

CHARISM AND CONSTITUTIONS

By MARY MILLIGAN

RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS throughout the world are involved in the task of rewriting constitutions. Asked by the Church to recapture the original inspiration of their foundation, they are attempting to formulate constitutions which can articulate and sustain that inspiration in the present and into the future. They are struggling to incarnate the relationship between spirit and law, to bring to birth a law which expresses and gives form to the original dynamism of their community — a dynamism which has been carried on through the years in the community's fidelity, its mission, its 'sound traditions'.

Various objections to this task have been and continue to be raised within congregations: 'Since the gospel is the supreme law of all religious communities, could we not base our lives solely on the gospel and channel the time and energy needed for revising constitutions into some more fruitful apostolic pursuit? In rewriting constitutions, do we not risk paralleling the gospel with our own law?'¹ Such objections surely have the advantage of furthering reflection on the relationship between constitutions and the gospel. They also point up the need for a clear understanding of such realities as the charism, the spirit and the 'sound traditions' of a congregation. To grasp what is meant by 'charism', it seems to me, is to clarify the relationship between constitutions and the gospel. It is this reality of the charism, then — what is sometimes called the 'charism of the congregation' — that I would like to reflect on here.

Congregations exist because of the particular way a christian experienced the gospel and his or her own historical reality. At the origin of each religious congregation lies a personal spiritual experience to which the founding person gave a particular response. In some sense, grace acted at the point of intersection of the Word and the world in a person's life, and that grace, freely responded to, moved the founding person to act. The particular 'charism of foundation', then, (or charism of the congregation, as this grace is sometimes called

¹ Cf David Stanley's exegesis of this reference to *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2, *supra*, pp 28ff.

in its historical continuity), is the dynamic power of God acting within a person, urging that person to respond to certain perceived needs in the Church and society. That power manifested in the person attracts others who discover within themselves an affinity to the experience of the founding person.

Put more simply, the charism of foundation is a grace given to an individual or to several individuals, resulting in the existence of a 'community in mission' within the Church. To say that this grace is given to an individual or to several individuals is to attempt to express the diverse origins of religious congregations. Sometimes it is clear that a particular man or woman is the guiding figure in the foundation of a congregation. In other cases, the role of an individual is not at all clear. There may be an original group whose leader does not stand out from the others. Or a congregation may trace its origins to a founding event, or a 'founding experience'. In some cases it is necessary to distinguish a re-foundation at some point in the history of a group. Some founders or foundresses inscribed the life and mission of the congregation within a particular school of spirituality (for example, the franciscan and dominican congregations, or groups which branched off from already existing congregations). The founder or foundress of a congregation did not necessarily found a spirituality, but is the person who took the initiative for the existence of a particular group within the Church.

The original inspiration

In reflecting on the charism of foundation, I will distinguish three 'moments' in the process of foundation. These 'moments', not necessarily chronological, are first of all what Vatican II has called the 'original inspiration'. This inspiration is in some way expressed externally, in word or action. A second 'moment' (sometimes preceding the first) is the gathering together of a community, of a group of 'disciples'. A third 'moment' is what I have called 'institutionalization': that is, the articulation of values, goals and means in a stable form.

To look at the elements of the charism of foundation more closely, it seems to me that in the 'first moment', the original inspiration, there are three which are essential: a particular faith-vision, a sensitivity to specific needs, and the dynamism of charity. The faith-vision is the gospel perception of the founding person. Each Christian has his or her own way of perceiving the gospel. Each one of us receives it, hears it according to our own temperament, our own

background and education, according to the life of faith that is ours. Each of us achieves a personal synthesis of the Word which is both meaningful and motivating, having certain accents and emphases. Nourished at various sources — scripture, theology, prayer, world events, other persons — this synthesis provides a unity and a 'hierarchy' to all elements of our experience.

The founding persons perceived the gospel in their own particular way, with specific accents, emphases and axes. And their gospel perception coloured the way they saw everything else. Reflective of their own inner experience of God in Jesus Christ, their faith-vision accentuated a particular aspect of the mystery of Christ; it revealed a specific trait of the face of God. This personal understanding of the gospel was a sort of prism through which the founders and foundresses saw the specific concrete needs around them. As doers of the word and not merely hearers, they were led to respond concretely to their own world. That response sometimes took the form of flight or protest; more often it took the form of intense involvement in works of mercy: in education, nursing, social services. The works undertaken by a congregation, then, sprang in some way from a faith-vision, from an original gospel inspiration.

