

Charisms, Congregational Sponsors, and Catholic Higher Education

Susan M. Sanders, R.S.M., Ph.D.

Abstract

As gifts of the Holy Spirit, charisms serve as reference points and guiding forces for women and men religious. Charisms can be agents of stability, as well as vehicles for change within the Catholic Church itself. This article explores how the Church and religious congregations generally understand charisms and why they both believe in their preservation and transmission within Catholic higher education. The article concludes with the hope that both religious congregations and the Church will plan for and develop leaders who will understand, respect, and cherish the role that charisms play in Catholic higher education.

Introduction

Charisma. Charismatic. Charism. While similar in their etymological origins from the Greek *charisma* meaning “gift,” “favor,” or “extraordinary power,” these words portray very different realities.

Charisma is a word that often describes influential, attractive, commanding, and dynamic leaders. Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa, and Barack Obama come to mind.

Charismatic is a term Max Weber used to explain a type of legitimate authority to which the governed submit “because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific *person*.”¹ A person has charismatic authority because he or she is gifted or dynamic. Charismatic also describes Christians, often within the Pentecostal movement, who

Susan Sanders is the Vice President for the Office of Mission and Heritage, Saint Xavier University, Chicago, IL.

¹ Max Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 295.

experience such gifts of the Holy Spirit as prophesying or speaking in tongues.

Charisms are “graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world.”² In the context of religious life, a charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to congregations of women and men religious. In general, charisms play the important roles of stabilizing and renewing the Church and the religious congregations of those who serve within the Church. In particular, charisms ground religious congregations, provide them with distinctive “flavors” or cultures, and act as reference points and as guiding forces for their ministries. Since the inception of Catholic higher education in the US with the founding of Georgetown University in 1789, religious congregations have drawn upon their respective charisms to ground and to guide their higher education ministries.

This article explores the roles that charisms play in the ministry of Catholic higher education. It examines how the Church and religious congregations generally understand charisms and why their preservation and transmission is considered important. The article concludes with an exploration of some of the challenges that religious congregations face when trying to preserve and transmit their charisms in the ministry of higher education.

How the Church Understands Charism

In a 1986 speech to women and men religious of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin proposed that even though “ecclesial documents use the word in several ways,”³ the Church agrees that charism in the context of religious life is crucial to understanding the fundamental identity of religious life. The particular charism of a religious community determines its identity, way of life, spirit and spirituality, structures, and mission.⁴

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Edition (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), sec. 799.

³ Joseph L. Bernardin, “Reflections on Religious Life, March 1986,” in *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Volume I: Homilies and Teaching Documents*, ed. Alphonse P. Spilly, C.P.P.S. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Drawing upon both Bernardin's proposition and a set of post-Vatican II documents,⁵ seven characteristics of charism can be identified. In general, charisms: (1) are special gifts that equip the faithful for a way of life or a specific ministry in the Church; (2) originate with the Holy Spirit; (3) are given to founders of religious congregations; (4) are subsequently transmitted from founders to followers; (5) are authenticated by the Church's pastors, who share responsibility with religious congregations for preserving them; (6) are distinctive; and (7) should be used for the ongoing renewal of the Church.⁶

For men and women religious, charisms are God-given gifts that function multidimensionally: first, by grounding and focusing their sponsored ministries; and second, by shaping the culture, style, and ethos of both their community and ministerial lives. As such, charisms distinguish the work and character of religious communities.

Charisms' Complementary Responsibilities

Endowed with the multidimensional gifts of charisms, what responsibilities do religious congregations share because of them? According to Bernardin, *Evangelica testificatio* identifies two complementary, but challenging, responsibilities for religious congregations which are trying to be faithful to their charisms: stability and change.⁷

⁵ See documents such as *Evangelica testificatio*, *Lumen gentium*, *Vita consecrata*, *Mutuae relationes*, and *Perfectae caritatis*.

