

FROM "SHARING THE MISSION" TO "LIVING THE CHARISM" IN A FAMILY

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SUMMARY

This article discusses the need for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to go forward in its discussion and move beyond the idea of sharing the charism with the laity, starting from some questions that emerge from various points of departure, ecclesial assumptions and horizons, in order to look at the strengthening of a charismatic Lasallian family with its own characteristics, as a place of growing in identity and to develop the mission.

Key words: association, charismatic family, identity, mission, communion, brother.

1. Sharing the mission based on a charism

A little more than twenty years ago the following expression was becoming popular in Lasallians circles: *shared mission*. Today it is already an expression heard in ecclesial circles. Much more recently, another expression, "*sharing the charism*" is less accepted. Both expressions are mutually enlightening and are, in fact, inseparable. But it was the awareness of "sharing the mission" that has awakened in us the need to... *transmit*, or rather, to *share* the mission, because without this, which is the spirit of the mission, there remains only the task.

When speaking about "shared mission" it has often been the case that the reality to which we were referring was simply a shared task, even though that task were one of education or even Christian education. Even more frequently the sharing was limited to what went on inside the walls of a school, without it reaching the religious community or without the responsibility of those who shared the mission feeling alluded to by the calls coming from the mission that goes beyond the educational work.

Many of the chosen paths of the *shared mission* in recent years by congregations devoted to education have been easy ones and therefore they have also had short-term results. What was not kept in mind is that an authentic shared mission includes *sharing the charism*. It is this type of path where questions arise, such as: "What happens to second generation teachers who have never known the presence of men or women religious in the school?" This is the sign that what was done was "transferring" or "handing over" or perhaps even "transmitting" but it did not really reach the level of "sharing." A school is transferred, ideas, a history and even some feelings are transmitted. But a spirit can only be *shared*. The spirit to which we refer, the *charism*, can only be granted by the Spirit (the divine Person). It is up to us to share it, because this charism is lived in communion and it does not exist on the margin of communion.

If Lasallian educational works have been able to maintain a spirit for a long time, it is because they were integrated into a network of relationships where this spirit was shared. When an educational work or, more exactly, its teachers cease to belong to that network of relationships that share the

spirit, the spirit also disappears, even though this generation that has been in contact with the "network" might be able to maintain a series of reflections, a style, some criteria, some motivations...All of this evaporates quickly without the blood or the spirit that comes from the charismatic network. Today we call this network of relationships that share the same charism in Church-Communion the "*charismatic family*."

"Shared mission" that does not create a *family* is a frustrated mission. That "second generation" of teachers that enters a school and does not find the family to ensure the spirit, or the charismatic blood of the school, is a generation that will assist in closing the school, at least in terms of a "school that bears a charism."

We will have to, then, ask ourselves about the roads we are following: where they come from and where they lead, what assumptions do we start from and toward what horizon do we directed. The roads contain the options that, consciously or unconsciously, we have made, and they point out the goals which, in principle, we should reach. What is obvious is that we cannot aspire to some goals that are not considered by the roads we have chosen.

2. A road of needs and options

Our road is made up of the needs that push us and the options that we ourselves take. When external needs are the only stimulus for going forward, the road becomes suspect. It is undeniable that, in the sociological context, the transfer of founding charisms to the laity is suspiciously united to aging and the scarcity of vocations of corresponding religious institutions, at least in European and other countries in the financially developed world. Might this not be a simple way of compensating for the lack of religious in works proper to the institution? Some people think this way and their suspicion is confirmed when the "shared mission" is reduced to a simple participation in tasks and the handing over of posts of responsibility.

But it is also true that the need to turn to lay persons to sustain works has obliged religious congregations to think about the possibility of forming them in the spirit or charism of the institution, considering that the works they may animate might lose their reason for being because they have been stripped of the charism. When they have begun to do this that have found proof that lay persons, once formed and motivated, can live the founding charism and keep it alive in corresponding works.

It is then when the road begins to take on reliable options, because they come from criteria that are not circumstantial; they are based on a deeper reality, a less "sensitive" one, which corresponds to Church-Communion. These options are not "re-active" ones, since they try to preserve or prolong a past, no matter what; but they are "pro-active" since they point to a new and positive horizon, towards which we should direct ourselves decisively.

