiding principle in living their own vocation.

The orders can only fulfil this service in and to the Church, however, to the extent that they do not appeal to their particular state, and thereby set themselves above others, but understand themselves as still seeking their vocation, despite their vows and their life according to the evangelical counsels: seeking for their own charism, so as to deepen their vocation on this way which is characteristic of them, but also seeking for their vocation itself, out of the inner realisation that they are still far away from a perfect living of it, and therefore, like all others, can only pray that God will lead them further on their way with God's grace and complete the good work that God has begun in them.

The traditional understanding of religious life as a state of perfection to be acquired—*status perfectionis acquirendae*³⁴—can, although it speaks of 'state', similarly make it clear that religious life, seen as vocation, is not to be understood so much as an individual and, so to speak, 'third state'. Rather it is to be seen completely in the light of baptismal vocation: to share more in the 'being and form' of Jesus Christ.³⁵ Therefore it is desirable for the good of the Church and the building of God's Kingdom that, through their living efforts, religious

³³ See *Lumen gentium*, 12 and 30.

³⁴ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 186.

³⁵ See Romans 8: 29.

make visible, more and more credibly, what vocation basically means: giving witness to God's love, out of fullness of experience of that love, through a life of selfless dedication. So, in the future as up to now, religious life will be experienced as a state *in* the Church, because the Church needs to remind all Christians of the vocation common to all of us and to help them to understand it as unmerited grace—to understand that God has made us sharers in God's love, and so has made us, too, capable of loving.

Where charism is seen one-sidedly and vocation is not seen as a living answer to God's call, ever to be given afresh, religious life is stuck in outward formalism, set, in a negative way, in a state that only seeks and defends itself. Where, on the other hand, an attempt is made to live vocation without constantly looking back to the charism of the order approved by the Church, the final consequence of this arrogance is a loss of the orientation, always necessary, that God wills to give to everyone through the Church. A vocation detached in this way from charism can scarcely contribute positively, as it ought, to the building up of religious community and of the Kingdom of God. Because it does not genuinely accept God's gift it remains at the level of self-redemption, which prevents people from experiencing their own vocation really as grace and bearing witness to others that it is so. The whole spiritual dynamic of religious life lies in this tension between charism and personally lived vocation, grounded in the tension between what is continuing and what is constantly to be brought newly to life; it lies in creative fidelity, in a vocation lived completely in the spirit of the charism.

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