

THE CHURCH'S UNIVERSAL APOSTOLICITY AT THE HEART OF ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS¹

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“Disdain for the form in the name of the Spirit’s
freedom always leads, intentionally or not, to
disdain for the flesh of Christ.”



Twenty-five years have passed now, as Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell recalled—and I take this opportunity to thank him for inviting me to speak—since the famous meeting of St. John Paul II with the movements, in the context of which the then-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, gave a memorable report in which he sketched for the first time what can safely be called guidelines for a “theology of the ecclesial movements.”² Much water has

1. This essay was originally presented in Italian: “L’Apostolicità universale della Chiesa: Al cuore dell’identità dei movimenti ecclesiali. Riflessioni sul tema a 25 anni dall’incontro del 30 Maggio 1998,” Annual Meeting with the Moderators of International Associations of the Faithful, Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, Rome, June 22, 2023. ©Dicastero per la Comunicazione—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Translated and printed with permission.

2. See Joseph Ratzinger, “Ecclesial Movements and Their Place in

passed under the bridge since then. First there was the papacy of Ratzinger himself, who became Benedict XVI; then came the pontificate of Pope Francis, during which there have been at least two weighty magisterial interventions on this matter: the first, theological in character, is the letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, issued in 2016 by the CDF and approved by the pontiff; the second, more canonical and disciplinary in nature, is the decree “Associations of the Faithful,” issued by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life in June of 2021. To the latter we can add the many speeches by Pope Francis addressed to the members of several of the movements represented here, not least the address on September 16, 2021, to the participants of the meeting organized by the dicastery on the theme, “The Responsibility for Governance in Lay Groups: An Ecclesial Service.”

Much has happened, then, between 1998 and today. Nevertheless, the guidelines sketched by the then-prefect of the CDF have lost none of their validity. On the contrary, today, in light of the journey of the past twenty-five years, with its lights and shadows, they prove to be more farsighted and valuable than ever, as the title itself that Cardinal Farrell decided to give to our meeting here clearly suggests. The idea that the key to grasp the identity of the ecclesial movements must be sought in the *apostolic* dimension of the Church is indeed the seminal insight, as was noted, that governs the Ratzingerian understanding of both the precious gift that the new movements have been and are for the Church and of the correct theological “locus”—to use his expression—of these new institutes within the organization of the Church itself. In my reflection today, I set for myself three objectives.

In part one, which is more substantial, I propose to recall, in a way that is inevitably compressed, what I consider to be the outlines of the Ratzingerian concept of the ecclesial movements, integrating into this presentation the reflection on the topic in *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, which is in many respects a development of the theological view already expressed by Ratzinger in 1998 and at the same time an incorporation of it into the authoritative Magisterium of the Church.

Theology,” in *New Outpourings of the Spirit: Movements in the Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller and Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 17–61.

In part two, I will seek to focus briefly on some of the more important pastoral concerns emerging from the Magisterium of Pope Francis, addressing a context that has changed significantly, not least by the fact that some movements whose founders were still among us in 1998 have had to confront the delicate phase of transition that always follows the founder's departure.

Finally, I will take the liberty of submitting three considerations that aim to suggest possible avenues for confronting the challenges made evident by the recent Magisterium of the Holy Father. Let me say immediately, to avoid misunderstandings, that these considerations are not intended as prescriptions or instructions. Rather, their purpose is to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and (why not?) debate among those present. Furthermore, they seem to me to provide this speech with a fitting conclusion, inasmuch as they are closely connected to the theological vision outlined in part one and intend to suggest ways of putting it into practice.

1. RATZINGER'S THOUGHT

To begin, it is useful to recall the well-known conviction of then-Cardinal Ratzinger concerning the historical role of the new movements in the turbulent postconciliar period.³ While simplifying matters somewhat, we can say that Ratzinger, in the wake of John Paul II, considered them as an unexpected method by which the Holy Spirit himself set about achieving one of the *desiderata* of Vatican II: to make clear the vocation to holiness of all baptized persons (*Lumen gentium*, 4) and thereby, or *in this sense*, to restore to the laity its rightful position of "protagonist" in the life and mission of the Church. While theologians haggled endlessly

3. See Ratzinger, "Ecclesial Movements and Their Place in Theology," *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 19ff. This essay is also available in at least two other volumes: Pontifical Council for the Laity, *The Movements in the Church: Acts of the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in Rome, May 27–29, 1998* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 23–51; and Joseph Ratzinger, *Opera Omnia* [Italian ed.], vol. 8/1: *Chiesa: segno tra i popoli* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), 398–430. Similar ideas, argued on the basis of personal recollections that are recounted at greater length, can be found in Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 42–44.

over the extent of the “powers” of the laity in the Church, lo and behold these new institutes appeared, whose members, according to Ratzinger, present two dominant features: first, the pure joy of being Christian, or the awareness that precisely the thing that qualifies the lay person as such, namely *ordinary* baptismal faith, is in reality *an extraordinary gift*; second, and consequently, the ardent desire to communicate this gift to others, or a lively missionary dynamism.⁴ We should already note here that the binomial “joy of faith”/“missionary impetus,” which Ratzinger *the eyewitness* acknowledges as a de facto trait characteristic of the members of the movements, is for Ratzinger *the theologian* not simply a matter of fact; it is, rather, the phenomenological reflection of the profound nature of the movements. We will return to this point later.

Ratzinger does not fail to recognize that incorporating the movements into the life and the ordinary structures of the Church involves “serious difficulties.”⁵ He emphasizes that this is *predominantly* a question of pragmatic difficulties. Nonetheless,

4. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 20. Toward the end of his report, he nevertheless presents, out of respect for the truth, a more detailed description of the profile of the movements, which also includes other characteristic elements: “Movements mostly derive from [i] a charismatic leader, taking shape in concrete associations, and [ii] these live the whole gospel in a new way on this basis and [iii] unhesitatingly recognize the Church as the foundation of their life, for without her they cannot exist” (*ibid.*, 55).

5. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 20. “Yet . . . there were tendencies toward being exclusive, toward having one-sided emphases and, thus, of being incapable of fitting into the life of the local Church. In their youthful impetus, they were convinced that the local Churches would have, as it were, to lift themselves up to their level, to share their form of life, not that they would have to allow themselves to be dragged into a framework that was something really somewhat decrepit” (*ibid.*, 21). Further on, he develops this idea at greater length: “One-sided developments are a threat, through the overemphasis on the specific task that arises either in a given era or through a charismatic gift. If the spiritual upsurge is experienced, not as one form of Christian life, but as people’s being struck by the simple entirety of the message, this can lead to their attributing an absolute value to the movement, which then understands itself as the Church herself, as the way for everyone, whereas this one way can in fact be shared with people in a variety of ways. Thus, on account of the freshness and the all-embracing nature of the spiritual upsurge, there is time and again, almost inevitably, a clash with the local congregations, in which there may be fault on both sides and by which both are therefore challenged spiritually. . . . In that case, both sides have to accept lessons from the Holy Spirit and also from the Church authorities, have to learn a selflessness without which it is impossible to attain inner assent to the many forms in which the faith is lived out” (*ibid.*, 57–58).

he is convinced that in order to confront them adequately it is necessary, on the one hand, to examine them in depth, and, on the other, to ask oneself questions about the ontological identity of these new institutes. Praxis, indeed, is always a reflection of a certain self-consciousness: if an organ does not know precisely what its function is, it will not be able to perform in an orderly and efficient way the function it has in the body to which it belongs, and in the end it will end up damaging its life. Conversely, there is also the danger that the other organs may not recognize, and may therefore reject, the contribution of the aforesaid organ, thus in turn hindering its beneficial activity. Hence the seminal insight of Ratzinger: to help the fruitful incorporation of the movements into the Church it is necessary to deepen our awareness of their essence, that is, of the purpose for which they exist and of the locus they occupy in the living organism of the Church—mind you, the Church that the Holy Spirit wills and builds up, not the Church of our human agendas.