For apostolic congregations, it is perhaps the understanding of *salvation* that is the key element in this faith-vision. Just as a profound vision of salvation underlies each one of the gospels and influences the way each evangelist speaks of Jesus's mission, so the founding persons' understanding of salvation influenced the mission and ministries of their congregations. Whether the 'work of salvation' is seen as liberation, as healing, as revelation of the Father, as reparation, makes a great difference in the life and mission of a congregation. The type and quality of presence and service of members of a congregation will be influenced by their common vision of salvation.

The needs of one's times are not just accidental to the charism. If this gift of the Spirit is given for the good of the Church, then the specific needs of the Church are integral to the charism. It is no accident, for example, that so many congregations arose in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, at a time when the needs of the Church and society were overwhelming. Religious congregations came into existence to respond to the physical, spiritual and moral needs of people. They were born at the point of intersection of Word and world, at the point where a particular faith-vision was brought to bear on an existential historical situation. It is there that this mysterious reality which resists definition and which we call

charis or charism was operative. The grace of the Spirit animated the founding persons and enabled them to act according to their own faith-vision. There may have been others who had the same intuition but who never acted to found a community. Even the founding person at this 'first moment' may not have intended to found a congregation. He or she may simply have wished to respond to certain needs through a christian and salvific quality of life and service.

When considering the response given by founders and foundresses to the needs of their times, it is important to remember the 'point of intersection' of Word and world. In other words, their response to concrete needs came out of a particular vision of salvation, out of a personal understanding of the human person redeemed in Christ. They knew that to free persons *from* misery and ignorance was to free them *for* a total response to God in love. The response they envisioned, therefore, had to do with a quality of life and of relationship, as well as with concrete service. They had grasped — often intuitively — that to do the works of mercy is to reveal the God of mercy; that the divine compassion is reflected in human compassion. The personal holiness of the members of the congregation was, in some sense, a *sine qua non* of their service.

There was, consequently, a great unity in the founders' and foundresses' vision of service. Because of this unity of vision, they often presupposed what later generations felt it necessary to explicitate: the relationship between service and holiness. This is especially evident in the statement of the 'object of the Institute' found in many original constitutions. Often the end or object is stated as 'the salvation of souls' or 'the works which could contribute to the salvation of souls'. In the nineteenth century, ecclesiastical authorities asked congregations to distinguish the 'primary end' (personal sanctification) from the 'secondary end' (the salvation of souls). Earlier founding communities had experienced and lived these two 'ends' in great unity. They understood that to do the work of God, to participate in the mission of Jesus Christ, required a deep life of faith, a life of union with God. Founders and foundresses saw the life of the evangelical counsels as capable of fostering this faith and holiness as truly redemptive in itself. Mission and the life of poverty, chastity and obedience were intimately linked in their vision.

The gathering of a community

In the founding grace, there is an attractive quality, an ability to attract others and to share the gospel vision and perception of society's

needs. This attraction constitutes a 'second moment' in the establishment of a congregation. The faith vision and concrete response of the founding person provoke a response in other persons who, because they share the same basic evangelical concerns, choose to associate themselves to the founding person. The life and experience of that person find an echo in the spiritual experience of his or her 'followers'. There is a very real affinity between the founding person and those who devote themselves to the nascent community. This affinity is 'spiritual' in the true sense of that word — from the Spirit who powerfully moves the initiator and likewise creates the same sensitivities in others. These persons recognize that the spiritual and apostolic vision of the founding person is able to encompass, express and support their own faith-vision. Thus it is that a community is born.

Among the persons sharing a common faith-vision and a common concern for mission, a certain spirit is created. What is the relationship of this 'spirit' to the charism of a congregation? Are the terms 'charism' and 'spirit' interchangeable? Do they denote the same reality? Surely, charism and spirit are closely related. They are, however, distinct. The term 'spirit' implies an experience of and a response to revelation as grasped personally and expressed interpersonally.

When describing the term 'spirit', it seems necessary to distinguish between the spirit of the founding person and the spirit of the congregation, since in both contexts the term indicates a slightly different reality. The spirit of a person is that reality, very difficult to describe, which gives that person a particular sensitivity and capacity to perceive reality, and to act in accord with that perception. Louis Cognet has called it 'one's interior attitude in regard to God, to the Church and to other members of the congregation'.²

The spirit of a founding person can be communicated to others through writings. How often founders and foundresses carried on a voluminous correspondence with the members of their congregations! And they frequently supplemented their correspondence with treatises and conferences destined to transmit and deepen a 'spirit' within the members. These writings transmit chiefly the ideal behind the spirit: that is, the gospel-vision intimately related to the spirit of the founder or foundress. The spirit of the founding person is also and especially communicated through his or her own life and person. Each individual

