

The Call to Live a Charism



A call to religious life is a call to a special life style, one guided by the principles of spirituality and apostolate that is at the heart of a given Institute. Each institute has its own charism to give to the Church and responding to the specific call of an Institute may be seen as living a certain charism.

The word charism has its roots in a Greek word meaning gift. In our context it refers to a special gift of God granted to a person for the benefit of the Church. Founders are known for their particular charism born of their personal experience of God and made clear through a spiritual inspiration coming from God. St. Vincent Pallotti had such an inspiration on January 9, 1835. He remained acutely aware of the graces God had lavished upon him and as a gift received is a gift to be given, Vincent devoted his life to putting his gifts at the service of the Church.

Those who join the Pallottine family are encouraged to reflect upon the personal gifts which we have freely received from God and how they might be put to use for the good of our particular institute and in service of our foundational charism.

Each of us at a certain moment in our lives heard the Lord call us to a different lifestyle, to something more than being an ordinary Christian. We felt ourselves attracted to the Pallottine religious life, — a mystery of divine grace! A vocation, in fact, is always a gratuitous gift initiated by God who calls whom he wishes and when he wishes.

During the initial formation period, the candidate is invited to enter into herself. In this work of introspection she discovers, contemplates and reads her own personal history which is a constellation of inspirations, gifts and talents; at the same time she becomes aware of the coexistence of shadows and limitations. And yet, God does not abandon her, but makes her see a great light in between which is capable of overwhelming her whole life: it is the charism, the spiritual inheritance left by the Founder. St. Vincent did not limit himself to giving us this gift of a rich spiritual inheritance, but he also "sealed" it with the testimony of his life.

The formative process is attained starting from three fundamental pedagogical principles: to educate, to form, and to accompany.

To educate – means "to lead forth, "to cause something to emerge". It consists of helping a person acquire awareness of her own personal truth, to help the person to know herself in order to give the best of herself to God and to the charism. Formation is more formal at the beginning but it is a life-long process of self-discovery, of facing the truth with its positive and negative dimensions in order to accept and assimilate the graces God offers to all who serve Him..

To form – means to propose a model, a new way of living, a new identity that the religious is called to

embody. It is the moment of choosing the ideal self, an option for the fundamental charism. It implies an opportunity which opens a new phase of life.

To accompany – involves the dimension of the self in relation to others. Accompaniment involves serving as a kind of stimulus to bring a vocation to fulfillment in community. The call to live a charism is an invitation to respond with one's total being to the call of the Spirit.

A person who is drawn to an Institute discovers, by the grace of the Spirit, a particular harmony between her deepest self and a specific form of following Christ. It is as if a mysterious attraction makes her recognize her own identity in this particular way of imitating Christ: what is called "being hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). From that moment on her whole existence and her dedication is aimed at achieving this identification. Her life in Christ, now understood from this special perspective, is the treasure hidden in the field: whoever discovers it goes, sells what she has in order to buy that field, not only the treasure, so great is its value (Mt 13:44-46). The sense of belonging to the Institute comes from embracing and embodying its charism and spirituality. Because we are called to identify ourselves with Christ the Apostle, we can travel no other road but that of making his way of life our own. As Pallotti exclaimed: "*Let my life be destroyed and the life of Jesus Christ be my life: his love be my love.*" (OOCC X p.618).

The act of embracing, loving, and assuming the charism of the Institute as her own makes the member capable of loving the Community as it is; to regard it as her religious family, to accept her fellow-religious with their riches and limitations, because beyond the differences there is a common project, sustained by God and confided to every person for the good of many. As a result, through her consecration every religious is entrusted to the Institute and the Institute is entrusted to her in such a way that both become responsible for each others growth, that of each individual sister and that of the whole Institute. Here Pallotti's words become meaningful: each member of the Union of the Catholic Apostolate must feel responsible as if he or she were its Founder (OOCC III p.29).

Today we speak about creative fidelity and continual discernment regarding the mission and the charism. Pope John Paul II, in his document *Vita Consacrata* (VC - Consecrated Life) affirms: "*Creative fidelity consists in courageously proposing anew the initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world. It is an appeal to adapt forms to new situations in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the Church's discernment.*" (VC # .37).

The consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the new creature she feels within herself. "*At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness*" (VC 69). "all these elements are united in the dimension of the charism proper to each Institute, as it were in a synthesis, which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects, not only apostolic but also ascetical and mystical." (VC 71).

Identity lived at the personal level forms the basis for the congregational identity. The charism left us by the Founder becomes our charism and we are responsible for its realization in the Church. The fact that we have chosen religious life requires renouncing our personal plans in order to take on, together with our fellow-religious, the plans of Christ, the Apostle of the Father, for our Congregation.