Now, according to Ratzinger, it is impossible to understand the position of the new movements in today's Church except in light of a more fundamental polarity that has always characterized the life of the Church: the polarity between permanent structures, which he also calls the "basic form of Church life," and "new interventions of the Holy Spirit, which ever again revive and renew this framework"⁶ Thus we can enter into the thick of the Ratzingerian proposal.

1.1. Polarity, not dialectic

In the first place, we should emphasize the fact that, according to Ratzinger, the aforementioned polarity not only exists *de facto* but is rooted in the deeper being of the ecclesial mystery. This means that there is no Church without a certain polarity between a principle that guarantees continuity and another that is connected more to renewal and reform. In this sense, he concedes that the Church is animated by a sort of salutary tension between at least three polarities, which are the same one, but viewed under its different aspects: the polarity of the

6. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 21.

institutional element and the charismatic element; the polarity of priesthood and prophecy; and the deepest and most important polarity of all, the polarity between the two inseparable missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Church.⁷ What he rejects is any interpretation of these polarities that opposes or merely “juxtaposes” the elements in them, as *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* puts it.⁸ By this is meant an interpretation on the basis of which institution and charism would be two parallel principles that bear fruit (almost) *independently* of one another. That is not so, nor is it permissible to picture the so-called institutional Church as a sort of inert body, which is kept alive *only* thanks to the activity of the charismatic-prophetic element. Such an understanding of the relation between institution and charism is for Ratzinger unacceptable for several reasons, the most serious and profound of which is the fact that it essentially misconstrues what is actually meant by institution.

Let me offer a brief background for this: sometimes it is insisted (correctly) that the Church is not an *organization* or a *structured association*, which weighs the members down with its rules and norms, but rather a *life* caused by the always unforeseeable action of the Spirit. This argument has been used to diminish the importance of the institutional element in the personal experience of faith. According to Ratzinger, this demonstrates only that someone has a decidedly reductive and even distorted concept of the meaning of the word *institution*. Indeed, even before it designates the hierarchical structure of the Church, the term “institution” refers to the sacrament and to the word of God, that is, to the ways that *the Lord Jesus himself instituted* indispensable access roads to him and to the new life of which he is the mediator.⁹ Here the authority of the twelve and their successors has its *raison d’être*: its function is to allow every

7. *Iuvenescit ecclesia* [= *IE*], 11–12.

8. “The hierarchical gifts and the charismatic gifts are thus reciprocally related from their very origins. . . . Summarizing, therefore, it is possible to recognize a convergence in the recent Magisterium on the coessentiality between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts. Their opposition, and equally their juxtaposition, would be symptomatic of an error or insufficient comprehension of the action of the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of the Church” (*IE*, 10).

9. Cf. *IE*, 14.

human being to see the *true* Jesus (Jn 12:21) and to come into contact with his *true* Body and Blood. Obviously, this does not mean that the hierarchy has the sole rights to prophecy, or that the Spirit cannot blow wherever he wills (Jn 3:8; 1 Cor 12:11). It does mean, however, that the Spirit's action, if it received with a pure heart, cannot help but always lead back to the ordinary sources, common to everyone, of the knowledge of Christ and of deepening one's relationship with him, that is, the sacrament and the word of God, authoritatively proclaimed by the Church (Scripture, tradition, and Magisterium).¹⁰

To this must be added a second consideration, which Ratzinger particularly emphasizes in his 1998 report: the dialectic opposition between institution and charism is erroneous *first of all* because of the simple fact that the ordained ministry is its own *charism*. It is not so much or not only because the ordained minister is empowered to carry out his characteristic duties by a specific gift of grace, but also and primarily because a priest's vocation is in itself a *charismatic event*: "The fact that this, the sole enduring structural element in the Church, is a sacrament means at the same time that it is always having to be constituted anew by God. The Church cannot dispose of it as she wishes; it is not just there and cannot be set up or arranged by the Church out of her own resources."¹¹

We can conclude, therefore, making explicit what Ratzinger says here only implicitly, the Holy Spirit plays a role in the life of the Church that is at least twofold. On the one hand, he *continually creates the institution*, making it possible for Christ to become present through the sacrament, the proclaimed word of God, the hierarchy, Church teaching, canon law, etc. In this regard, Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks felicitously about the *objective Spirit*.¹² On the other hand, the Paraclete is also the one who enlightens the minds and inspires the hearts of believers, so as to permit the Church to taste and see, thanks to the contribution of their individual personal experience, ever-new dimensions of

10. Cf. *IE*, 12.

11. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 23.

12. About the polarity objective Spirit/subjective Spirit in Hans Urs von Balthasar's thought, see his *Theo-logic*, vol. 3: *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

the truth and the life contained in the objective *mystery* of the Christ event. We can speak here, again with Balthasar, about the *subjective Spirit*—so as to indicate the ever-new and creative hermeneutic activity that the Spirit of truth carries on in history through the charismatic experience of the saints (cf. Jn 14:25–26, 15:26–27, 16:12–14).

The reason why there is neither opposition nor juxtaposition between institution and charism is that the Spirit's activity in the saints is nothing other than a continual reinterpretation or exegesis (cf. Jn 14:25–26, 15:26–27, 16:12–14) of the one divine revelation that has already been entirely accomplished in Christ—a revelation that is preserved and transmitted to the Church by the same Spirit through the institution. This twofold character of the Holy Spirit's action is correctly reflected in the terminology of *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, which not accidentally speaks about *hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts*.¹³

We will return several times to these important considerations, since they serve as a background to much of what will be said from here on.¹⁴ For now, it is enough to confirm the central importance of the basic idea: for Ratzinger, any overly neat antithesis between the *institutional-hierarchical element*, the guardian of what is unchangeable, and the *charismatic-prophetic element*, understood in contrast as the sole source of the Church's renewal, is misleading simply because the two principles are inextricably interlocked, mutually supporting, and work together, just as the action of Christ and of the Spirit in the Church are inseparable from one another.

In reality, a correct understanding of the action of Christ and of the Spirit in the genesis of the Church, and in the life of every baptized person as well, is precisely the place where we must

13. This opens up a topic for reflection on which we cannot dwell within the parameters of this essay: How is this unity-in-distinction between institutional guide and charismatic presence to be embodied concretely, since, according to what is suggested in *Iuvenescit ecclesia* 10, it describes not only the life of the universal Church but also the life of the movements themselves within it? What is the function of the *institutional* authority within an ecclesial movement if the founder has passed away or retired? Is it possible to outline recommendations that are more or less valid for everyone?

14. Cf. esp. 1.2 (the Spirit reveals in time the treasures of grace and truth contained in Christ) and 3.3 (humility with respect to the charism).

seek the key to frame correctly the question about the relation between institution and charism, and therefore also to answer the question about the locus of the new movements in the Church.

Cutting to the chase, Ratzinger's argument can be summarized in three theses, which I will now set forth.

1.2. The Spirit reveals in time the treasures of grace and truth contained in Christ

First, it is necessary to say that the reason why the unrepeatable Christ event “does not dwindle into what has been”¹⁵ is the power of the Holy Spirit's action, which on the one hand makes it “present at all times in all places,” and on the other hand gives the Church the ability to understand anew and to proclaim the mystery of that event in ways adapted to those times and places.¹⁶ This also means, as was already emphasized, that the revelatory action of the Spirit does not cause us to “leave behind”¹⁷ the flesh of the historical Jesus but rather permits us to perceive its glory (Jn 16:12–14), revealing to human beings in every time and place the secret wealth of those concrete signs—Eucharist and word of God—through which the concreteness of that flesh makes them “taste and see” it until the end of the ages. The mutual interiority of *institution* and ever new *charisms* must therefore be understood in light of the mutual interiority of Christology and pneumatology in the mystery of revelation and salvation. Distancing ourselves from Ratzinger's language and harking back to an insight of Hans Urs von Balthasar,¹⁸ which was also repeated by Monsignor Piero Coda in his report to the convention in 1998,¹⁹ we can

15. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 30.

