

Michael Green fms

Lay Spirituality and Charisms

A way to foster vitality and integrity in Australia's Catholic Schools

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Setting a context

This could be a short discussion if we took the approach that each of the authors of the books of the New Testament seems to do, that there is no discrete group of people within our Church called "laity". It's true: search every verse of the Christian scriptures and you will look in vain to find the Greek word *laikos*. And if there are no lay people, then it would follow, logically, that there could be no such concept as "lay spirituality".

This is no cute play on words. Saint Paul would have struggled with the proposition that there are degrees of spirituality, or a kind of ecclesial caste system, that presumes that some of us were the professional, full-time, holy Christians, while others of us were only part-timers, with serviceable enough spiritual lives but having no serious claim to a developed expertise. Paul, rather, taught the Christians at Colossae, as he teaches us: "You [that is, all of you] are God's chosen ones, his saints."¹ In the first letter of Peter we read that we, all of us, are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart."² The four evangelists would have similarly been puzzled by a notion of a "lay" spirituality. In each of the four Gospels, the so-called "hard-sayings" of Jesus are not directed at some special elite, nor just to the Twelve, but to everyone.³ They did not pen the gospels with monks and nuns in mind. The core concept is that of *discipleship*, and that this discipleship is for all who answer the call of Jesus. In all that has happened and has been written in the two millennia since, nothing has altered this basic truth. Each of us, as a Christian, is called to be a disciple of Jesus. There are no grades of discipleship, no first-class and second-class Christians, no full members and associate members of the Church. So, where do we get this idea of a "laity"? Is it valid? Can we legitimately talk about "lay spirituality"?

Here is not the place to present a detailed history of the development of lay people in the Church, or to trace the crests and troughs of ecclesiology over the centuries.⁴ It is sufficient to recognise that ordained ministry was defined clearly enough in the first centuries after Jesus and that a concept of laity subsequently emerged by a kind of default. The relative importance and the roles of the ordained and non-ordained members of the Christian community have found varying expression over time. In the course of the Church's history, and in its various rites and geographical regions, there have been considerable change and difference in how the clergy and the laity – and additionally those in the various forms of eremitical, monastic and apostolic religious life – have understood their place and purpose in the Church, and have related to each other. By the end of the Middle Ages, there had developed a strong clerical ascendancy, augmented by a certain *fuga mundi*

¹ Colossians 3:12

² 1 Peter 2:9

³ For example, Mt 4:18-22; 10:34-36; 19:21; 22:12-13; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 9:22-26; Jn 15:6. This idea is developed well by Donna Orsuto, Director of the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas (Rome), and lecturer in the Institute of Spirituality at the Gregorian University. See Orsuto, D. (1997) *The challenge of lay spirituality*.

⁴ See Faivre, A. (1990) *The Emergence of the Laity in the Early Church* for a good analysis of this. Tony Hanna (2006) *New Ecclesial Movements* also considers the question insightfully.

emphasis in spirituality which, by implication, was exclusive of most lay people in their normal worldly lives. Morality became separated from spirituality, at least for the laity, leaving them with a diminished approach to Gospel living. This was challenged from time to time by renewal movements in the Church, often enough led by lay people or certainly accessible to them, such as that begun by Francis of Assisi, or spiritual schools such as that developed by Francis de Sales and his contemporaries. But the institutional face of the Church (as distinct from its charismatic one), remained largely clerical or monastic. The concerns and documents of the Council of Trent, for example, are occupied almost entirely with the priesthood, something that set a pattern for the succeeding centuries. As late as the time when, in the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman was pioneering some reclamation of the legitimate role of lay people in the life of the Church, he was famously condemned by Monsignor Talbot:

What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.⁵

The second half of the twentieth century, as we all know so well, saw much written and implemented to re-establish the right and proper role of lay people in the Church. Already before the Vatican Council, the theologian Yves Congar, especially, and others such as Hans Urs von Balthazar and Karl Rahner were agitating for change. The Council caught the spirit and formalised it by proclaiming unambiguously that the call to holiness was universal, and that the responsibility to share in the evangelising mission of the Church belonged to all Christians as a fundamental result of their baptism. It was a paradigm shift. It was, as hoped for by Pope John XXIII, an *aggiornamento*. The notion of the Church as the People of God was reclaimed and developed. All of us, pilgrims and disciples. All called to be holy. How we respond to that call, in community and for the mission of the Gospel, we may understand as our spirituality.

Our own experience here in Australia is typical enough of the western Church as a whole, at least in the developed world. Consider who might have attended a national Catholic education conference sixty years ago, who would have been speaking, and what they might have been speaking about. There would have been plenty of collars and veils, lots of black and white. These clergy and religious would have been seen, and would have seen themselves, as the ones doing the work of the Church. A few lay people may have been filling in gaps here and there, but mostly they would have known their place: to pray, pay and obey. While some committed lay people might have been involved in movements such as St Vincent de Paul, the St Thomas More Society, or Young Christian Workers, and a few of the cognoscenti may have actually described such involvement as the “lay apostolate”, the Church’s self-concept was skewed towards the clerical. Today, by contrast, the work of the Church is largely undertaken by lay people. In education, in health services, in aged care, in social welfare, in youth ministry, in evangelising and catechising, in planning and animating prayer and worship, in building and leading parish communities, it is mainly Christian people other than priests or religious who are doing it. A typical Catholic conference today – in virtually any field of the Church’s mission – would be quite different: many people, both men and women, of all ages, of diverse backgrounds, with a range of connections with parishes and the life of the institutional Church, and with an even greater range of faith experience and maturity in the spiritual life. At least in my experience, it will also be a group of people of enormous good will, generosity, professional skill, fired by their genuine love of the people they are serving.

But what of the priests, religious sisters and brothers today? Generally in the Latin Church of western countries, they will be few and getting fewer, old and getting older. It needs be emphasised at the outset that this was not the vision of Vatican II. The composition of a conference like this was not the hope of the Council. What do I mean? When Congar and others were writing of the coming age of the laity back in the 1950s, and when the Council captured many of these hopes in documents

⁵ Quoted in Hanna, *op.cit.*, p.129.

such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* no one envisaged that lay people would or should replace an ageing clergy or a vanishing band of religious. Indeed, the new thinking was formulated at a time when numbers of clergy and religious were at their height. It was not anticipated that this would change, that there would be what we often call the “vocations crisis”. It was not an ecclesiology that was born out of a context of clerical diminishment. There was not a sense that lay people needed to step up to the plate because the innings of the nuns and brothers were over. So, also, in pivotal gatherings such as the Synod on the Laity in 1987⁶, and the landmark document, *Christifideles Laici*, that came from it, there is no sense of a church or a mission that was the province of lay people alone. Other documents – and, particularly for our concerns here, those published by the Congregation for Catholic Education – are written within a similar conceptual framework. The most recent says it all in its title: *Educating Together in Catholic Schools, a Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*.⁷ The first part of the document situates this mission in the context of a central idea of the modern Church, that of *communio*. This is not a sociological concept, as Pope Benedict reminds us,⁸ but a theological and ecclesiological one, founded on the complementary and unified states of life in the Church as the Body of Christ: the laity, the ordained priesthood, and the consecrated life.

