

# DISCOVERING THE FOUNDER'S CHARISM

By JOHN CARROLL FUTRELL

MANY THINGS have happened in religious orders and congregations since those Christians consecrated to the vowed religious life were called by the council to a renewal of the gospel ideal shaped by the particular vision of their founder, and to adapt their manner of realizing this vision in community life and work to the signs of our times.<sup>1</sup> Renewal chapters have met and have issued beautiful documents, in the language of the council and of contemporary biblical theology, to express religious ideals in current vocabulary. These documents also have given a mandate for bold experimentation in styles of life and in forms of apostolate. Religious men and women have been experiencing the difficulty of realizing these ideals in practice and of actually achieving the lofty goals of these experiments.

Inevitably, most communities began with a sometimes frenetic effort at adaptation, in the sometimes unconscious hope that out of this liberation from old structures, renewal of the spirit would happen almost automatically – as it were *ex opere operato*. This has not been the case. The good effects of the reform in externals have been many; but it has also in many instances led to confusion, polarization, a tendency to ‘throw out the baby with the bath water’, and a great deal of ambiguity concerning the meaning of the religious life and the reality of the vision of the founder. At the same time, the mass exodus from the religious life of many of their companions has left those religious who remain with a great desire to penetrate to the deepest dimension of their own reason for remaining; to gain insight into the shared charism from the holy Spirit originating in the founder, which has brought them together in a religious community. It is now becoming clear that authentic adaptation of their manner of life and of work to our own times can be accomplished only through authentic renewal of their spirit; and that this, in turn, depends upon the clarity of their understanding of the founder’s charism.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

This desire to discover the founder's charism, however, has itself produced some unhappy results. On the one hand, some religious, threatened by experiments for adaptation to modern times, tend to give way to the temptation to 'fixation': that is, they wish to identify the charism of the founder with the historically and culturally conditioned forms of its expression in the past, and thus, in the name of authenticity and of loyalty to the founder, to reject any radical change of structures. Other religious, impatient for immediate and revolutionary change, tend to seek to justify practically anything at all through a literal reference to the founder's charism, even when the change cannot possibly be in accord with it. There is an acute need, therefore, to find a way to identify and to describe accurately the charism of the founder as the one norm of discernment of new forms of its expression today. In this paper an effort will be made to clarify some of the issues involved in trying to discover the founder's charism.

The charism of the founder of any religious community is this charism as it is lived *now*. It does not exist in the air. It is not a myth or a pious ideal. It has no actual, lived existence even in the rule, or the constitutions, or in other historical documents expressing a past reality. If this charism has any real being at all today, it is because the holy Spirit is still operative by his presence and power within certain persons, calling them to the service of the people of God and of the world to which he originally called the founder through this gifted vision and dynamism. Any charism, we know, is a gift of the Spirit to an individual for the good of others. A specific charism is given at certain moments in the history of the Church to a person whose manner of reading the multi-dimensional gospel portrayal of the life of Jesus brings him to focus on some particular aspect of Jesus' life, leading him to follow Jesus and to serve others for his love in a particular way. The mode of receiving the charism is shaped, then, by the person's historical and cultural conditioning, as well as by his temperament, human gifts and limitations; all of which Christians recognize as the effects of God's active love in history.

Theoretically, any such charism is always time-bound. It does not co-exist with the Church, which is the permanent presence in the world of the whole Christ until he comes again. It is simply a graced way of seeing and of following Jesus for the service of the whole Church, which can cease to exist, if and when this vision and this service cease to be a true good for the Church. Here is one

reason why certain religious orders, once of great value to men, no longer exist. An honest attempt to discover the founder's charism, therefore, always implicitly contains the honest question: 'Is this charism still a true and valid form of service of the Church today?' If not, we should frankly say so, and seek to discern what new charism the holy Spirit may be giving to us. If it is still valid, then, we must seek truly to renew this charism within ourselves. Religious orders have also ceased to exist, even when their charism remained real, because none of the members were actually living it. Once more, the charism of the founder *exists* only in as much as it is lived now.