16. *Ibid.*

17. “The connection to the origin, that peg in the ground of the once-only, unrepeatable event, is indispensable. We can never escape into a free-floating pneumatology, never leave behind the solid earth of the Incarnation, of God's action in history” (*ibid.*, 30).

18. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. Donald Nichols and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), Introduction.

19. Cf. Piero Coda, “I movimenti ecclesiali, dono dello Spirito: Una riflessione teologica,” in Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, *I movimenti nella Chiesa:*

perhaps venture a definition of charisms: they are *ever new views* of the revelation which is ever the same. In them, the action of the Spirit takes on form and life to help the Church to deepen her understanding of the Gospel and at the same time to “*translate it*” into languages and forms adapted to the changing times.

1.3. Apostolic ministry is the locus unifying two aspects: conservation and deepening

Clearly this discussion leads logically to a second thesis, which is the consequence of the first: for Ratzinger, the testimony of the Apostles, along with the note of apostolicity, is the connecting link or locus of the weld between being attached to what is original, that is, to the Jesus Christ event, and an ever-new retranslating and actualization of the Gospel under the Spirit’s guidance. The twelve are indeed, on the one hand, the divinely anointed eyewitnesses of the original event. On the other hand, they are also the ones to whom the Lord himself entrusts the *missio ad gentes* and with that the “translation” of the Gospel “into all languages,” for which the Holy Spirit qualifies them by descending upon them at Pentecost.²⁰ The Apostles were simultaneously

Atti del Congresso mondiale dei movimenti ecclesiali Roma, 27–29 maggio 1998 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 85–86: “Each of these charisms—von Balthasar writes—is like a lamp from heaven, destined to illuminate one fresh point of God’s will for the Church in a given time, manifesting a new type of conformity to Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore a new illustration of how the Gospel should be lived out, a new interpretation of Revelation. . . . This is the basis for the typical novelty of the charismatic gifts. We are not talking about an absolute novelty, because God the Father, in giving us his incarnate Son, told and gave us everything in him, or rather, gave himself entirely. The novelty lies in the fact that the Holy Spirit from time to time—and not without a precise plan of the Father’s love—brings into bold relief, illuminates, and makes operative a particular aspect of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ. The aspect which, in the logic of the providential plan that guides history, is a superabundant response to the demand of a particular era.”

20. The importance of the Lucan account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11) in Ratzinger’s ecclesiological vision is well known—this is not the place to dwell on it. It is enough to recall that for the him a correct exegesis of Luke’s account brings out the primarily *universal* character (in both an ontological and a chronological sense) of the mission entrusted to the Apostles. On this topic, see Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 123–52.

the *first bishops* (in the etymological sense of custodians watching over the true faith) and the *first missionaries* (inasmuch as they were sent to the whole world to proclaim the Gospel), and in them we can see actualized the indissolubility between fidelity to the original [deposit of faith] and creative renewal, which characterizes the pilgrim Church in her innermost nature.

1.4. Apostolic movements are an expression of the Church's universal missionary character

The third thesis, which closes the circle of the argument, sets out from a historical reflection,²¹ though this is not the place to recall all its details.²² I limit myself to focusing on the key passages and the conclusions. First, there is no doubt that

the immediate agents of Christ's mission from Pentecost onward are the Twelve, who very soon are also met under the name of "apostles." . . . The sphere of action allotted to them is the world. Without any restriction as to locality, they work for the building up of the body of Christ, of the one People of God, of the one Church of Christ. . . . The office of apostle is a universal office, directed toward the whole of humanity and thus toward the whole of the one Church.²³

Second, the first formation of local churches occurs with the postapostolic generation. Incumbent on those responsible for them, that is, on the successors of the Apostles, was a twofold obligation: on the one hand, "guaranteeing unity of faith (of the local Churches) with the Church as a whole,"²⁴ besides shaping their internal life, and, on the other hand, stimulating missionary

21. Concerning the epistemological importance of Church history in ecclesiology, Ratzinger makes an observation worth considering: "If anyone chooses a dialectic of principles as the starting point for an attempted solution, this will not achieve our goal. Instead of trying to [do that], in my opinion one should choose a historical starting point, which corresponds to the historical nature of faith and of the Church" (Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 32–33).

22. Cf. *ibid.*, 33–50.

23. *Ibid.*, 33–35.

24. *Ibid.*

zeal. According to Ratzinger, two different typologies of apostolic ministry were thus spontaneously delineated; both should be understood as the natural prolongation of the ministry of the twelve: on the one hand, those responsible for the local Churches, the ancestors of what then would become the local episcopate; on the other hand, a ministry of a supralocal and missionary character, the heir of the universal mandate received by the Apostles. This second form of apostolic ministry started to disappear over a relatively brief period, for reasons that are not altogether clear, and eventually they were reabsorbed into the local episcopate no later than the end of the second century.

Third, it remains clear, however, as we can tell from the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, that the concept of apostolic succession includes two fundamental elements: the task of preserving (*episkopos* means precisely custodian) “the continuity and the unity of the faith”²⁵ and the heavy responsibility of bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

A sort of inevitable tension is said to have been created between these two aspects of the apostolic mission, the episcopal and the missionary aspect, since the strong bond of the episcopal ministry with the local church, by the nature of things, runs the risk of weakening its openness to the universal dimension of mission. Hence the initiative of the Holy Spirit, who personally takes charge, so to speak, of keeping the “second lung” of the apostolic mission alive by stirring up what Ratzinger at this point calls apostolic movements.²⁶ This category includes phenomena that are rather diverse but share a twofold common denominator: first, the desire to live out the Gospel radically; second, the desire

25. *Ibid.*, 37.

26. As mentioned before, we cannot follow in detail here the historical analysis by which Ratzinger strives to give concreteness to his thesis. It is enough to say that, after and on the basis of that prototypical charismatic movement that monasticism was in the patristic Church, he singles out five major waves in Church history: 1) the missionary monasticism of the seventh-eighth century; 2) the monastic reform movement at Cluny in the tenth century; 3) the mendicant orders in the twelfth century; 4) the evangelization movements in the 1500s, among which the Jesuits stand out; and 5) the missionary congregations of the 1800s, in the context of which the female apostolate and the Marian movement were distinguished.

to communicate its newness to all mankind.²⁷ The contemporary ecclesial movements, without prejudice to their novelty and specificity (features connected with the peculiar historical circumstances in which the Church is called to carry out her mission today), can be understood correctly only if they are registered in the broader picture of the phenomenon of the major apostolic movements that have never been absent in the Church and that, on the contrary, have always been an indispensable supporting lung of the Church's universal apostolicity.

Thus we arrive at a clear answer to the problem posed at the start. We can say that the new ecclesial movements embody today what Ratzinger calls the universal dimension of the Church's apostolicity. This means two things. On the one hand, it means being rooted in the faith and the Christ-experience of the twelve²⁸ and, therefore, being attached to the Magisterium of the Church—in particular of the successor of Peter.²⁹ On the other hand, it means reference to the *mission*. The main reason why the Spirit continually stirs up new charisms in the Church is to make

27. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 39, 43ff.

28. *Ibid.*, 48.