⁶ See Pope Paul VI, "Evangelica testificatio: On the Renewal of the Religious Life According to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council," http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19710629_evangelica-testificatio_en.html; Pope Paul VI, "Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; Pope John Paul II, "Vita consecrata: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World," http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html; Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Sacred Congregation for Bishops, "Mutuae relationes: Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_14051978_mutuae-relationes_en.html; and Pope Paul VI, "Perfectae caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life," http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html.

⁷ Bernardin, "Reflections on Religious Life," 158.

In reality, the charism of religious life ... is the fruit of the Holy Spirit who is always at work within the Church.⁸ ... It is precisely here that the dynamism proper to each religious family finds its origin. For, while the call of God renews and expresses itself in different ways according to changing circumstances of place and time, it nevertheless requires a certain constancy of orientation.⁹

As “constancy of orientation,” charisms are stabilizing forces for religious congregations. They define and shape each congregation’s mission, and they focus the mission on activities that become institutionalized in ministries.

For instance, the charism of the Sisters of Mercy impels its members toward the compassionate service of the poor, sick, and uneducated. When institutionalized, the Mercy charism is expressed in ministries such as health care, education, social service, and pastoral care. The Dominican charism, by contrast, channels the congregation’s energies into the “four pillars” of prayer, community, study, and the apostolate. Typically, this charism is expressed in the ministries of preaching and teaching and does not usually include extensive involvement in the ministry of health care. In reality, however, no type of ministry is the sole province of any single congregation. Rather, charisms direct or divert a congregation’s works toward or away from various undertakings. As stable and formative reference points for congregations’ activities, charisms establish a way of life that provides stability to religious congregations and to the Church in which they serve.

As a fruit of the Holy Spirit that also provides dynamism “... in different ways according to changing circumstances of time and place,” charism not only stabilizes but also effects renewal and change. Such change occurs as members of religious congregations discern the signs of the times through personal and communal prayer, reflection, and discussion. The topics of such discernment are varied but often center on questions about ministries. The questions may include, for example, whether the Holy Spirit is calling the congregation to respond to a new need, or in contrast, whether it might be time to withdraw from a long sponsored ministry because there is no longer a need, because there are other persons to maintain it, or because the congregation no longer has the resources to continue the ministry.

⁸ Pope Paul VI, “*Evangelica testificatio*,” no. 11.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, “*Evangelica testificatio*,” no. 12.

Charism-propelled discernment often results in the founding of new ministries. For example, in Chicago during the 1970s, a coalition of religious congregations founded the 8th Day Center for Justice to work as a nonviolent “alternative voice to oppressive systems and to serve actively to change those systems.”¹⁰ This type of decision illustrates the complementary effects of faithfulness to charism: stability in founding and preserving ministries; and dynamism, change, and renewal in institutional retrenchment, and in the founding of new ministries that respond to the needs of the time.

The decision to withdraw from long-sponsored ministries is one of the most painful charism-driven and discernment-based conclusions a congregation can reach. Congregations involved in the ministry of education have known this pain often, especially since the late 1960s. In Catholic higher education, for example, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary made the decision to close Mundelein College in Chicago. An institution committed to providing higher education for women since 1930, Mundelein College became the last four-year women’s college in Illinois before its affiliation and merger with the campus of Loyola University of Chicago in 1991. The congregation’s decision to merge the college into Loyola’s campus resulted in the loss of identity for Mundelein College, but not of the sisters’ charism. Instead, the sisters found ways to preserve their charism and core values of freedom, education, charity, and justice while sustaining the congregation’s commitment to the education of women; for instance, they used some of the congregation’s assets to found and to fund the Ann Ida Gannon Center for Women and Leadership, now operating out of Loyola University.¹¹

Not only do charisms shape the mission and guide the ministerial decisions of religious congregations, but also they achieve something less tangible: charisms help to create a “family flavor,”¹² or style, within the religious congregation, which is expressed in ministries undertaken and in the life of the community. The family flavor of the Sisters of Mercy, for example, emphasizes compassion, hospitality, and graciousness. The flavor or élan of other congregations may be somewhat different.

