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(translated from Italian)

“They have no more wine”.

Contribution to a reading of relationships between charisms and their economic works

Luigino Bruni

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This is the great attraction today:
to reach the highest contemplation
while sharing in the life of every person,
being one among many.
I would say more:
to merge oneself with the crowd
so as to allow the divine
to penetrate it,
like wine
penetrates a piece of bread.
I would even say more:
as sharers in God’s plans for humanity,
to place points of light within the crowd,
sharing shame, hunger, troubles,
and brief joys with our neighbor.
(Chiara Lubich).

1. *Economy and charisms*

This writing arises from the experiential and theoretical conviction that even economic and civil life can and should be read as dialectic between “charism” and “institution”. Something of this dialectic was revealed to us by Max Weber with his studies on charismatic authority. Von Balthazar went even further, when, in various reprises, he spoke to us in his theological works of the “Marian profile” of the Church, and of its relationships with the other profiles, among which the Petrine profile.

Studying these theses, and observing the life within and outside of markets, I’ve reached the conviction that reading economic life as dialogue between charisms and institutions, or between the “Marian” profile and the “Petrine” profile, allows me to say new and original things, and to understand dimensions of economic life that would otherwise remain too much on the background of history¹.

In this note, we will look at the journey of a charismatic work from the charismatic, or Marian, perspective; we will therefore put ourselves on the side of Mary, who is the icon and archetype of every charism.

The episode of the *Wedding of Cana* is the most eloquent imagine of Mary as icon of the charismatic principle in history: it is Mary who, during the feast of the wedding, is the first to notice that the diners “have no more wine” (Jn. 2:3). This Marian episode tells us a few basic things about

¹ I dealt with the “charismatic profile” of economy in a book I wrote together with Alessandra Smerilli, *Benedetta Economia* (Cittanuova, Rome 2008).

charismatic logic within history which can serve as a background to the discourse we are about to begin and which we will return to every once in awhile.

In the first place, charisms *see farther*, in particular they see different things that others (disciples, friends, institutions, etc.) do not see. A charism, in fact, is the gift of different eyes that know how to see opportunity in things where others see only problems².

Then, to satisfy the need, because the “wine” effectively arrives to the diners, it is necessary to activate all the various actors in the house (Mary is not enough): an Alliance is necessary with other aspects of common living, today are called “laity”, market and politics.

Charisms were and today still are places of great human “innovation”. Humanity, not only the Church, goes ahead thanks to a continual relay between innovators (charismatics) and institutions that universalize those innovations.

The charism is given to people. The first people that receive the charism are the founders of communities and movements, but followers and those who live within charismatic movements also receive a personal and direct call. They are not simply imitators of the founder but people who are original carriers of the same charism of the founder. In other words, every charism, especially the “big” ones, is a “cluster” of charisms. Whoever lives a charismatic experience goes ahead and continues to make the founder’s charism alive because he has received a personal vocation. This is from where the corollary derives, which are always people who have the charism within them, who make the institutions become charismatic as well, and not vice versa (as can instead happen with the institutional profile of the church and of society). Even if, then, once institutions are created, they form people. In charisms, the meaning of the personalistic principle can be fully seen at work, as well as the primacy of the person over structures.

2. Charismatic work as journey

In this writing, I will try to complete an experiment and imagine that charismatic works, concrete expressions of action within the history of the Marian profile (of the church and of civil society), have an historical development that in some way repeats the stages of the life of Mary, the so-called *Via Mariae*. Reading the development of the Christian life as a reliving of the stages of Mary’s life is one of the most beautiful and original intuitions of Chiara Lubich. She spoke about it many times, and the *Via Mariae* represents one of the cornerstones of the spirituality of the Focolare Movement³. Obviously, the analogy between the Christian life (in particular of a member of the Work of Mary) and that of the Mother of Jesus is an archetype of reading, which however inspired the concrete life of many people. In this writing, I will try to extend the analogy of single people to works that arise from charisms, as I believe that such a reading can offer some significant cues to understanding the nature of works that arise from a charism, and therefore, even for their