29. "The essential yardstick [i.e., criterion for discerning authenticity, is] . . . that of being rooted in the faith of the Church. Anyone who does not share the apostolic faith cannot claim to do apostolic work. Since the faith is one, for the whole Church—indeed, it constitutes her unity—the desire for unity is necessarily associated with the apostolic faith, the desire to stand with the living fellowship of the whole Church and, in concrete terms, to stand with the successors of the apostles and the successor of Peter. . . . If the 'apostolic' element is the place [locus] of the movements in the Church, then the desire for the *vita apostolica* must be fundamental to her in all ages. The renunciation of property, of descendants, of any effort to impose one's own idea of the Church—that is, obedience in following Christ—have in all ages been regarded as the essential elements of the apostolic life" (Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, 55–56). If you will allow me a suggestion, as a corollary to Ratzinger's words, it is necessary on the other hand to avoid reducing the movements to a simple "arm" of the Church, or as mere executors of what the pope or the bishops say. In this sense, it is right to wonder whether it is not advisable to stress also the note of *catholicity*, besides the note of apostolicity, in describing the nature of the movements. Whereas apostolicity expresses more clearly the reference to the pope and the bishops, the note of catholicity, inasmuch as it is connected to the idea of *universality*, brings to light the fact that this mission consists of bringing the Gospel to peoples of every race and culture (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§849–56) and thus puts greater stress on the creativity with which the movements, by dint of their own gifts, are called to carry out their own task.

the Gospel attractive and comprehensible to the people of every time and culture. “Apostolic life,” Ratzinger continues, “calls out for apostolic action: there is in the first place . . . the proclamation of the gospel as the missionary element.”³⁰ Before moving on to the pontificate of Francis, let us pause a moment on the concept of laicity, which specifies the distinctive note of *today’s* apostolic movements. There is no doubt—I think everyone can agree on this without multiplying words on the subject—that one of the features characterizing our time is secularization. The genius of the new movements is precisely their mission *in the world*—bringing the light and the leaven of the Gospel to surroundings that are increasingly impermeable to it nowadays. Right before our eyes we see the formidable work of *implantatio Ecclesiae* that the movements have accomplished and are accomplishing in the most disparate settings: from the working world to the university and cultural scenes; from the world of the marginalized and of social degradation to that of the family and the school. The list could go on. Thus we understand Ratzinger’s judgment: while the world, above all the Western world, is enclosed in a self-sufficiency that seems to make the proclamation of the Gospel useless, if not a hindrance, the institutes of the movements testify that the faith makes life “more Life,” since it renews and transforms from within precisely those realities that are interwoven with the life of the common man who is immersed in the world—work, family, culture, human relations, etc.

2. IN DEFENSE OF THE APOSTOLIC VOCATION OF THE MOVEMENTS: THE PASTORAL MAGISTERIUM OF POPE FRANCIS

At this point we can move on to the second thematic knot of this reflection. It is not my intention to provide here a full-scale presentation of the teaching of Pope Francis with relation to the movements.³¹ I will limit myself to focusing on three pastoral

30. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 56.

31. On this topic, I refer the reader to Andrea D’Auria, “I carismi e la nuova evangelizzazione nel magistero di Papa Francesco: Questioni problematiche aperte,” in Associazione canonistica italiana, ed., *Evangelizzazione e missione nella riforma della chiesa*, Quaderni Della Mendola 30 (Milan:

concerns that recur in his addresses, although first I must make two preliminary remarks. First, these concerns do not repudiate Pope Francis's fundamental esteem for the great gift that the movements are for the Church. They rather express it. A father corrects; he does not only confirm. Second, these concerns, if they are to be understood adequately, must be interpreted against the background of the theological vision that we have just now presented—a vision that the pope has shown that he shares, not least by approving the CDF letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*. They are therefore aimed at defending and promoting what we have called the apostolic character of the ecclesial movements, and not at clipping the wings of the movements themselves.

2.1. *Self-referentiality*

The first and, I would say, central concern of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, revolves around the word “self-referentiality”—a term that has re-echoed often in the addresses that he has given to the movements, both before and after the promulgation of the decree “Le associazioni di fedeli.”³² In reality this is not a new concern. Ratzinger himself, in the above-cited report, already spoke about the risks of being “exclusive,”³³ “one-sided,”³⁴ or having difficulty viewing themselves “in terms of a totality larger than themselves.”³⁵ What is new, so much so as to appear to be

Glossa, 2023). I thank the author for having allowed me to review the manuscript.

32. Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, Decree “Le associazioni di fedeli che disciplina l’esercizio del governo nelle associazioni internazionali di fedeli, private e pubbliche, e negli altri enti con personalità giuridica soggetti alla vigilanza diretta del medesimo Dicastero” (Vatican City, 11 June 2021). Cf. D’Auria, “I carismi e la nuova evangelizzazione nel magistero di Papa Francesco,” 25–26.

33. Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 21.

34. *Ibid.*

35. “Thus”—Ratzinger writes— “[the] movements—even if they have found the whole gospel on their path and are sharing it with others—must be warned that they are a gift made to the Church as a whole and that they need to submit to the demands of the whole in order to remain true to their own nature” (*ibid.*, 58).

“a neologism in the current theological-juridical panorama,”³⁶ is instead the term being used: what is meant by self-referentiality? In the briefest summary, we could put it this way: there is self-referentiality when a subject refers only to himself, or, in the case of an ecclesial institute, considers itself the immediate depositary of all the light of grace and truth required in order to live out one’s relationship to God, without the need to drink at any other fountains than one’s own illuminated spirit. We could say that, in the present context, “self-referentiality” designates a sort of charismatic elitism, such that one considers oneself the depositary of a spiritual light that is so exceptional as to make secondary, if not downright negligible, the objective mediations to which the Lord entrusted access to the knowledge of God and the divine life. The *subjective sense* of the individual, of the group, or of the leader of the group becomes the supreme criterion of the true and the good, while comparisons with the objective rock of the word of God, dogma, the Church’s Magisterium, and the saints are neglected because these references are not felt as decisive for the purpose of growing in one’s own life of faith. “Concretely,” Pope Francis explains, “it is a matter of closing oneself off . . . with one’s friends in the movement, with those who think the same as we do.”³⁷

It is rather clear in what sense this first spiritual pathology, to use the Holy Father’s terminology, contradicts and therefore pollutes [*inquini*] the apostolic character of the movements. What tends to grow thin here is the reference to the apostolic or catholic faith (in the etymological sense of “universal”) as to a source of real sustenance from which to draw life and light. This is not negated, but it is in fact relegated to a distant background, without any effect on the concrete path of faith of individual persons.

Therefore we can say, taking up again the Ratzingerian idea of the apostolic nature of the movements, that self-referentiality, understood in the sense just described, tends to hinder the innate vocation of the movements inasmuch as it counteracts what we have seen is the first essential dimension of apostolicity: cordial, clear-sighted rootedness in the faith of the “universal Church.”

36. D’Auria, again, puts it this way in “I carismi e la nuova evangelizzazione nel magistero di Papa Francesco,” 25.

37. Cf. *ibid.*, 25–26.

2.2. *Forms of personalism*

A second temptation against which the Holy Father has warned the movements severely is personalism, in its different variants (protagonism, authoritarianism, attachment to offices and leadership roles, etc.). Since this topic was already examined in depth on the occasion of the meeting on September 16, 2021, in the presence of the pope himself, I do not intend to dwell here on the topic directly. My interest, rather, is to raise a question for your reflection, tossing it out like a pebble into a pond. I wonder whether the spread of what the pope calls “forms of personalism” is a phenomenon to be understood only in terms of moral categories, as being due to a lack of ascetic vigilance, or whether it should be interpreted instead as a consequence that is in a way consistent with the first and fundamental problem brought to light by the pope, namely that of self-referentiality. In other words, is the excessive emphasis on the role of those in leadership roles—I refer here in particular not to those institutes whose founder is still alive but to those who have already witnessed his departure—simply a moral problem? Or does it have to do also with how one conceives of the nature of the charism for which one is responsible? Is it solely a pragmatic problem? Or is it also a conceptual one? These inquiries seem to me anything but trivial.