² Cognet, L.: 'Qu'est-ce que l'esprit d'une congrégation', in *Session des Supérieures Générales* (France, May 1966), p 6.

member of a community is called to share this spirit, this interior attitude. Sharing in the same spirit creates what Louis Cognet again calls a 'collective mentality',³ which presents a unity and a continuity in both space and time. This collective attitude, a reality in itself, is called the 'spirit of the congregation'. It has a direct relationship to the spirit of the founder or foundress, and in some sense is identified with it. It is fundamentally a way of perceiving reality and responding to it; it expresses itself in relationships within the congregation itself and with those outside it. These relationships have a certain quality which can be recognized, perceived and felt rather than defined. An analogy might help to clarify the reality of this 'spirit'. One might take two families consisting of mother, father and three children, coming from the same social and ethnic background, living in the same location, involved in the same profession, schools and community groups. Exteriorly, these two families might appear to be the same. One would only have to be with each of them a short time, however, to discover that they act out of different values, that they see life quite differently and relate to one another very differently. Sensitivity to the interaction among persons would reveal the 'quality of life' of each family. It is this 'quality of relationships', based on shared values and shared vision, which is the elusive 'spirit' of the family.

The spirit of a congregation originates in a sharing of the same fundamental faith-vision. It is the 'collective attitude' essentially related to the gospel perception of the founding person and, therefore, to his or her charism. 'Spirit' is the way members of a congregation relate to one another out of their common faith-vision and tradition, their common values and ideals. These common values and ideals make a difference because they do influence the way members relate to one another. Spirit, then, is the interpersonal living out of 'charism'. This is obviously not a definition but an attempt to describe what is meant when we use the word 'spirit'.

The various practices and structures of a community have a great deal to do with the creation and continuation of its spirit. When a community determines the relationship between contemplation and action in its life, it comes to a decision out of its own vision of salvation, and how members of the congregation are to participate in the 'work of salvation'. A strong accent on reparation, for example, may not express itself in the same way as a strong accent on healing or

³ *Ibid.*, p 7.

liberation. Decisions regarding contemplation and action will spring from the fundamental vision of life. Whether 'community' or 'apostolic activity' will be the focal point in the life of the congregation is also a decision that springs from its faith-vision.

The common vision and values of a group will, therefore, influence its structures, structures which in their turn will affect the spirit of the congregation. The accent given to community life and relationships, to institutional apostolates, to local or international apostolates, to diversity, for example: all of this will have a bearing on the spirit of a congregation. The spirit is not contained in a vacuum or in a text but within human persons who are affected by their environment, who are formed by their experiences and surroundings. It is these persons in whom the spirit of the congregation lives and is communicated.

Institutionalization

I have spoken of the first two 'moments' in the coming to birth of religious congregations. These moments are the original inspiration and its implicit or explicit expression, and secondly the gathering of the founding community. A 'third moment' is the 'institutionalization' of the charism. This institutionalization is for the sake of the community itself. Any apostolic group living together will have to ask itself the questions: 'Why are we here together? What do we hope to do together? What kind of structures do we need to foster our common vision, our shared life and mission? How do we express our bond with one another? Are there certain things which are essential to our existence as a community, which we need in order to be who we are called to be and to do what we are called to do?' The articulation of its life helps the group to have a clear goal and a coherent ideal. Once gathered together, a community lives and reflects on its shared vision and mission; it seeks ways of stabilizing meaningful forms of prayer, asceticism and activity which will sustain a vocation now become a 'community vocation'. There is at this point an effort to articulate the group's experience, to reflect on it and judge what best fosters the group's common vision and mission as well as the bonds of charity among the members. The articulation of the group's experience and vision serves as an ideal and a support for the present members.

One of the ways of articulating the community's vision and the means necessary to sustain it was through constitutions. Foundational documents were not meant to crystallize forms and practices so that

they became unchangeable. They were meant to express clearly the faith-vision of the group and to express the ways that could assure continuity in the community's quality of life and service. They were means to foster continual conversion, growth and response to need. Internalized by each member, constitutions were a guarantee of the evangelical quality of the life and service of the community. It is this evangelical quality which the Church officially recognized through its approbation of the constitutions of a given congregation.

If constitutions played an important part in sustaining the ideal of the present members of the community, they were likewise intended to make the experience and vision of the founding group available to future generations. Members who might enter the community in the future would be called not to conform their conduct to a written law, but through the accumulated wisdom expressed in the letter, to capture the spirit which brought that law into existence. The written word was meant to be an invitation into the life and experience of the community.