This clarification is critically important for our concerns, and we shall return to it several times. Vatican II is often misrepresented in this regard, and a misconceived ecclesiology can develop as a result. It is not good theology or good ecclesiology to speak of a “lay church”. This is not what John Paul II meant when he envisaged the twenty-first century as the century of the laity. Nor will it give us a healthy or viable understanding of “lay spirituality” if we consider the spirituality of lay people as a phenomenon that is independent from priests and religious (or *vice versa*). It is a diminished and incomplete understanding of spirituality, because it is a diminished and incomplete understanding of church. If this is the sense in which we are approaching it, then it is indeed not valid to talk of a “lay spirituality”. In the context of the charismatic⁹ spiritual traditions of the Church – which is the major focus of this article – it is similarly flawed to think of the spirituality of lay people as some kind of successor of the spiritualities of the religious orders that are now so limited in their presence and activity.

To develop these ideas, let us look in order at the *what*, the *why* and finally the *how* of the rich charisms of the Church may be able to help us to develop the spirituality we all need to become disciples of Jesus and to undertake the mission of the gospel together as the People of God.

WHAT is lay spirituality? What is charisma?

Spirituality can be one of those nebulous concepts that people sometimes make to mean anything they want, and often nothing more than fluffy thoughts or fuzzily warm feelings. There is so much inanity that masquerades as “spirituality” on the nu-age shelves of our bookshops and the “mind-body-spirit” lift-outs of our Sunday newspapers. Spirituality is, nonetheless, something that we need to understand and to appreciate at the intuitive level.

One of my French confreres, who is also a professor of history, has suggested to me on more than one occasion when we have been discussing *Marist* spirituality, that no-one can engage in an informed consideration of the concept of spirituality without first having digested the definitive

⁶ Or, to give it its full title: A Synod on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World.

⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education, 2007.

⁸ As Cardinal Ratzinger he commented most clearly on this point in 1992 when he wrote an editorial piece for the twentieth anniversary of the theological journal *Communio* of which he was one of the co-founders. See Ratzinger, J Communio: A Program, in *Communio*, Fall 1992 (American edition)

⁹ My preference is to use “charismatic” as the adjective relating to “charism”, and “charismatic” with “charisma”. I suggest that, in normal English usage, this can effectively distinguish something that is theological from something that is largely sociological.

work on the subject, which he judges to be *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* – all ten volumes of it, written of course in French! While I do not doubt the worth of such a study, I am more inclined to a more cut-to-the-chase Anglo approach to the subject, so I am attracted by a simple definition of spirituality that has been proposed by the present Superior General of the Marist Brothers, an American by the name of Seán Sammon, who suggests simply that spirituality is “what we do with our passion”.¹⁰ Brother Seán describes the burning desire, the hunger, the restless that each of us feels, primally and deep within us: our passion. His idea seems to align very much with the famous awakening moment of Saint Augustine that we find at the beginning of his *Confessions*:

Our hearts are restless, O God, and they remain so until they rest in you.¹¹

Restlessness, hunger, desire, thirst: these are not uncommon themes among spiritual writers. It is a restlessness for meaning, a hunger for relationship, a desire for integrity in our lives, a passion for love. I call it a “God-thirst”. Ultimately it is a thirst that can be quenched by God alone, lived out in our loving relationships and in our prayer: union with each other, with creation, with God. For the Christian, it is discipleship with Jesus that quenches this God-thirst. Pope John Paul II, in addressing the topic of lay spirituality, points out that all Christian spirituality must always come back to a relationship with Jesus. People’s responses to the universal call to holiness may vary, according to the late Pope, as a result of differences in their concrete situations, their living and working conditions, their abilities and inclinations, their personal preferences for a particular spiritual or apostolic director, or for a specific founder or religious order, but finally an authentic Christian spirituality will lead to and from Jesus. John Paul quotes from the powerful verses of John Chapter 15:

Remain in me ... Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit.¹²

Christian spirituality will ultimately be a spirituality of discipleship, which will deepen a people’s sense of their personal vocation, give them an experience of communion with others, and propel them into mission.¹³ These are the three dimensions of any Christian life – whether it be lay, clerical or religious. The US Catholic Bishops agree with this view of the call to every person – to personal holiness, to community, and to mission/ministry – and they add a fourth, perhaps distinctively American, imperative: a call also to adult Christian maturity.¹⁴ Closer to home, the Archdiocese of Brisbane is shaping its mission around the same tripartite understanding of the Christian life, calling it simply “Jesus, Communion, Mission”.¹⁵

John Paul II, while pointing out that the essence of all Christian spirituality leads to and from Jesus, also importantly observed that each one of us will engage this discipleship in a different way, a way that suits who we are, where we are, how we are living and working, and connects with our personal abilities and preferences. What he is saying is that there are, legitimately, different forms of Christian spirituality and these forms will work well for some people, but not necessarily so well for other people. The personal spiritualities of some of the most inspiring Christian people in the Church’s history have grown into spiritual traditions, and indeed schools of Christian spirituality, as others have been attracted to learn from these people, and have found that their distinctive way of discipleship has also worked for them. Some of these spiritual traditions will more naturally and readily satisfy the God-thirst in one person than will others. This is not to suggest that some Christian spiritualities are richer or more efficacious than others – that is another matter – but only

¹⁰ Sammon, S (2003) *A Revolution of the Heart, Marcellin’s spirituality and a contemporary identity for his Little Brothers of Mary*, p.47.

¹¹ *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo, Book 1, Chapter 1.

¹² Pope John Paul II (1993) *Lay spirituality is rooted in Christ*. General Audience, Vatican, 1st December.

¹³ See Orsuto, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ USCCB (1995) *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium, Reflections of the US Catholic Bishops on the Thirtieth Anniversary of the ‘Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity’ and the Fifteenth Anniversary of ‘Called and Gifted’*.

¹⁵ See the website of the Archdiocese of Brisbane: <http://bne.catholic.net.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=11497>.

to recognise that all Christian spiritual traditions have grown out of particular social, cultural, ecclesial and historical contexts. The kind of spiritual practices, emphases and styles that have evolved as a result of the origins and development of a particular spiritual tradition may not connect so well with someone whose present situation is not socially, culturally or ecclesially similar.

A person must feel at home in a spirituality if it is going to lead that person to a genuine experience of Christian discipleship. It has to feel right; it has to fit who that person is, and where, when and how he or she lives. That is not to suggest that it might not be a challenging experience, or have its quite demanding aspects, as the Spirit takes the initiative. It has to be able, however, to bring the person's faith, culture and life into harmony, to give his or her life an integrity and a unity.¹⁶ Many people experience some degree of disconnectedness between their ordinary lives – in family and in work – and the “God stuff”. These are people in search of a spirituality that will allow them to integrate these different strands, to be able to incarnate the gospel, as it must be. Each of the great spiritual traditions of the Church, for example the Benedictine or the Ignatian, was begun by someone who sought to do this and was able to effect it in a way that was compelling both for them and for their time and place. Benedict and Ignatius, both as laymen, had an experience of God, over time, that led them to develop a distinctive response. Both wrote it down, so we have the Rule of St Benedict and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, in order that, as other people were inspired to follow them, they could be schooled in the same spiritual experience. In the context of this paper, it may be important to emphasise that the Spiritual Exercises – which underpin Ignatian spirituality and all that flows from that spirituality – were developed long before Ignatius was ordained priest or founded the Society of Jesus. They came from a lay person's experience of God in his ordinary living. This is not to define it as a “lay” spirituality, but as a Christian spirituality, one that has sated the God-thirst of countless men and women, lay and clergy, consecrated and married, for centuries now. So, also, could we point to so many traditions – Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, Lasallian, and others – that have done the same.