¹⁰ 8th Day Center for Justice. “Mission Statement.” <http://www.8thdaycenter.org/aboutus/mission.html>.

¹¹ Mundelein College. “Mundelein College Archives.” <http://www.luc.edu/wla/mcarchives.shtml>.

¹² Sister Doris Rauenhurst, quoted in Dawn Gibeau, “Where Have All the Charisms Gone? They’re Alive and Being Adapted in Old and New Communities,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 17, 1995.

According to theologian Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., a congregation's family flavor or style arises from "deep narratives,"¹³ or congregational histories and stories, that hold mythic importance for the community members who tell and celebrate them.

I suggested that the category of charism as it applies to a congregation is best understood as the ongoing 'deep narrative' developed throughout the community's history with its attendant myths and symbols, outstanding events and persons, struggles and triumphs, projects and challenges, psychology and spirituality that the group has developed from its origins to the present and that has become the inner heritage of each member down through the years generating among them a shared identity....This charism may derive in part from the personal influence of some outstanding founder like Benedict or Teresa of Avila, but that is very often not the case. The issue of charismatic identity is not so much one of 'Who founded us?' as 'What have we become together by the grace of God[?]'¹⁴

Transmitted from generation to generation of vowed religious, charisms are, according to the Church and "by the grace of God," spiritual realities that make religious congregations "distinctive,"¹⁵ even as they share what Schneiders calls the fundamental charism of religious life: "the call to perpetual self-gift to Christ in consecrated celibacy for the sake of the Reign of God."¹⁶

Thus, religious congregations do not regard charisms as artifacts of an earlier age or things they should preserve out of nostalgia. Neither do they cast charisms as strategic planning tools, although religious congregations certainly plan and use words common to that craft. To view charisms in these ways would be to reduce these powerful spiritual forces to secular organizational realities, thereby ignoring their essential dimension of self-gift for the reign of God. Instead, charisms are core spiritual forces and reference points that the Holy Spirit provides to stabilize and to change sponsored ministries such as Catholic

¹³ Margaret Susan Thompson, "Charism' or 'Deep Story'? Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Growth of Women's Religious Life in Nineteenth Century America," *Religious Life and Contemporary Culture, Theological Education Process*, cycle 2 (Monroe, MI: Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 1998).

¹⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Religious Life in a New Millennium, Volume II: Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 74-5.

¹⁵ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, Sacred Congregation for Bishops, "Mutuae relationes," nos. 11, 14.b, 21, 23, 25, 26, 47, 49, 57.c, 59, 59.a.

¹⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Religious Life in a New Millennium, Volume I: Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 285-86.

colleges and universities. Further, as an action of God's Spirit, charism "connotes mystery."¹⁷ To live faithfully with mystery is always challenging, but especially when men and women religious experience a constant decrease both in the numbers of members and in their lack of direct control over their institutions of higher education.

In the midst of God's mystery, however, the Holy Spirit does not leave religious congregations and the Church without hope or without the potential ministerial resources necessary to bolster their efforts. Because the Holy Spirit confers charisms not only on religious congregations but also "among the faithful of every rank"¹⁸ so they may be preserved "for a way of life or specific ministry[...] both within and for the Church,"¹⁹ religious congregations will find both hope and resources in their lay colleagues who currently serve or who will serve with them in higher education. What are religious congregations doing to help these "faithful of every rank" assume increasing responsibility for protecting and transmitting charisms through the ministry of higher education?

Early Strategies to Protect and Transmit Charisms in Catholic Higher Education

Efforts to protect charisms and the ministries that derive from them have taken several forms in Catholic higher education. Earliest strategies often relied on civil and canonical governance relationships. For example, one strategy has been to require that all or a majority of the trustees of a sponsored college or university, and/or the president, the senior administration, and as many faculty as possible, be members of the sponsoring congregation. This strategy was predicated on the assumption—a relatively unfounded one in view of current congregational demographics—that congregations would be able to provide their schools with a continuous supply of qualified women or men religious who would be capable of holding key leadership and teaching positions.