In 2021, as is well known, the pope censured as unacceptable the idea that there is a sort of passage of the charism from the founder to his successors in the government of the institute.³⁸ Looking at it the other way around, I think we should ask ourselves also why such an idea could ever spread in several of the ecclesial movements to the point of requiring a direct pronouncement on the subject by the supreme pontiff. In other words, beyond the various theories with which some tried to support the possibility that a founder’s charism passes to his successors in the leadership of the institute, why did anyone ever feel the need to do so? This, I think, is where

38. Cf. Pope Francis, “Address to the Participants in the Meeting of Moderators of Lay Associations, Ecclesial Movements, and New Communities” (Vatican City, 16 September 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210916-associazioni-fedeli.htm>. The meeting was organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life on the theme of “The Responsibility for Governance in Lay Groups: An Ecclesial Service.”

the connection between self-referentiality and personalism comes fully to light: where an ecclesial institute is conceived, not in theory but in fact, as an almost entirely self-sufficient micro-church, it will inevitably need leaders who enjoy a charism of “infallibility” somehow analogous to the Petrine charism—or even in a certain sense superior to it, inasmuch as the figure of the charismatic leader is invested here with an aura of indisputability that is not limited, as in the pope’s case, to *ex cathedra* pronouncements but tends to extend to everything he teaches.

A clarification needs to be made with regard to the relation between the charism and the person of the founder. I do not think it is superfluous to recall that the founder himself, although the original receiver of the charism, is not infallible in the absolute sense. Here I think that an adequate formation about the distinction between *gratia gratis data* and *gratia gratum faciens*, which is already present in a nutshell in the Pauline letters³⁹ and was then formulated so well by Thomas Aquinas, can be beneficial.⁴⁰ When one or more persons are endowed with a charism, even a great one, not only does this not make them personally infallible, but it does not even necessarily make them holier than someone who has not received such a charism.⁴¹ Part of the dizzying paradox of these divine gifts, charisms, lies precisely here: God does not give them or take them away based on the degree of holiness of the person who bears them, so that there can be a case of bearers of authentic charisms that are rather useful to the Church who nevertheless have not reached a

39. See esp. 1 Cor 12–14; Rom 12:6–8; Eph 4:7–11.

40. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 111, aa. 1, 4, 5; II-II, qq. 171–89. According to St. Thomas, as everyone knows, *gratia gratum faciens*, which in the final analysis is identified with *caritas*, is the grace that makes its recipient holy. *Gratia gratis data*, in contrast, “is ordained to this, viz. that a man may help another to be led to God” (I-II, q. 111, a. 4 resp.). For a good presentation of the New Testament teaching on charisms, besides the authoritative summary in *Iuvenescit ecclesia* 4–8, see the important book by Cardinal Albert Vanhoye, *I carismi nel Nuovo Testamento*, Analecta Biblica 191 (Rome: Gregorian Biblical Press, 2011).

41. “Paul observes, regarding this, that, if one lacks charity, even the highest charisms do not help their recipient (cf. 1 Cor 13:1–3). A stern passage from the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 7:22–23) expresses the same reality: the exercise of the more visible charisms (prophecy, exorcisms, miracles) can unfortunately coexist with the absence of an authentic relationship with the Savior. Consequently, Peter as much as Paul insists on the necessity of directing all of the charisms towards charity” (*IE*, 5).

high degree of sanctity. This has a consequence that seems to me salutary and liberating to understand and to keep in mind: although it is true that the possession of a great charism does not make its bearer holy *ipso facto* to the point of infallibility and irreproachability, it is on the other hand true—the other side of the coin—that admitting that the bearer of a charism may have made mistakes, even in important matters, neither obscures nor compromises in any way the greatness of the charism itself (to tell the truth, it does not even contradict the sanctity of the bearer). Rather, this paradox, like a reflection of the paradoxical character of the very mystery of the Church, *nigra sed pulchra*, “very dark but comely” (Sg 1:5), implies that one must discern between those things in the words and decisions of a founder that are the expression of a charism given to him by God and those things that in contrast are not—a discernment that, as *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* explains clearly, is the competence of the ecclesiastical authority.⁴² Appealing to the *ipsissima verba* of the founder or to his personal decisions as the unique and incontestable criterion by which to determine how a charismatic institute should continue in time, besides being problematic from the empirical perspective because of the inevitable conflict of interpretations of his words, is problematic for a considerably deeper and more serious reason: it means, like it or not, perpetuating a confusion between the charism and the person of the founder, which on the one hand presupposes and on the other hand expresses a sort of “charismatic monophysitism”⁴³ that the Church cannot and never will be able to

42. “Recognizing the authenticity of a charism is not always an easy task, it is, nonetheless, a dutiful service that pastors are required to fulfill. The faithful have ‘the right to be informed by their pastors about the authenticity of charisms and the trustworthiness of those who present themselves as recipients thereof.’ . . . This process is time-consuming. It requires an adequate period to pass in order to authenticate the charisms, which must be submitted to serious discernment until they are recognized as genuine. The reality of the group that arises from the charism must have the proper time to grow and mature. This would extend beyond the period of initial enthusiasm until a stable configuration arises. In this whole itinerary of verification, the authority of the Church must benevolently accompany the new group. The pastor’s accompaniment will never diminish, because, just as the solicitous love of the Good Shepherd always accompanies the flock, so too the paternity of those in the Church called to be vicars of the Good Shepherd never wanes” (*IE*, 17).

43. With this expression I mean to indicate the explicit or implicit belief that the humanity of the bearer of a certain charism is imbued by the action of the Spirit of Christ within him to the point where it makes him infallible

accept as legitimate. Obviously, this does not mean that the will and the words of the founder do not deserve an altogether privileged attention on the part of the institutional Church in the process of discerning a charism. Nor that the institutional Church can fail to take into very serious consideration the insights of someone who has received a certain charism. It does mean, however, that a founder's decisions, apart from the degree of sanctity of the recipient of the charism, must always pass through the sieve of discernment by the ecclesial authority, which may maintain that to some (or even to a great) extent they must be disregarded, in order for the charism given to continue to bear fruit in history. The case of St. Francis, a charismatic par excellence, is paradigmatic here. In fact Ratzinger himself does not fail to cite him as an outstanding, splendid example of a "virginal" relation with the charism that had been received, to the point of making its bearer capable of sacrificing his own opinions and convictions so as to obey the Church's judgment. The words of the German pope on this subject are worth citing extensively here:

Francis of Assisi, strictly speaking, was not the founder of an order, nor did he intend to be one. He knew that a much more radical task awaited him: he intended to gather a *novus populus* that would follow the Sermon on the Mount without alteration, finding therein its unique and immediate rule. . . . He was always passionately opposed to incorporating his new people into the already well-known juridical-ecclesiastical schema of an "Order," . . . thus making it a variant of the existing monasticism. . . . Today, Francis's rejection of the existing forms of the Church would be called a prophetic protest, but there could have been no more radical rejection than his. . . . But this radical "no" to the concrete forms of Western Christianity coexisted with an equally radical "yes" to the Church: doing everything in obedience to the Church was for Francis a program just as radical as living

in matters of faith and morals. The opposite correlative of this excess, to stay with the picture of the christological analogy just suggested, would be a sort of "charismatic Nestorianism," by which one falls into the error of separating excessively the charism from the *concrete humanity* of its bearer—a humanity made up of sensibility, temperament, personal genius, etc. A founding charism is always not only *given to* but also *in a certain way incarnated in* (without confusion) the concrete medium of the founder's personality. This is the reason why knowledge about the life and words (in addition to the writings) of the latter should be considered a fundamental locus for the knowledge of the charism itself.

in the most complete obedience to the letter of the Gospel. . . . Obedience to one's task is not diminished but rather made complete by staying in the Church obediently, because only the latter confirms the former: self-abandonment is the authentic criterion of the true charismatic; or, to put it in more radical terms: the criterion of the true charism is the Cross, allowing oneself to be torn between the task and the place where it is to be carried out for love of the task itself. Someone who is unwilling to do this, who prefers the safety of the ego to the accomplishment of the task in the place that is proper to it demonstrates that essentially he considers his own ego more important than the task, thus destroying the charism.⁴⁴

This touches on what is, in my opinion, one of the most fascinating paradoxes that the theme of the coessentiality of institution and charism allows us to contemplate:⁴⁵ on the one hand, the charismatic is called to the sacrifice of entrusting to *people other than himself* the definitive judgment on “*his*” gift, and of the way in which it has to be inserted into the Church; on the other hand, the institutional authority has the very serious responsibility to welcome that gift into the Church and to ensure its future growth and integration in the mystical Body of Christ through the exercise of a correct discernment, lest it extinguish a charism (1 Thes 5:19) that otherwise could have produced much fruit.