² Much has been written on the topic of charisms in the church, given its complexity and richness under different profiles (anthropological, theological, historical). The uneludable reference is undoubtedly the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, in which we find a clear theology of gifts (charismata) in the ecclesial community and of their function, not only in sight of the individual salvation of who receives them, but of the common good, the ecclesial body. From this Pauline perspective, charisms are both prophecies and ordered ministry, both deacons and healers. While not able and wanting to deny that this idea of charisms explains much about the dynamic of the church and of the concrete Christian communities, I am likewise convinced that such a reading is not the most adapt to understanding the role of charisms that have come together in the course of history – from Benedict to Francis, from Vincent de Paul to Don Bosco, from Mother Teresa to Chiara Lubich. To fully understand such charisms, I believe it is necessary (for example, in line with *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council) to read such realities as special gifts of nature and different dimensions with respect to the gift-charisms of the Pauline type. From this point of view, I consider a Bathasarian reading more efficient: seeing the dynamic of the Church in its historical development as a dialogue between different profiles and principles, that can be synthesized in the charismatic profile (or Marian) and the institutional one. At any rate, this will be the meaning of charism that I will use in this writing.

³ One of the last official interviews in which Chiara spoke and described the *Via Mariae* was during the Marian congress, which took place in Castelgandolfo, in May of 2003. The interview was printed in the book *Mary, Transparency of God* (Cittanuova 2003), and on the website: <http://www.loppiano.it/ore-roma.pdf>.

economic management. My focus is essentially on Christian charisms (even if I believe the discussion could have an even more general reach, but much more work would be necessary).

Two methodological precautions.

First of all, the *via Mariae* is a discussion that Chiara Lubich developed thinking of the walk of people who put themselves in an evangelical journey. The discussion that we are beginning here is instead referring to institutions and to works: the degree of mediation required is therefore greater, above all if one wants to utilize the archetype discussion to interpret concrete situations and perhaps propose operative solutions. In spite of this warning, I believe that methodologically it would be possible to extend the reasoning and the intuition of Chiara to the historical dynamic of charismatic works.

Secondly, the considerations that we lend are references to *works* of charisms, *not to the charism itself*, even if evidently between the two realities there exists a very close relationship. A charism is, however, *always greater* than its works, even when these are integral parts of the charism (for example, the educational works of Don Bosco)⁴.

2.1. First stage: the Annunciation

Every charismatic work arises from an announcement, from a “meeting” with an “angel”: from a meeting of the founder (or of other members) with a person that plays the same function of the angel in the Gospel of Luke (messenger). Other (rare) times, the work arises from an inspiration in solitude, but normally it is a meeting with other men and women from which the first inspiration of the work arises. What is announced is something that:

- Is almost never in the plans of who receives the announcement (the founder or others), and for this changes his or her life plans, messing up programs (“I do not know man”);
- It is the announcement of gratuitousness: “Hail full of *charis*”, Hail *full of gratuitousness*. The work does not arise from instrumental reasoning, even if holy (how to spread the charism, increase vocations, etc.), but from a *vocation*, from an interior call, therefore from gratuitousness;
- We do not know where that call will lead us: not knowing “what we are doing” is typical of charismatic works, as the project is understood, discovered, revealed by living it. A first operative implication for works: it is necessary to be careful of experts and consultants who want to, and should, apply “recipes” that work in all different kinds of contexts. Every charism has its own nature of mystery, which is discovered by living it.

2.2. Second stage: the loss

After the announcement follow years of growth in “age, wisdom and grace”: the work matures, and it matures in wisdom and in experience of gratuitousness, although always accompanied by the first sufferings and trials (thinking of the announcement of old Simeon: “a sword...”).

At a certain point, however, an important event comes about, a first substantial crisis that we can rediscover symbolized in the life of Mary in the episode narrated in the Gospel of Luke, in the experience following the losing of Jesus in the temple, when the boy Jesus, found again by his parents, tells them, “did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?”

