

Familia Oblata

CHARISM FAMILY

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I had been back in Rome for a few months from the mission in Congo, when, in November, 2015, I received an invitation to participate in a meeting of charism families. After more than 10 years away, I was looking to reinsert myself into the Italian reality, both social and ecclesial, but was not particularly enthused by the idea of immediately going to such a large gathering. Then, convinced a little by curiosity to understand what this was about, and a little by the responsibility placed in me by my leaders who obtained the invitation, I joined in the first meeting/assembly organized by the Association of Members of General Administrations (AMCG in Italian)-families with charisms. I found myself with other Oblates, professed and lay. Thus, began an experience that continues today, characterized by the breath of the Church, based on collaboration among representatives of various charisms, enriched by mutual respect and by the discovery of the beauty of the gift of the varied states of life.

WHAT IS THE AMCG-CHARISM FAMILIES, AND WHAT ARE THEY PROPOSING?

In 1995, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, the Council Members of General Administrations of male Institutes based in Rome (UMCG in Italian) changed its name to: Association of Members of General Administrations (AMCG in Italian). From then on, members of

general administrations of female institutes also took part. In 2015, the association was further enlarged to include the leaders of associations, whether lay or various other states of life, and was subdivided, each into its chosen state of life and with the same charism reality, and took on the name AMCG-charism families. This last step was inspired by the call of Pope Francis that the year of Consecrated Life (2015-2016) should be celebrated not only by consecrated people, but also by others, especially the lay faithful who, in their lay status, shared the same reality of the charism as the various Institutes (cf. Apostolic Letter to all the consecrated on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated life, III,1).

Since 2015, there have been regular gatherings of the members of General Administrations responsible for the relationship with their lay associates and with the institutes that have been inspired by the same charism, with the aim of sharing their experiences and projects. At the beginning of this process of sharing, a small group of religious was established, among whom was Fr. Fabio Ciardi, OMI, and the first meetings took place at the General House of the Oblates, Via Aurelia 290 in Rome.

The input given by the Association of Charism Families was contained in a rule, *ad experimentum*, dated November 15, 2016:

- promote a common study of the identity, the function and the challenges of the various components of each charism family;
- support common research into the life and methods most suitable for a more efficient development and action of the charism family;
- promote a common understanding, and the spread of the idea, that the communion among the vocations in a charism family is based on the sharing of the same charism while respecting the autonomy of each institute and association;
- serve the pastoral and missionary conversion of the family charism to effectively promote development in the various fields of the New Evangelization. (cf. The Joy of the Gospel, 26 and 27)

The fact that laity and consecrated religious feel called to build a family, sharing one and the same charismatic reality, doesn't constitute a new reality, since, from the beginning, many founders had as a reality the involvement of difference states of life in the mission that God confided to them. And, for decades we have been speaking of the charism family, in the hope of involving the laity more and more. This has

often been done as a consequence of the diminishment in the number of vocations that are specifically religious, a motivation that is functional, that reflects a response to a need rather than attention to the vocational dimension, to the call which comes from the Spirit.

These initiatives are often seen internally as supplemental, but the vision of the Church as a body demands a change of mentality that

Arises from the need to share responsibility...above all in the hope of living aspects and specific events of the spirituality and mission of the institute (...). If in other times these were created by religious men and women, above all to nurture and direct forms of life which bring the laity to themselves, today, thanks to an ever greater formation of the laity, it can become reciprocal aid, favoring the understanding of the specificity and the beauty of each state of life. Communion and reciprocity in the Church are never only in one direction (*Starting Afresh from Christ*, n. 31).

What is new therefore comes from the understanding of this “communal understanding”, characterized by a sense of pertaining to, and the capacity of sharing a charism, through common participation and integration, that arises from the exchange of the gift of each state of life, between consecrated and laity.

Starting from the consciousness of the universal vocation to holiness (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, V), many church documents have traced the path of this journey of communion.

It was already affirmed in the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* that “today not a few institutes have arrived at the conviction that their charism can be shared with the laity. It can be said that, from the list of historical experiences such as the diverse secular orders or third orders, a new chapter, rich in hope, arose in the history of relationships between consecrated persons and the laity (n. 54). The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, stressed that “the laity are not simply workers in the vineyard, but an integral part of that work”, considered “priests, religious men and women, and the lay faithful, are, all at the same time, the object and subject of the communion of the Church and the participation in its mission of salvation”, and recognized diverse and complimentary charisms and ministries, different methods of living the same vocation and the same mission, working in the one vineyard

of the lord (n. 8, 55). From this arose a vision which opened the way for a “new” rapport in communion between consecrated religious and laity, an experience which is made possible where there are people who believe in this communion, who know how to be involved with one another, who do not fear to face the complexity of a walk which does to arise from on high in institutional structures, but from lived experience, who know how to search together and bring to fruition the progressive repositioning needed for a project which points to fraternal authenticity, the possibility of exchanging gifts, and welcoming the challenge to translate diversity into complementarity.

