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Province of Latin America and the Caribbean

This text, entitled “The Living Charism and our Congregational Identity,” is adapted from a talk given by Sister Mary Maher at the meeting of Congregational Leaders and Formators in August 2014. Sister Mary was invited to repeat this talk at the First Province Gathering of the Province of Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC), in February 2015. The ALC Provincial Council felt that it would give a helpful context for the particular focus of their Province on prioritizing ministries and planning for responsible use of “resources” (understood as personnel, finances, properties, and ministries).

Since this focus is a need in all our provinces, the general council decided to make the text available to the whole congregation as it was given to the ALC Province in February 2015. It can be found on the international website, www.gerhardinger.org, in the section on Formation, under “Resources.”

Here is the outline of the paper:

The Living Charism and our Congregational Identity

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Introduction

Today and tomorrow you, as a province, will focus on topics that are essential to our life and mission: ministry-discernment, stewardship of resources (personnel, finances, properties, ministries), and formation. In all cases we will be involved in discernment of our future. Discernment, as we know, involves information-gathering. We need to be informed if we are to discern well.

This morning, I would like to lead us into the next days by reflecting on the most fundamental information we need for discernment of our future: **we need to know who we are.** Who are we, the School Sisters of Notre Dame? What is our identity as a *particular* community of disciples who are sent into the world to serve and minister in the name of Jesus Christ?

I remember saying to the meeting of leaders and formators, gathered in Rome last August, that knowing our identity is important because if we do not know who we are, then whatever we do in initial formation is bound to fail. If the understanding of our identity is so narrow that it has no room for cultural diversity, we cannot welcome and be mutually enriched by the new members that are coming to us today. If the understanding of our identity is so broad that it allows for anything, with no particular content that we claim as our own, then the congregation will die.

This is true also of ministry-discernment: What we do has to be consistent with who we are! It is also true of discerning how to use our resources: Why will you spend money and time and the energy of our sisters on this and not on that? The reason must have to do with our identity. So . . .

What is our identity?

To enter into our exploration of this, I want to invite you to a simple exercise. This is not something you will be asked to share. I just want each one to do it for herself. Take a few minutes to write down three most important things you would want to say about our identity as School Sisters of Notre Dame. In other words, what are three of the most important features of our congregational identity that you would share with anyone who asks you who we are?

Just put that to the side now and you will have time to look at it later.

The Concept of Charism

Since the Second Vatican Council, we have become accustomed to using the word "charism" to try to describe the uniqueness of each religious congregation. It is interesting to note that the word "charism" is not found at all in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the council document on the renewal of religious life which was the charter for all our efforts at renewal in recent decades. Vatican II spoke instead of the "*spirit* of the founders" as a principle of renewal and refoundation, along with fidelity to the gospel and a perceptive reading of the signs of the time.¹

¹ See Margaret Susan Thompson, "'Charism' or 'Deep Story'? Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Growth of Women's Religious Life in Nineteenth-Century America," page 1. This is a paper delivered at the History of Women Religious Conference, Chicago, June 1998.

In the ways in which we use the term now (that is, as "charism of the founders," or "charism of the congregation"), the word seems to have appeared first in an address by Pope Paul VI in 1971. Some years later, in 1996, Pope John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* contains 86 uses of the term charism in this way.

We have all been influenced by the evolution of this concept. However, we have not been served well by thinking of charism as a static reality, a gift given to Mother Theresa and passed on to us unchanged. Such an understanding divorces the concept of charism from our lived experience, especially as it has developed historically in the contexts of changing circumstances.

You Are Sent is extremely helpful in this regard, particularly in its openness to the historical development of our charism. Let us look together at the Prologue. [I take this opportunity, dear sisters, to say how much our discernment of future directions can be helped by prayer with the Prologue of *You Are Sent*.]

"Our charism, gift of the Spirit, was *embodied in*" Mother Theresa. How is it expressed in your language? Notice the word that is used. In English it is translated as *embodied in*.

