

## The Charism of an Ecumenical Partner: the Example of Justification

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The notion of ecumenical receptivity proposes that in the otherness of the other tradition, the Spirit of God offers us a gift. Ecumenical receptivity encourages a stance before the other tradition that expects to find this tradition a place of grace. This grace is to be found not only in the personal, but also in the structural-institutional dimensions of the other tradition. I will use the language of institutional charism to describe the grace embodied in the life and structures of one church that can be perceived as a gift of the Spirit by a partner church.

My proposal is that a theology of institutional charisms can contribute to the development of receptive ecumenism. This was not an explicit focus of the recent volume on receptive ecumenism, except in the contribution by Ladislav Orsy, but it is implicit in much of the discussion.<sup>1</sup> I will begin from Congar's understanding of the charisms in ecclesiology, and then apply this to the ecumenical encounter. As a concrete example, I will take up the agreement on the doctrine of justification between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, and conclude with an outline of a Roman Catholic homily on justification.

### 1. Congar on Charisms in the Life of the Church

While Congar had always thought of the Spirit as the animator of the life of the church, by the time he wrote his three-volume *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* he had come to see the church as made by the Spirit. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit *co-institute* the church.<sup>2</sup> Together they establish the church in its charismatic reality and together they establish the means of grace – the scriptures, the sacraments, the apostolic ministry. He came to see the *charisms of the Spirit as a basis for the whole life of the church*. It is not that he sees a charismatic element alongside an institutional one. He explicitly rejects an idea that he had himself taught in 1953, in *The Mystery of the Church*, that there is a kind of “free zone” reserved for the Holy Spirit alongside the structures and means of grace. Rather, in both the charisms and in the structural means of grace, Word and Spirit act together.<sup>3</sup>

The theology of charisms forms the basis for a properly “pneumatological” ecclesiology: “Pneumatology should, I believe, describe the impact, in the context of the vision of the Church, of the fact that the Spirit distributes his gifts where he wills and in this way builds up the Church.”<sup>4</sup> Congar attempts to keep a balance between charisms and structural elements of the church. On the one hand, he insists on the central importance of word and sacrament, ordained ministry, and proper authority in the life of the church. On the other hand, he sees the charisms of the Spirit as part of the church's constitution and as a principle of its order.<sup>5</sup> It is the operation of the charisms that produces the institution.<sup>6</sup> The charisms give rise to the variety of ministries in the church, including the ordained ministry, which then has a role in the ordering of the charisms. In a remarkably strong statement, he claims that the church is open to the Spirit only when it is open to the charisms of each member: “The Church receives the fullness of the Spirit *only in the totality of gifts made by all her members.*”<sup>7</sup>

How might this theology of charisms apply to the ecumenical movement? It suggests that when dealing with Christians of another tradition, we may need to be aware that they too have charisms of the Spirit, that their church tradition may embody an institutional charism,

and that we may be truly open to the Spirit only when we are open to the institutional charism of a partner church. I will explore this line of thought in the rest of this paper.

## 2. *Applying the Theology of Charisms to Ecumenical Receptivity*

Congar has offered hints and suggestions about how a theology of charisms might apply to ecumenical receptivity. Already in the 1930's, with his *Chrétien Désunis*, he was discussing what he then called the *spiritual impulses* or *positive faith values* of the great schisms that have divided Christianity:

Each of the great schisms which have become great Christian communities represents, in its positive aspect, certain genuine values, even if it is tragically astray in those aspects in which it is negative, exclusive and peculiar to itself.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that his aim at this stage was to make clear that the reunion of churches need not mean that a partner church is required to give up the genuine spiritual impulse that is central to its existence. Congar's extensive work on the Holy Spirit culminated in the publication of this three volume work in French in 1979 and 1980. In books that follow this foundational work on the Spirit, he explicitly suggests an ecumenical application of the theology of charisms. In his *Diversity and Communion*, published in French in 1983, he comments on recent discussion on the Augsburg confession, particularly the suggestion of scholars like H. Fries that the Roman Catholic Church might recognize the Augsburg Confession:

In these conditions, the Lutheran expression of the common faith would represent a development in response to a *particular charism*. It would make clear the message of salvation by pure grace, of Christian liberty in the faith, of the sovereignty of the Word of God, and finally of a theology of the cross. It would be a school not only recognized as such, but one which kept its parochial and organizational structure, though henceforth in reconciliation and unity.

