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# CHARISMS THEIR WORKS, THEIR GOODS, THEIR POVERTY

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# CHARISMS, THEIR WORKS THEIR GOODS, THEIR POVERTY

*The present time is one of those periods in which, what normally seems to constitute a reason for living vanishes and, if you don't want to sink into bewilderment or unconsciousness, everything must be called into question (Simone Weil).*

## ***Introduction***

The crisis we are experiencing is also due to the marginalization of charisms from public life, and likewise due to a mutual responsibility, whether of the charisms themselves or of political, economic and civil institutions. But when charisms are lacking in the public sphere, other fundamental resources are also lacking, that uncover and then resolve essential and vital social problems in societies, such as the new forms of misery, exclusion, conflicts, and solitude. Great civil and human innovations are lacking, which always depend on the ability to see invisible and important things, an ability that arises from the anthropological surplus typical of places of gratuitousness, that is, places inhabited by charisms. The market is one of the most extraordinary human inventions known to history, because it has strengthened and enormously expanded the domain of our freedoms and relationships; but the market cannot be a substitute for gratuity, even if it can be its ally.

The word *charism*, and the other word deeply associated with it, *gratuitousness*, are in fact words worn out by time and especially by ideologies. Charism and gratuitousness, that is, *charis* (which is the root of both: this common root should already say a lot by itself), have become, in the 21st century, irrelevant words for civil life, not to mention economic life. Being irrelevant to economic-civil life, they seriously risk becoming simply irrelevant. The nature of charisms and gratuitousness is profoundly civil and public, and if removed from their natural environment and relegated to an increasingly narrow private or religious sphere, they become words without roots, without a present and without a future. And therefore, in fact, *flatus vocis* (empty words).

Today the public and civil role of charisms (civil, political and economic) must be recognized, because the eclipse of charisms creates the sad condition, civil and economic, that characterizes the West above all (which was largely generated by those two words). And when the West loses contact with charisms, with their vocation, with social function and their typical words, it becomes lost, because without *charis*, life in common simply doesn't work. It doesn't innovate or generate, and the joy of living is lost; this joy of living is always the first sign of every true and fruitful action, even economic and political. For this reason, it is also the first sign that humanism without charisms ends up transforming itself into dishumanism.

We must bring charisms and their gratuitousness back to public squares, to parliaments, to the board of directors of companies and banks, to trade unions, to political parties, to condominium gatherings, to the collegial bodies of all schools, because that is also their place. Charisms, gratuitousness, *charis* express precisely one of the most specific points of humanity: the value of things in themselves, the highest dignity of persons and of all reality, which are worth first and far more than being useful for something. This is the reason that when these big words disappear from the scene, only an utilitarian calculation remains; the end is lost and becomes a means (and little by little, the means become the ends), and the "useful" dominates the horizon.

The religious world needs to engage in reflection of its works, its goods, the management of goods, and poverty.

## CHARISM'S WORKS

“Recovery project of the former convent of the Poor Clares for the construction of a Relais<sup>1</sup> with Spa.”<sup>2</sup> There are many construction sites with similar signs, especially in the nicer areas of cities and villages. This is true particularly in Italy which over the centuries has seen the rise of an extraordinary number of convents, monasteries and churches, thanks to the great charismatic biodiversity of this “beautiful Country”, made beautiful by its landscape, history and poets, of course, but made even more beautiful by the spiritual creativity and community of thousands of founders and foundresses. The Italian landscape would not be a world heritage site without the views of cathedrals, parish churches and cloisters.

The secular analysis of the demographic data of religious congregations and orders, however, mercilessly tells us something we do not like to hear: that within a decade or two the vast majority, perhaps 90%, of religious buildings will be empty, and many are so already. This trend started over half a century ago, but again, by the time we realized that this process was underway, it was already too late. Churches and empty buildings, sold or put up for sale, are the tip of the iceberg of something much larger and more important, and at the same time neglected.