Then *You Are Sent* lists aspects, if you will, of our charism. It is given a content: oneness, Eucharist, poverty, Mary. Seeking God's will, struggling for unity, responding to urgent needs, preferring the poor, educating with a world vision . . . "In these gifts of the Spirit to our foundress . . . we recognize the evolving charism of our congregation."

Brilliant! *Embodied in* Mother Theresa, yet evolving. There is a content here. It was embodied in Mother Theresa and it evolves as historical circumstances change.

Where does it come from? It "flows," *You Are Sent* says, from our spiritual heritage. There is a content here. It is not the same as the Franciscan content or the Dominican content. It is a different coming together of influences. It is ours as School Sisters.

Then, the last section, "our charism *continues to develop in the living community* . . ."

To some this can seem very slippery and vague. Shouldn't we just do what Mother Theresa did? How does our charism continue to develop and how do we know we are being faithful to who we are?

I would imagine that all of us at some point or other have been asked to describe who we are as a congregation. And I would imagine that all of us give very fine responses to this question. But let me ask you this. Have you found yourself coming away from such conversations wondering: *Did I say the right things? Did I say all I should have said? Did I leave something out? Is this just my version of who we are?*

How can we make sense out of the fact that we do not seem able to define our charism in a way that enables us to feel that we have it in a neat definition?

In 1989 (Marianist father) Bernard Lee wrote what I have since come to regard as a ground-breaking article entitled, "A Socio-Historical Theology of Charism."² In it he said:

² *Review for Religious* (January-February, 1989): 124-135.

The 'recovery of charism' may be one of the most unsupportable and unnecessary burdens a religious institution has ever been asked to bear, because it cannot be done. Charism is not a property. It is not a possession. It is not transferable, not transmittable, and not controllable. Charism is a deeply historicized social phenomenon. It cannot be duplicated in any other time or place.

Whenever charism does recur in some historical tradition, it is *reinvented* in a new social and historical setting.³

Dear Sisters, this is the most important insight to keep in mind when we are discerning the future of our ministries (and the stewardship of our resources).

Here is the main point: Only when we really grasp these features of charism – that it is deeply historical, occurring in a specific time and place and not transferable to another time and place – can we legitimately ask the pressing question: What do we need to do to have our founding charism – that wonderful gift of God to the church and world of 19th century Bavaria through Mother Theresa and Bishop Wittmann – reinvented for this time and place, here and now in Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, of the 21st century?

That is the question of the day!

I invite you to take time to absorb Father Lee's basic point: A community does not possess a charism as a property. Stay with that for a moment. We do not possess our charism as a property. Charism is more in the nature of an event. Charism occurs.

I think this can help us make sense out of the fact that we have seemed incapable of defining our charism in a way we can all say: "Yes, that's it! That is our charism."

When we speak of our charism, we must understand that we are not recovering or defining it abstractly so it can be transferred to or applied in all times and places in the congregation's life. Rather what we must be about is reinventing our charism in each time and place. Charism is not a potential waiting to be actualized. Rather, charism is a happening of grace born only in a specific historical situation.⁴ It is a deeply relational event, enlisting the spirit God has given us in our community to answer a crying, desperate need in our particular world-situation. Charism is an *event* we co-create with God, making ourselves available for this connection between spirit and reality.

³ Lee, 1989, page 124; emphasis mine.

⁴ Bernard Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, (2004), p. 16.

Charism and "Deep Story"

To explore this idea a bit further, let us look at what our community *does* possess. We possess what is called a "deep story," a narrative structure, a unique, incarnated spirit. This so-called "deep story" is a shared story that all of us recognize as our group identity but that none of us can express definitively. This story, this uniqueness, is a gift from God. It "is a necessary condition for charism, but the story is not the charism."⁵

To help us grasp this idea, Father Lee invites us to engage in a thought experiment: Ask a group of twenty School Sisters to name the three most important features of our life. Most likely no two responses would be completely identical. Then do the same for four other groups of religious – Franciscans, Sisters of Charity, Jesuits, . . . whomever you like. The results he predicts are these: Upon reading all one-hundred responses, any School Sister would be able, without fail, to identify which ones are the SSND responses. In addition, he is also convinced that this would be true if the responses collected were from a variety of our provinces, cultures and countries – an international group of School Sisters, let's say. And, Lee believes, in sorting out the collections of the most important features listed, the Franciscans would be able to identify their answers, the Sisters of Charity theirs, and so forth.

