

CHARISM AND COMMUNITY: SOME BASICS

December 4, 2014

As most of you know, in recent community meetings we have been discussing topics in a booklet from the National Religious Vocation Conference, the first two topics being “charism” and “community.” By chance, the other day I happened upon a brief statement about charism written several decades ago by a man named John Carroll Futrell, the co-founder of the Institute of Religious Formation. He said something that is worth keeping in mind, for it could prevent us from trying to pin down with excessive detail something that will always elude precise definition. He wrote: “Religious communities, like persons, are living organisms actualizing their own individuality through their own unique way of experiencing life and of integrating relationships....The founder’s charism, as shared and lived by the members of the community today, is a mystery, as is anything which is dynamic and alive. It cannot be defined. It can only be described.”¹ One way of helping describe it was suggested at one of our recent meetings, namely, letting the newer members of our community hear something about the life and personality of some of our predecessors here, such as Thomas Verner Moore and Alban Boulwood, so Fr. Joseph has kindly offered to give us a talk about a few of these men next Thursday evening. Tonight, I want to speak somewhat more broadly (and briefly) about some of the basics of our life under the overall rubric “Charism and Community.”

I’ll start with something I learned from a book that I’ve been using with our newer members in weekly formation classes, a book called *The Age of the Cloister*, about monasticism in the Middle Ages. The author points out that with the rise of new forms of religious life in the twelfth century, there arose an occasionally heated controversy over which form of life was most appropriately called “apostolic,” for at that time there was a great desire on the part of many to live a life patterned closely on that of Jesus’ first followers. To calm the waters, a canon regular in Liege whose name has not even come down to us wrote an irenic treatise titled *On the*

Different Orders in which he argued that all different forms, whether what we'd call Benedictines, or Cistercians, or Augustinians, or Premonstratensions, all had their rightful place in the Church and could find their rationale and justification in Scripture. All were fully within God's providence. A corollary, of course, is that such variety is desirable, meaning that no one group should try to do everything, but rather strive to do as well as possible what makes them somewhat distinctive. This is surely advice that is true at all times, though it is also true that the way a particular group or order lives its charism in one era will differ somewhat from what was appropriate at a different time and in other circumstances. Our life here at St. Anselm's in 2014 could not and should not be just like life at Monte Cassino when St. Benedict wrote his rule back in the sixth century. There are, however, certain basics that will endure, and I want to dwell a bit on a few of them, especially ones highlighted by Fr. Michael Casey in a talk he gave to the general chapter of the American Cassinese Congregation last year, since published in two parts in *The American Benedictine Review*.

First of all, regardless of whether one uses the word "spiritual" or "mystical," the depth dimension of monastic life is foundational. Surely none of us entered the monastery primarily to do a certain kind of work but rather because we felt drawn here by a loving God, which is only another way of putting Benedict's phrase that a monastic community must above all make sure that a newcomer is truly seeking God. But that kind of choice is never a once-and-for-all event. As Casey writes, the genuine following of Christ comes about "not only through the initial gesture that brings us into the monastery, but all life long as we struggle in the hope of arriving at that singleness of heart in which the vision of God is less obscured. We sometimes forget this. We think of our first renunciation as complete, but we are forgetting the more interior work of purification that still needs to take place [and] ... is, at least partially, dependent on our

cooperation [with God's grace]."² That's why Benedict includes in his Tools of Good Works such phrases as "Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ" (RB 4.10, quoting Matt 16:24) and "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way" (RB 4.20). This, of course, is true not only on the individual level but on the community level, which is why all of us should try to be mindful of our own recently revised mission statement, which we took up as part of our discussion of charism and which captures a lot of what we, precisely as a community, intend to be.