Let us summarize these criteria that will help us on the journey:

1st When we make the effort to transmit or share the charism we put the mission in the context of communion, or more precisely, in the "mystery of communion" that defines the very essence of the Church, and we enter into a dynamic of communion that reaches all who participate in the mission.

2nd If we share the charism we enter into a spirituality that discovers the meaning of the educational mission and we also participate in the ecclesial ministry to which the charism refers.

3rd The mission that we share based on the charism is the mission of the Church, the unique mission that exists in the Church and which all members of the Church share. It is the work of evangelization in all its plenitude, that seeks to liberate and save human persons considered in all facets.

4th The charism that we share for the service of the mission is the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is the authentic protagonist of the mission of the Church. It is the Gift that has been given to the Church for its mission, and it is made manifest in various charisms, small ones and great ones. At the same time it is the free Being par excellence, it is like the wind: it blows where it will, it does not stop at the borders of the institutional Church but it pushes against the borders so that the Church continues towards the plenitude of God's Kingdom.

3. The horizon is clarified as one advances

To the extent that these criteria would dictate our choices, the "shared mission" goes on to broaden the horizon, in this way:

- In the most reduced version "shared mission" is limited to participation in tasks within the educational work (or to the "handing over of keys" and functions due to aging or the disappearance of the school's religious personnel). Hence it goes from "sharing the Institute's mission," where it is a given that lay persons basically come to collaborate in this mission which is "the Institute's," or the Brothers'. The Institute continues to be the guarantor of the mission and, therefore, the Brothers continue to be the ultimate ones in charge of the pursued ends of the educational work. Responsibilities are ceded to lay persons, who are always dependent on the religious and those who want to participate in "the spirit of the Institute" are associated "with the Institute."
- In a more advanced phase, the mission that is shared is "the mission of the Church," the unique mission in which both Brothers and lay Christians are called to collaborate together, on the same level, with no precedence of one over another. Each one contributes his own personal charism, his way of living the Christian life.
- Finally, the mission breaks through the borders of the Church and becomes "the mission of the Kingdom of God," in which all believers of other religions participate and are invited to participate, all men and women of good will. There are many values and objectives that may be held in common between one another with regard to the fulfilment of the person and of society.

In parallel form, the "transfer of the charism" has an enriched meaning. We can distinguish these successive stages:

- Firstly some aspects of the spirituality of the Institute are shared with lay persons, perhaps those who could help to better fulfil the tasks of the mission. Anecdotal aspects or examples from the life of the Founder are contributed.
- Then there is talk about lay persons coming to participate in the "spirit of the Institute." It is a somewhat mysterious expression but it no doubt has a more global trait than the previous one. Certainly the Institute continues to occupy the centre position and the life of the Brothers is not especially affected by the arrival of lay persons, but some Brothers accompany the lay people in acquiring the spirit of the Institute. On this level lay people

already have discovered that the Founder of the Institute is also their Founder because he shows them a special way of seeing life and living the mission. It is this experience that pushes them to the next step.

– *Charisms of the Church.* The most decisive leap in this evolution, not the last one, happens when we begin to accept the idea that the charism of the Institute, as the *founding charism*, belongs to the Church. This step is difficult: you have to separate the concept of "founding charism" from the concept of "religious life project," and this is not always clear. But we begin to recognize the founding charism as a "path for living the Gospel," or as "a global way to live one's Baptism," which can be fleshed out in different forms of Christian life.

On this level of understanding we discover the founding charism as a *place of encounter* for religious and lay persons, as a call to live the communion for mission from different Christian identities. That is how the new model of "charismatic family" begins in accordance with Church-communion, understood as a "communion of communities."

Lay Christians discover the Lasallian charism as a spiritual identity, not superimposed over their Christian identity, but as a particular way of living the Christian identity which is common to all the baptized.

The novelty of this is not just for lay persons but also for the Brothers, at least in part, since this dynamic leads them to discover the charism with a more global view than they are accustomed to, as their way of being Christians. This view helps them connect with lay persons who come to live that same charism. But they also discover the charism as their particular way of being consecrated, which gives them the necessary key to find themselves in today's Church and in the Lasallian Family with full meaning of their own value and with a fundamental role to be developed in it.