This works because communities have a deep story into which the members are socialized – even so-called fringe members because, as Lee asserts, "fringe is the fringe of something! . . . Deep under all the differences within any community is a shared story that participants recognize. They not only recognize it, they experience the world from its perspectives."⁶

We see this very clearly in the congregation-wide dialogues which prepare us for General Chapters. From all over the congregation – from all the provinces – similar answers are repeated in a variety of ways to the questions concerning our values and the needed focus for our future.

Now, one could argue that such results are to be expected after more than forty years of growth and development in conducting international dialogue and conversation about the challenges of responding to the modern world. However, we also saw our deep story remarkably expressed early on in our modern history.

In February 1970, at the second session of the special General Chapter of renewal,⁷ the delegates were polled as to what elements of School Sister life *had to be in the new constitution*. The small groups, made up of sisters of diverse cultures, quite unused to international dialogue, came back with an amazing unanimity in their answers. Here was our deep story in evidence, expressed at that time in the 23 paragraphs of the first version of *You Are Sent*.⁸ Here was our identity as a congregation coming to expression out of our deeply-formed story, the effect of our "formation" into our inheritance, the gift from God embedded in the pattern of our lives, constituting what it means to be School Sisters of Notre Dame.⁹

⁵ Lee, 1989, p. 125.

⁶ Lee, 1989, p. 125.

⁷ The first session was in October 1968 at which Mother Georgianne was elected.

⁸ Later it was detected that there was a great divergence in tone between the English and German texts. However, this does not detract from the point that the responses regarding what constitutes SSND life were remarkably similar across cultures and provinces.

⁹ See Lee, 2004, *The Beating of Great Wings*, Chapter Two, "Deep Story and the Possibility of Charism," pp. 16-35, especially p. 24.

Lee derives this notion of deep story from structural theory in anthropology which provides a method for interpreting group identity. What this theory suggests is

that group identity is rooted in a narrative structure, that is, in recurring patterns of relationships and social activities. The narrative structure of any complex and interesting group, however, is extremely elusive because it is instinctual and unconscious even more than it is deliberate and self-conscious.¹⁰

In this sense, deep story, (or the patterns and structures of our being as a group) cannot be told. Our deep story can only be disclosed in the particular stories that are formed out of it. The deep story lies too deep in our consciousness to be directly told. In fact, it *forms* our consciousness rather than being among the factors of our identity of which we are aware.¹¹

Lee is trying to talk about a certain "style" or "way of being" that characterizes us School Sisters of Notre Dame as a group. The deep story gives configuration to *how* we experience, not just what we experience. This *how* corresponds to *style*. There is a style of religious life that is distinctively ours.

Two implications of this analysis I would like to elaborate. First, it helps us understand something of the frustrating nature of our efforts to clarify our charism.

Secondly, we have to return to the question I mentioned earlier: What do we need to do to reinvent our charism for this time and place? What do we need to do to re-create, re-incarnate, our founding charism – that wonderful gift of God given to the church and world of 19th century Bavaria through Mother Theresa and Bishop Wittmann – here and now for the church and world of Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, of the 21st century?

Our Experience of Attempts to Define Charism

In this wonderful era of interacting with religious men and women of other congregations in so many ways and contexts, have you ever had the experience of trying to distinguish our charism from that of other religious congregations which use similar language to describe theirs?

The general council uses the services of a very fine facilitator, Sister Brid Long, for example. She is a Sister of St. Louis. Her community's motto is: *ut unum sint* = that they may be one. Their charism is unity. Now, I have, on occasion, said that an essential element of our charism is unity, or, more precisely, *the struggle for* unity – longing, like Mother Theresa, for the oneness of all in God. But I know I am not a Sister of St. Louis.