A second strategy has been the two-tier governance structure that many congregations adopted following the Second Vatican Council. Here, the religious community, known as the "corporate member," is the first tier of governance and tries to maintain influence by reserving certain governance powers. These "reserved powers," usually specified in

¹⁷ Bernardin, "Reflections on Religious Life," 158.

¹⁸ Pope Paul VI, "Lumen gentium," no. 12.

¹⁹ Bernardin, "Reflections on Religious Life," 158.

the institution's articles and bylaws, vary from school to school. Typically, however, they include retaining key governance functions: approving (and sometimes appointing) key leaders such as trustees and presidents; approving changes in identity-defining documents such as mission and philosophy statements, articles of incorporation, and bylaws; and approving actions that affect the assets of the school such as the alienation of property, the encumbrance of debt, or the dissolution of the corporation.

The second tier in this two-tier governance structure is the school's board of trustees. The school's board of trustees holds overall fiduciary responsibility for the well being of a school, while exercising the duties of loyalty and care. Typically, these duties include safeguarding and advancing the school's mission and purposes; preserving the institution's Catholic identity and the charism of the founding religious congregation; defining and assessing strategic directions; setting university policy; appointing, supporting, and evaluating the president; assessing the board's own performance; electing successor trustees (usually subject to the approval of the corporate member); ensuring academic quality; and protecting or growing institutional assets. As with the first strategy, the school's articles and bylaws may specify that a certain number or proportion of trustees be members of the school's sponsoring religious congregation.

As civil law structures relationships between these two tiers of governance, canon law structures the relationships among the Church, a sponsoring congregation, and its individual college or university. This relationship can be described as one of "sponsorship." What does congregational sponsorship of a Catholic college or university mean? How does it affect governance, and the resulting relationships among the hierarchical Church, the sponsoring congregation, and the administration and board of trustees of an individually sponsored Catholic college or university?

In general, a religious congregation's sponsorship of a Catholic college or university is what links that ministry to the Catholic Church. Indeed, it is what makes the ministry publicly Catholic. Canonist Sharon Holland, I.H.M., describes the primary responsibilities of a sponsor:

We can say that, in a general way, a sponsor: Preserves and fosters the expressed mission of the institution, system, or juridic person, thereby promoting the internalization of the philosophy and mission at all levels; Administers and safeguards the properties and funds intended for the furtherance of the entity's mission. These are known as "ecclesiastical goods" (c. 1257, sect. 1),

goods at the service of the mission of the Church—which must be handled according to canonical norms.²⁰

In this passage, Holland identifies the organizational and structural key to congregational sponsorship and governance, that is, a juridic person. What is a juridic person?

A juridic person typically, although not always, “refers first to a religious institute, which in the Code of Canon Law is a public juridic person once it has been erected by ecclesiastical authority (c. 6-34).”²¹ When an ecclesiastical authority designates a religious congregation as a public juridic person, the ministry of that “person” assumes a Catholic identity and becomes a recognized ministry of the Church. According to Holland, a sponsoring religious congregation is a juridic person when it assumes a public identification with a ministry such as higher education and provides some support for it in order to carry out the ministry in the name of the Church.^{21a}

Future Challenges for Congregations Seeking to Transmit Charisms

Religious congregations will be challenged to recruit, prepare, and support higher educational leaders from among the faithful of every rank in the mission of preserving and transmitting congregational charisms. In emphasizing the importance of charisms in the education and support of these leaders, religious congregations will have to make sure that their efforts are not perceived as “trumping” Catholicism with charism. Neither can the distinctiveness of their charisms be used to justify any type of ministerial competitiveness that defeats intercongregational collaboration in ministries. Finally, insofar as they are charged with the responsibility of protecting and transmitting charisms, both the Church and religious congregations should want to know whether their efforts have been successful. This concern raises the issues of assessment and accountability.