We are wading now into the domain of what is commonly described in contemporary Church parlance as “charism”. If “spirituality” is an evasive concept to pin down, “charism” can be downright problematic.¹⁷ That is because it has become a short-hand, grab-all, jargon word for a range of spiritual, social, ministerial and other sub-cultural phenomena. We need to be cautious about our use of this word. For some it means little more than a distinctive pedagogical style; for some a cult-like attachment to a particular founder or foundress; for some an insular or inwardly focussed association of people with a circle-the-wagons motivation for remaining associated; and for others a nostalgic but ill-defined hankering after what it was like when the sisters or the brothers were around. None of that is charism, because none of it is likely, of itself, to promote either discipleship of Jesus or to serve the evangelising needs of the Church.

Charism is not a word that has had much currency in the Church over the centuries. Indeed, since St Paul coined a Greek word drawn from *charis* (meaning “gift” or “grace”) to describe the spiritual gifts evident in some early Christian communities, it has not found significant mention in Church documents or teaching until the twentieth century. Vatican II famously gave the word oxygen and put something of a new spin on its meaning in key paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*

God distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and upbuilding of

¹⁶ Such an approach to spirituality fits easily within the definitive understanding of it that has been proposed for it by the noted writer and theologian, Sr Sandra Schneiders IHM: spirituality is “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives”. “Spirituality in the Academy.” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 684

¹⁷ Wambacq has a useful analysis of the term charism as it emerged from the Council: Wambacq, BN (1975) *Le Mot Charisme. Nouvelle revue théologique*, 97, 345-55.

the Church. Whether these charisms¹⁸ be very remarkable or simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church.¹⁹

Pope Paul, in applying this Vatican II understanding of charism to the religious life itself and as well as to individual founders and foundresses,²⁰ helped to take the concept further than we find it described in the Pauline texts. It then became a term recurrently used by Pope John Paul II, and employed in the same sense:

The Holy Spirit, while bestowing diverse ministries in the Church communion, enriches it still further with particular gifts or promptings of grace called charisms. They can take a great variety of forms both as a manifestation of the absolute freedom of the Spirit who abundantly supplies them, and as a response to the varied needs of the Church in history.²¹

The word has entered general Church discourse, nowhere more than in Church's service ministries of education and health care. This has been perhaps because these ministries are often enough undertaken or sponsored by apostolic religious institutes of relatively recent founding whose corporate memory of their founding generation is proximate and alive, and ones who have been active in attending to the spiritual formation of their lay co-workers. This has been a mixed blessing. The benefits – which we will explore more fully below – have been many, as lay people have found rich spiritual paths to follow and inspirational fellow-travellers with whom to share the journey. But there have also been, and continue to be, some less helpful developments. A first has been the misappropriation of the word charism, a word that is problematic in itself because of confusion with its close lexical cousins “charisma” and “charismatic”, and its other uses in the Church, particularly within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the various Pentecostal movements. A second has been a demeaning of the word as the result of another confusion: people's mistaking the temporal expressions of a charism (for example, a distinctive teaching or caring style, or a grouping of people) with the essence of the charism itself, which is always a way of embracing the gospel of Jesus. This has happened as the original charism has attracted successive generations of people who have developed a communal story, a culture, replete with its heroes, legends, sacred places, music, literature, iconography, ministerial style, and its strength of association. While all of these things can and should be authentic ways of incarnating Christ-life in our world – of allowing the Word to pitch his tent in our midst – there is sometimes confusion between the tent and its inhabitant. This seems particularly the case when the charism has been the means of addressing a practical social need, such as education or health care. A third factor is the conventional view that a charism belongs to a religious order or some other church group, when in fact it belongs to the whole Church, to all the People of God, for its benefit and its enabling for mission.

So, can we validly continue to use the word charism in such a way that its post-Vatican II usage does not betray or skew its Scriptural origins? The answer to that question is yes, but carefully. The concept of charism as it was understood by the Council and has been used by the Magisterium since then, is the same as Paul's: a grace of the Holy Spirit, freely given to a member or members of the Christian community, to enable them to receive and to preach the gospel of Jesus in a particular way, and that every charism enhances the Church's shared capacity for the service of the Gospel.²² The novelty of recent Popes' use of the term, and its widespread currency in the Church, including Catholic schools, is not essentially at odds with this. Indeed, it is well that those involved in Catholic

¹⁸ Some translators prefer “charismatic gifts” to “charisms”; others stay with the Latin word *charismata*

¹⁹ *Lumen Gentium* #12. In Abbott, (1966) *The Documents of the Second Vatican Council*.

²⁰ See Pope Paul VI (1971) *Evangelica Testificatio, On the renewal of the religious life according to the Second Vatican Council*. #2, #11.

²¹ *Christifideles Laici*. #24

²² The Pauline understanding of spiritual gifts is developed through a number of Paul's letters and those of the Pauline school: cf Romans 14; 1 and 2 Corinthians; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; 1 Peter 4:10.

education embrace the call of the Council and of the Popes of our time to receive these charisms “with gratitude”. The charisms are, as one commentator has put it, the “great gospel ideas”²³, the inspired ways of discipleship that have stood the test of time and have proven fruitful, that have inspired generations of Christians to recognise and to love their God, and to undertake the mission of the Church. They have given them a story to join, a community of mission to which to belong, a work to do, a way to pray, a face of God to see. They have been built around inspired and inspirational people, indeed saints. They have grown into rich and wise schools of spirituality. These charisms are treasures of the Church; they are the Spirit alive in the Church. The word “charism”, nonetheless, remains a little strange for many, one that doesn’t roll easily off the tongue. For this reason, and because of the way it can be misused, I usually prefer to use the terms “spirituality” or “spiritual tradition” except where the meaning of charism or charismatic is clear from the context.

It should not be presumed that Christian spiritualities are all “old”, or even new expressions of old. While the Church remains profoundly enriched by its well established spiritual traditions such as the Benedictine, Ignatian, Franciscan, Marist or Salesian that were born of monastic, mendicant and apostolic movements over the centuries, the Spirit continues to irrupt among us, to inspire and to create. The last century saw a remarkable explosion of new movements both before and after the Council, for example the St Egidio Community, the Focolare Movement, Communion and Liberation, the Neocatechumenate, Opus Dei, the Emmanuel Community, the Charismatic Renewal, the Cursillo. In many cases, these have grown up in situations where the life of the Church, including the consecrated life, had become jaded and tepid, or anonymous and tired. Generally called the “New Ecclesial Movements”, they stretch across the liberal-conservative spectrum, if such a thing exists, and continue to attract many new members. In one country, Spain, it has been estimated that over forty per cent of Catholics actively involved in the Church are doing so primarily as part of a “movement” rather than through parish or traditional structures.²⁴