What is the difference? It is a difference in deep story, in the instinctive patterns and unconsciously assimilated styles, between School Sisters of Notre Dame and Sisters of St. Louis.

¹⁰ Lee, 1989, p. 126.

¹¹ Lee, 1989, p. 126; here Lee quotes Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971): 295.

This is difficult to name. Every time we try to articulate our identity as effectively as we can, we come up against our inability to capture the whole mystery. Certainly *You Are Sent* is a wonderful expression trying to edge us toward a grasp of our deep story. But we are all aware that unless and until the constitution is enlivened more or less faithfully by us in our real situations, it remains only well-crafted words.

We are talking about spirit and deeply-formed identity.

In the face of how difficult it is to define our identity, a very popular scholar in the United States, who has written several fine books and numerous articles on religious life, maintains that there is "no pressing need" for a community to define its particular charism with precision or explicitness. She suggests that apostolic congregations like ours, founded in the 19th century, have spent too much time trying to uncover, highlight, clarify and distinguish their respective charisms.¹² We are just all too much alike.

I disagree with her on this point. The issue is not that we have spent too much time and energy trying to define our uniqueness as a congregation. The point is that we have looked in the wrong place. The idea of re-creating charism by bringing our deep story into effective relationship with the needs of the world can free us from a stifling self-absorption and can put us in touch with the call of God to focus in a more vital way the mission of the congregation in the many different contexts in which we live and serve.

So, I do not feel we have put too much energy into retrieving our SSND charism. I feel, perhaps, sometimes we have put our energies in the wrong place.

So, where is the right place to put our energies in the search for who we are called to be in today's world?

Reinventing Charism Today

We need to look *not at ourselves, but at the world*, at the concrete, specific, real needs of the world situation in which we find ourselves. And we need to do this from out of the depths of our deep story, our unique, instinctive identity as School Sisters of Notre Dame. When these two meet – our deep story and the pressing needs of our time – in a real and effective way, charism will occur, will be reinvented or re-created.

This is a question of discernment. The world situation has changed so much since our foundational charismatic movement. If the congregation in our various places is to have a future, I deeply believe that we must engage in communal discernment which begins not with ourselves but with the world context read from the perspective of God, out of our deep story as followers of Christ and School Sisters of Notre Dame. The focus of such discernment is to determine how WE (not each of us as individuals, but how WE as a unique religious community) are called to respond to the signs of the times.

¹² Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 300; see also pp. 298-9.

Without such discernment, which might possibly issue in – dare I say it? – a plan for mission, a ministry-plan, in our different locations – we are by default, I fear, resigning ourselves simply to hanging on to our present mode of life until the last sister dies.

I believe it is an open question whether or not we can do this. Can we risk openness to an in-depth reading of the signs of our times? Are we willing to risk a *corporate* (that is, *communal*) response out of our rich heritage, our deep story, as School Sisters of Notre Dame?

Your provincial council has courageously called you to answer yes to that question. They are drawing you into communal processes of prioritizing ministries and planning for the use of your resources. These processes take time and effort. You will follow *You Are Sent*. You will engage through the provincial assembly and dialogue in your Areas. And, in the end, the council will make the final decisions. It is an essential process, and you have the support of the general council in every step.

With regard to new vocations and the future, I want say that if we can answer yes to the question about risking this discernment, we will inspire women to join us. We know from our experience that they come to us when they see how our deep story meets the needs of our times.

“Every charismatic moment reflects the cry of the age,” Lee writes. And “the cry of one age is never identical to the cry of any other age.”¹³ Of course, there are recurrent human concerns that exist across ages, but charism is not a moveable feast, as he points out.

Sometimes we like to think of Mother Theresa and Mother Caroline as so gifted that they were ahead of their times. I think it is truer to say that they were so in tune with their age and the needs of their times, that their response produced a truly charismatic movement that became the congregation in Mother Theresa’s case and in Mother Caroline’s case became the expansion of the congregation in North America. This was the founding charism. It cannot be repeated but only re-invented by a meeting of the pressing needs of *our* time with our deep story, our communal identity.