In that connection, it is important to note that of our statement's three "bullet points" listing principal ways of seeking God in all things, the first point is prayer. We need to make sure that our time here in church for the divine office really is a time of personal communion with God. As I said at one of our recent community meetings, our relatively slow chanting of the psalms helps in this regard, but we cannot ignore the challenge that some phrases in the psalms pose for us. As a single example, four mornings ago we chanted the verse "Have no mercy on these worthless traitors" (Ps 59:6). We can, of course, understand such "traitors" to be our own unruly thoughts, or we can just acknowledge that the psalmist's honest expression of dislike or even hatred for certain groups is a sentiment that we can find in ourselves at times and realize that we should pray for the grace to get beyond such feelings, but in any case it is surely harder to use such a verse in prayer than those many other parts of the psalms that are more obviously in accord with Jesus' teaching to love our enemies and pray for any who persecute us.

Because the divine office is not an exercise unrelated to the rest of our daily life, we must never forget Fr. Casey's point that "the Office will be prayerful to the extent that it is buttressed by the traditional monastic practices of [private] prayer and *lectio divina*.... We do ourselves and others a disservice if we underestimate the degree of doggedness required for regular prayer....

The daily effort to [make sure that private prayer is always part of] our activities has a beneficial and even transforming effect on the quality of our lives as a whole.”³ In this respect, our entire tradition, going back to people like John Cassian and John Chrysostom, highlights the value of short prayers, lovingly and faithfully repeated, though perhaps with some variations lest the repetition become unduly monotonous. Each one of us should feel utterly free to experiment so as to find a way of private prayer suitable to himself at this particular time in his life. As Abbot John Chapman of Downside used to say, “Pray as you can and not as you can’t.” But let us never forget that “the only way to become prayerful is to pray.”⁴

The second bullet point of our mission statement refers to life together, in other words, to community. Although Benedict allows for the possibility of a monk’s becoming a hermit, it is quite clear from the rule as a whole (and from the end of the prologue in particular) that he expects his monks regularly to remain living in the community until death. For someone like Fr. Edmund, with his special health needs, this is not literally possible, but since he was with us for a while on Thanksgiving let me repeat what most of you have heard, even more than once: that when someone once asked Edmund what he liked best about our life, he said “the community,” and when asked what he liked least, he gave the same answer. Perhaps all of us could say the same. To live cheek by jowl with people of many different temperaments and interests and personalities will always be a challenge, in religious life no less than in civil life, but unlike those who work in stores or government offices, we can’t retreat from the workplace at 5 p.m. each day and be away from it all weekend. Here’s the way Fr. Casey deals with this point:

“Benedictine monasticism is *cenobitic*. It envisages not a code of conduct to be followed by an individual, but a corporate way of life that will be both formative and transformative.... It is characterized by a moderation which leaves the strong with scope for generosity without being a

source of discouragement for the weak (RB 64.19). Because it is moderate, its effects are realized only in the longer term; it is not necessarily a source of immediate gratification and so a certain tolerance of imperfection is needed for stability to become a reality.”⁵ Benedict emphasizes the same point in his 72nd chapter when he writes that we are to “support with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly compete in obedience to one another” (RB72.5-6). Such mutual obedience is certainly not a matter of monks going around giving one another orders that have to be obeyed. The phrase must surely be understood with reference to its Latin root *audire*, to listen, to be attentive, that is, to be sensitive to the needs of another and to respond in a way that reflects something of the love that Christ has for each one of us. There is no ready-made formula for doing this, only a call to be alert, mindful, sensitive.

Our mission statement’s third bullet point refers to the kinds of work we do. I’ve already spoken quite a while, so lengthier reflections on this can be saved for some future conference. Let me just conclude with the inspiring words with which Michael Casey closed his address to the members of the general chapter of the American Cassinese last year: “The shape of monastic living may change, but its fundamental character remains constant. It will always be a corporate form of truly seeking God in a lifestyle that is ordinary, obscure, and laborious, lived in the hope that in all things God may be glorified.”⁶

1 John Carroll Futrell, "Discovering the Founder's Charism," *The Way Supplement* 14 (1971): 64-65.

2 Michael Casey, OCSO, "Monasticism: Present and Future: Part II," *The American Benedictine Review* 65, no. 3 (2014): 299.

3" Ibid., 308.

4" Ibid.

5" Ibid., 306.

6" Ibid., 311.