2.3. *The embalming or petrification of the charism*⁴⁶

This risk seems especially characteristic of those institutes that, after the founder has passed away or retired, are confronting the phase following the heroic era of the beginnings. Now there is “a temptation to grow rigid and to be content with reassuring but sterile plans,” “forms and methods . . . become ideological, far from reality, which is in constant development; shut off from

44. Ratzinger, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 8/1, 391–95.

45. For the importance of this concept in *Iuvenescit ecclesia*, see note 8 above.

46. Precise references can be found in Giorgio Feliciani, “Voi potete essere braccia, mani, piedi, mente e cuore di una Chiesa in ‘uscita’: Papa Francesco e i movimenti ecclesiali,” *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale* (December 14, 2020), 35, <https://doi.org/10.13130/1971-8543/14697>; and D’Auria, “I carismi e la nuova evangelizzazione nel magistero di Papa Francesco,” 26.

the newness of the Holy Spirit”; the charism is reduced to “a museum of memories, of decisions that have been made, of norms of conduct.”⁴⁷ Whereas, in the case of self-referentiality, what ran the risk of failing was rootedness in the first pole of apostolicity, we can say that what is denounced here is a weakening of the second, the missionary impetus. The missionary impetus goes hand in hand with humble listening to the new demands and challenges that continually arise with the changing of the times, and which require a patient and at the same time daring willingness to find new and creative forms of proclamation, presence, and response. Here we meet again the observation made with regard to self-referentiality, since in both cases what is reduced is the ability to listen to the other, a readiness to get input from outside, so to speak. With one significant difference: whereas in the case of self-referentiality the problem seems to be an excess of self-confidence, here the pathology lies instead in an excess of zeal, often due to insecurity, with respect to the *historical forms* by which the charism was manifested at the beginning, especially in those cases in which the founder is no longer with us.

3. CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

I would like to offer three brief considerations that point out three possible ways of confronting the problems just described. These considerations, besides being in a certain sense implicit in all that has been said until now, are meant as an invitation to reflect on the polysemous wealth of a word, *humility*, which I believe designates the type of posture the pope is inviting the movements to adopt in order to bear more and more fruit. Therefore, I would like to try now to describe, in a necessarily brief way, three *forms of humility*, which appear to me to offer a practical way to remain faithful to the apostolic vocation of the movements.

First, I will say something about what I would call *humility with respect to the Lord*, and more specifically about *the common and ordinary ways*, so to speak, through which he reveals and gives himself to his Church. Second, I will point out a second form of humility, this time with respect to those for whom the apostolate

47. Cf. Feliciani, “Voi potete essere braccia,” 35.

is destined, or *the men and women of today's world*. Finally, we will speak about humility with respect to the charism—the charism that always *surpasses the recipient's understanding*, whether the person in question is one of the most recent disciples or even a saintly founder.

3.1. Humility with respect to the Lord Jesus

Let us start with the *first form of humility*—the one that we called humility with respect to the Lord and to the ways that he himself instituted in order to come into contact with him. It is often said, echoing Balthasar, that charisms are particular views at the one Gospel that is common to all; if that is true, then it means that in reality charisms are radically and by their innermost essence *hetero-referential*. A charism is not something self-enclosed and self-sufficient, but rather, as Fr. Giussani had occasion to put it in other words, a “window through which you see space in its entirety,”⁴⁸ a window that “introduces us to dogma as a whole,”⁴⁹ making us perceive its luminosity and relevance to our life.

How then can we explain the temptation to self-referentiality? The following seems to me to be one possible common-sense answer: rather than enrolling in the school of the founder and looking with him, or with the new eyes received from him, toward what he looked at and invited others to see—that is, the *totality*, a totality made up of Scripture, tradition, the Church's Magisterium, etc.—the charism itself—that is, the word of the founder or of the institute's own internal discourse—is turned into something hermetically sealed in itself, which is therefore inevitably exposed to the danger of becoming sclerotic. For example, rather than thinking of the particular emphasis of the charism as a lens through which to read the word of God, this

48. Luigi Giussani, Stefano Alberto, and Javier Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World: New Traces of the Christian Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 80.

49. Ibid. Giussani continues, “If the charism is the mode with which the Spirit of Christ makes us perceive His exceptional Presence, then it gives us the power to adhere to it with simplicity and affection. It is living the charism that throws light on the *objective content of dogma*. . . . *The charism is therefore the mode with which the Spirit makes the perception of dogma, the perception of the content of the Event as a whole easier, more conscious and fruitful*” (ibid., emphasis added).

particular internal word is turned into a substitute for the word of God.⁵⁰

At this point we should bring up an important note concerning this, which is meant to mitigate the excessive severity with which one may be tempted to stigmatize the phenomenon just described. The tendency to treat something particular as an absolute, as though it were the whole—in other words, the temptation to idolatry, to hearken back to the biblical vocabulary—is a fact that should not scandalize us, as sacred history itself teaches us. Indeed, this is a temptation to which the people of God has always been and will always be exposed—and the more the particular thing in question (in this case a charismatic personality) is endowed with actual splendor, all the more this will be so. The purism of the theologians and moderates who look with suspicion and sometimes disdain at the possibly excessive devotion that surrounds the figures of great saints and great charismatics of course hits the bull's eye when it denounces the risk of par idolatrous personalisms. On the other hand, it runs the risk of becoming “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (!) if it calls into question the goodness of the movement of faith that the Lord himself has stirred up and continues to stir up through the humanity of these great figures. Rather than being scandalized by the phenomenon and hastening to hurl anathemas, it is necessary, rather, to interpret it through the much more realistic (and less Manichean) law of the process by which the human mind develops and matures, both at the natural and at the supernatural level. That a child should idealize his father and mother to the point of excess is altogether natural, and in any case inevitable, at a *certain phase* of his growth. The important thing is that the child's maturation process not be arrested and that he be helped to complete the passage from the earthly to the heavenly Father,

50. “This is important: knowing how to discern. Very often we have seen throughout history, and we even see this today, some movements that preach the Gospel in their own way, sometimes with real and genuine charisms; but then they take it too far and reduce all the Gospel to a ‘movement.’ And this is not Christ's Gospel: this is the Gospel of the founder and yes, it may help at the beginning, but in the end it does not bear fruit [because it has no] deep roots. For this reason, Paul's clear and decisive word was salutary for the Galatians and is salutary for us too. The Gospel is Christ's gift to us, He Himself revealed it to us. It is what gives us life” (Pope Francis, General Audience [Vatican City, 4 August 2021]).

in other words, to understand that the “window,” to use Fr. Giussani’s expression, is a *pathway* to a totality that is *different from and greater than itself*.