– *Charisms for the Kingdom.* We are beginning to envisage the next step, although in practice it is already being lived in not a few places. This happens when we understand that, if the Spirit is not closed in by institutional Church borders, then neither are her charisms. The founding charisms, among them the Lasallian charism, aspire to serve the all of God's Kingdom. They are, effectively, "Gospel roads," and the Gospel is also expanded in the "*semina Verbi*" or "seeds of the Word" (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* 11.2; 15.1) which are present in all cultures and religions, and they connect with many human and religious expressions beyond the Catholic Church and Christian churches. Believers of other religions feel called to participate in the saving mission, alongside Christians (religious and lay) as transmitters of God's love and mercy, and they refer to the Founder as a teacher and guide who reveals for them the profound meaning of the human tasks they carry out.

Based on this experience the Lasallian Family begins to open up to include persons from other religions (including non-Christians) who recognize themselves as called to that same charism which they identify with the Founder, and because it is for them a way to live their own religion and their commitment to humankind more deeply.

4. Now in the FAMILY: a place to grow in identity and to develop communion.

4.1 The two vectors of the charismatic driving force

Charismatic families are among the most representative results of the new Church-Communion ecosystem. They are sets made up of institutions and groups of believers who are united by the same founding charism or the same "charismatic root," but with different forms of life and different accents of the same charism.

The definition that we just gave has its support point or central axis in this expression: "*united by the same founding charism.*" This cannot be reduced to a "trademark" which is identifiable from the outside; nor is it a "link" that maintains united groups. It is, rather, a *driving force* that circulates among the members of the overall group. It is a spirit, or better yet, the blowing of the Spirit. Family life, its capacity for regeneration, its future, depend on the smooth flow which that "blowing" circulates among the family members, and not the number of family members. The driving force that the founding charism promotes inside the family is that it gives rise to distinct identities and, simultaneously, to the communion between them. We will try to approach this mystery by using an analogy from the field of physics.

The founding charism, as an expression of the Spirit, is a multiple driving force, a force that spreads out by means of two *vectors* that cause two planes or force fields, a horizontal and a vertical; the combination of the two planes produces the space or "charismatic volume":

- In the horizontal plane the "*communion vector*" is developed: it is the force of the charism that gathers persons who benefit from the same charism, they are in solidarity and the promote communion for the ecclesial mission among themselves.
- In the vertical plane the "*prophetic vector*" is developed: it is the force of the charism that drives towards commitment for the Kingdom, it attracts the more radical values of the Gospel.

Neither of the two *vectors* can develop independently of the other. They need each other, they complement one another and require one another. But it is also true that, in practice, the founding charism can adopt one of the planes, forgetting about or reducing the other one, losing or diminishing, therefore, its space or "*charismatic volume.*" This is possible because, when all is said and done, the development of charisms is subject in great part to human will, to historical circumstances, to the current ecclesial model... Many founders and foundresses knew that when they tried to develop the charism according to the way the Spirit enlightened them, they were faced with social rejection or lack of understanding on the part of ecclesial representatives.

What is true is that a founding charism will not have reached its full potential when not developed harmoniously in the two force fields highlighted by both *vectors*. Consider what this means for us today, the results leading the development of each of these two *vectors*, as it helped the other alternative.

4.2 The relationship between communion and prophecy

In the history of the majority of current charismatic families, as is the case with the Lasallian Family, when their founding charisms begin to develop in the Church, this is not characterized precisely by the communion of all its members, nor by the unique and shared mission, nor by common dignity nor by a common call to holiness...In that situation, the charism displays its

prophetic vector, promoting sensitivity to certain needs of the Kingdom and the incarnation of certain evangelical values, but only in one line: celibate consecrated life. The *communion vector* remains closed within the limits of the institution of consecrated persons, without committing the faithful from other states of life. In practice, the founding charism fades away and is confused with the original project of consecrated life.

It is, then, the development of the "*prophetic vector*" that has given rise to the existence of religious congregations and societies over time through the forms of consecrated life, which, by being constituted of *intentional* communities and by their own institutionalization in the Church, offers the best conditions for guaranteeing the continuity of a charism. The existing Church model at the time when the charism was beginning to develop did not facilitate, and in many cases it put up obstacles to the prophetic dimension growing in harmony with the dimension of communion, and the charism spreading in the Church through various life projects.

The model of Church-Communion, recovered by Vatican Council II, hugely facilitated the development of founding charisms on the level of communion and reached out to various believers; the corresponding result was new charismatic families.

Pressed by the needs of the Kingdom which made manifest the charism and attracted by the values of the Gospel which emphasized the charism, many believers felt called to join the same family. The founding charism created that *force field* within which relationships were interwoven among the family members who little by little were formed and among the groups that were made up.