The two most common ways in which lay people are connecting themselves with the spiritualities of the Church are, first, through the New Ecclesial Movements and, second, through movements associated with established religious orders and institutes. This parallel but not unconnected development was symbolised ten years ago when two quite separately convened gatherings occurred contemporaneously in Rome. The first was the regular meeting of the Union of Superiors General which was devoted its 1999 meeting to examining the myriad of ways that lay people were seeking to associate themselves in one way or another with the spiritualities that had long given life to religious orders and religious institutes. Some of these orders had had lay branches for centuries, for others it was a new challenge. It was their common experience, however, that lay people were being attracted in unprecedented numbers to share in the spirituality and the mission of the different traditions. There was a broadly felt call that they needed to widen the space of their tents.²⁵ The second gathering was the first World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, a plenary gathering of invited leaders of fifty-six new ecclesial movements. Much favoured by John Paul II in the last ten or so years of his pontificate, these movements had grown to such an extent that many in the Church were beginning to see them as the most efficacious way that the Church of the present age was being prompted to be renewed and reformed by the Spirit. It has always been new movements, or fresh irruptions of the Spirit, that have reformed the Church, and often enough they have been met by suspicion by the old guard of the Church. This is not the place to undertake a

²³ The phrase is Claude Maréchal’s, the then Assumptionist Superior General, who delivered an insightful paper on this topic at the 56th Conference of Superiors General, in Rome, in 1999: *Toward an effective partnership between religious and laity in fulfilment of charism and responsibility for mission.*

²⁴ Hanna, T, *op.cit.*

²⁵ Cf. Isaiah 54:2

deep analysis or evaluation of this modern Church phenomenon,²⁶ but only to observe that there are new spiritualities continuing to emerge in the Church, including ones that are being associated with Catholic schools. Although the new movements represent a range of style, structure and emphasis, many of them share a number of characteristics: they are predominantly lay in their membership but also have clerical members as well as a few who make a deeper, life commitment (in some cases as consecrated people, in some cases not); they have a more radical way of living the gospel than is typical of many other members of the Church; they emphasise fellowship and community experience rather than private spirituality; they are zealous in catechesis and evangelisation; and they are attractive to young people in particular by proposing Christ in compelling and fresh ways.²⁷

In the context of a consideration of charisms, the growth and the vitality of the new ecclesial movements teach something critically important to the whole Church. Almost without exception – whether they appeared before or after the Council – they have a structure that is consistent with Vatican II's emphasis on *communio*: they are largely lay, with lay people unambiguously embracing their baptismal responsibilities to grow in Christian holiness and share together in the mission of evangelisation, but they also have a strong Sacramental life with the ordained pastors of the Church actively exercising their priestly ministry within the movement's life, and mostly they allow for some members to make a more intense, celibate, long-term or permanent commitment, and to live a common life in ways not dissimilar to older forms of the consecrated life. They exist to provide a means for their members to deepen their own sense of vocation and holiness, to form community, and to take part in the mission of the Church. In this they provide a paradigm for the traditional spiritualities if these spiritualities also are going to continue to be relevant and engaging for the contemporary Church. The "old" spiritualities are called to the same thing: to be largely but not exclusively lay, to be able to integrate their charismatic vitality into the institutional life of the Church, and to inspire their members to a holiness that propels them to mission.

It is the lay thing that will be the biggest challenge for many of the traditional spiritualities, because they have for so long been defined primarily in terms of clergy and religious, with lay people often seen only as associates. Some traditions, however, such as those associated with Ignatian, Franciscan and Dominican spiritualities, have long enjoyed a quite inclusive membership by recognising that all people can embrace the spirituality in differential ways that suit their respective state of life, and their other personal circumstances. For example, the Christian Life Communities, the Apostleship of Prayer, the Eucharistic Youth Movement, and various Jesuit volunteer organisations, as well as a number of congregations of religious sisters such as The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the "Loreto Sisters") and the Sisters of Charity, are all Ignatian in their spirituality and identity but are not institutional appendages of the Society of Jesus. Indeed, at their 2008 General Congregation, the Jesuits deliberately rejected some kind of institutional membership of non-Jesuits because it blurred the consecrated identity of the Jesuits themselves. This was not to suggest that lay people were to be excluded from the Ignatian way; quite the contrary. The Congregation was distinguishing between "Jesuit" and "Ignatian", and it proposed the concept of an "Ignatian Apostolic Network" among all those "who share an Ignatian commitment to service in the Church".²⁸ The Jesuits were thus proposing that the way forward for Ignatian spirituality in today's Church, was to be around a sense of shared mission, with people acting as a church community and graced by a spirituality built on one of the "great gospel ideas" as it has evolved over the centuries, So must it be for any group. Here are the essential links between charism and lay spirituality.

²⁶ A recent doctoral study by Tony Hanna which has since been published as a book (Hanna, *op.cit*) offers a comprehensive, critical and well-balanced analysis of the new ecclesial movements in general, with a specific focus on three of them: Communion and Liberation, The Neo-Catechumenate, and The Charismatic Renewal.

²⁷ Hanna, *op.cit*. considers these features and supports them by a comprehensive survey of relevant literature.

²⁸ Society of Jesus (2008) *Collaboration at the Heart of Mission*. Decree of the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. #23.

WHY 'lay spirituality and charisms'? And why now?

Over the last three decades, the Congregation for Catholic Education has published several simple but profound documents on the identity and the purpose of the Catholic school, addressed principally to those of us who undertake this critical aspect of the Church's mission across the world. They are all well worthy of our reading. Early in its most recent publication, one which addresses the complementary roles of lay people and consecrated in Catholic schools, there is a critically important observation:

The project of the Catholic school will be convincing only if it is carried out by people who are deeply motivated because they witness to a living encounter with Christ, in whom alone 'the mystery of man becomes clear'.²⁹

There are, at the present time, no greater challenges to the integrity and the effectiveness of Australian Catholic schools as agents of evangelisation than (a) the depth of spirituality and (b) the degree of ecclesial commitment of those who teach and work in these schools. In world terms, our Australian Catholic schools are built and resourced outstandingly. They are led and staffed by well-educated professionals, indeed people who, in the history of Catholic education in this country, have never been more highly qualified. Although most of us are endlessly chasing extra funding for this or that capital project, and always seem to have fewer dollars than we have ways to spend them, our funding levels and our resources are the envy of most countries. The schools are serviced by Catholic Education Offices and Catholic Education Commissions that provide high level curricular, financial, legal, and personnel support for policies, programmes and governance. They allow our dioceses and religious institutes to conduct a world-class network of schools, and to be able offer these to virtually anyone who is seeking a Catholic education. But to what extent is it still a *Catholic* education that we are offering? Or, to put it more pointedly, to what extent are our schools communities where the gospel of Christ is proclaimed unambiguously and received openly, where Jesus is known and loved personally, where the reign of God pervades all that is done there and how it is done? Are they places that satisfy the God-thirst in people and promote Christian discipleship? Let us hope that the answer to each of those questions is strongly affirmative. Many of us work in such places; most of us know schools where it is exceptionally so. The degree to which it is the case in a school will be largely a function of the depth to which the staff who lead it can personally answer yes to each of those questions posed.³⁰

For the first time this year, I heard of a Director of Catholic Education in one diocese who openly questioned if a particular school in his diocese – a largish, urban, secondary school – could any longer be honestly called a Catholic school. Yes, the school was still a school owned and operated by the diocese; its signage and documents all proclaimed its church identity; it required its students to take the usual religious education classes; a majority was nominally Catholic; and there were other ostensible vestiges of its Catholic heritage. But was it any longer Catholic in practice? His doubts seemed to be more prompted by his assessment of the people who led and staffed the school rather than the largely un-churched and student population whose active parish engagement was probably less than five percent. What was the staff's personal sense of being disciples of Jesus, or their being Christian educators? What was their understanding of the Church's mission in education and their own role as evangelisers? How many of them had any sort of conscious or committed religious faith, let alone a Catholic one? What was their working knowledge of Scripture and of the teachings and traditions of the Church? What was their parish involvement? What were their social justice

²⁹ Congregation for Catholic Education (2007) *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A shared mission between consecrated persons and the lay faithful*. Rome: Libreria Edrice Vaticana.