You can do this as a province, sisters. You can do it. Will you? Are you willing?

Charism: The Meeting of our Deep Story with the Urgent Needs of our Time

In the past I have used a helpful image for this effective meeting of deep story and the cry of our age.¹⁴ Consider this beautiful singing bowl. This represents our deep story as the religious congregation of School Sisters of Notre Dame. Here, in my other hand, we have this wooden clangor which represents the pressing needs, the cries, of our specific historical time and place. Now we strike the gong. The sound is our charism, the concrete, historical meeting of God’s gift to us with the needs of our times.

¹³ Lee, 2004, p. 27.

¹⁴ Sister Barbara Valuckas (AM) suggested this image to me some 20 years ago or more.

That is what Mother Theresa did. She brought the gift God had given her to meet the need for education of women and of the poor for the transformation of society. She struck the gong. And the sound reverberated for generations, around the world. It reverberated in us. We carried it on. It still sounds today.

Think of all the examples you can of when we did this. Look around the room and reflect on how each of your former units was founded. Contemplate where we serve and what we are doing today.

When you use a well-crafted singing bowl or gong, one with a resonance that lingers in the air waves after it is struck with the clangor, this image can be very effective in helping us understand charism as an event. The sound is our charism – the effective, graced meeting of God's gifts to us with the concrete needs of different times and historical contexts. Various things can be used to sound a gong. So, too, many different places, peoples and their needs can, and historically have, drawn out our charism.

Each School Sister can celebrate examples of this which have inspired her and in which she has participated. I will mention some obvious examples. Please know that the list is partial. It could go on and on. Add to it from your experience. That can be a wonderful exercise to open us and free us for discernment.

- The congregation flourished in Bavaria and other places in Europe during Mother Theresa's lifetime. At the time of her death, "more than 2,500 School Sisters of Notre Dame were living religious life according to her spirit" (*Origins of Our Congregation*). Yet, the needs always seemed to exceed our numbers. In so many towns and states and countries in Europe, some still thriving today, the gong was sounded. These were places with similar needs for education of girls and young women, yet places different from Bavaria, places with their own colors, sounds, and rhythms.
- In 1847, another sounding of the gong occurred when the small band of missionaries went to North America to teach immigrant children. New colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It flourished.
- In 1915, North American sisters went outside the continent for the first time to Puerto Rico, responding to an urgent need for education of the poor. New colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It flourished all over the island.
- In the 1930s, sisters from various provinces in Europe went to Brazil and Argentina. Again, new colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It all flourishes even to today. You can still hear the reverberations of the gong.
- In 1948, sisters from St. Louis went to Japan. 1948. Seven years after the Japanese bombing of the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands, and three years after the U.S. atomic bombing of two cities in Japan. Let it not be, after that, that anyone will say we cannot go here or we cannot there because the history is too painful. Japan. Once again, the singing bowl was sounded. New colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It flourished!
- Some forty years later, sisters from Japan went to Nepal. Desperate need for education. New colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It flourished . . . and the gong continues to sound in new ways, as the mission there responds to unfolding needs.

- And, nearly 45 years ago, sisters from North America went to the continent of Africa. The sounding of the gong there is fresh and strong. New colors, new sounds, new rhythms. It flourishes . . . now as a province, now expanding . . .

Dear sisters, our situations today require a *new* sounding of the gong based on a deep, communal reading of the signs of our times and the pressing needs of our age! It must take account of who we are, and who we are not, in each place.