We know that in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first three of the twentieth, the constitutions of religious congregations underwent a massive evolution. A strong centralizing tendency in the Church required that the constitutions of religious congregations conform to certain norms, the same for all congregations. Revisions dictated by the legal code of the Church at times drained constitutions of much of their originality. Much of what was distinctive in congregations — a fourth vow, for example — disappeared. Henceforth it was the 'secondary aim' of the congregation which was to differentiate it, the 'primary aim' generally having become uniformly crystallized as the 'personal sanctification of its members'. Often, however, the secondary aim was a statement of the existing works of a congregation, and so tended to produce a misleading identification between the mission of a congregation and its works.

This identification of the mission or object of the congregation with its works led to an incomplete understanding of the charism of the congregation, which was sometimes identified with the works themselves. At times, a congregation's identity became tied to its works — works which were often institutions. Schools and hospitals were seen as a community's 'charism'. Perhaps this identification was an implicit attempt to express the fact that the charism of a congregation implied an ecclesial *mission*. The charism is given for the good of the Church; and it inevitably carries a mission with it. In fact, though, both charism and mission are realities which are much broader than their

concrete expression in a particular ministry, even though in some few cases a specific ministry may be an essential expression of that charism. 'Charism' encompasses a congregation's shared faith-vision, its shared values and their expression in the life and mission of the congregation. Particular works are an expression of the charism, a revelation of the congregation's fundamental call.

Founders and foundresses grasped this relationship. Many of them expressing it in terms common to their own age, spoke of the Work and the works. As one founder has written: 'You are associates of the apostles in the great Work of re-establishing the Kingdom of God. That is the Work; all the rest is only a means'. All 'works' of the congregation are a participation in the one Work of salvation.

Sound traditions

In referring to the heritage of each community, *Perfectae Caritatis* mentions its 'sound traditions'. Once again, it is the reality of 'charism' which throws some light on what are called 'sound traditions'. During the course of history, many factors, both external and internal, have influenced the evolution of religious congregations. The sociological laws operative in all human groups have not spared religious congregations, nor have the strong influences of culture and society. Religious groups have experienced the hardening of structures, the narrowing of vision, the limitation of scope, the defensiveness and triumphalism which characterized many human and ecclesial communities in the not-so-remote past. They have experienced as well the uniformity and levelling imposed by a climate of legalism and centralization within the Church, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And yet in spite of a certain 'myopia', the fundamental vision was not lost; the powerful apostolic energy inherent in the charism was never quenched. On the contrary, it expressed itself in ways of extraordinary effectiveness.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the apostolic dynamism of religious congregations often expressed itself in the creation of institutions. In an age where social and religious understanding of woman's role placed her firmly 'behind walls' in home or convent, generations of women religious could live fully at the service of others without ever leaving the confines of either hospital or school. Within the apostolic congregations, 'charitable institutions' in some sense replaced the monastery, allowing religious to meet the needs of their society while at the same time living a life which was understood to be 'cloistered' or 'semi-cloistered'.

Reflecting on the historical development of congregations, which traditions — or perhaps more importantly, which 'evolutions' — are to be considered sound? A basic touchstone in such discernment is, it seems to me, the charism of the congregation. To determine which historical developments are an authentic expression of the charism, mission and spirit of a community is to determine which ones are 'sound'. This, however, is not yet to say whether or not they are to be continued. To discern those to be fostered in the present and the future requires attentiveness to the signs of *these* times, an attentiveness which is an element of the charism.

One of the marks of the charism of foundation is necessarily creativity and adaptability. If the charism stands, as I believe it does, at the inter-section of Word and world, then those who live it must be constantly attentive to both of those realities. Congregations came into existence to bring a response to certain needs, and that response was new and creative in the sense that founders and foundresses judged that no one else was giving it. The responsibility of the present generation is *not* to carry the concrete works of the first generation into the future, but to continue to stand at the precarious point of intersection of Word and world, to continue to respond to the needs of their own times out of a faith-vision and a tradition which nourishes them.

As an example, the contemporary sensitivity to the poor is an area which touches very closely on the question of tradition, and its evaluation in the light of the charism of the congregation. It is a fact that many congregations founded for the poor, or to undertake works 'with a preference for the poor', found themselves in the second half of the twentieth century either totally divorced from the materially poor or with an overwhelming preponderance of their personal and financial resources at the service of the wealthy and middle classes. Such an evolution had been effected by a variety of historical factors, perhaps even by the apostolic effectiveness but accompanying lack of mobility of certain congregations. For example, it happened at times that a community originally went to a poor population which later, to a large degree through the social or educational efforts of the religious, shifted from poor to middle class. Most often the community remained in that location, and the religious found themselves distanced from the poor. A similar phenomenon was that of the institution. Apostolates in the early part of this century tended to be institutional. Any institution — schools and hospitals in particular — tends to become a population 'centre'. The poor, on the other hand, tend to be

marginalized. And so, once again, some congregations found themselves removed from those they were meant to serve.