³⁰ See the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of NSW and the ACT, *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads*, for a discussion of important issues around the identity and mission of the Australian Catholic school of the future.

involvements? The religious institute which had originally founded the school had long since ceased any connection; the local pastor had written it off and rarely visited.

While not wishing to be unnecessarily alarmist or pessimistic, there are likely to be an increasing number of such schools, or schools heading in that direction. As the next generation of teachers moves into middle-management and senior leadership – a larger number of whom have grown up in families that have not been active in their practice of the faith in the traditional sense – this is likely to become more the norm. There will be what some commentators call “mission drift”.³¹ You notice it first in little ways, such as the staff briefing starting with a “reflection” rather than a “prayer”, so as to be more inclusive and not to offend anyone’s religious sensibilities; or images or posters with beautiful photographs of sunsets or rainforests with some pithy sentence of wisdom, replacing more overtly religious figures or images. Then the rhetoric of the school may shift ever so subtly from talking about faith in God and a personal relationship with Jesus, to more vaguely espousing the Christian values that underpin the school. Masses may begin to be replaced with non-Eucharistic liturgies, and gradually the celebration of the Sacraments in the school community just doesn’t happen any longer. The danger? It moves subtly towards becoming just a low-fee private school – albeit one that may be quite professionally run and with a solid value base that is not in conflict with the Gospel – but with little capacity for explicit evangelisation or catechesis, or much understanding of it or vision for it. As far as involvement with the life of the Church goes, the main point of connection may be through the local Catholic Education Office rather than any parish, pastor or religious institute, these being judged – possibly not too unfairly – to have lost touch, lost vitality, and lost relevance for the school. They might still be saying something, but not in any effective way. In any case, the school is no longer listening to them.

Not everyone will be uncomfortable with such a scenario, or even necessarily notice that it has actually happened. The world of young Australian people, including younger teachers, is for the most part a post-Christian and post-modern one. There are quite notable and inspiring exceptions, and there are certainly differences among ethnic communities across the country, but most people under fifty live quite secular lives. They are not the “ecclesial natives” that their grandparents were, and perhaps some of their parents. Church is another country. They don’t always feel at home there, or understand its language. They do not intuitively connect with it. It is not their tribe, as it was their forebears. Increasingly, on enrolment application forms, we are seeing “not applicable” written in the box where applicant and parents are asked to nominate their religious affiliation. It is not done provocatively, just honestly. It is no more than a reflection of the fairly rapidly changing statistics that we read in five-yearly national census.

Should we panic? Should we limp off in defeat? Only if we are not students of history, or have doubts about the Church’s facility for renewal, or do not believe in the Holy Spirit. There have been many times over the centuries, in various places, when the Church has become dispirited, discredited, and disenfranchised. What has happened? One of two things, typically: either it has wallowed in its old ways and remained disconnected from the lives of most ordinary people, or it has been open to the fresh ways that the Spirit has offered people to satisfy the God-thirst in them, personally and communally, ways that suited their time and place. Witness, for example, the emergence of the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the medieval church, the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation, or the explosion of apostolic movements in France in the decades that followed the revolutionary-Napoleonic period. In our own country, look at the contribution of religious institutes in saving and building our Catholic education and health sectors. The Spirit will always be seeking to irrupt when and where the needs are greatest. The inspirational people and the inspired movements that emerge in such situations – for example the apostolic religious institutes of the nineteenth century – sometimes have a short life-span to allow the Church to meet

³¹ See Nicholson, P (2009) *PJPs: Issues in Formation* for a discussion of this phenomenon.

the needs of a particular time and place. This is the fate of most. They are established, they serve the Church's mission for a time, and then they fade. Others – a smaller number, and what *Lumen Gentium* may have understood as the “more remarkable” ones³² – enter the life of the Church, and become a continuing part of its spiritual fabric. They do this by their facility for adaptation to different times, places and cultures, and their accessibility to many different people. For example, the Middle Ages saw the birth of both the Franciscans and the Knights Templar. While both grew exponentially and influentially, one proved to be a creature of its time and today seems weirdly anachronistic, the stuff of a Dan Brown novel; the other continues to be one of the most attractive spiritualities of the Church, still capturing the hearts and imagination of the young, still giving a graced way of Christian discipleship. This seems to be the way of the Spirit. For a spirituality to be one that will serve the Church of the third millennium, and particularly one that is going to be embraced by a contemporary Catholic school, it will need to be one that allows for an expression of *communio* in the sense that Vatican II has proposed it: it must be inclusive of lay people as its main constituent group. Let us look for such spiritualities. Let us be alert for them, because it may be that we might just find the Spirit at work.

Franciscan spirituality, to continue that example, is a telling case in point. When an invitation to a conference went out earlier this year to every school in Australia that bore the name of St Francis, or had some historical connection with one or other Franciscan group, there was an avalanche of responses. Many Australian Catholic schools have St Francis or St Clare as their patron saint, or were founded by Franciscan sisters or friars, but have long since ceased using a Franciscan spirituality to define their identity or to shape their mission, if it was ever there at all. They are not unusual in that. Many schools, especially parish primary schools, have not continued to draw from the spirituality associated with their founding religious institute in a normative or defining way after the sisters, priests or brothers withdrew. Nor do many schools make much more than occasional reference to their patron saint. It is not so much a decision not to reject this approach; it is more a case simply that there is no ongoing connection with that spiritual tradition among the leadership of the school, or the name with which the school is saddled does not seem to connect naturally with its present reality. For many parish schools, the way the gospel finds its vitality and incarnation is in the life of the parish itself: its community, its sacramental programmes, its liturgies, its various ministries. Does a school need to tap into one of the charismatic spiritualities of the Church in order to be a vibrant, spiritually rich, and effective evangelising community of mission? Not at all. If the parish is firing and the staff of the school is closely integrated into it, or if there is a practice and tradition in a particular school community that attends to the spiritual nourishment of its staff and there are good means of sustaining this, or if there is leadership in the school that is spiritually credible, informed and inspiring, then a school should well be able to remain a genuine and effective Catholic school. It has to be suspected, however, that the extraordinary response to the Franciscan invitation this year indicates that many Australian Catholic schools – staffed almost entirely by lay people – are struggling with their sense of mission effectiveness, and are looking for something else. The movements that have grown from the “great gospel ideas” can provide them with some answers for their search.

HOW can the charisms of the Church empower lay people for mission?