What can this episode tell us? This is the moment that, sooner or later, arrives in all charismatic realities, when who has founded a work realizes that the work is not his or her “property”; it is not a reality that belongs to him or her. It is an analogous experience to those who

⁴ Plus, in what follows, I will not deal with all the stages laid out by Chiara (I will not talk about the stage of the “visitation of Mary to Elizabeth,” and neither the announcement that a “sword” that old Simeon makes, and neither the “birth of Jesus”, even if there will be references to some of these in my discussion), in order to focus only on those moments which I consider particularly significant in the historical dynamic of a charismatic work.

live in a parent-child relationship, when at a certain point the parents must understand, painfully, (and if they do not understand and behave accordingly, it will have serious pathological effects over time, like narcissism) *that the child is not theirs and that they are not property of the child*, but that he or she has a specific and unique vocation to fulfill. The child must take a step in his relationship with the family (especially with the mother), and the parents must help him to understand that the family is only a starting point for giving himself to the world, and not a private “good” to consume. It is a cut that is as painful as is decisive for growth.

In charismatic realities, when the Work begins to bring fruit, to be esteemed, to work well, a moment arrives in which the person who began the work falls in love with it. In a certain sense, he identifies himself with the work itself. He is no longer capable of distinguishing that the “gift” was for the others and not for us. What is put to the test is gratuitousness, the heart of every charismatic experience, of *charis*. This moment or stage can take on different forms, and here I indicate a few of them:

- a) For various reasons (age of the founders, absence of vocations, etc.) others arrive (for example, laity) to run the work, and who has founded it experiences in this detachment a kind of death;
- b) This stage can also assume a different form: who has founded a work begins to claim more autonomy from the Institute from which it was born. In this case, typical of the second stage of charismatic movements, the crisis is lived by who has the institutional responsibility and must manage these requests of autonomy and freedom⁵.
- c) Or, this phase can assume the shape of “temptations” that would like the work to remain a bonsai, not “letting the boy leave home”, and make it therefore remain a cute tree that cannot grow however, and therefore will not bring the typical “mature” fruits.

If this second stage is overcome (it is possible that every stage not be overcome, and can therefore block the journey of the charismatic work), a long season begins (the longest in the life of Mary), when the work takes off, takes flight. Big miracles begin, conversions, plentiful fruits, but also persecutions, great trials (slander, denouncements, etc.). They are the years (centuries, at times!) where the work sings the beatitudes with life, and it sings them many times, and in various tones.

However, the *Via Mariae* of a charismatic work does not finish here.

2.3. *Third stage: the “desolate”*

If the first two stages are overcome, a third stage begins – the crucial one – from which truly depends the full flowering of the vocation of a charismatic work. It is the desolate, the biggest of Mary’s trials. This is the moment of the true death of the work. First, there was a kind of death (detachment), but now it truly dies. At this point, great temptations arrive for charismatic works. It may be noticed (out of charismatic instinct) that a new crisis is arriving, that preludes a certain death, but *instead of charismatically dying* (which I will soon explain), attempts are made to find ways out. Some of these attempts to escape include the following:

1. *The closing sale*: the works sell themselves to the highest bidder, without a global charismatic project, but in order to “plug” the holes in the budget and to try to survive. The charismatic community is no longer able to manage the work, and without a true, deep analysis to charismatically understand what to do, they try to undo themselves as quickly as possible.

⁵ This gives us cues to underline the fact that, even in a charismatic work, there exists dialogue among charisms (innovations, reforms) and institutions (hierarchical and orders).

2. *The withdrawal of the charism*: the most important works are “delegated” to “lay” workers. These are often – and here is the point – these are often the works that are typical of the charism: the hospital wards, the school benches, the shacks, etc.). In some cases, many consultants advise the members of the charismatic work to only worry about the roles of responsibility, transforming themselves in managers in order to “save” the works, and not let them “die”.

3. *Strong Apache*: does not delegate to anyone, does not close any work, but resists up to the last drop, and dies a glorious death.