The charismatic family also discovered the *evangelical family* thanks to that prophetic vector that pushed it to be a sign for the Church and society of a *face of the Gospel* that underscores harmoniously specific stances of Jesus, specific values of the Kingdom, a form of mediation of God's salvation... The Lasallian Family is a bearer of the *Good News*, the *Gospel* of God's concern for the young and the poor, the desire that God has for their self-fulfilment, *to save themselves* fully in life and reach their maturity as persons. The Lasallian charism converts this Family into a *mediator* of God's salvation for children and young people, especially the poor: "*He looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as being their protector, their support and their father and it is to you that he entrusts this care. This God of goodness places them in your hands and undertakes to give them everything you ask of him for them...*" (Meditation 37.3). This evangelical dimension of the Lasallian Family is in no way opposed to the inclusion of believers from other than Christian religions, to the extent that *they also* become *mediators* of the loving God's salvation for children and young people.

Each member of the charismatic family assumes that *face of the Gospel* characteristic of his family, like the particular icon that gives meaning to his life, guiding his efforts in being *configured with Christ*, in the case of Christian believers, and inspiring his *existential project*. In the same way, each group or community belonging to the family has their foundation and motivation in the same evangelical face, which tries to welcome as a gift and being their reflection for society. This was the role that previously was reserved for the consecrated group.

The *prophetic vector* thus enters into play and combines with the *communion vector*. Without the driving force that one contributes to the other, the result could be a "flat" charismatic family, with a variety of projects, yes, but each one of them perfectly dispensable because there is no special richness that is offered overall and, definitely, to the mission that justifies the existence of this family in the Church. This is a risk that must be kept under vigilance, since the eagerness for promoting the charismatic family can bring with it the forgetting of the prophetic dimension, which is the source of life and growth for the family.

The *prophetic vector* gives rise especially to community signs, institutional signs that call strongly for attention and take away from the group in favor of fundamental values of the mission. Consecrated life is, no doubt, one of those prophetic signs. Communities of lay persons or mixed communities that have opted for a demanding community project of shared life, are another of those prophetic signs. Mission projects in favor of especially needy people or that demand special availability and gratuity are also prophetic signs that give life to the charismatic family.

It is here where the *prophetic vector* of the charism points out the difference. It is the call to live *communion for mission* more radically and significantly. This prophetic call, which traditionally was related to consecrated life, is also received in other stable forms of life and it can be responded to in new structures of communion that the charismatic family makes possible. The difference, always a richness, no longer comes from the separation of places and functions (more "pastoral" or more "profane," more "ecclesial" or more "social and mundane"), since the evangelical family is aware of all of them, but from the contribution of each one from his or her way of being a disciple or, if you prefer, from the particular gifts received for the mission.

4.3 An area of tension

The relationship of the different identities inside the charismatic family must be placed precisely in this context or "*field of tensions*," made up of the two *charismatic vectors*: communion and prophecy.

Driven by *communion*, we construct a system of relationships based on the common charismatic call to mission, from the common source of Baptism for Christian believers and from the Spirit who calls us; a system of relationships that affirms equal dignity and co-responsibility of all in the mission of the charismatic family.

Thanks to communion, each person who is integrated in the family participates in the collective identity proper to it. It is not about, then, a system of relationships in the abstract, nor simply about a friendly atmosphere. Integration into this group assumes that the person has the ability to say "us," based on a posture of solidarity and the feeling of belonging to the group. But it also assumes the "narrative" sense of the group; that is to say, as the person is integrated into the family, the person discovers that he or she is also integrated into a history, or better yet, into a narrative that has a plot that unites the events and channels them in a determined direction. The charismatic family has a living history, a journey that continues to develop in creative fidelity to the founding charism.

Driven by the *prophetic vector* we begin to recognize and give positive value to the personal charisms, to the differences that come owing to aptitudes, abilities, ways of life. But within the group we value the signs and we promote a culture of assessing signs. It is very important to cultivate awareness among all members of the family concerning the need that the *prophetic vector* be developed broadly within it, in such a way that all feel responsible for promoting it, of being involved in a vocation ministry that invites the taking on of life projects that incarnate that dimension especially.