Is this possible?<sup>9</sup>

Another important book, *The Word and the Spirit*, first published in French in 1984, integrates Congar's theology of the Spirit within a systematic synthesis, where the Word of God and the Holy Spirit always "do God's work together." In the final paragraph of this book, Congar turns again to his passion, ecumenism:

How and to what degree does the grace of Pentecost play a part in the disunited churches? *Under what conditions can a theology of the variety of charisms be applied to them?* How should the dialectical tension between 'diversity' and 'communion' be conceived and put into effect? It calls for an immense effort on the part of Jesus' disciples. It calls above all for effort on the part of the Catholic Church, which looks back at Jesus and at its own origin and forward to the fulfillment to which the Breath is urging and leading it.<sup>10</sup>

Congar asks about the conditions under which a theology of charisms might be applied to partner churches. In the *Receptive Ecumenism* volume, Ladislav Orsy has offered some criteria for ecumenical learning and receiving, which I find helpful.<sup>11</sup> William Rusch has described ecumenical reception in detail, showing how it involves a number of stages, and providing some fundamental criteria for reception, such as fidelity to Christ and to the

apostolic faith.<sup>12</sup> Building on their contributions, I suggest, in response to Congar's question, that the following six conditions might provide guidance in the reception of an institutional charism of an ecumenical partner church:

1. What is proposed as an institutional charism of the partner church can be recognized by the receiving church as an authentic expression of biblical and apostolic faith
2. It leads to Christ, to faith in him and to authentic discipleship
3. It is not opposed to the deepest self-understanding of the receiving church
4. It can be seen as an organic development of the faith of the receiving church
5. It brings to the receiving church a renewed energy and life
6. It is accompanied by the fruits of the Spirit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22).

Where these conditions are met, I suggest that a theology of the diversity of charisms can rightly be applied to a partner church's guiding spiritual impulse. It can be celebrated as an institutional charism of the Spirit, and as a gift of God for the receiving church.

### ***3. Justification as an Example of an Institutional Charism***

In Augsburg, on 31 October 1999, official representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church solemnly signed and confirmed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. What is ground-breaking about this common statement is that it is not simply an agreement between dialogue teams but an agreement of *the churches*. In the “Official Common Statement,” the two church bodies declare together: “The understanding of the doctrine of justifications set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics.”<sup>13</sup>

As William Rusch points out in the *Receptive Ecumenism* volume, this agreement is of a particular kind: it is a *differentiated consensus*.<sup>14</sup> A basis agreement is declared, while remaining differences are acknowledged. And as Walter Kasper notes, in a differentiated consensus there can be no contradiction of one another's position, but there can be differences that are complementary.<sup>15</sup>

Something truly remarkable has happened in this agreement. The two churches have come to a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification, agreed that mutual condemnations of the past no longer apply to the doctrine of partner churches, and also agreed on a common vision of united church as a unity in reconciled diversity.

What is the gift given to the Roman Catholic Church in this event? I believe that it is nothing else than the positive institutional charism that has inspired the Lutheran tradition from the beginning, the joyful, liberating Gospel that we are saved not by what we do, but by God's grace alone and in faith. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church continues its emphasis on human cooperation in grace, the real inner renewal that grace works in us, and the fruits of grace in Christian life. But it does this now in the light of a new moment of the Spirit, as it receives into its own life the institutional charism of the Lutheran churches.

In the preceding section, I outlined six conditions for the reception of an institutional charism from another church. From a Roman Catholic perspective I think it is quite clear that in this case the first four have been met, those concerned with biblical faith, leading to Christ, non- opposition to the church's self-understanding and organic development of faith. This is evident by the fact that the *Joint Declaration* has been received into the Catholic Church through the official instruments of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, with the Bishop of Rome expressing his approval and joy. The last two conditions, renewed energy and life and the fruits of the Spirit, have been experienced by those closely connected to the events at Augsburg and to Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues around the world, but as yet not yet by many ordinary church members.

If the Lutheran tradition on justification is truly a gift of the Spirit at this moment for the Catholic Church, then it is to be received not only at the level of proper church authorities, *but also at the level of local Roman Catholic communities*. This can happen through many means, but homilies will be crucial. Such homilies, I suggest, would aim to communicate not only the event of the *Joint Declaration* as an act of the Spirit, but also the institutional grace that the Lutheran tradition offers to the Catholic community. In order to make this suggestion more concrete, I will offer an outline for a homily for the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, where the second reading is from Romans 3:21-25, 28

#### **4. (Part of) An Outline for a Homily on Justification**

It is truly a joy to celebrate the fact that we have come to such an agreement on what was the central cause of division between the two churches. And what a joy it is, that we Christians no longer condemn each other's views on the central truth of our faith, our salvation in Christ! This agreement has been endorsed and accepted not only by the Lutheran World Federation, but also by the authorities of the Catholic Church. So we should ponder the work of the Holy Spirit in all of this and give thanks and praise to God.