A person gradually comes to realize that he has been given the charism to be a founder when he recognizes that the way of following Jesus and the service of men to which he is called does not yet exist in this specific form in the Church. He is called to a beginning. Religious who join an already existing religious community do so because they come to recognize that their own charism is the communal charism of this community. A group within the Church is already reading the gospel as he reads it, and so he sees that he is called to join them in their communal actualization, here and now, of this charism which had its initiation through the holy Spirit in their founder: a charism so powerful, a response so appealing that it has attracted others and continues to do so. In order truly to clarify the meaning of his *own* personal vocation, therefore, anyone who believes himself committed to a religious community must discover the charism of the founder.

But is it really possible to identify the charism of a founder, especially if the founder lived hundreds of years ago? Or if, as is true of many nineteenth century apostolic congregations, the community was founded in a very *ad hoc* way for a specific work now no longer relevant? Furthermore, is it possible to differentiate among various religious communities of very similar ideals and works a specific charism which gives each its own individuality? For instance, is it not legitimate to identify the charism of *any* apostolic community as 'the apostolic service of Christ in companionship'? To answer these questions, it is necessary once more to recall that the charism of the founder of any religious community is this charism as it is lived *now*.

The first consequence is that the charism of the founder cannot be fixed in an abstract, verbal definition. To attempt to do so is to attempt to identify living, individual communities on the level of

theoretical 'natures'. But religious communities, like persons, are living organisms actualizing their own individuality through their own unique way of experiencing life and of integrating relationships. Just as Peter and Paul are irreducibly different as men, although either can be defined as in the old scholastic way as a 'rational animal', so the jesuits and the redemptorists are different religious communities, although both can be defined as apostolic. The founder's charism, as shared and lived by the members of the community today is a *mystery*, as is anything which is dynamic and alive. It cannot be defined. It can only be described, as we describe those presently visible characteristics of a living human being, by which we identify character and personality and history and body: by which we recognize him as an irreplaceable individual having his own face and name.

To discover the founder's charism, then, we must begin at the beginning. The founder is not a plaster saint or a legendary cultic hero. He was a man alive in his own skin when he received his charism, as we are alive in ours today. His life, the gradual unfolding of experiences which led him to recognize his call, his expression of his own vision of following Jesus and of serving men, are just as patient of historical research and documentation as is the life of any other historical figure. This is why not just anything can be called, for example, the society of Jesus of St Ignatius of Loyola, just as not just anything can be called the christianity of Jesus of Nazareth who lived and died and rose again in roman Judaea two thousand years ago.

The goal of this historical research is to discover and to describe as accurately as possible the founder's personal conception of the life and action of the community he founded. It is to identify and clarify the *profound intention* underlying the founder's historically and culturally conditioned expressions, in his own language, in his own time, of this intention. The purpose of this study is to be able to articulate, in the language of our own times, the authentic vision of the founder, in order to recognize the spiritual continuity of the charism originating in him with this same charism as it is lived today: across the radical discontinuity of its historical and cultural expressions. Now a researcher is also an historically and culturally conditioned person. He looks with time-bound and limited eyes at the time-bound and limited work of the founder. No one today can know the exact way that the founder himself thought and felt about the vocation and the dynamics and life of his religious community,

because no one today is the founder or lives in his epoch. Nevertheless, one can approach the profound intention of the founder through the historical documents relating to him, seeking thereby to take up again the dynamic movement of the charism of a man long dead. The research is always controlled by the documents and it is always a process. By expressing the profound intention of the founder in our own language, we gradually clarify it in the language of the founder. We recognize at the same time the unity (always partial) and the discontinuity within the ongoing dynamic movement of this charism.

But because the charism of the founder lived today in the community is a dynamic movement, the charism itself is not discontinuous. The vision of the founder initiates specific dynamics, which can be recorded. Nevertheless, because this dynamic movement is incarnated in radically new cultural patterns, it is not in its embodiment the same as it was in the time of the founder. Yet, because the founder lived the specific dynamic movement which the holy Spirit brought to being in him, the movement he inaugurated is irreversible and in some way always identifiable as *this* charism, which is realized partially in all of its successive and different incarnations in the ongoing life of the religious community. No historico-cultural expression of it (even that of the founder himself) fixes this movement once and for all. And yet, the dynamic movement remains the same charism.<sup>2</sup>

What is required first of all, then, in order to discover the founder's charism is the painstaking work of historical research. The communal charism of a religious community is a dynamic movement with a specific, historical origin, knowledge of which can be acquired. This research, however, must very carefully clarify the radical intentions of the founder which underlie his historically