So, to invoke charism, to discover what it is, to make it happen, three conditions must be met:

- ❖ We must be rooted / formed in our deep story, our particular way of living the Gospel, of following Christ. [Our deep story is expressed: in privileged articulations of the charism, such as we have in *You Are Sent*; in particular words and events from the life of Mother Theresa; in examples of other great women in our history; and so on. In other words, our congregational identity is recognized in words, expressions, examples, memories that light a fire in the hearts of School Sisters. Whenever we hear them, something resonates in us. Our hearts are opened and we recognize ourselves. This is us. This is home.]
- ❖ We must be deeply inserted in our culture, our world, recognize its urgent needs, experience its essential passions and hungers (not accommodating to the culture but not standing objectively to the side either).
- ❖ We must "sound the gong," that is, make them meet in effective ways that are possible for us today.

To move forward now we must meet these conditions for charism *together* in communal discernment and decision-making about our future. This must happen in every province and be supported by, and at times guided by, our general leadership. And, of course, there are some things I feel we must do as a congregation – specifically, we must take up all that is involved in the implementation of the Acts of the 23rd General Chapter, those concrete and interconnected steps into the future.

Implications . . . a direction for further reflection and dialogue

In closing, I want to try to suggest a potentially fruitful connection between our congregational identity and the issues you will address today and tomorrow.

When we look at the so-called "prophetic" vocation of religious life over time, we see that it is born from a deep experience of God – a foundational experience – that is closely related to critical moments in the history of the church and society. Recall the cultural shifts taking place at the time of the rise of monasticism, at the foundation of the Mendicant Orders, then the Apostolic Orders, and, finally, our modern religious institutes.

This is a very important reflection and it presents a clear opportunity to talk about *our* congregational identity.

The history of religious life reveals that in every era of profound cultural change which called the church to a new consciousness of itself and its mission in the world, the church's mission was best served by those communities that found new expressions of evangelical (gospel) poverty. This is true of the men and women who formed the first monastic communities, of the followers of Francis and Clare of Assisi (that is, the Mendicants), and of the followers of Ignatius of Loyola (one of the first of the Apostolic Orders).¹⁵

Alongside these great traditions, the tradition established by Bishop Wittmann, Father Job, and Mother Theresa may be more humble, but it is nevertheless greatly influential in its world-reach and its world-vision. Their insights and convictions belong clearly within the history of how religious life has served the mission of the Church, God's mission. Their insights and convictions continue to carry inspiration for those of us who follow them.

If we take seriously the fact that Bishop Wittmann, Father Job, and Mother Theresa affirmed poverty as the foundation of our congregation, if we claim how central gospel poverty is to the life of our congregation today and always, I am convinced we will find that this tradition offers us a corporate identity that inspires both our ministries and our formation programs. It means that: we ourselves are poor; we rely on God and on one another; and we serve those who are poor *and/or* in situations where the future of those who are poor is decided.

In the writings of Mother Theresa we have numerous expressions of our congregational identity that resonate within us and inspire us. There is one expression in particular that I find particularly adaptable for us today. You may remember it from the State of the Congregation Report at the 23rd General Chapter.

*United and content with little, we go out into the whole world, into the tiniest villages, into the poorest dwellings, wherever the Lord calls us, to bring poor children the good news of the Reign of God.*¹⁶

The words are from an early letter, written in 1839, to the Archbishop of Munich, when Mother Theresa was still living in Neunburg vorm Wald and, at the same time, searching for a suitable place in Munich to establish a Motherhouse.

The letter is lengthy, for in it Mother Theresa outlines what is needed for the sisters to live their religious life with integrity and to be enabled to respond to the urgent educational needs of the society at that time. She expressed to the Archbishop all the challenges facing the congregation, the "work of God," as she called it. Her letter ends with these words:

United and content with little, we go out into the whole world, into the tiniest villages, into the poorest dwellings, wherever the Lord calls us, to bring poor children the good news of the Reign of God.

What a touching summary of who we are called to be! It rings true to us. It resounds in our hearts. What does it mean today? Reflecting on that question can give direction to everything!

¹⁵ I am indebted to an article by the late Rev. David N. Power, OMI, for reminding me of this historical reality. He presented this in a talk to the Oblate Formation Conference in March 1987. The talk was entitled, "Oblate Evangelical Life as a Cultural Response."

¹⁶ Letter 144; see *Trust and Dare*, October 17.