



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

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Religious sisters in the Vincentian family / St. Vincent de Paul Society

CHAPTER X

Hearing the same call: A shared charism

From October 12–15, 2017, the city of Rome was awash in a sea of yellow scarves as over 10,000 members of the Vincentian Family from 99 countries around the world gathered for a symposium marking the 400th anniversary of the charism of St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660). Collaboration was a key point in the conversations and it was of particular interest to note the number of participants from various Christian as well as other faith traditions who identified themselves as Vincentians. This story drawn from the Anglican Company of Mission Priests makes this point:

The Company of Mission Priests came into being in the early days of World War II. Its original purpose was to care for evacuated populations in places where the usual

level of housing and pay could not be made available. So these Mission Priests would have to be unmarried and willing to share accommodation, income and expenditure. It was hoped that, after the war, these priests could serve on the great housing estates, where resources were few and the need for pastoral care and mission was great. This was exactly what happened. After the war CMP priests both in teams and individually served with distinction in some of the most-needy areas in Britain, and also overseas in Guyana, Madagascar and North America.

In 1992, the Company had over 40 members; but the decision of the Church of England's General Synod in that year to proceed with the ordination of women to the priesthood caused a crisis of conscience for many. As a result, in 1994 over half the members withdrew in order to seek admission to the Roman Catholic Church. During 1994 and 1995, the remaining members engaged in a serious and prayerful re-examination of the Company's life and purpose. This led, among other things, to a recognition of our affinity in spirit and work with the original body of Mission Priests founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1625, and then to our joy to a growing affiliation with the worldwide Vincentian Family which includes the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, our own Anglican Sisters of Charity, as well as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and some other bodies. We have gained much from this ecumenical closeness, and we are very grateful to our confreres and sisters for their help and guidance.





Sr. Marge Clifford and members of the Anglican Company of Mission Priests / Used with permission

The Greek word *charisma* means gift or favour. Introduced into religious language by the apostle Paul, the term implies a free gift of grace. In everyday English usage, “gifted” people may be tempted to think of themselves as a cut above others. For St. Paul, however, a charism is a gift having its source in the *charis* – grace or favour – of God and destined for “the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). It is bestowed by the Holy Spirit for building up the Body of Christ. In the Christian community, charisms are many and all are related to various services and functions. The whole long section of 1 Cor. 12:4–14:10 is devoted to the relative merits of various charisms. The significant

point of his analysis is his insistence that not only is there a variety of gifts but that there is a variety of service and that the gifts are essentially gifts of service. In this context, chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, which may read like a digression interrupting the natural flow between chapters 12 and 14, this becomes central to the apostle's argument. Paul describes "a still more excellent way" and identifies the highest gift as nothing other than love. An all-embracing Christian love which shows itself in action is the measure of all other gifts. In general, charism inspires and makes fruitful the love and labour of Christians who generously commit themselves to serve those in need.

As a gift of the Holy Spirit, a charism may be claimed but cannot be owned by any one group. Thus, the Vatican's *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (DAPNE) affirms the contribution religious communities might make to the fostering of ecumenical thought and action (DAPNE, 50). This role is recognized as well by bishops of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity and Mission (IARCCUM) who state in their 2007 text *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* (GTUM): "Anglicans and Roman Catholics share a rich heritage regarding the place of religious orders in ecclesial life. There are religious communities in both our Communion that trace their origins to the same founders (e.g. Benedictines and Franciscans). We encourage the continuation and strengthening of relations between Anglican and Catholic religious orders, and acknowledge the particular witness of monastic communities with an ecumenical vocation" (GTUM, 115). In *The Church as Communion*, the closer cooperation between religious communities is an example of the communion that is already shared by

the two churches (CC, 52). In more general terms, *Salvation and the Church* states: “The Church is called to be a living expression of the Gospel... In its ministry to the world the church seeks to share with all people the grace by which its own life is created and sustained” (SC, 28)



Roman Catholic and Anglican participants in an ecumenical 'Internovitiate' formation program / Used with permission

In what ways have you experienced the sharing of religious charisms across different Christian traditions?

How do you see the sharing of charisms in religious communities contributing to the restoration of Christian unity? What can be done to promote this?