In assessing today one's presence among the poor, the original intention and the vision of the community are extremely important. 'Whom are we meant to serve? Among whom are we meant to minister — and be ministered to?' But while the original intention is important, so also are the 'signs of the times'. The contemporary call of the Church, the imbalance of the contemporary world, make active concern for the poor essential for all congregations. Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio*, did no violence to the charism of any particular congregation when he called *all* religious to respond to the cry of the poor. The proclamation of the gospel to the poor remains a sign of the kingdom: and in its focus on the world through the prism of its own faith-vision, no congregation can ignore the distressing reality that a vast number of people constituting the human family are being impoverished by the wealthy few.

Expressing the charism in constitutions

To formulate in texts the original intuition, incarnated and held as an ideal by the present community, is no easy task. The world of today, its values, its language, its world-view, are not those of past ages. It is not a question today of doing the same works that the founder or foundress did, but of embracing the same ecclesial mission. It is a question of incarnating *together* a particular perception of the gospel message and finding in that message a motivation for the service of others.

Writing new constitutions presupposes first of all a context of faith. Basic to such a task is the conviction that the Holy Spirit gifted the founding person for future generations as well as for his or her own. That same Spirit has continued to sustain the gift within the Church through past generations and into the present. While a congregation must surely be courageous enough and faithful enough to ask honestly whether the Lord wishes to continue his gift to the Church through this group — or rather if this group's life and mission continue to be a gift to the Church — the very life and health of a congregation would lead one to venture an affirmative response. And if the congregation exists today, it is to be understood that the gift resides primarily *in its members*. Constitutional texts, as has often been stated above, are an attempt to express and sustain that gift lived within the community.

The charism of foundation, by its very nature, implies a certain continuity. Each generation does not re-create the congregation. Formed by the common spirituality and mission of the group, inheriting their common past and traditions, the present generation comes to maturity in faith and freedom by assuming and integrating that past, not by denying it. Just as a mark of an individual's spiritual maturity is the recognition and acceptance of the reality of the person's own history, so it is with a group. The past has been formative of what the group is in the present. The more clarity one can bring to bear on that past, especially in terms of the Lord's saving action, the greater the possibility of freedom and responsibility in the present. If openness to the future is conditioned by openness to the past, then for a community to be in touch with its roots can release an apostolic dynamism and freedom which is a true source of renewal. The clarity of the original intuition, sometimes blurred in the course of history, can throw light on the path to the future.

How does a congregation look at its sources in the light of today's world? How can the particular gospel intuition of the founding community be revived and expressed today, so that it can sustain the religious on the uncharted and complex paths of the future? How does a congregation look at the world through the evangelical prism of its own sources? Any revision of constitutional texts which considers the present moment only, without a clear consciousness of its past, is like a person suffering from amnesia and therefore from a crisis of identity. While the past is not the focus of our regard, it is a *locus* for discovering God's power acting in his Church through a particular congregation, and is by that very fact an element in the discernment of God's call in the present and in the future. The 'dynamic memory' of a group helps it to be faithful to what it is, and who it is called to be in the present and future.

One of the primary tasks of those undertaking constitutional revision would seem to be to acquire an understanding of the original graced reality of the congregation, which continues to be the source of the life and mission of its members. Sensitivity to the charism as experienced and lived today, in a multiplicity of circumstances and places, can help to discover that same charism in original source documents. Constitutional revision must spring from a constant dialogue between the experience of the *power of the Spirit today* and a recognition of that *power in the origins* of a congregation. The reading of the sources is illuminated by existential experience, just as that same experience is clarified by an understanding of the sources.

Writing constitutions, then, is not simply a repetition of texts and formulae from the past, with minor adaptations to contemporary reality; neither is it an expression of the present-day situation sprinkled with foundational phrases. As in most human tasks, it involves the integration of two movements — in this case, towards the past and towards the future. The tension between past and future must somehow find its resolution in the persons of those who draw up the revised texts.

The revision of constitutional documents is the responsibility of the whole community. If one truly believes that the entire congregation transmits the Spirit's gift to the Church, then it is the entire congregation which must try to articulate its experience of that gift, of that power of the Spirit. Those who have the task of formulating the texts are ultimately responsible to the whole congregation. They are merely the scribes — essential ones at that — of a community which has perceived and articulated its stance at the point of intersection of Word and world, of the past and the future, of the law and the Spirit.