In this process, there is light and darkness, the acknowledgement of the knowledge that the Holy Spirit unites all differences, not in equality but in harmony:

Only the Spirit can call forth diversity, plurality, multiplicity and, at the same time, promote unity. Here also, when we wish to remove the diversity and close ourselves in our particular view, our exclusiveness, we bring about division. And when we wish to remove unity according to our own plans, we end up bringing in uniformity and homogeneity. If, on the other hand, we let the Spirit guide us, richness, variety and diversity never conflict with one another.¹

What is central to this communion?

The radicalness of the choice of Christ and of his Gospel, the conviction that every charism is born from the Church and with the Church at the service of humanity, that particular and unique emphasis that the face of Christ is met and known by Founders male and female, that undeniable element, all qualify their vocation and ours as a new work in the Church. “Their experience is, by its nature, communicable, has a collective force, and is participated in by others. It contains a permanent and directed genetic code, and together is realized in an always creative manner in the signs of times yesterday, today and tomorrow.”²

And, at the center of this communion is the rapport, the direct dialogue, among people. We cannot run the risk of considering a charism solely as “content”. Each foundational charism includes a “content”, but at the same time, also a particular “mode of being”, “mode of proceeding.”³

Pope Francis invites everyone – priests, consecrated men and women, laity - to live the “mystery of the encounter”: the capacity to feel,

to listen to other people, to search together the route and the method. If every one of you is for others, there is the precious possibility of an encounter with God. I am speaking of rediscovering the responsibility to be prophets as a community, to rediscover together, with humility and patience, a word the sense of which can become a gift, and to witness to it with simplicity. You are an antenna, ready to collect the seeds of new life called forth by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the church community to assume this view for good, and find new and courageous ways to gather everyone in⁴.

Bishop José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, underlines the call to communion thus:

Consecrated Life was born in the Church, and with the Church and for the Church... Today, we are called to pass, as in concentric circles, from a consciousness of the local Community to that of the Order or Institute; from a consciousness of Order, Institute, Society or Association to that of the charism family, and from a family we need to enlarge the heart to communion with all the charisms in the Church.⁵

A revolution in mentality, changing of the perspective which affects everyone, consecrated and laity:

The Holy Spirit enriches the Church to evangelize with diverse charisms. These are gifts to renew and build up the Church. It is not a closed patrimony, consigned to a group to take care of. Rather, we speak of the gifts of the Spirit, integrated into the body of the church, drawn to the center which is Christ, from whom it is incarnated into a force for evangelization. A clear sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial dimension. It is in community, even if it is so challenging, that a charism reveals itself authentically and is mysteriously prolific. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 130)

A charism is a gift which no one can appropriate to him or herself:

In this sense, we cannot think that it is for the consecrated religious to have the laity participate in their own charism. Analogously, as would happen for them, it will be the Spirit who gives the laity the charism which they receive from the consecrated. It is the Spirit who

calls them to share a particular experience of religious life. Certainly, on the part of the consecrated persons, it will happen, as for founders, to give witness to an experience of life, showing its richness, its beauty, its efficacy, and with these, attract and sustain the desire to share the same experience. But this also is true for the laity themselves, who can become instruments to attract others to the consecrated life.⁶

Pope Francis, announcing the year of consecrated life, recalls that the charism operates within its own interest and fertility as a family:

In this letter, I wish to speak not only to consecrated persons, but also to the laity, who share with them the same ideals, spirit and mission. Some Religious Institutes have a long tradition in this regard, while the experience of others is more recent. Indeed, around each religious family, every Society of Apostolic Life and every Secular Institute, there is a larger family, a “charismatic family”, which includes a number of Institutes which identify with the same charism, and especially lay faithful who feel called, precisely as lay persons, to share in the same charismatic reality.⁷

Let us now turn our attention to the “charism family” arising from the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

THE CHARISM FAMILY ARISING FROM ST. EUGENE DE MAZENOD AND THE OBLATES

In the beginning, the Missionary Association of Mary Immaculate followed other types of lay associations, such as the “Friends of St. Eugene”. More recently, we speak of the “Oblate Family” or the “Mazenodian Family”, with a more fluid terminology; rarely do we speak of a “charism family”. Generally this refers to the laity who, in various forms, share the spirituality and the mission of the Oblates. It is necessary, however, to ask ourselves if, and of what type, there could be a link with the various institutes of consecrated life begun through the initiative of some Oblates.