---

<sup>2</sup> The investigation into the historical documents concerning the founder must be a continuing research of many themes and an ongoing dialogue among the researchers, according to the remoteness and the complexity of the evidence. No one interpretation can be definitive. Each must stand on its own merits and each must be questioned in the dialogue of research, always in reference to the historical documents through which we approach the founder. Each effort at research is limited at the same time as it seeks to be serious and authentic. As limited, each effort at research can be questioned by new research that enters into dialogue with it. This dialogue provides the evaluation of the research, at the same time as it opens up new fields for further research. An example of research into the charism of the founder by way of historical documentation is the writer's own unpublished doctoral dissertation, which has appeared in condensed form as the book *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of Superior according to St Ignatius of Loyola* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1971).

conditioned expression of it; because it is this intention that initiates the dynamic movement of the charism and its continuation through radically different forms of expression during the evolving life of the religious community. Thus, the founder's vision of a particular way to follow Jesus cannot be identified with the particular spiritual vocabulary of his own times used to express it; nor can the founder's ideal of apostolic service be identified with the particular works in which the ideal was incarnated during his own epoch.

For example, one religious congregation of women in the United States was greatly troubled by the fact that the foundress had expressly stated that the end of the Institute was the education of illiterate girls in rural areas. Since it is very difficult to find such girls in that country, the religious feared that perhaps the charism of the foundress was no longer relevant or real. Further research and reflection solved their problem by revealing her radical intention, necessarily expressed in terms of her own cultural milieu. She and her companions had gradually become aware that they were called to give their whole lives to Christ as consecrated virgins, but not as contemplatives. Rather, they were to seek to serve Christ in the human needs of his people, through those services traditionally called the corporal works of mercy. Since these young women were from a social class that provided education to its daughters at a time when this was a rare privilege, it was easily discerned that the way to live out this profound intention would be the work of educating girls deprived of such an opportunity. The founder was not a prophet of the future. She had no reason to speculate on possible social and educational developments during succeeding generations. Quite naturally, therefore, in writing down the ideals of her Institute, she described the concrete way of realizing her radical intention during her own life-time. But, having clarified the intention underlying her historically conditioned expression of it, the religious congregation today is able to seek to discern the radically different ways demanded by the signs of our times to realize the same profound intention now. Indeed, it is clear that the only way to be truly loyal to the foundress is to undertake the radically different apostolic works which alone can incarnate their community charism, originating in her, at the present moment in the movement of this charism across the years.

Essential though it is to discover the founder's charism, it is not enough to research and to document its origins. There must be an equally serious study of the dynamic movement of this charism,

through the years of the life of the community and its 'successive' incarnations up to the present moment, which is the only actual existence of the charism. This means that, in addition to historical research, there must be a conscious effort to help the actual members of the religious community to bring to the level of conscious awareness the charismatic call which they share and which they are experiencing and living; but which, perhaps, they have not yet clarified individually and corporately in the language of our own times. This is a problem of awareness and of communication, as the first problem is one of research and documentation.

Through seriously undertaking these efforts, a religious community should be able to discover the founder's charism and to express it in contemporary language as the ideal of spiritual renewal and the norm for discerning the necessary adaptation to the signs of our times. That is to say, these efforts should result in an authentic description of the individual physiognomy of a particular religious Institute. Historical research into the origins of the community charism in the gift of the holy Spirit to its founder will reveal a particular angle of looking at Jesus in the gospels, a special stress or emphasis upon a certain way of following him and a certain way of serving him in other people; all of which originated with the founder and which gives ever after to this community a special *élan* or *esprit de corps* shaping its own self-image and its image in the eyes of others.<sup>3</sup> Just as an individual person, who shares many of the same experiences with others, nevertheless receives these experiences in his own unique way, stressing certain elements, leaving others only implicit, shaping his way of perceiving reality and colouring his own consciousness and expression into an individual *personality*; in the same way a community's way of living

