

Charism and institution: what defines a religious community?

Tim Watson, Chemin Neuf Community

“We need a wild burst of fresh and Spirit-fuelled imagination about Religion [= religious community life] in the 21st century. It will be embedded in its traditions, but as in all past renewals of Religion it will also be different. Above all it will be spontaneous, not top down and under control. So what needs doing? What institutional changes are needed? How does the church, how do the churches (we are not all Anglicans here) obstruct you, hinder you when we should celebrate and support? What re-imagination do we need?”

Justin Welby, Archbishop’s Day Conference at Lambeth Palace, 28 March 2014

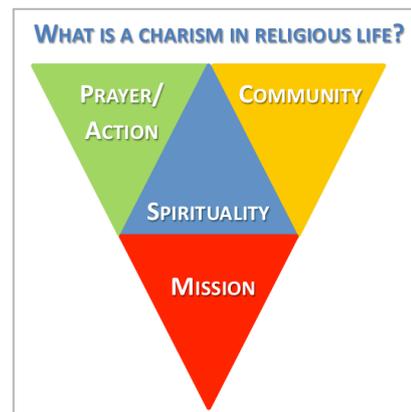
What makes a religious community (traditional or New Monastic) distinctive? What gives it its profound identity? In what way does it differ from a mission organisation, or any other group of Christians coming together with similar interests to pursue a common activity?

And: how should a religious community relate to the wider church? Is it supposed to be entirely independent, entirely spontaneous – at the risk of being anarchic and disorderly? Or should it be an official body of a recognised denomination – at the risk of being managed and controlled out of existence?

One good way to address these two fundamental questions is to talk about the “charism” of religious community life.

What is a “charism”, and how does it make a religious community distinctive?

A “charism” is defined as “a specific God-given gift to the benefit of the whole Church”. God gives us all gifts to enable us to carry out our vocation as baptised Christians, because it’s impossible for us to do so without God’s help. But God also gives “collective” gifts to groups of Christians, enabling them to live out a distinctive form of Christian life in a particular way, as an inspiration to the whole Church. This is the theological basis for religious community life: not a theory or an idea, but the experience of a group of people who feel called to follow Christ more closely together, in a particular way, in a particular time or place.



The heart of a religious community’s charism is its distinctive **spirituality**: a way of understanding its members’ relationship with God from a specific perspective. It begins with a shared spiritual experience, and it finds its expression in distinctive spiritual practices. The many different historical spiritualities of religious community life each have distinctive emphases: Franciscan, Benedictine, Ignatian, Celtic ... Newer communities can be expressions of a classic spirituality in a contemporary context, or more creative fusions or innovations. In all cases, the family resemblance will be the common call to follow Christ more closely, forming a distinctive community of disciples at the “sharp edge” of Christian life.

This spirituality finds expression in three ways:

1. A specific balance between **prayer and action**. This balance will be distinctive and different for each community (e.g. some will be more contemplative, others active).
2. A way of **living community life**. Daily life in community is an expression of the spirituality which is the “secret heart” (e.g. some will be monastic, others mendicant ...). This will be especially true of its structures of governance and authority, as its members seek to discern the will of God in prayer and put it into practice.
3. A specific **mission** in service of the Church and the World. This could be education, service of the poor, the unity of Christians, or many other things.

It's important to realise that a community's mission is not its primary reason for existing, nor is it a way of justifying its continued existence. On the contrary, a community's mission is an expression of its spirituality, which flows from the community members' personal and collective relationship with God, and is sustained by their community life. This is what distinguishes a religious community (traditional or New Monastic) from a mission agency. A religious community is not defined by its mission purpose, but by the charism, the gift of God, which its members have collectively received; equally, its mission is an organic and necessary expression of its life.

How does a community's charism relate to Church structures?

If religious communities are fundamentally “gifts of God for the benefit of the whole Church”, then they are – by their very nature – part of the Church, and so their relationship with the wider Church is intended by God to be one of mutual blessing and profound communion. But for this to be the case, it's important to avoid two extremes:

1. the extreme of **autonomy**: when a religious community behaves as if it's “a law unto itself”, rather than a gift of the same Holy Spirit who animates the whole Church.
2. the extreme of **institutionalisation**: when a religious community's life is squeezed out of existence by structures which are not a faithful reflection of its charism.

It's a delicate balance, because all religious communities need the right mixture of institutional order and independence in order to survive; and also, like any group of people with an unusual interest, they can become narrow and unhealthily introspective if left entirely to their own devices. Fledgling communities (whether traditional or New Monastic) face particular challenges as they seek to find sustainable ways of living out their spiritualities in prayer, community life and mission; it's important for them to receive support and wisdom from outside as they go through this process. Historically, some kind of relationship of obedience to the wider Church has been a key characteristic of religious community life. But the rootedness of community life in a God-given charism is a vital reminder that – even within an episcopal ecclesiology – the Church is first and foremost a bottom-up grass-roots movement, and only secondarily a top-down institution. Within episcopal churches, a positive relationship between bishops – in their coordinating and enabling role as chief pastors of a region – and new religious communities can be invaluable, and is often necessary from the outset when licensed or ordained ministers are involved; equally, the risks of injudicious institutionalisation are considerable, especially when the nature and purpose of religious community life are not well understood, or when the Church's regulations are too inflexible.

The theology of charism gives us some very helpful ground rules for establishing appropriate internal structures within new religious communities, and also for healthy external relationships with the wider Church.

1. The structures (including governance) of a religious community should be an outworking of the community's charism. Though needing to be developed and refined over time, they are essentially organic, innate, and inherent in the gift of God that brought the community into being.
2. When developing their structures, new communities can benefit greatly from the wisdom of older communities which have been through this process before, especially if they have a similar or related charism.
3. The principal role of external church authorities exercising a ministry of oversight is helping religious communities to identify their God-given charism, to stay faithful to it over time, and to ensure that their structures reflect it. This process should be rigorous, but wherever possible supportive and celebratory. In seeking to be faithful to the charism, bishops and pastors are being faithful to the Holy Spirit.
4. Communities seeking formal institutional recognition from the wider Church need to cultivate the virtues of trust and patience, recognising that large church institutions, though slower and less flexible than small communities, are no less God-given ...
5. The charism of religious life is distinct in principle from the charism of ordained or licensed ministry, though often in practice there is a fruitful overlap. Especially in the Church of England, ordained or licensed ministers discerning a call to religious life – or community members discerning a call to ordination – will need to have a specific conversation with their denominational authorities about how to articulate both aspects of their vocation. Equally, many religious communities do not in principle require ordained members in order to live out their charism.
6. Visible signs of communion and unity between a religious community and the wider Church are a crucial sign that the community's charism is authentic, and a reminder that all charisms exist "for the benefit of the whole Church".