Now, if all this is correct, we can understand one possible way of maturing: the leader must take care to educate his own members to be familiar with and to enjoy the integral richness of the Church’s faith. If, for example, one member of a certain movement or association were insufficiently helped to see Sacred Scripture, the Catechism, the Magisterium of the Church as important sources of nourishment for his own experience of the faith, it will be difficult for him to be able to accept naturally the corrections and demands of the ecclesiastical authority and easy for him to regard it instead as incomprehensible interference. The problem here is not moral. The person described above is completely in good faith. The problem is that he does not possess the interior categories to be open to possible corrections, because in effect, between what he is accustomed to consider his experience of Christ and the objective teaching of the Church, between life and doctrine, there is in his view only a very ineffective intersection. Hence the importance of a formation that normalizes esteem for the major sources of knowledge of the mystery of the faith, starting with Scripture, as Balthasar already recommended,⁵¹ then through the Catechism, Church history, and the Magisterium, etc. Familiarity with the “objective” Christ, that is, the Christ who comes to us through the testimony of the Apostles authoritatively mediated by the Church, is what frees us from the temptation of sectarianism, as well as from the danger of fashioning for oneself (even in good faith) a “tailor-made” Christ.

51. “A deeper familiarity with the Bible will help guard against the danger we mentioned above of absolutizing the special charism of the movement in such a way that one is no longer sufficiently aware that it is essentially a member of a greater whole, of the *Catholica*. . . . Such a contemplative reading is, moreover, indispensable for the layman, if his praying is not to remain stuck at the subjective, indeed, often at the infantile level. Childlikeness in the gospel sense—a fundamental quality of good prayer—has nothing in common with this immaturity, which distorts the father-child relationship by reducing it to egoistic opinions and wishes, whereas the true child of God always keeps in view the entire greatness of the love that has been revealed and demonstrated by the triune God” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Lay Movements in the Church,” in *The Laity and the Life of the Counsels: The Church’s Mission in the World*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV, with D. C. Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003], 252–82, at 268–69).

Does all this mean taking space away from the charism? Not at all, if it is true that every charism is a *window not onto itself but onto Christ*. It means, rather, allowing the charism to continue to be what it radically is. Moreover, it means allowing it to unleash more and more its potential as a thorough reinterpretation of the mystery of the faith, extending its scope also to aspects thereof on which the founder perhaps did not reflect explicitly, but which the changing of the times has made vitally relevant.

3.2. Humility with respect to those far away to whom one is sent

Thus, we return to the “second form of humility,” the one with regard to “the world,” one might say, although it is perhaps better to say “contemporary men and women.” If it is true that the purpose for which the Holy Spirit stirred up the movements is to bring the Gospel to the men and women of our time, then we can understand how another natural barrier to self-referentiality, and even more to the temptation to petrify the charism, is to listen actively for the ever-new demands, worries, and challenges that the changing cultural context brings with it. In this way, the movements reforge their own proposal in such a way that, while springing from the experience of the foundation’s charism, it is not simply the repetition of the same old speech or the same old formulas, but rather it is reborn from attentive, courageous dialogue with the men and women to whom one is sent, from the active immersion in those “existential peripheries” that are the field in which the movements naturally labor. It has been said that the new ecclesial movements have distinguished themselves (and still do) by their ability to bring the Gospel to surroundings that are most resistant to it today. If that is the DNA of the movements, then empathetic yet prudent listening to the ever-new “cries” that, depending on the contexts, arise from the hearts of those who are “far away,” can only be one of the primary tasks of the movements themselves, if they want to remain faithful to their nature.

3.3. Humility with respect to the charism

Another important point on which the pope has insisted, for example in his speech to Communion and Liberation on October

15, 2022,⁵² is the fact that every charism, in much the same way as the ever-deeper understanding of dogma over the course of history, is always greater and richer than the understanding of those who benefit from it, including the founder. This requires that the person who is invested with it, on the one hand, should always resist the temptation to presume to have understood entirely the gift that he has received, and, on the other hand, should prove to be actively desirous to discover its latent and unexplored dimensions. Two simple ways to do this have already been suggested in the two preceding subsections. I add now the invaluable experience of dialogue and comparison with other charismatic institutes different from one's own. We understand and appreciate the peculiar character of the Johannine view of the mystery of Christ if we read the gospel of John in dialogue with the other gospels—if we do not only read the gospel of John. In the same way, the better acquainted we are with other movements, the better we will understand the peculiar emphasis of Fr. Giussani or Chiara Lubich in their way of perceiving and thinking about some aspects of the Christian life.

What I just said leads me to the final observation I would like to make. Not presuming to have already understood everything about a charism does not mean that there should not be something clear and precise about it, in which one has instead the duty to remain firmly and faithfully rooted. The contrary is true: the clarity of the essential nucleus of a charism is the prerequisite for a true development, for flexibility in applications, for an ability to adapt creatively to ever-new situations: if I do not know what is indispensable, neither will I be free to renounce

52. "First and foremost, it is important to remember that it is not the charism that must change: it must always be newly received and made to bear fruit today. Charisms grow like the truths of dogma and morality grow: they grow in fullness. . . . The potential of your charism is still largely to be discovered, it is still largely to be discovered; I therefore invite you to shy away from any withdrawal into yourselves out of fear—fear will never lead you to a good harbour—and from spiritual weariness, which leads you to spiritual laziness. I encourage you to find suitable ways and language so that the charism that Father Giussani left you may reach new people and new environments, so that it may be able to speak to today's world, which has changed since the beginnings of your movement" (Pope Francis, Address to the Members of Communion and Liberation" [Vatican City, 15 October 2022], <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/october/documents/20221015-comunione-e-liberazione.html>).

what is not; I will not be able to retranslate this nucleus into a new language that is adapted to the new context. Rigidity is not the daughter of too much certainty, but rather of a lack of clarity about what is truly an indispensable somatic feature of one's own face and what is not. Another insight comes into play here, in my opinion a prophetic insight by Ratzinger that was repeated in *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*: an insistence on the necessity of a certain institutionalization of the charism, ordered to its lasting fruitfulness.⁵³ In my opinion, to understand these words as a sort of invitation to allow oneself to be put on the leash of ecclesiastical rules and norms would be to misconstrue their meaning completely. Here, too, the exact opposite is true: if the task of an institution, as we recalled earlier, is to safeguard vigilantly and authoritatively *what is permanent*—which in the case of the institutional Church is the sacrament and the word of God—then, even in the case of the movements, institutionalization must mean something similar. That is to say, the institutionalization of the charism does not have to do *initially* with a question about forms of governance as much as with the identification and the preservation of what canonists call “the charismatic patrimony.”⁵⁴ Where there is no

53. “Pope Benedict XVI, in addition to confirming the coessentiality of the gifts, deepened the affirmation of his predecessor, remembering that ‘in the Church the essential institutions are also charismatic and indeed the charisms must, *in one way or another, be institutionalized to have coherency and continuity*. Hence, both dimensions originate from the same Holy Spirit for the same Body of Christ, and together they concur to make present the mystery and the salvific work of Christ in the world’” (*IE*, 10, emphasis added). See Benedict XVI, Address to the Members of Communion and Liberation Movement on the 25th Anniversary of Its Pontifical Recognition (Vatican City, 24 March 2007), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070324_comunione-liberazione.html.

