



HOW DOES INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT OF CHARISMS AFFECT THE PARISH OR THE LARGER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY?

Discerning charisms communally enables a parish to thrive on the gifts of its people. Far from being “just another program,” this is a whole new way to look at our parishes. Our communities are filled with organizational and pastoral needs that are usually met by recruiting anyone who shows any interest or who, perhaps, is just unable to say, “no.” Because we seldom look first at the gifts and call of individuals, our communities too often contain generous and energetic people who have been burned-out or even traumatized trying to fill “vacuums” for which they were ill-equipped. But if we look first at our gifts, our communities will come to be shaped by our loves, because God calls each of us to (and gifts us for) the work that we most love. The discernment process ensures that individuals cease to be anonymous to the leadership of the community and to each other. In our large Catholic parishes and institutions, it’s easy for individuals to come and go without being noticed and to believe that they have nothing to contribute. When people start to discern their gifts, they also start to talk to each other about their gifts. New relationships begin to form among parishioners, and parish leaders often find that new priorities for the parish begin to emerge.

The discernment of their gifts draws people from the periphery of the community to the center. Some of our most gifted people are sitting, unrecognized, in the back of the church. Many lay Catholics emerge from the gifts discernment process with a much stronger sense that they have something important to give to the larger Christian community and to the world. Catholics who used to sit quietly on the sidelines take new risks, and others emerge as leaders of new initiatives. Recognizing the charisms of all helps the Church answer the call of the Holy Spirit.

Pope John Paul II called the Church to a New Evangelization and heralded a “great springtime” for Christianity. Lay Catholics, in particular, are called to be the Church’s “front line,” the people in whom the majority of our contemporaries meet the risen Christ. They need to discern their charisms in order to meet this call, and the parish is the most accessible setting for discernment. As partners in the mission of Christ, everyone has been “called and gifted” for the sake of the world!



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More questions?

Please contact us. We'd love to hear from you.

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CHARISMS

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a charism (spiritual gift)?

“Charism” is the Greek word used in the New Testament for “favor” or “gratuitous gift.” Charisms, or spiritual gifts, are special abilities given to all Christians by the Holy Spirit to give them the power both to represent Christ and to be a channel of God’s goodness for people. Whether extraordinary or ordinary, all charisms ought to be exercised in the service of God (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2003).

Are all baptized Christians given charisms?

Yes. According to Catholic teaching, it is the faith of the Church that you possess one or more of the charisms (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 951). Our charisms manifest when our faith in God is personal, and there is a situation that needs that calls for one of the charisms we have been given.

What is the difference between the traditional seven “Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” the “Fruits of the Holy Spirit,” and charisms?

There are gifts of the Holy Spirit that we are given to keep and gifts we are given to give away. The traditional “seven gifts of the Holy Spirit” and the “fruits” of the Spirit are gifts given to us to keep. They are part of our inner transformation as Christians and provide the inner “Christlikeness” necessary for the effective use of our charisms (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1830–1832). Charisms, on the other hand, are given to us to give away, and are one of the ways God continues to enter the world through our assent and cooperation. They always benefit other people.

How many charisms exist?

There are three primary lists of gifts in the New Testament (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4), and St. Thomas Aquinas lists about 14 charisms in his Summa. We have no reason to believe that these lists are meant to be exhaustive. The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory (the Institute’s handbook on gifts discernment) covers 23 of the most common charisms, including most of those listed in St. Paul’s letters and St. Thomas’s writings.

WHY SHOULD I DISCERN MY CHARISMS?

God is calling you to a work of love that will fill your life with purpose and joy. Discerning your charisms can help you discover that call. Knowing your God-given charisms can greatly clarify your decision-making. In particular, if you are wondering how you are to fulfill the mission God has for you, or navigate a life transition (entering retirement, changing jobs, re-entering the job market, etc.), you might find that gifts discernment helps you decide what turn to take next.

Understanding your charisms can help you simplify your life and avoid burnout. If you know your gifts, it becomes easier to say, “no” when people ask you for things that you don’t really have to give. And because it is unusually energizing and fulfilling to exercise a charism, you are much less likely to burn out if you are working in your area of giftedness.

Discerning your charisms can help you discover how God has gifted you to make you more effective at what you do for a living, no matter what kind of work you do.

Understanding your charisms can free you from the need to compare yourself to others. Participants in our workshops regularly comment how healing an experience it is to discern their gifts. If you find that you judge yourself for not measuring up to the standards of others, you can be freed by recognizing that your giftedness and calling are different from theirs.

Understanding your charisms can make a big difference in family life! It can enable you to understand and cherish your spouse’s gifts and help you recognize and nurture the emerging gifts of your children. Some people recognize that they are especially called and gifted by God to work with children or families.

The discernment of charisms can help you understand and name what you are already experiencing. After interviewing thousands of average Catholics, we have discovered that many lay people are having remarkable experiences of God that they don’t understand, can’t put into perspective, and feel that they can’t talk about with anyone else. If this sounds like you, gifts discernment can help you to see that some of these experiences may be signs of a charism, a normal part of our lives as Christians.

The Church is calling all Catholics to participate in a new evangelization, and your charisms empower you to play an essential role. Catholics are to actively help spread the Faith through our relationships at work, in our families, and among friends. Our charisms are tools given to us both to help us convince people of the reality of Christ and to be a sign of God’s loving presence in the world.

HOW DO CHARISMS DIFFER FROM NATURAL TALENTS?



Charisms differ from natural talents in several important ways. Charisms are not “in-born,” that is, inherited from our parents, but are given to us by the Holy Spirit, whom we received through Baptism and Confirmation. Secondly, charisms are supernaturally empowering. In other words, they enable us to have an effectiveness that surpasses our natural, human abilities. For example, if a doctor possesses a charism of healing, he may well find that his patients get well in extraordinary ways, either recovering more quickly than would be expected naturally, or getting well when natural healing would not have occurred at all.

Finally, we could use a natural talent for an evil purpose, or for our own enjoyment. God will not allow himself to be used for evil, and charisms are always for the benefit of others, rather than ourselves.

As disciples, we offer our entire selves to God—including our personalities, natural talents, education, life experience, and background—to be used for his purposes. But when we serve God, we are not limited to just the gifts with which we were born! Our natural talents can be wonderful tools for God’s purposes, and sometimes a charism is added to an existing natural talent by the Holy Spirit after an individual has undergone a deepening conversion.

Some charisms may seem “extraordinary” (such as prophecy, healing, or discernment of spirits) and others quite “ordinary” (such as administration, service, hospitality, or mercy), but all charisms are empowered by God. We use our charisms together with our natural talents and all that we are to serve God and our neighbor.