If we look at the present reality of the “Family”, it is possible, in general terms, to point out a few essential components:

- The Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate is the main place for the incarnation of the charism of Eugene.

- Laity are associated in various forms and models.
- Institutes of Consecrated Life have been born from the Oblates in different countries of the world.

The laity

The reality of the laity who share the Oblate charism is present at the level of the Constitutions and Rules (cf. R 37a, 37b) or at the level of some provincial directories and apostolic works. There is an implied journey, which has a number of perspectives.

The laity linked directly to our institutes are some of the many who ask to share our spirituality and mission, inspired by the charism of the Founder. It is truly a new chapter in the experience of consecrated life in these years: families, couples, single people, young people, all desire to link themselves more fully with us, showing a particular attachment to our charism (...) This was affirmed, for example, by the Oblate General Chapter of 1992, stating what was happening a little bit everywhere: “a new reality is becoming evident: families, married couples, single people, and young people wish to become more closely united with us and manifest a special commitment to our charism... This relatively new phenomenon is a *sign of the times*. We are not the owners of our charism; it belongs to the Church. And so we are happy to see that lay persons who are called by God want to share it.”⁸

The vocational dimension of the laity is emerging with great strength. For example, the MAMI, the groups of young people who are linked to the Oblates, the “Friends of St. Eugene, the diverse initiatives that are taking place at the level of provinces and units. This adherence to the family arises from the sharing of the Gospel, lived with the specific color of the charism, and sustained by a formation that prepares for the understanding and acceptance of the plurality of expressions of the Incarnation.

The Institutes of Consecrated Life

Rule 37c states:

Several religious and secular institutes have links to the Congregation because of their origin or because of their spirituality. Each

Province or Delegation will seek to strengthen these spiritual bonds, and, if possible, establish concrete forms of apostolic cooperation, with all due respect for the autonomy of these institutes.

In addition, there are provincial directories that better explain this reality.

Here, for example, is that of the Mediterranean Province:

The Mediterranean Province will maintain a special relationship of fraternity and collaboration with the religious, lay institutes, and associations, which have arisen from the Oblate charism. (cf. R 37c).

In the Mediterranean Province the ecclesial reality of consecrated religious, priests, laity adults and young people, who are inspired by the spirituality and mission of the Oblates, and recognized by the Provincial Superior, are welcome in the Oblate family (n. 4:9-10).

As far as Institutes of Consecrated Life founded by Oblates, there are two important experiences: the meeting of April 22-27, 1991, in Rome, with Superior General Fr. Marcello Zago, in which 21 institutes participated, and that in Aix, from May 3-8, 2004, with Superior General Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, in which 15 institutes participated.

These gatherings, however short, brought forth the awareness of the identity of some institutes born of the charism and founded by Oblates, from an experience of communion.

We can ask ourselves what are the concrete steps to fully respond to the invitation given by Pope Francis in the *Apostolic Letter to all the Consecrated*:

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Perhaps there are no answers for all situations. A positive attitude may start from a few questions: Do we who see ourselves as sons and daughters of St. Eugene have a single vision of the identity of the Ob-

late missionary family? Or, is it better to continue or develop a way in which we can meet one another, going above and beyond our own “visions” to arrive at that of the Church – family – communion?

Here are the suggestions of the Associations of Family Charisms, so that each family, in prayer, in listening, and in reciprocal awareness, might draw up an

Identity charter that underlines the specifics of the Charism: what makes it different from the others and allows it to enter into dialogue with those other charisms, offering its own vision without running the risk of losing its specific identity, and, at the same time, enriching itself with the beauty and diversity of the other charisms. Thus they will respond together to the challenges brought by the new views of today’s mission of evangelization. (such plans would become) a reference point for the groups to share about, and offer common elements in the specific journey of each group, delineating the basic elements that will construct the unity in the spirit of the Founder or Foundress, offering orientations and sensibility in relation to the apostolic mission, general orientations for a shared formation and for the composition and animation of the Charism Family.⁹

It would be very helpful to have and promote the connection between those who feel called to the sharing of a charism (laity and professed), to have them come to an agreement on a definition as a family, in an authentic spirit of communion of unity to respond to the Church on the periphery as asked for by the Pope.