²⁰ Sharon Holland, I.H.M., “Sponsorship and the Vatican,” in *Health Progress: Journal of the Catholic Health Association of the United States* (July/August, 2001), no pages given.

²¹ Ibid.

^{21a} Ibid.

Training and Supporting Leadership from “the Faithful of Every Rank”

Focusing on the development of leadership to transmit such cultural realities as congregational charisms finds significant support in the literature of organizational behavior. Organizational theorist Edgar Schein, for example, posits that any attempt to shape organizational culture necessarily depends on the organizational leader: what she or he values and pays attention to; the messages that he or she gives; and, especially during times of organizational stress or crisis, the consistency with which he or she articulates and delivers these messages.²⁴ In turn, what the leader understands, accepts, articulates, and models is reflected in and reinforced by an organization’s design and structure; its systems and procedures and the “rules of the game” for becoming accepted into and getting along within these systems; the design of its physical space, facades, and buildings; its language, rituals, and demeanor; its stories, legends, myths, and parables about important events and people; and its formal statements of organizational values, philosophy, creeds, and charters.²⁵ Many Catholic colleges and universities, cognizant of the power of such culture-creating forces, already emphasize these “secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms”²⁶ at campus celebrations such as Founders’ Day or homecoming; at liturgy; in the choice and placement of signs, artwork, and symbols; and in their core documents.

However, because organizational culture “will always be manifested first in what the leaders demonstrate, not in what is written down or inferred from designs and procedures,”²⁷ religious congregations seeking to preserve and transmit their charisms would be well-advised to commit a substantial part of their limited resources to the development of college and university leaders at all levels. As a key component in shaping organizational culture, the charisms of the sponsoring congregations should be core content for leadership development programs.

Further, because “one of the most subtle yet most potent ways in which culture gets embedded and perpetuated is in the initial selection

^{22,23} Deleted in proof.

²⁴ Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985), 224-35.

²⁵ Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 237.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 241.

of new members,”²⁸ religious congregational sponsors and governors should pay careful attention to the people they recruit to lead and teach at their colleges and universities.²⁹ This includes a more than pro forma review of those being considered for membership in sponsorship and governance structures, and of candidates being considered for appointments as college presidents or trustees. Moreover, each school should take particular care in the process of recruiting new faculty members, especially those having long-term professional prospects such as tenure-track faculty members.

Organizational theorists who espouse leadership theories of organizational change are not the only ones who believe leaders are keys to organizational success and the transmission of organizational culture. Pope John Paul II, in the Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*,³⁰ also focuses on the importance of organizational leaders in Catholic higher education as being central to maintaining an institution’s Catholic identity. John Paul II emphasizes that those in leadership positions within Catholic higher education—trustees, presidents, and faculty members—should be, as much as possible, Catholics who both practice and are conversant about their faith. As noted in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, “the university should strive to recruit and appoint Catholics as professors so that, to the extent possible, those committed to the witness of the faith will constitute a majority of the faculty;”³¹ “to the extent possible, the majority of the board should be Catholics committed to the Church;”³² and “the university president should be a Catholic.”³³

Ensuring that Charism Does Not “Trump” Catholic

John Paul II’s emphasis in *Ex corde* on having Catholic leadership at Catholic colleges and universities, and the absence of a discussion of the role of congregational charisms in higher education, suggest a belief that the ministry of Catholic higher education is not so much about being Mercy, Jesuit, Dominican, Franciscan, Benedictine, or Vincentian as it is about being Catholic. Some researchers, however, have suggested

²⁸ Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 224-35.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pope John Paul II, “Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities,” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html.

³¹ Ibid., Particular Norms, Article 4, Sec. 4.a.