---

<sup>3</sup> Many apostolic congregations were founded during the last three centuries in response to a need for a particular form of apostolic service, often in areas of social services or of education. To become religious Institutes, these groups often adopted a classical rule: augustinian, benedictine, franciscan, dominican, jesuit, etc. The discovery of the founder's charism in these instances involves seeing how these classical spiritualities were *applied* in practice (whether or not this was explained theoretically) to the particular apostolic charism. There is a useful analogy here to the special way of following Jesus as he is multi-dimensionally presented in the gospels, which individualizes the great rules. A rich spirituality like that of St Augustine or St Francis or St Ignatius also has many dimensions. The various apostolic congregations which adopted a classical rule, necessarily, even if unconsciously, shaped its spirituality incarnationally for the apostolic end of *this* community, initiating the dynamic movement which, through the history of the congregation until today, is its own individualizing charism, giving the congregation its own face and name as distinct from all others.

the gospel life and engaging in apostolic service is shaped and individualized by the specific dynamic movement of its charism initiated within its founder by the holy Spirit. People recognize these individualizing differences in religious communities as they do in persons. We speak of franciscan ways, and benedictine ways, and dominican ways of spirituality and of apostolic service.

Furthermore, the ongoing, lived history of a given community delineates its own physiognomy. A man of forty is marked in his body and in his character by the personal experience and the relationships of his own life, many of which he shared with others, but all of which he experienced and integrated in his own unique way as his own. Consequently, he is identifiable to others and to himself as uniquely himself. The same is true of a community which has its own particular and individualizing history. This is why a religious community should look to its great personalities, its saints, to its most striking accomplishments and its most dramatic crises, in the same way as an individual looks to the peak experiences of his own life, as individualizing moments which give to it its own particular quality and uniqueness. For example, the personality of a Francis Xavier, the suppression and restoration of the order, and the other events in its community biography, shape the individual physiognomy of the society of Jesus in a way that differentiates it from any other apostolic Institute.

Finally, since the charism of the founder of any religious community is this charism as it is lived here and now, a religious institute is given its own unique individuality by that fact that it is *these* individual, unique persons, and not others, who at this moment share and live the charism. It is their particular relationships with each other, their ways of following and serving Christ as emanating from these relationships, which here and now incarnate the dynamic movement of the charism. To be anxious about the 'identity' of my own religious community, in comparison with other communities of basic and even detailed similarity in abstract formulation, is to be the victim of a theoretical, unreal, unexistential way of looking at reality, especially human reality.

The dynamic movement of the charism of a given religious community is a movement of organic life. As long as the charism is truly alive in living persons, it is a continuity of life originating from the founder, despite radical discontinuity in the forms of embodiment of this life. The same is true of all organic life. There is a continuity of life from the seed through the branch and the flower to the fruit,



even in a sequoia a thousand years old. There is a continuity of life in Peter, from the womb, through infancy and childhood and adolescence, through the years of self-actualization as a young man and an adult, and on into old age, until he dies. Yet, this continuity of personal life in Peter is embodied and expressed in radically different ways across the years, even in his own self-image. Peter, however, always sees his past with his present eyes: the eyes of the same Peter in all his different, successive moments. And the *meaning* of Peter's own past, far from being a possession acquired once and for all, is a dynamic movement of insight into a mystery which evolves with age and constantly takes on new dimensions. The continuity of Peter's *self* across all these different moments enables him to hold on to the memory of his past, even of previous self-images, so that in the light of his present moment, he can 're-make' the history which has carried him from the past to the present: the way in which, little by little, from event to event, his own view of himself has changed. The present arises out of the past, and the past is given its full meaning in the present.

The continuity of the dynamic movement of the founder's charism in a religious community depends not upon some necessary biological process, but upon the conscious, free taking up again of the dynamic movement of the founder's charism by the persons who are the religious community today. This organic process of continuity depends upon successive and inter-connected realizations of the same dynamic movement which had its charismatic origin in the founder by the power of the holy Spirit. For a religious community, as for an individual man, to take up one's past is at the same time the creative acceptance of one's present and of one's future. The religious institute, in its effort at authentic renewal, must look to its own past, read it, and interpret it, in order to create its future. The present is different from the past; but this looking to the past can overcome the difference through taking up again the dynamic movement of the charism of the founder; the movement is from him to the persons who are the religious community today.

What religious communities are called to do in the renewal of their spirit and the adaptation of their life to the signs of our times is really to re-found themselves. They are called to a *re-founding*, because they must communally discern the radically new ways of incarnating this charism in life and action to which the holy Spirit, speaking in events, calls them in the world today.