The Church has always been revitalised by movements, by inspired and inspiring people. The great “spiritual families”³³ of the universal Church that continue to this day, and the newer ones to which the last century gave birth, are such movements of grace. At the present time, the Church looks to these spiritual families, through their inclusion of lay people within them, as “one of the great hopes

³² *Lumen Gentium* #12

³³ The term is the one used by the Congregation for Catholic Education in this context. See *Educating Together in the Catholic School*, #28-30.

for the future of the Catholic educational mission”.³⁴ The ones that allow lay people to draw on the spiritual and apostolic fruitfulness of the original charism of the movements’ founders, while at the same time ensuring that they can live out fully their secular vocation, are those to which we as contemporary Catholic educators should be looking.

The Second Vatican Council spent some time considering the complementary roles of the hierarchical and the charismatic dimensions of the Church.³⁵ It saw that the Church needed both its structures of authority, teaching and organisation, as well as ways that fostered its being open to the movement of the Spirit in fresh and compelling ways, even in ways that were unsettling, as they were for Mary the mother of Jesus. Without the former, the Church would lack direction and surety, without the latter it could lack vitality and relevance. For the Church to proceed with both integrity and inspiration, it needs both. The Council Fathers probably did not have in mind Catholic Education Offices when they were debating the role of the institutional structures and the exercise of authority, but perhaps these creatures of the Australian Church are not too far from their thinking. A Catholic Education Office is essentially an arm of a bishop’s curia, his bureaucracy; it is a contemporary expression of the institutional dimension of the Church. There is nothing wrong with that; indeed it is essential for prudent governance and stewardship. At the same time, a local church needs continually to ask itself – as does the universal Church – about the relative influence that its curial offices have at any one time, because it is less likely that these are going to be the nests from which the fresh and surprising ways of the Holy Spirit will fly. This is a strong claim, but look at the history of the Church, look at where and in whom the great irruptions of the Spirit have occurred. No, the role of the institutional arm of the Church is, in *Lumen Gentium’s* words, to receive these charisms “with gratitude and consolation”. To take this a step further, a bishop who is interested in enlivening the life of his local church, would be always alert to inviting new charismatic movements to his diocese and to supporting older ones to renew themselves and to remain apostolically and spiritually fruitful. It is a way for him to keep a rich “ecclesial gene pool”. The larger charismatic movements have a life in the universal Church, and so can bring to a local diocese and a local parish a broader view of church and a diversity of spirituality that may be unlikely to grow indigenously. They also provide a necessary foil to the natural tendencies of any bureaucracy – ecclesial or otherwise – that can confuse uniformity with unity, diversity with disunity, innovation with disloyalty, and difference with independence. Look at the ways that some of the new ecclesial movements have been treated with suspicion and rejection, because they do not fit the prevailing model of how the Church should operate or how spirituality should be expressed.

Some of the new movements – including those associated with as an exciting a phenomenon as World Youth Day – are sometimes dismissed as conservative, revisionist and, therefore, out of sympathy with the *aggiornamento* and “spirit” of Vatican II. Interestingly, these criticisms often enough come from late middle-aged Catholics – including religious and priests – who themselves have become somewhat tepid or anonymous in their witness to their faith or their overt practice of it. We have all probably also met these Vatican II refugees from the 1960s and 1970s who are cynically dismissive of anything they judge to be pre-conciliar. When they see young people showing up in huge numbers to Eucharistic Adoration or Benediction, or lining up for individual Confession, or wearing clothes that identify them as committed Catholics, even religious habits, it has them tut-tutting over their caffè-lattes and choking on their scotches. For the young people, burdened by none of their elders’ baggage, they are simply developing a personal relationship with Jesus,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cardinal Suenens was, both during and after the Council, among the most powerful and eloquent proponents of the charismatic dimension of the Church, and typical of the line of thinking that entered the Council documents. See, for example, his intervention in the debate on the drafting of *Lumen Gentium*: ‘The Charismatic Dimension of the Church’ in Y. Congar, H. Kung, D. O’Hanlon (eds.) (1964) *The Speeches of Vatican II*.

allowing their imagination to be captured by the beauty of the Church's liturgy, and being inspired to make a radical commitment of their lives, as young people do.

One of the characteristics of the contemporary Catholic education scene in this country is the ascendancy of the Catholic education bureaucracy over the more charismatic dimensions of the life of the Church. As the religious institutes have become less involved and less influential in the education sector, they have left a vacuum into which lay people have not adequately stepped. Whereas lay people occupy places in the curial bureaucracy, both comfortably and competently, they are yet to assume their rightful positions of recognised leadership and practical influence in the spiritual traditions of the Church in ways that impact sufficiently on the life and mission of the Church in education. The result? Diocesan Offices are left, often on their own, to look for ways to meet that most pressing of all challenges that faces us: the development of staff spirituality. Despite the best of intentions and the deployment of resources, they are less well oriented to be as successful or as inspirational. It's not their game. At its worst, it reduces to a tick-the-boxes or count-the-hours approach, for example, a requirement that four units of post-graduate study in theology being a requisite for an assistant principal's position, or eight units for a principal's. Teachers log their mandatory minimum professional development hours as an employment requirement. Spirituality, however, is not something that can be mandated. It is something of the heart. Certainly, the practice of particular spirituality and an understanding of it can be taught and learnt; the term "school of spirituality" rightly implies this. But, first it has to attract and to inspire, and it has to suit each person at the intuitive level. Each has to feel at home with the spirituality itself, and with his or her spiritual companions.

The best spiritual families and the ecclesial movements work first on this inspirational level; people are attracted to join them intuitively. They provide ways of incarnating Christ-life into time, place, mission, and the hearts of people. As a founding charism moves over time to become a spiritual tradition, it develops a wealth of accumulated wisdom and resources into which others can tap to learn from those who have walked and are walking the same spiritual path. It gives people a story to enter, a group to which to belong, a mission or work to share with others. It provides them with a literature to read, songs to sing, an accessible language and symbols to use, and saints from whom to draw inspiration. These are pegs onto which our faith hats can be hung. While not ends in themselves, they do often provide powerful means to receive and to promote the gospel of Jesus – a do-able discipleship.

In the context of a Catholic school community, the potential benefits of belonging corporately to such a spiritual tradition or movement are immense. If it is one that suits that school community and its present realities, one that is attractive to its members, then it can provide a graced way to give compelling life to the gospel. First, it will give people a means of deepening their personal and their communal spirituality, a way of quenching their God-thirst, a path to meeting Jesus. Second, it will give a treasure chest of resources, solid formation programmes, literature, symbols and rituals, strategies for ministry, extra-parochial and extra-diocesan links, and collected wisdom, from which the principal and staff can draw. It becomes the glue that binds the community and gives it focus in its mission.

School communities need, however, to beware of a quick-fix mindset. For a school community to choose a spiritual tradition of the Church as the way it wants to define and to animate its life and mission, it is not simply a matter of going along to the charism store and selecting one off the shelf. A few years ago, when I had the position of Chair of the Association of Marist Schools of Australia, I occasionally frustrated some of my fellow committee members with the degree of caution I adopted each time a new school sought membership of the Association. AMSA is a network of like-hearted schools whose principal aim is to be mutually supportive of each other in bringing the Marist

spirituality of St Marcellin Champagnat to the service of Australian Catholic schools. It is all about charism. The line I took whenever a school wanted either to re-connect with its Marist identity, or to develop one, was always to ask if it were real. It had to be much more than just a name on the front gate, or some claim to a Marist heritage or past association with the Marist Brothers. It could not be just an underdeveloped idea in the mind of the school principal, or a wished-for holding on to something that had actually ceased to exist in the life of the school. Was Marist spirituality at the heart of the school's mission and culture? Was it named as such, and generally owned as such? Is that how the school leadership and staff understood what it meant to be Marist? In other words, were there roots to the flowers that they thought they saw, and were they prepared to cultivate and water these roots in ways that would allow them to sink deeply into the ground of the school?