Who is to accomplish the promotion of this “service”? The institutional aspect cannot be excluded, without forgetting that, at the center, there is the experience of the Spirit who brings forth in hearts the desire and will to live in unity.

It is possible to search out and put in place strategies to grow in communion and a reciprocal membership on the national level, to underline the positive which is already present and understand together the new steps to take. A typical example could be the Oblate Family Council of the Mediterranean Province.¹⁰

Certainly the steps to take are many, but what is basic is the will to meet one another to continue to read the signs of the life that lie ahead, and to have them grow as a family. If we have the dream and the passion, we can nourish and witness a life spent in unity, knowing there is a

way that is the time of the Spirit, and that what counts is to be attentive to the Spirit's voice. We are not speaking of being "Family" as a human reality, but to help one another to bring forth the charism already present.

A challenge in this process is given by formation:

In almost all congregations, the theme of the Charism Family is not present in the curriculum of formation of young religious, for whom the formation models probably are already linked to the transmission of content, consciousness of methods to function in their role or development of abilities, rather than the comprehension of what is happening or going to happen in relation to the charism. I understand that for that to happen, the best place is not a lecture hall. The fact remains that the charism's culture as a whole has not found a place for cultural communication or significant elaboration. And thus it is that almost no one of the young religious who have come from formation is involved in a convincing sharing about the charism, leading to a journey together among professed and laity. Nor has there been an increase in interest of young religious involved in their daily apostolic work if the institute has not invested as much as necessary (if not in sporadic celebrations together) before promotion to vows and then in finding the time, at the provincial or national level, that permits meeting, sharing of ideas, and formative choices.¹¹

Perhaps this analysis is only slightly adapted to the formative process of our institutes of consecrated life. Perhaps they are already present in the journey of community unity. But in any case, there remains the challenge for a shared formation: "Formation of members falls to each group according to their common patrimony and is specific to them. In any case, there are common elements to be found, possible convergence, wonderful collaboration."¹²

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis urges us to become Family. It is not merely a question of meetings in which one prays or celebrates together, consecrated and laity, or of a shared mission. It is first of all a "style" of Family, something which arises from being together and becomes "oxygen" that one feels, breathes, and which gives life. It is a commitment and responsibility to witness the charism in one's own life, in the choices of

every day. It is a vocational direction and the capacity to give oneself for others, at the service of the poor, in announcing the Gospel. It is to learn and dream, to think, to act as one. It is to learn to welcome the other without fear, and recognize that they bring a newness and richness to the incarnating of the charism.

Accepting the invitation of Fr. Louis Lougen, Superior General, we pray that this year dedicated to Oblate vocations will permit us to walk in this direction, to produce “A Spirit-filled happening, giving us surprising perspectives and filling us with immense hope”.¹³

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¹ Pope FRANCIS, Solemnity of Pentecost, St. Peter’s Square, May 19, 2013.

² F. CIARDI, *Religiosi e laici insieme nella stessa “famiglia carismatica”*, Conference of the Assembly of Charism Families, Rome, November 6, 2015.

³ Cf. J. M. BERGOGLIO, Intervention at the Synod on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, XVI General Congregation (Rome, October 13, 1994), n. 5.

⁴ Pope FRANCIS to the members of Secular Institutes, May 10, 2014.

⁵ Conference to the World Congress on Consecrated Life, January 28-February 2, 2016.

⁶ F. CIARDI, *op cit.*

⁷ Pope FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter to all the Consecrated on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated life*, November 21, 2014.

⁸ F. CIARDI, *op cit.* The referral is to the Chapter Document *Witnesses in Apostolic Community*, n. 40.

⁹ L. SANDIGO, *Strategie per una formazione comune e in comunione*, Assembly of the Charism Family Association, November, 2016.

¹⁰ “Where diverse components are present, at the local, national or provincial level, there should be the establishment of a Council of the Oblate Charism Family (CFO-in Italian), with the task of increasing the fraternity, discernment, defining the urgent missionary needs of the territory, and coordinating a united response, based on the specific contribution each one could offer according to their own state of life and possibilities.” (*Italian Administrative Directory*, 4.10.2)

¹¹ R. COZZA, “Alleanza profetica e la famiglia carismatica”, Conference of the Assembly of Charism Families, May, 2017.

¹² L. SANDIGO, *op. cit.*

¹³ Letter for the year of Oblate Vocations, August 15, 2017.