54. Balthasar remarked as late as 1987, “The movements have different structures. No movement can exist without a minimum of structure; one needs a formulated goal, precisely defined expectations of the members, meetings that are announced in advance, and so forth. Now, there are a number of strong movements that have gathered entirely around the personality of the founder and have organized themselves according to his directives. These can attain a marvelous flourishing, but if their internal structuring remains at the minimum described above, they run the risk of falling apart when the leading personality dies. It may be that providence intends precisely this; but it may also be the case that providence desires the movement to persevere, and this can be made possible if some institutional structures are set up in time. These structures would include not only organizational regulations, but certainly also directives that tap into the spiritual depths and look beyond what is

clarity or at least no initial clarity about the central, indispensable nucleus of a charism, then it is subject to all sorts of appropriations: if there is no “rule” that defines the *nucleus* of the charism, even without any claim to exhaustiveness, then the one criterion for recognizing its action and presence will be the fascination that one or another person is capable of exercising, without the institutional guidance of the Church and of the movement itself in communion with Church authority being able to conduct the discernment that it has the duty to carry out.⁵⁵ Indeed, there is no clear criterion for determining who is faithful in this matter. The analogy with what was said concerning the very close connection that exists in the structure of the mystery of the Church between institution and being anchored to the origin, to Jesus Christ whom the twelve met and knew, thus proves to be decisive in understanding what is truly at stake when we speak about the institutionalization of the charism. To reject a certain crystallization of the charism into a “rule” made up of teachings and reference documents, as though that meant attacking the vital and therefore ineffable nature that cannot be harnessed in formulas of the charism itself, is in reality no more and no less than a rejection of the law of the Incarnation, whereby God, in his humility and mercy, lowered himself to the point of allowing the Spirit to be condensed into human forms and words. Disdain for the form in the name of the Spirit’s freedom always leads, intentionally or not, to disdain for the flesh of Christ.⁵⁶ Of course, like the word-sacrament plexus, this “rule” must be continually re-experienced and creatively understood anew, with the help of the Spirit, by the persons who receive the charism as an inheritance

relevant specifically to the present day. Sometimes the excessively central role of one particular personality, who has been able to fascinate a great number of young people, has hindered the continued existence of a genuine charism” (“Lay Movements in the Church,” 281–82).

55. Cf. *IE*, 17.

56. Balthasar remarks concerning the compilation of the New Testament and the establishment of the scriptural canon, “From a merely human point of view, Scripture was an indispensable help given by the Spirit—considering the rapid process of corruption of the memory of Jesus (in Gnosticism, but even in Papias). Scripture was given to the Church as a *special charism*, to serve as a sure standard for her authoritative tradition” (*Theo-Logic*, vol. 3, 324, emphasis added).

under the vigilant guidance of the institutional authority (of the Church and of the movement itself). As the sacrament and the word of God work efficaciously only in the context of a living tradition, that of the Church, so it is with the charism of a foundation.⁵⁷ This does not prevent something like a canon, a “rule of life and faith,” but rather it presupposes and requires its existence. So it was in the supreme case of the founder of founders, our Lord Jesus. It can only be this way in every other case of a foundation. Here we find again in a very helpful way the above-cited distinction-in-unity between the objectivizing action of the Spirit, which incarnates the love of God in *concrete, definite forms* (objective Spirit), and the “subjective” action of the same Spirit, which in contrast makes sure that the objective is seen and understood, appropriated and experienced in a way that is ever-

57. This is not the place to go into the details of a correct articulation of the relations between revelation tradition, and Scripture (on this subject, see *Dei Verbum*, 8–10). As a partial explanation of what is asserted above in this article, suffice it to recall that according to Church teaching “the mediator and the altogether complete fullness of Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*, 1, 2) *properly speaking* should be identified with the person of Jesus Christ, not with Sacred Scripture or with tradition, although the Scriptures took shape and were then canonized within the riverbed of tradition. Hence a twofold corollary: first, since the reality of the God-man Jesus Christ *surpasses* what Scripture and the tradition say about him, it is right to acknowledge that the Spirit, the Paraclete, can reveal over time to the Church truths and mysteries that are not *directly attested by* nor *clearly attainable through* the ordinary sources of revelation. On the other hand (second corollary), it is no less true that the harmony with Sacred Scripture, as authoritatively interpreted by the Church, along with the tradition and the Magisterium, remains the decisive criterion for evaluating the authenticity of mystical revelations or new theological insights, so that from another perspective we must say that Scripture, read in the context of the tradition and the Church’s Magisterium, plays a conclusive [*dirimente*] role in discerning what is “new” (according to the well-known law of the analogy of faith). What is maintained above is that something similar must be true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the development of a foundation’s charism. An organic and sound development of the institute that is founded, whether a religious community or an ecclesial movement, will be guaranteed only insofar as it assures, with forms that of course may vary depending on the charism itself, an adequate articulation of the relation that binds the various constitutive factors of the ecclesial *traditio*: founder, oral tradition, written texts, magisterium of the institutional leader. Concerning the “incomprehensibility” of the figure of Christ by means of mere exegetical investigation, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us?: Do We Know Him?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

Regarding the “secondary character” of the written New Testament compared to the grace of the Holy Spirit that is received as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 106, a. 1.

new and personal. The Spirit who inspires persons and kindles life within them, as was emphasized earlier, is none other than the Spirit who creates the sacraments and inspires Scripture, the Magisterium, canon law, etc. He is, rather, the one who opens the eyes and the hearts of believers so as to make them discover the ever-greater riches hidden *within* the “circumscribed sign” of the sacrament and of the objective word. The same thing, *mutatis mutandis*, must be true in relation to the charisms of foundations. The objective form (founding documents, statutes, rules of life, etc.) is not in opposition to the ever-new action of the Spirit in persons; rather, the objective form and the action of the Spirit require one another and have meaning only in relation to each other. Hence, the movements are truly “volcanic” institutes (in the good sense). One of the chief tasks for which the institutional leaders of such realities are responsible, whether founders or their successors, is the duty to work, with the help of the Church authorities, to identify in an increasingly clear way the unmistakable features of their own charismatic patrimony, where they are not already identified, so as to allow the institute’s own members to live out their membership in the movement in a way that is simultaneously loyal and personal, obedient yet creative, for the benefit of the whole body of the Church, the spouse of the Lord Jesus and the mother of us all.

Finally, we spoke about a threefold, salutary humility which the movements are asked to cultivate. If I may say so, I think it is advisable to emphasize that something similar is asked of the institutional authorities as well: a sincere spirit of welcome, a willingness to make room, with patience and openness, to the newness of what the Spirit is working—new outpourings that, as we know, are never easily understood in their value or immediately received as a gift. Ratzinger himself, in his 1998 report, recalled the need and even the urgency, especially on the part of the bishops of the local churches, to overcome prejudices and vague fears, and above all the inevitable human temptation to try to include these new institutes “in the ranks” of what is already known, of one’s own idea of the Church:

The local Churches too, however, and even the bishops, have to be told that they should not indulge in any pursuit

of uniformity in their pastoral arrangements or planning. They should not set up their own pastoral plans as a yardstick of what the Holy Spirit is allowed to do.⁵⁸

It is even more reasonable, I might add, to expect a yet more farsighted humility and attitude of listening from the pope and from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, which, in light of all that has been said, are the natural ramparts of the ecclesial movements.

Returning to the unforgettable image with which the gospel of John concludes, we can and must say that, although it is true that “the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper” (Jn 21:20b), must agree to *follow* Simon Peter in order to continue to follow the Master (Jn 21:20a), it is equally true that Peter in turn is called to accept the fact that this disciple especially loved by Jesus should “remain” (Jn 21:22) in order to give his special testimony. Moreover, he must recognize that this “remaining” (cf. Jn 21:22) of the beloved disciple is a resource for himself (Jn 21:7) and for the whole Church of which he is the pastor (Jn 21:15–17). The answer that Jesus gives to Simon Peter on the shore of Lake Tiberias, when the latter asks him, “Lord, what about this man?” (Jn 21:21–22) can and must be understood, it seems to me, as a recommendation that the Lord makes to every one of his successors: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” (Jn 21:21–22).

In the Church there will always be Johns to whom the Lord gives the gift of a special intimacy with him, a new and unprecedented look into the depths of his heart. And Peter is always called to guarantee that John has the freedom to testify to what he alone saw and heard while leaning his head on the Lord’s chest (Jn 13:25).—*Translated by Michael J. Miller.* □

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58. Rateringer, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 59.