One of the things not always sufficiently appreciated by some Catholic education bureaucrats is that "charism hopping" is difficult, and not always natural. To be inspired by one of the great charisms of the Church is something that affects a person's heart and defines person's self-understanding. These are things that can be neither easily discarded nor quickly acquired. Membership of a spiritual family brings a person into community with fellow disciples, people who become not only colleagues but spiritual companions. At one level it is quite possible to become "literate" in a particular charism, by reading its documents, learning its language, knowing its symbols and rituals, and appropriating its ways. But to become part of it as a movement, to belong to it, is something more profound because this calls for a spiritual connection, for an intuitive bonding, for feeling at home within it and with those who belong to it. To some degree, a person's own identity becomes inextricably meshed into the broader narrative of the movement. This is in the affective domain more than the cognitive. Charismatic traditions should be schools of holiness, where discipleship can be taught and learnt, but this does not mean that they can be reduced to a skill-set or a core knowledge-base. While, in the final analysis, they all lead to discipleship of the one Lord, and communion with the one Church, and while there is a natural 'simpatico' among some charisms because of their bloodlines, it is a diminished understanding of the way they work incarnationally to presume that an educator, and most especially a school leader, can become something of a charism chameleon. Quite understandably, there is an expectation that aspiring leaders of Catholic schools should gain experience in different schools. Unfortunately, this cannot always take place in a way that allows a person to grow within a chosen spiritual family. Nor, it must be said, is the value of that often enough recognised or encouraged. Part of the reason is Catholic education has become organised largely on a diocesan basis in this country, while most of the spiritual traditions operate on a supra-diocesan basis as part of the universal Church. The other part of the reason is that the voice of the spiritual traditions in the Catholic education sector has become muted and tired. They wait for lay people to revocalise them.

There are several factors that seem essential to be in play if a school community is to be genuine in its embrace of one of the charismatic spiritualities of the Church, and likely to benefit from it to undertake its evangelising mission. Let's call them the "Seven C's of Charism".

1. *Coherence*

A school's practices and its organisational culture have to match its charism rhetoric. If the claim is that a school is animated by a Benedictine or a Franciscan or an Ignatian or some other spirituality, then to what extent is this played out in the school's daily life, or to what extent is it just window-dressing? Is it reflected in the way the school community, especially the staff, publicly prays and worships? What can be found in its documents, policies, symbols, and rituals? Is there an explicit language that most people use, or shared ways of acting and reacting, of judging and intuiting, of prioritising and evaluating, and of relating and organising, that would be readily identifiable as emanating from that spiritual and apostolic tradition? To

what extent do staff and students have a self-understanding as being part of the tradition, of belonging to its wider story, and indeed of being its present-day protagonists?

2. *Critical mass*

In any school community, the reality is that the staff will act out of a range of religious faiths and practice. So, also, when a school is part of a charismatic tradition. At one end of the spectrum will be those who identify strongly with the tradition: it is their preferred personal spirituality; it defines their pedagogical and pastoral style; they feel in communion with others in the same spiritual family; they even take responsibility for articulating it, for nurturing it, and for inducting new people into it; they may even have actual membership of a third order, oblate branch, or some other kind of formalised association. There will be others who, while generally in sympathy with the values and intuitions of the charism, would not see themselves as actually belonging to it; for them, it is their job, their employment, and that is as far as it goes. There may be some others who, at least covertly, only tolerate the religious emphases of the school because that is where fate has landed them; they have made certain undertakings as part of their employment contract, but it has little resonance in their personal lives.

For a school to be a genuine community of mission within one of the spiritual traditions of the Church there needs to be a critical mass of people at the strongly-identifying end of the spectrum. Among these people has to be the principal, along with, ideally, the entire leadership team. So, also, it is helpful that the people on staff who carry the most influence among their colleagues identify with similar clarity. These may be longer-serving members of staff who carry the corporate memory of the school, or it may be others who have moral authority on staff, but they need not be in any particular role. Every school has them. They may be the receptionist or the deputy principal or the sports coordinator. Whoever they are, these are the people who need to know the story of the spirituality, to own it, to be able to share it with others, to feel it in their bones, and to inspire others in their appropriation of it. In the Australian Church context of today, they will be people who see themselves living out this spirituality fully as lay people; they will not understand themselves riding on the coat-tails of religious, or doing their best in the absence of religious. Indeed, although they may have a deep appreciation and even affection for the religious institute which introduced the spirituality to the school, they will themselves now be taking responsibility for it. If there is not a critical mass of such people on staff, then a spirituality is unlikely to have much significance in the ordinary life of the school. It will be dilute and diffuse. Worse still, there could be a dysfunctionality among centres of influence in the school.

3. *Christian discipleship*

Any Christian spirituality or ecclesial movement will, if it is genuine, be a way of nurturing people's discipleship of Jesus, and of bringing them into community with others who are attracted to the same way and to the same mission. It will be a spiritual thing, primarily and essentially. In proposing what he described as the "six criteria of ecclesiality" for discerning the value of any new lay group within the Church, Pope John Paul II's first measure was the extent to which the group could be considered to be a "school of holiness" that promoted a "unity of faith and life".³⁶ That is, by belonging to a particular group or movement, lay people would grow spiritually. The charismatic traditions of Catholic education are not merely sets of characteristic patterns of pedagogy, or care, or shared human values. While we may validly describe a Lasallian way of educating, or an Ignatian pedagogy, these are expressions of a deeper experience. At its best, all Christian spirituality leads to and from an encounter with Jesus. For a spirituality to be Catholic, this encounter will be significantly found in the

³⁶ *Christifideles Laici*, #30.

Sacramental life of the Church, and within its shared pastoral mission. A school could well ask itself, therefore, the extent to which it is normal for its staff to pray and worship together, to be nurtured spiritually, or to be linked into the life of the Church.

4. *Constancy of orientation*

It takes time to embed a particular spirituality into a school community. When such a spirituality does become a defining feature of that community – where there is indeed a congruence between what the school claims and what its members actually are and do, where there is an active critical mass of lay people who have a self-identity defined by that spirituality, and where a distinctive form of Christian discipleship is at the heart of it all – then a school is likely to have something powerful at work. But this will not happen overnight. It requires sustained leadership, and a certain “constancy of orientation” to use a way of understanding charisma that was proposed by Pope Paul VI.³⁷ For a school to develop into a real “school of holiness”, in the sense that John Paul II used the term, it will need people who are steeped in the spirituality, and where there is a continuity of leadership. In the context of the Australian Catholic school, the principal is the single key person in this regard. It is the principal who will be the one to witness convincingly and teach wisely about the way that the particular spiritual tradition can provide an “integration of faith, culture and life”.³⁸ If the leader of the community of mission is not able, willing, or naturally disposed to do this, or to do it with sufficient credibility, then it is unlikely that the spirituality will grace the mission of the school in the way it could otherwise do. This has significant implications for criteria of principal selection and support.