These three types of death are not, normally, charismatic deaths (we have experienced a few of them), but they are *plain old death*, in the same way as what happens to Mrs. Prassede after the plague: “Of Mrs. Prassede, when they say that she died, they said it all”⁶. What does it mean to die *charismatically*? I am not completely sure. I limit myself only to indicate a few elements and intuitions, that I humbly propose, as the beginning of a reflection to be developed on various levels. It is a reflection, however, that is ever more crucial for the present and future of many charismatic works, a challenge that depends much on the quality of life of the religious institutions in the near future.

Above all, it is essential to know how to discern, comunitarianly and on various levels (that it, involving all the right people in the discernment, without falling into the temptation to decide by skipping some level or person because of difficult relationships, for example), if that which is being lived is the right “hour” to die (charismatically), if therefore the work is “dying” because it has reached its fulfillment, or simple because of our errors (of technique, of wisdom, of disunity, of erroneous consultations, etc.). In this second case, the death must be fought against.

Once, together and with the right discernment, it is understood that a certain work must die, if we want to be faithful to the charism, that work cannot die...*and that's that: everything must be done to try and find the charismatic meaning of that death*. What therefore is needed is to *foresee a resurrection* beyond the death of the work. If no resurrection is at least foreseen, it is very probable that this is a sign that the work is not dying charismatically, according to its specific vocation. Rather, it is dying...and that is that.

Understanding then that charismatic “death” of a work should also be the beginning of new “offspring”: “women, here is your son”, there, John. All the difficulty of this *charismatic* death lies in recognizing “John”, a new continuation, different but not less charismatic, of the vocation of the work.

One can then understand that when one is capable of living the stage of the desolate like this, in which it seems to be dead, and in a certain sense is, it was in reality only the dawn of the resurrection.

2.4. *Fourth step: Mary after the resurrection*

The earthly life of Mary continues after the resurrection of Jesus, in the emerging church. What does this say in our discussion? Also here, I limit myself only to a few suggestions.

Above all, the resurrection of Jesus is not only that of Lazarus, who died again after a few years. We're not talking about “reanimating” the “old” work, but knowing how to foresee a new reality, that is both in continuity and in discontinuity with the first work at the same time.

Secondly, in light of the *Via Mariae* and the Gospel, one must keep in mind that a work fully reaches its design when *it dies to become something else*, a “something else” that has the nature of the originating work, but that was capable of transcending itself and sublimating itself in “another”. Here, much wisdom and communitary discernment is needed to know how to die well and, therefore, to rise. What is needed, for example, is to do things in a way that, in the case of

⁶ Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi*, cap. XXXVII.

giving up a house, hospital or school because of lack of forces, among the various proposals there can be identified that which gives charismatic meaning to the whole history of the work, that can be a resurrection, that is, a universalization of the work, even if mysterious. Therefore, much care should be taken in these phases: a sale of a work could be a “death and that’s it” option (when it is given up to a business that transforms it into for-profit agric-tourism), or it could reveal itself to be a death-resurrection. For example, if the “New Horizons” movement of Chiara Amirante takes on a house that a community of Vincentians can no longer bring ahead, this could be a resurrection of a work arisen from a charism for the poor. Or, we can think of a religious institute that closes a house in order to reinforce and support others and so start again the “miracle” of the original charism.

Sometimes, in the end, it is also necessary to accept the “death and that’s it”, if the conditions do not exist, but we must at least be conscious of this and try once in our lives and in our communities to “die charismatically”.

3. Instead of concluding

If what has been said so far is plausible, then we need to look at the decline of vocations (when this exists) and the resulting “closure” of works with a new perspective: a charismatic reality reaching its design under the cross. We need to learn to read history, to avoid that pessimism (even if understandable) that sometimes is felt in our realities. If one dies charismatically, death is the pinnacle of a mature process and not a failure. It is the light of a sunrise, not the shadow of a sunset.

But in order that this “optimism” be serious and responsible, we need to read history also from charismatic perspectives and their logics; we need to put ourselves in the place of Mary, the icon of every charism, and so hope to still fill our institutions and charismatic works with that true joy that is always the sacrament of every charism.