First of all, there is a direct economic and therefore civil question. These convents and monasteries were built in the past thanks to donations from families, inheritances, and interventions by the municipalities. Originally, then, they were common goods, community goods, an expression of the communities that used them, because those religious men and women also took care of the poor, the sick, and schools; they invented our welfare. When today a convent is sold to a multinational that transforms it into a Spa, the ones who profit from it are no longer all the inhabitants of that village or city area but only the “solvent”, and so that public good becomes private. A privatization of former common goods takes place, a private extraction of a once public value. This reduction in value should concern us, and not only as a Church but as a civil society.

The crucial question then becomes: what to do concretely?

These structures were generated especially by the life of a Christian community. They nearly always arose out of the concrete needs of individuals, communities and the poor. Their under-utilization or non-utilization today signals, first and foremost, a definite decrease in the needs that gave them birth in the past. In past centuries, charisms were born out of the intrinsic strength of the charism itself, and also as a concrete response to the challenges of those historical times. The world changes, the forms of how the need is expressed change, and with these changes the works of the charisms progressively disappear from the scene. Understandably, the first job on the part of communities should consist in *actualizing* the original charismatic idea. If, for example, a congregation was born for the education of poor girls at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a context where young girls did not have access to education, the establishment of schools was the answer for that community to embody its charism. But today, with public and universal schools in many countries, what should be the response to that same charismatic idea? Perhaps that congregation should move to the educational frontiers of today’s “poor” girls (marginalization, migrants, hardship), thus changing the historical answers to remain faithful to the charismatic questions. When instead we become attached to the answers that the charism gave yesterday (schools) we end up forgetting the charismatic questions, and today’s *fidelity* to yesterday’s answers becomes, without wanting it, *infidelity to the charism*.

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<sup>1</sup> A Relais is a wellness resort.

<sup>2</sup> A Spa is a business that offers treatments of thermal water (hydrotherapy) and/or seawater (talassotherapy) for health benefits.

Furthermore, “empty houses” also signal a crisis of the vital worlds around religious communities. If, in fact, alongside the current structures there were living and dynamic communities, some of these structures that are being emptied would come back to life – and in the few cases where these living communities exist, we see the ancient structures rise again.

Then there is a broader discussion to be made about the market. A negative and biased look at the “market” as only interested in religious buildings helps no one. When the market – a company, a fund, a bank... – approaches a property, this interest already signals something serious. It says that, at least in terms of the market, there is value in that “house”. And this revealed value is already positive. It will not be a spiritual value, but it is at least an economic-financial value, and therefore it is always a matter of value. When a structure expresses a value, then that structure is still alive, and if it is not dead it can continue to live and generate more value. The market often performs a function analogous to that of heirs of a great scholar who sell his precious library; the heirs who are not interested in those books put them on the market and by doing so revive them for new amateurs and enthusiasts who will buy them. Those books are thus freed from shelves and niches, and their dispersion generates new life. Hence a first message: property sold is preferable to property that goes to ruin and becomes an infected wound in a city or territory. The real problem today is not the lack of spiritual value; the drama is the absence of any value because that structure *is no longer worth anything*, from any point of view. Of course, not all values are the same and not all new uses of the property have the same value from a charismatic perspective. A sisters’ school that continues to be a school thanks to a cooperative project has greater charismatic value than a former school that becomes a massage parlor, just as those (few) revaluation projects of former convents are certainly preferable by assigning them to public use like a museum, university, hospital, prison.... But – and this is the point – *a wellness center is better than weeds and broken glass!* In these cases, in order not to sell on the market, very strong ethical reasons are needed (suspicions of illegality, scams, money laundering, immoral new businesses). In all other cases, even the “normal” market can be a possible solution, and discarding it is only an irresponsible or at least immature choice. It is almost never the optimal solution, as we have said, but it is in any case better than abandonment. Discernment consists in choosing among various options that may not be optimal but are possible. Needless to say, if one chooses the market path, one must learn the language and the rules of the market: be organized, get help from the right people (the issue of consultants is central today), and be as cautious as snakes while preserving the charismatic candor of doves.

