

The Roots of Our Being Together

The inspiration bestowed on Francis Albertini evolved historically and ecclesially from its initial expression in a lay form; this led eventually to other concretizations in a priestly form and several religious forms. The gift bestowed on Albertini in prayer could thus be called the "original charism" which later manifested itself in the lives and mission of other key figures who in turn possessed unique charisms of their own. Admittedly, the later forms can trace their descentance from the original more or less directly. Still, the historical details outlined here indicate the good reason why Albertini can be referred to as "the common father" of the charism's several manifestations. For the Work which Gaspar, Maria, and others were called to shape and direct -- and here they are unequivocally the founders of their respective congregations -- was essentially one, springing from an original inspiration given to the Archconfraternity's founder.

This implies some crucial things for the ongoing vitality of the charism in the Church and world today. The first is the need to retrieve the charism's origin which, as we have seen, lies within a lay association from which its priestly and evangelical forms emerged. Such a recovery is made the more urgent by two phenomena of postconciliar experience: declining membership in religious institutes, and the increasing involvement of the lay faithful in all sectors of ecclesial life and activity. A careful review of the charism's origin -- the "constant return to the sources of the whole of Christian life and to the primitive inspiration of (religious) institutes" (*Perfectae Caritatis* 2) would serve as a response to these developments ensuring the charism's thorough renewal and future survival.

This process of retrieval is not suggested, however, merely out of practical concerns which, by themselves, are an inadequate motive for engaging the charism so radically. On the contrary, a return to the origin is proposed here primarily for theological and spiritual reasons. For the charism's differentiation by state of life (lay, priestly, religious) and by gender reflects the unity-in-diversity which traverses the whole of Christian revelation and experience. In other words, when the charism is seen in relation to the mysteries of trinitarian and ecclesial communion, it seems to possess a singular capacity to reflect Christian truth and life. Fidelity to the charism's deeply inclusive nature thus poses a challenge to its recipients, a challenge to model a fruitful interrelationship between the states of life and between men and women -- the charism's various forms belonging equally, though distinctly, to the one ecclesial reality designated by the comprehensive term "albertinian charism."

Implementing such an effort might also imply a reassessment of the canonical status of the charism's ecclesial forms in light of their recovered interrelationship. What calls for additional reflection, in line with ecclesiological and canonical developments scarcely conceivable when the charism made its first appearance, is the juridical form the charism might have taken if current possibilities and understandings were available to the founding figures. This further attempt to contemporize the charism by means of a thorough radicalization would help ensure that the charism's institutional expressions are fully congruent with its ecclesiality. A possible direction here might lead to a renewal of the charism through some form of organic unity-in-diversity that would respect the charism's full extension.

In point of fact, initiatives throughout the world are presently underway to renew especially the lay form of the albertinian charism. Some of these are consciously part of the Union of the Blood of Christ while others are not, though they all have some affinity with Albertini's vision and its earliest manifestation. These initiatives attest, moreover, to efforts designed to promote interrelationship between lay groups and the priestly and religious forms of the charism. The latter too are actively

pursuing collaboration among themselves as witnessed by the work of the Precious Blood Leadership Conference and the Precious Blood Task Force.

Regarding lay forms of the charism, several approaches or levels of commitment, are discernible which determine the scope of collaboration between the Missionaries, Adorers, other congregations committed to the blood of Christ, and their lay associates. At one end of the spectrum, laity are invited to share in the spirituality of these congregations through primarily devotional means, along the lines of a "prayer group" model. A second level aims at a more thorough formation, both spiritual and apostolic, which envisions significant involvement on the lay affiliates' parts in the mission of the priestly and religious forms of the charism; such groups are intent on a program of Christian formation that includes regular meeting, study, prayer, support, and ministry. The third level of commitment asks lay members of Christ's faithful to be integrally involved in the life and mission of the sponsoring congregations, sharing in their spirituality and mission directly; a sense of mutual belonging is fostered at this level through any number of concrete means. The Companions Program among the Missionaries of the Blood of Christ in the United States is a particular effort to create an integral community among distinct forms of the albertinian charism.

As efforts in this regard are contemplated, and initial steps taken, it seems they can serve to verify something once said by the current Bishop of Rome, namely, that the charism and spirituality in question lies "at the heart of the Christian life." As such it is deeply planted in the mystery of faith and Christian existence, for its source is the same as that of the Church itself: the blood mixed with water flowing from the side of Christ, the sign and motive for ecclesial communion and mission: the source of our intimacy in the community founded in the blood of the cross.

(Fr. John Colacino, C.P.P.S., "Common Origins in the Charism of Francis Albertini," The Wine Cellar, February 1994, Vol. 1, Number 1, pp. 40-48)