The founding charism is, by nature, provocative: it creates signs, calls persons to be signs, especially community signs. Prophetic signs give life to the entire family, they keep it alert, tense, always able to overcome. Along these lines, consecrated men and women offer to the whole family the signs that are more specific to consecrated life: their gratuitous commitment for the Kingdom, their experience of communion, their witness of seeking God. Jointly with consecrated persons the

prophetic witness of lay persons must emerge: whether they are celibate or married whose personal or paired project is strongly marked by the charism.

This group of persons and communities form a nucleus that we can define as the "*heart, memory and guarantor*" of the founding charism in the family. Without that nucleus, which is not reserved to religious, the charismatic family could not survive. It plays an essential role in generating the communion of the identity of the family and it makes possible that those who join it can take on that collective identity. But its effectiveness depends also on how this nucleus is inserted in the relationships of communion with the other members and, above all, how it assures the accompaniment of new members.

The tension created by these two *charismatic vectors*, communion and prophecy, does not lead us to an easy understanding of tranquil harmony. But to the extent in which we maintain that tension in prolific dialogue, we are prepared to realize God's plan for humankind, his saving mission, from the particularity of our founding charism.

5. The "brother": the paradigmatic figure for the Lasallian Family

The story being written today by the Lasallian Family, animated by its charism, is aimed at re-founding the Lasallian project in our time, in this Church and in this society. It is about living our charism in Church-Communion and in postmodern society, it is about recovering roots, the foundations that have their origin in John Baptist de La Salle and developed today in a social situation and in a Church which are very different than those encountered by the Founder.

In order not to get on the wrong path, not to compose a story that is alien to this charism, it is important to have a clear idea of the fundamental reference in which the charism is condensed, and it is none other than the figure of the "*brother*": the paradigmatic figure in which the two *vectors* intersect and are incarnated and to which we have already referred, communion and prophecy.

So that this affirmation is not misinterpreted, I want to add right away that the Lasallian charismatic figure, "the brother," is the founding reference for re-founding the Lasallian project today, both for men and women religious from Lasallian institutions and for lay people and priests who participate in the Lasallian Family. I am not, then, proposing to lay Lasallians that they take as a reference religious brothers, but the charismatic "brother" figure, which finds its root in the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, and is developed in three dimensions. Each one, male or female religious, lay person or priest, will put different accents based on their own Christian identity, accents that are always complementary. The Lasallian charism will be lived "more completely" to the extent in which it is lived *complementarily*, recognizing differences and contributing them as a richness for the group.

– The first dimension or central axis of the story consists in "*being brother*." "Brother," which is a singular word, has nonetheless a plural content which belongs to its own essence, since the "brother" only exists in the midst of "the brothers," in the context of fraternity, never in a solitary way. To be brother always has a plural relationship.

Taking seriously this idea of "being brother" is the first sign that the Lasallian charism is being lived. When Lasallians get together to make community, what they do is to build a fraternity, not a pious group, not a group of intellectual training, nor even a group of apostolic action. The first thing is fraternity, communion, "being brother." That fraternity is lived, continuously, as a gift ("charism") that comes from god and refers to Him, to his

covenant with humankind. That gift is the same that we share in fraternity and that we deliver in the mission.

– Secondly, the figure of the brother points to belong to the People of God, in its "basic" sense, not hierarchical sense. "Brothers" refer to "lay," a basic member of the People of God. "*And you are all brothers*" (Matthew 23: 8). Lasallian fraternity takes its *lay nature* very seriously, its constitution in the base, without previous hierarchy; the tasks within it are tasks of animation that do not award more dignity nor privileges. This does not prevent priests on the inside, provided that they accept this lay, fraternal dimension since it is an essential part of the charism. The feeling of belonging to the base acts as a driving force, not just from within, but also from outside the community it gives a special sense to "tune in" with everything that affects the base, the Church, and humankind, sensitivity to suffer with the little ones and to go in their aid.

– Thirdly, being "brother" based on the Lasallian charism is equivalent to building a *ministerial fraternity*, that is to say, a fraternity for the mission (understood as a portion of the ecclesial mission), a fraternity that lives for and is nourished spiritually by the mission, and it finds itself sent, an instrument of God to communicate the mystery of the saving God to the targets of the mission. Fraternity lived based on the Lasallian charism is a ministerial fraternity: it represents the ministry of Christian education to the Church based on the Lasallian charism. The subject of the ministry is not an individual but the community in which very diverse functions are carried out, and the entire community is constituted as the guarantor of the mission entrusted to it by the Church.

For further reflection

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