Finally, we should have the courage to make a more radical and perhaps crucial reasoning. Houses, buildings, convents, churches are not ends in themselves; they have value and meaning if and as places that facilitate community and life. For ten thousand years we have become sedentary animals and we have begun to love our shelters and homes very much. But we must never forget that every time a great spiritual novelty has arrived on the earth – from Abraham to Christ – it all started because someone left a house, a safe shelter, and set out to walk towards the land of the not-yet. Houses, structures, buildings tend by their nature to keep us in the past, to look to Egypt and its bricks, and keep us from setting off again towards the new promised land. St. Francis, in an era populated by many monasteries and abbeys, sensed that the new times would begin by setting out again, by being beggars along the road, and being “those of the street”. He felt the desire of the “*wandering Aramean*” so strongly that he experienced the birth of the friars’ convents with great discomfort, inviting them to follow the poor “son of man who does not know where to lay his head.” As much as we like and love them, because they bear the stigmata of life and love, we must be aware that our properties are almost always vestiges of a Christianity that is waning in its forms of worship and life; the message of the gospel and its promise is not waning, however *christianitas* as we have imagined it in the West for over a millennium is ending.

There is a need for a new and strong ability to set out on the journey, free and poor, and to do it together. If some structure helps along the way, it must be used, saved, valued. We must get rid of the others, so that they don’t hinder us from the necessary new “flights of fancy”, at any age, and

the stones don't become masters over people and charisms. What really matters is to set out with light baggage, going towards the many who are still waiting along the roads for a message of life and future. The most important houses are those of tomorrow, which will be very different from those we built yesterday: they will be more like mobile tents and less like palaces, more like camps and fewer walls; homes that we will then leave again to become pilgrims of the absolute.

## POVERTY

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has greatly emphasized the aspects of capitalism that kill, that discard, that exclude. He also said important things about the environment. *Laudato si'* is about poverty and the environment together. This is very important, because the real novelty of these last few years is the impossibility of considering environmental ethics as something to be respected, a cost to bear; environmental ethics must directly become economics, and if it does not become so *immediately* it will *never* be so.

For Pope Francis capitalism is not a balanced system because it consumes more resources than it regenerates, and starting from the environmental crisis he makes an analysis of the economic model, judged unsustainable, in need of being completely revised. What led to a certain type of development in the twentieth century no longer works in the twenty-first century because the context has completely changed. Adhering to a capitalist economy that aims to maximize profits but considers everything else as lifeless, to be used and exploited, simply doesn't work anymore. The Pope builds his analysis on these two fundamental coordinates by which he dwells on the ecological debt and on what is "discarded" – another theme he cares deeply about, because capitalism discards human beings as resources that cannot be reused.

To then have a more complete picture of today's capitalism, alongside Pope Francis, we must add another Francis, the poor man of Assisi. This young Francis was the son of middle-class merchants when he decided to disconnect with his father's mercantile wealth and devote himself entirely to a new life. At the dawn of every authentic vocation, there is always the stage of dispossession. It arrives when the person called understands that he must *reset* his own existence: reset and start anew, as if he were born in that moment, because he is truly being reborn. Not only. When a charism breaks into history, a new conception of wealth and poverty also makes its appearance. And the Franciscan charism has brought about a real civil and even economic revolution in this sense. Francis, in fact, by choosing poverty, achieved a cultural revolution that is central to the birth of the modern market economy, which would not be as we know it without the Franciscan works and school of economy.

A charism with sister poverty at its center, with detachment from even material goods as a sign of perfection, becomes the first school of economy from which the modern spirit of the market economy will emerge; from total detachment from money comes a new economic synthesis. That act of dispossession was the act of birthing a different *oikonomia*, of a new house government, no longer managed by the search for profit. It was the genesis of a kingdom where the real currency is *charis*: gratuity. Because every economic revolution begins by recognizing that real goods are not gold and silver, but others, invisible yet very real. This is the reason that not only were some of the most important theoreticians of medieval economics Franciscans, but from the Franciscans of the Observance in the fifteenth century came the "Monti di Pietà"; these were proto-civil banks, the first non-profit microfinance institutes, created to take care of the poverty and usury in the cities of central Italy. From the poverty freely chosen by the Franciscans, therefore, came institutions to free the poor who had not chosen poverty but were weighed down by it. «As long as there is a poor person – the Franciscans used to say – the city cannot be fraternal.» That first gratuity initiated an economy and civilization of gratuitousness that has freed and continues to free millions of poor people. Only those who know gratuity can give life to new economies, because it is gratuity that gives the right value to money, to profits, and to life.