³² Ibid., Article 4, Sec. 2, a.

³³ Ibid., Article 4, Sec. 3.1.

that many Catholic institutions may have lost sight of the Catholic dimension of their identity and allowed charism to supersede.

Researchers Melanie Morey and John Piderit, S.J., for example, believe this may be the case when a school's recruitment literature and branding leads

with words like Jesuit, Dominican, Mercy, Franciscan or Lasallian, instead of Catholic; ... [or when] mission statements refer to Mercy or Jesuit institutions in the Catholic tradition. [Here] congregational identity trumps Catholic identity. This approach puts the cart before the horse; it is a strategy that undermines vibrant Catholic institutional identity.³⁴

Morey and Piderit also arrive at this conclusion, observing correctly that faculty and staff are more likely to talk about—and even express affection for—the charisms of the founding and sponsoring congregations than they are to talk positively, knowledgably, or even at all about the Catholic identity of their colleges or universities.

There may be several reasons for this. Most have nothing to do with any conscious decision on the part of sponsoring congregations to have charism “trump” Catholic. While it is sadly true that some faculty and staff at Catholic colleges and universities have antipathy for Catholicism, most simply do not have sufficient theological training to understand Catholic theology, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, or Catholic Social Teaching.

Charisms, on the other hand, while sometimes misconstrued as being “different” or apart from Catholicism, are generally more accessible and more proximate than Catholic theology or the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. They have become part of an institution's history and ethos, and are perceived as palpable in the lives of men and women religious who serve at the college or university. Because they are more accessible and, thus, easier to understand, charisms can become the starting points for discussions that lead the skeptical or uninformed into possibly significant conversations about Catholic theology, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Catholic Social Teaching, and the sacramental and moral life of Catholicism. Perhaps by encountering and understanding the charisms of Saint Francis or Catherine McAuley, for example, members of the campus community might be better able to access the Church's teachings on simplicity, stewardship, compassion, and service.

³⁴ Melanie Morey and John Piderit, “Identity Crisis,” *America* (October 13, 2008), http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11119&o=33357.

Serving as an introduction to Catholicism, charisms can become important avenues for conversations about Catholic teachings such as human dignity, the common good, sacramentality, vocation, and social justice—conversations that can enhance a college or university’s Catholic identity. In these cases, charisms would not trump Catholic. Rather, they would be forces that college or university leaders could draw upon to expose members of the campus community to new and valid understandings of what it means to be Catholic.

Drawing upon Charisms for Collaboration, not Competition

Religious congregations are clearly proud of their distinctive charisms. In fact, since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has encouraged congregations to discover that which is distinctive about their charisms. However, according to Schneiders, in some cases this search has led communities away from their shared charism of religious life and toward an intercongregational competitiveness and divisiveness. Specifically, Schneiders argues that the Second Vatican Council’s exhortation to religious congregations to return “to the charism of their founder”³⁵ was “at least as divisive and disheartening as unifying”³⁶ and occasionally resulted in “mutual disdain among orders,”³⁷ sometimes to the degree that it inhibited intercongregational collaborations or affiliations.

In higher education, for example, it has been more common to see the complete takeover of one college or university by another than it is to see mergers that maintain the charisms and identities of each collaborating partner. For this reason, some congregations would prefer to “go it alone” rather than risk the loss of charism and identity that typically results from these types of partnerships. Still other congregations refuse to consider partnerships on the grounds that their distinctive charisms preclude collaboration with those having different charisms. In each of these cases, it is difficult to understand how the shared charism of religious life and the distinctive congregational charisms that guide many religious toward the ministry of higher education should become the rationale for refusing to cooperate in efforts to strengthen a common Catholic ministry. Perhaps by recalling what Schneiders describes

³⁵ Pope Paul VI, “Perfectae caritatis,” 2; Pope Paul VI, “Evangelica testificatio,” 11.

³⁶ Schneiders, I.H.M., *Finding the Treasure*, 287.