But what does it mean for us? Obviously, it is important because it is a real step towards overcoming the division between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. But there is also something deeper here. The Lutheran Church has always given a central role to the doctrine of justification. Now that we have reached substantial agreement, we Catholics can find that Luther and the Lutheran tradition have something precious to teach us about our life of faith.

Luther lived at a time when theology had degenerated and there was a good deal of corruption in the life of the church. Many people lived in terrible fear of God. They feared final damnation and this was reinforced by popular preaching and piety. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther himself experienced intense anxiety about where he stood before God. He had a deeply troubled soul, and a troubled conscience. Many of those around him also had troubled consciences. By studying the Scriptures, and particularly St Paul, Luther came to a truly *liberating* discovery. We don't make ourselves right before God. We are justified simply by God's grace. It is God who saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation comes to us as an absolutely free gift. We do not earn our salvation. It does not depend on us. It is not a matter of how well we perform. It comes to us as a free gift. Our response is faith. We entrust ourselves to God. We trust not in ourselves but in God's grace.

Of course, being made right by God, being justified necessarily involves us in living a Christian life of love for others. At the time of the Reformation the Catholic Church emphasized our human cooperation with God's grace, and the reality of our transformation

by grace. But what is clear in this new agreement is that we can hold onto these precious truths while also receiving into our own lives what was so precious to Luther and his companions: the discovery that we are justified not by what we do but by God's grace and that what we need to do is trusting in a God of mercy and grace.

What is so liberating in all of this is Luther's discovery of a *gracious God*, a God who reaches out to us in Jesus Christ, bringing healing, forgiveness and peace. We can be freed from a troubled conscience because we no longer depend upon our own efforts, but depend radically on a God of grace and mercy. At the end of his life, Luther reflected on how he felt when he made this discovery: "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates."

Luther's discovery was that we don't have to make ourselves right. It is God who makes us right in Christ. And God does this as an absolutely free gift. God justifies us through grace, by faith. Our Christian living flows from this free gift of God.

I believe that this insight is a gift from the Lutheran Church for the Catholic community of our time. Some of us are still caught up with troubled consciences today. Some people are afflicted by a scrupulous attitude to Christian life. Some have a view of God that fills them with fear. They need to hear again the liberating idea that God is a God of grace and mercy, and that it is God who makes us right, not what we do.

But there are other important ways in which this insight is important in our society today. We attempt to make ourselves right in all kinds of ways. There is a kind of desperation to prove to ourselves and others that we matter, that we are important. We can try to make ourselves right by the kind of home we have, or by endless expensive home improvements. We can try to make ourselves right by competing for attention, for status, for a better job, for more money. Many of us get caught up in a cycle of more and more work, as if taking on more work, or achieving more makes us right.

The Lutheran emphasis on the doctrine of justification is a powerful reminder of what is central to the Gospel: that we are made right by God, and by God alone. We are made right by God's love poured out in the world in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. We are made right by a God of love, whose grace and mercy always goes before us and in whom we can entrust in every aspect of our life and our death. In entrusting ourselves to the God of Jesus we find true freedom. We are enabled to live in freedom, free of the desperate need to prove ourselves. We are freed to take joy in God's creation and in love for those around us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ladislav Orsy, SJ, "Authentic Learning and Receiving—A Search for Criteria," in Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism*, 39-51, particularly at 47.

<sup>2</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 2, 5-14.

<sup>3</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* 1, 156.

<sup>5</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, 80-1.

<sup>6</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, 130.

<sup>7</sup> Congar, "Pneumatology Today," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167 (1973): 443.

<sup>8</sup> Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, translated by M.A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1939), 40. For Congar's distinction between "faith" and "faith-value," see Aidan Nichols OP, *Yves Congar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM, 1984), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Congar, *Word and Spirit*, 132.

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<sup>11</sup> Orsy, “Authentic Learning and Receiving,” 43. Orsy has further helpful comments in the rest of his article, particularly in his treatment of the receiving community (pp. 44-46).

<sup>12</sup> William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 54-88.

<sup>13</sup> *Joint Declaration*, 41

<sup>14</sup> William G. Rusch, “The International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue-An Example of Ecclesial Learning and Ecumenical Reception” in Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism*, 153. On this “differentiated consensus” see Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today* (London: Burns and Oates), 124-30.

<sup>15</sup> Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, 129.