Although born out of a radical critique of the economy, the Franciscans have developed a positive and inclusive concept of economy. St. Francis wanted his friars to work, having himself a high regard for work. Then history led the Franciscans (friars and nuns) to generally detach themselves from the lay professions and announce another kind of economy. But the Franciscans' choice to live in *extreme poverty*, that is, *without possessing anything*, remains even today (and above all today) a great prophecy for the economy because it says at least two fundamental things. The first: no economy (the selling and buying of goods) works if before the merchandise, we are not able to see the *goods*, that is, those realities that have value not only because they have a price; and in a world like ours where all goods are becoming commodities, Francis' *oikonomia* is increasingly necessary if we don't want to wake up tomorrow in a supermarket which, like the Truman Show, has turned into real life. The second: the economic principle works if it is based on the principle of gratuity, because we can sell and buy, exchange and make profits, if we first recognize a law of gratuity that underlies everyone's life, if we know how to see the value of things as infinitely greater than their price.

Our world continues to have an infinite need for gratuitousness, for fraternity, for poverty.

But what does it mean today to take the words "blessed are the poor" seriously? And what does it mean for a charismatic community and for people who have made the "vow of poverty"?

For almost two millennia the "Sermon on the Mount" has been trying to resist the attacks of those who have tried to reduce it to mere simpler things of common sense, or even to ridicule it. This struggle against the simple radical nature of the beatitudes is particularly strong in regard to the beatitude of the poor, which happens to be the first one. This simplification began early on, with a strong emphasis on the "spirit" that we find in the Gospel of Matthew, while leaving aside those who are "truly poor". (In Luke instead, poverty refers to the material condition of poverty, which in fact is opposed to wealth and misfortune). Starting already from the time of the Fathers, it was stated that the "blessed" are not so much the real poor but those who experience spiritual detachment from wealth, those who share goods or those who use them for the common good. These things are true, and they are in the Bible, but they have distanced us from the very simple and terrible reality: "blessed are the poor". This beatitude *should be left entirely and only for the poor*. At least this one is entirely and only for them; and if the poor possess this beatitude, then they are not always and only poor, because they have at least this great wealth. It is theirs, let's not take it away from them with complicated and abstract reasoning.

After all these centuries, we know well that it is not easy to understand and love this first beatitude. How can we call the poor blessed when we see them as victims of poverty, abused by the powerful, dying in the middle of the sea, looking for food in our garbage? What beatitude do they experience? Do we manage to say "blessed are the poor" while sitting with them on the rubbish dumps of our cities?

For this reason, I have seen many times that the first and most severe critics of this first beatitude are precisely those people who spend their lives alongside the poor, trying to free them from their misery. The greatest friends of the poor often end up becoming the greatest enemies of the first beatitude. We must understand them, and even thank them for feeling scandalized. Then we can try to push the discussion into new and daring terrain.

How can we love and appreciate this "blessed are the poor"? To do this, it is necessary to cross its paradoxical and scandalous terrain – how many "rich gluttons" have found in the beatitude of the poor an alibi to leave Lazarus "in beatitude", in a condition of deprivation and misery, while perhaps defining themselves as "poor in spirit" because they gave some crumbs to the poor?!

Luke's text gives us some clues about this paradox. The first is very beautiful: it is the *Kingdom*: «... because theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.» Perhaps then the distinct happiness of the poor lies entirely in that they are *already* living in the Kingdom, in this different kind of kingdom. The Kingdom "is" theirs today, it will not "be" theirs only tomorrow in heaven. The beatitude of the poor does not need the "not yet"; the "already" is enough.

The poor are blessed because even now they are inhabitants of the Kingdom of heaven. Among the poor called blessed were the rejected, the homeless, those who had little or nothing to live on. There were lepers, widows (almost all of them women), orphans (almost all children), people who, not surprisingly, were Jesus' main friends and companions during his life. Most of his disciples who had met him on the roads of Palestine were poor, ordinary people who started walking behind him and together with him. They were already poor or became so by encountering another kingdom, following another kind of happiness. In saying "blessed are the poor", Jesus was speaking with his friends, and he continues to speak with his friends: he looked at them, he saw them, and the first beatitude was born in them: «Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.»