³⁷ Schneiders, I.H.M., *Finding the Treasure*, 298.

as the fundamental and shared charism of religious life—“perpetual self-gift ... for the Reign of God”^{37a}—religious congregations can avoid the emphasis on distinctiveness that sometimes leads to divisiveness, and find the common ground that leads to ministerial collaboration for the sake of the Kingdom.

Assessing the Success of Preserving and Transmitting Charisms

For all their efforts to preserve and transmit their charisms throughout institutions of Catholic higher education, how will religious congregations and the Church know whether they have been successful? This question raises the issues of assessment and accountability.

Organizational best practices suggest that the ideal way to measure success is to set goals and objectives that have measurable outcomes. But how effectively can one measure the construct of charism? Further, how might sponsoring bodies measure the success of their efforts: whether their charisms have been transmitted; by what vehicles; to what degree; and at what cost?

While it will be relatively easy to catalog *what* sponsoring bodies and individual colleges and universities have done to promote the preservation and transmission of charisms, it will be more difficult—if not impossible—to determine whether their efforts have actually had the desired effect. Documenting financial resources spent on efforts and programs to preserve and transmit charisms and counting how many people participated in them would be fairly straightforward. Neither of these is an outcome; rather, both are inputs. Yet, while it is possible to survey people about their attitudes and behaviors, determining whether real attitudinal or behavioral change has actually taken place is more difficult. Thus, attempts to engage in best practices that measure the success of preserving and transmitting charisms are fraught with daunting methodological complexities.

Nevertheless, the difficulties of measurement and assessment do not preclude a sponsoring congregation’s legitimate expectations for accountability at all levels of sponsorship, governance, and college or university practice. Given the reality that charism is ethos and mystery,

^{37a} Ibid.

as well as a force for both stability and change in a congregation's ministries, a better approach to assessment might be simply to discover and catalogue what each governance group and institution is doing to reinforce the sponsoring congregation's charism. While not technically assessment, such a process would nevertheless hold governors and institutional leaders accountable for *trying* to preserve and transmit congregational charisms. Further, such an approach would respect the individual autonomy and unique culture and circumstances of each school, even as the method generates useful information that could be shared among those charged with charism- and mission-related responsibilities. Finally, though such an approach fails to be rigorously quantifiable and to establish definite causal relationships, it would provide a relatively inexpensive way to hold sponsoring bodies, individual schools, and their trustees accountable for Catholic identity and congregational charisms at each level of authority and influence.

Charisms, Congregations, and Catholic Higher Education: A Challenge to the Church and the "Faithful of Every Rank"

Because of the important roles of charisms, both the Church and its religious congregations share the responsibility for preserving and transmitting them to the "faithful of every rank." To protect the transmission of these charisms, and the ministries and organizational flavor that derive from them, religious congregations have adopted a variety of strategies that involve the corporate and canonical restructuring of their sponsorship and governance relationships. While each of these strategies has inherent strengths and weaknesses, these efforts have brought new resources and strengths to Catholic colleges and universities. For instance, in the case of the Sisters of Mercy, the formation of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education (CMHE) has already been effective in key areas of sponsorship and governance.

Going forward, however, sponsoring congregations will need to do more than redefine authority relationships and exercise control through vehicles such as reserved powers. They will need to plan for and develop the types of leadership at all levels of sponsorship, governance, and administration that will help the laity understand, respect, and even savor the role that charisms could and should play in institutions of Catholic higher education. Once substantial efforts have been undertaken to recruit and train dedicated lay leaders at all levels of sponsorship, governance, and higher education administration, both congregational and Church authorities will then need to acknowledge and respect the

competence of these lay leaders. Thus, the beneficiaries of charism will become the carriers and promoters of charism, creating a future for Catholic higher education that is guided with faithfulness, characterized by self-gift, and renewed by the informed and courageous actions of lay men and women committed to establishing the reign of God.