5. *Continuing formation*

Religious institutes have long recognised the critical importance of what the Church often calls “formation”. This is not a term that has much currency in the English language, but one that has been appropriated from Latin languages and has the general sense of education and training. In the Church, it is usually associated with guided personal and spiritual development. Members of religious institutes benefit from a mindset of life-long formation, and most religious institutes invest significantly in it. While a good deal of formation can happen through critical reflection on normal life experience, there is nothing that can replace the worth of formal programmes, courses, reading, and spiritual direction.³⁹ If the lay members of a spiritual tradition are to develop in their embrace of that tradition, and allow it to develop in their discipleship, they need formation opportunities. This is not only for their own benefit, but also for that of the tradition itself, because it will only ever be as vital and convincing as are the people within it. In its discussion of the roles of lay and consecrated people in today’s Catholic school, the Congregation for Catholic Education devotes a major part of its document to this imperative.⁴⁰ Fortunately, some of the richest programmes and resources for spiritual development and formation are those produced by the spiritual families of the Church. It is perhaps their greatest contribution to her spiritual vitality. One of the most attractive benefits for lay people to become part of one of these traditions for their own spirituality and mission, are the opportunities for ongoing formation that they offer.

6. *Church connection*

In a recent address to members of the Franciscan family, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on Francis’s intuition, even in his spirit of radical reform, to place his mission within the Church,

³⁷ Paul VI (1971) *Evangelica Testificatio, On the Renewal of the Religious Life according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council*. #12.

³⁸ *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, #21.

³⁹ See Nicholson, *op.cit.*, for a discussion of the importance of formation for lay people in this sense.

⁴⁰ See *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*.

and not outside or alongside it.⁴¹ He need not have done so, observed the Pope: Francis could have tried to reform the Church from the outside. The Franciscan way has made such a perennial fruitful contribution to “rebuilding the the Church” because Francis took the option that he did, something Benedict XVI urged present-day Franciscans to continue to do. He pointed out to them that “charism and institution are always complementary” for the Church; it needs both. One of the unhealthy directions for which any community needs to be alert is that of insularity. When a group becomes too clubby, or defines its identity or its mission differently from the Church, it runs the risk of moving from being an ecclesial community to being a cult.

7. *Community of Mission*

In the end, it all comes back to mission. We often say that the Church has a mission, but another way to understand it is that the mission has a Church.⁴² All charisms are about empowering the Church for that mission, that is for bringing people into discipleship with Jesus and associating them together as community, so that they can become a “community of mission”.⁴³ This is the final criterion and the ultimate goal for any Christian spirituality. If it effects that, then we can all shout ‘Amen!’

Conclusion: an ancient ecclesiology waiting for rebirth

In the theology and the practice of eastern Christianity there is less emphasis on all the words that we westerners like to use. There is a more mystical, a more symbolic, a more visual, and a more experiential approach to the Divine. This icon of the Ascension is typical. The basic form of the icon of the Ascension is always the same, and has been so since the early centuries. There is so much that could be said about this icon, but that would be falling into a western mindset, and probably debasing its power. For the purposes of this paper, it may be helpful, nonetheless, to draw briefly a couple of insights from it and to put some words around them.⁴⁴

First, the theme of the icon is not really about the Ascension at all, or not at least the literal event. For one thing, there are twelve Apostles, the twelfth being Saint Paul who of course was not present in the biblical scene. This icon is, rather, a theology of the Church, presented visually. We see Christ ascended in heaven, flanked by two angels cloaked earthly green, while on earth the angels are cloaked in heavenly white and gold, alongside Mary who has a robe of green but a cloak and shoes of red, the colour of the Divine. Heaven has come to earth and earth has come to heaven; the work of redemption and salvation is done. But let us look at the Apostles. We have Peter, on Mary’s right, not at the physical centre of the group but cloaked in gold and the most stable of the Apostles. Mary’s right hand, raised in prayer, also points to him, as do the eyes of the angels alongside Mary’s. On Peter’s side of the icon, there is more solidity, more structure, more order: the tradition of the Church. Peter’s gaze is fixedly on Christ and he points everyone in this direction. Mary’s left hand is open in front of her breast, the traditional symbol of witness or martyrdom for Christ. The Apostle closest to this hand is Paul, the missionary. On his side of the icon there is more movement, reflecting the apostolic dimension of the Church. James is in the icon with the others, and significantly there is John, the beloved disciple. You will always find him heavily wrapped in bright

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI (2009) *Attract to Christ Men and Women of All Times*. Castel Gandolfo, April 20.

⁴² The phrase belongs to Stephen Bevans SVD who used it as the theme of a lecture series sponsored by Mission Australia, presented in Sydney and Melbourne in April 2009.

⁴³ See *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*. This is a major theme of the document of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

⁴⁴ Much of the following is drawn from the theology of Hans Urs von Balthazar. See Craig Larkin SM (2005) *The Icon of the Ascension, A Marian Church*, for a synopsis of the different dimensions of the life of the Church that are represented in the traditional icon of the Ascension. Tony Hanna, *op.cit.*, also has a useful discussion of the Balthazar’s ecclesiology, especially the Marian principle as the archetype of the Church.

red over on the side, personifying the mystical life of the Church. In these figures, the icon reflects the different dimensions of the life of the Church, its poles of reference – specifically the Petrine, the



Pauline and the Johannine. Maternally gathering them together is the first disciple of Jesus, Mary. Although she is prominent in the icon, providing something of a pivot and a unity, the visual flow of the image is towards the ascended Christ figure. Mary is no-one's object of devotion, yet she is there at the heart of the Church, as a kind of model and archetype of the Christ-life on earth. She is *theotokos*: the bearer of God, as we all are called to be. And let us remember who Mary is: she is lay, and she is a woman. This is an image of the Church that is quite different from the pyramidal one that I first saw in primary school: with the pope and the bishops at the top, the laity at the bottom, the religious sandwiched hierarchically in between. Here in this ancient image we have the people of God, with the distinctive giftedness of each, but without there being a hierarchy of gifts or a hierarchy of holiness. The basic paradigm of this holiness is visually represented in Mary: totally aligned with Christ but with her feet on the ground; with one hand indicating a life of witness to Christ, and the other in prayerful connection with the Church; born of the earth and cloaked in the life of God; with a halo to signify her holiness or, in modern Church parlance, the integration of faith, culture and life. It is the Marian dimension that gives the disciples of Jesus identity, purpose, direction and meaning. Mary, a woman and lay. Mary, the first disciple.

The ecclesiology of this ancient icon is very much a post-Vatican II one. This is the people of God, in all its charismatic diversity, and in communion with one another, with God, and with the eternal cosmos. It is a visual theology that could be applied not only to the universal Church, but to all manifestations of church – whether they be diocesan, parochial, or within one of the ecclesial movements or spiritual traditions of the Church. The same poles of reference apply and the same universal call to holiness. The lives of all its members lead to and from Jesus, forming a community of disciples, on mission. Each of the charismatic movements of the Church will find or lose its

relevance for today's Church by the way it does or does not engage all who may be attracted to it – including those we awkwardly call “lay” – into such an experience of Christian discipleship.

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