

# What is Charism?

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by Sr. Annie Klapheke, SC

I want to focus this short presentation on two questions: what is charism? In discerning religious life, how do you discern which charism?

Charism is not easy to define. I offer this as a simple definition: charism is a gift from God for the church and the world, given as different ways of living out the Gospel. As I was preparing this talk, I thought of the Pentecost story as a beautiful way to help us understand charism:

Acts 2:1-6

*When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.*

Just as at Pentecost, the source of the all charisms is the same – the Holy Spirit. What differs is the way it is expressed. The Gospel message is too full, too rich to be contained in any one charism. Like a mosaic or a quilt, which requires many diverse pieces to create a beautiful, unified image; so the Church needs many ways of expressing the Gospel.

Charism may also be described as the spirit of the community. Like the strong, driving wind in the Pentecost story, it is a powerful energy that permeates through the community members and the way in which they do their ministries. It does not define *what* they do, rather it defines *why* and *how* they do it. So, how does a community name or articulate its charism? Charisms are partially defined by the founding of the community, but also the on-going deep story of community – how the charism plays out through time, in particular places and circumstances, is also an important part of defining the charism. The charism helps guide how the community responds to the ‘signs of the times’.

There are many charisms in religious life – Charity, Marianist, Vincentian, Franciscan, Dominican, Ignatian. Which brings us to our second question, how do you discern to which community or charism that God is calling you? I offer three concrete ways: learn the history and stories of the community, spend time with the community, trust in the guidance of the Spirit.

As mentioned before, a charism can be defined by its founding and its on-going deep story. As you explore communities, learn about the founders and the early history of the community. You often find this information on a community’s website, or there may be books written about the founder of the charism. In addition to this history lesson, learn also about the current ministries of the community. Again, this information can often be found on websites, on in community newsletters or publications.

Second, spend time with the community. You can learn a lot about a person or a group simply by being with them. Experience their life – pray with them, share meals, visit ministries, have a live-in experience. Essentially – build relationships. It is often said that charism is “caught” rather than “taught”. So while studying the facts and history can be helpful in learning about the charism, your best

information will come from actually immersing yourself in the lives of those who are living it out. As you spend time with the community, ask yourself, 'Do I feel at home here? Do I feel attracted to the way these women are living the Gospel?'

Finally, and most importantly, trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you will be led to a particular charism, and you may feel that it was not of your own choosing. If you ask God to lead you where you are meant to be, then open yourself to being led. Know that there is no such thing as a "perfect" charism or community. There will probably be pieces of *every* charism that attract you, because, after all, every charism, at its core, is rooted in the Gospel. And perhaps you will even be surprised by where God leads you. The charism that God has created you for will utilize the gifts you have, and also challenge you to grow in gifts yet to be uncovered.

In closing, I offer these words of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, "Contemplate how you are being asked to give your heart to God amidst your everyday activities. Be prepared to meet your grace in every circumstance of life."