The poor are in the Kingdom simply because they are poor; they don't have to make great efforts to enter it, they don't have to become Christian, they don't have to become good; they already are poor. Let us not diminish that «blessed are the poor because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.» The beatitudes are anti-volunteerism: one does not enter the Kingdom because one undertakes to do something while being poor, but only because one is poor.

And instead, we have been saying for centuries that not all the poor are in the Kingdom, but only the good ones, those who love, those who live the gospel; we can say it and we do so, but *Jesus didn't say it*, he only said "blessed are the poor", and *that's it*.

Francis is blessed because he chose poverty, but also blessed is Job, who did not want poverty but endured it. They are both inhabitants of that unique kingdom, and if we too want to enter it, there is only one way: to become poor. But how? For those who are not poor, there are two main paths: to become poor and follow Jesus (the "rich young man"), or to place one's wealth in common (cf. Acts 2). Only the poor, by choice or by destiny, are inhabitants of that different kingdom. Let us try to imagine who lives today in Jesus' Kingdom of Heaven which has already come: all the rejected, the forgotten, those who are victims, the abused, those without rights, the migrants in boats. If we could see the world with the eyes of the gospel, we would look at the world very differently, perhaps too much so, to really understand it. There must be something stupendous about that "blessed are the poor". Only those who first saw, understood and finally desired a different civilization: the civilization of the hundredfold.

## **Conclusion**

Poverty today is a great prophecy, especially when it becomes communion. "Blessed are the poor", the basis of all beatitudes, continues to be a great prophecy. The beatitudes are the song of utopia, of the non-place, because the beatitudes are truly experienced in a "non-place". They are the most universal pages of the gospel, because the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the desperate and the persecuted are not defined by the boundaries of Christianity. Sure, Jesus sees those poor, hungry, weeping among his disciples – he pronounced the beatitudes while looking at his own. But his own are a representative sample of all the poor, hungry and weeping people on earth. I am a universal magna carta, which starts from the disciples and reaches everyone.

The whole gospel has been from the beginning an unheard cry and a great unfinished story, but the beatitudes are the unfinished of the unfinished, the cry of the unheard cry. The whole gospel waits after two thousand years to be taken seriously by communities and societies (and if it was, it was by individuals and small communities for a short time), but within the gospel the beatitudes are those who wait the most. Even among Christians, the poor, those who cry, those who are hungry and those who are persecuted are not called blessed nor have they been in the past. On the contrary they are humiliated and discarded every day, sometimes by non-poor Christians themselves who then perhaps make donations to some NGO to help the poor.

Because of their untimeliness, we see the beatitudes as a great social, economic and political manifesto of the gospel, which is true because it is not yet complete; it is a promised land because

we have not yet reached it. The beatitudes are there, kept in the heart of the gospel, to remind us of the land of “not-yet”, a diverse and distant land that for two thousand years has judged our land of “already”; it will always judge it in order to call it to the “not-yet”. The beatitudes are the *Shabbat* of the Gospel, a different kind of seventh day, towards which all the others tend prophetically – and on the last *Shabbat* we will hear again resound on earth: “blessed are the poor”. Those who have managed to stay poor until the end will hear themselves called by this name.

Charisms continue to perform the same function as the biblical prophets. Hence, they continue to indicate a promised land, the liberation of slaves, the dawn of a society of where gratuitousness is possible. But the discourse on charisms is, in our age, too confined within the boundaries of the “religious” or the “spiritual”, and so we forget that the first gift of charisms was and is a civil gift, an essential contribution to add beauty to the city of all. So let us seek together the civilization of the hundredfold, the land of the not-yet.

Charisms occur in the world for the good of all, even those who do not see these charisms or despise them. But they come especially for the poor. If there were no charisms the poor would not be seen, loved, cared for, saved, esteemed: «Today salvation arrived in our community: a family with five children, all handicapped» (Don Lorenzo Milani). It is the unique gaze of charisms that gives the poor hope, joy, and often resurrects them. And it is the gaze of the poor that makes the charism alive; it does not die or become a mere institution.

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