

## TERESIAN CHARISM

by Fr Dominic Borg, ocd

This evening I am going to speak about Teresian Charism. I am going to start with a sentence that you might think at first, ‘what does this have to do with Teresian Charism?’ It does not have direct influence on Teresian Charism, but for sure it does affect the notion of Charism in our lives. This sentence is taken from the Talmud. The Talmud says *“The amount of light that our deeds radiate is always proportionate to the amount of joy we invest in doing those deeds.”* Many of you know this sentence. I use it quite often, because it is very profitable in our lives. *“The amount of light that our deeds radiate is always proportionate to the amount of joy we invest in doing those deeds.”*

If you enjoy cooking, you don’t just cook, you also make it beautiful, appetizing, so that when your husband or your wife arrives, and you set a place for them, they look at that plate, and even if they are not hungry, they will want to eat. They will eat even as an act of gratitude, respect for you taking time to cook their food. Why did I start with this statement? I started with this statement because it is very important that when we speak, when we use terms, they reflect what we are saying. What is the meaning of the terms that we are using? Because many times we say “I love you”. And then you ask the other person “What is the first duty of love?” they respond “I don’t know” and believe me, they do not know. And then you teach them. “The first duty of love is to listen. Listening is love in action.” And they will say “and then”, then you will have to find another answer, “and then” and you try to find another answer. This happened to me. The person was answering jokingly, “and then, and then, and then” and when I was fed up of “and then, and then”. I said “And then you shoot him.”

The word ‘**charism**’ is what we have in front of us. The word ‘**charism**’ comes from ‘*charisma*’ which is plural, and it means “**gifts**”. The word **charisma** also comes from the word ‘*charis*’ which means “**grace**”. The word *caris* also comes from the word ‘*cara*’ which means “**joy**”. So we have **gifts, grace** and **joy**. The gifts that we speak about when we speak about **charism** are different gifts than the gifts when we speak about *dorea*. The name Dorothy means “*dorea*” gift, “*Theos*” means God. “*Dorea Theos*”, “gift of God”.

*Dorea*, means gifts, and these gifts are **given to you** - not so with charism. With charism – gifts are given to you, not only for your benefit, but first and foremost for the service of others. You cannot treasure them, you cannot bury them, you cannot keep them to yourself. It is what we say in biblical studies: **It is God who acts and we who react.**

God will see the situation, the situation of the Church and He will give certain charisma, certain gifts to certain people to be able to bring light out of darkness – to be able to bring cosmos out of chaos. He will allow the Spirit to hover over the chaos of this void and give the courage for people to die to themselves, and begin to live for others. The Talmud is clear here. The Talmud says *“For something to become a higher something, first it has to become nothing.”* It is in this process that we can become something better, I call it transformation. St Paul says in Romans, chapter 12: *“I appeal to you therefore brethren by the mercies of God to present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God*

- *what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” There is this word, that especially nowadays in spiritual theology, is coming more and more to the forefront - **Transformation**.

It is not enough to hear the Word, but we have to allow that Word to operate in us. *“unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it stays alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* It is so easy to remember that verse. It is found in John chapter 12, verse 24. **The process of dying to ourselves.**

In the word **charism**, there is the notion of a gift that has been given for the service of the Church. It is not for yourself. It is not just for you to experience a joy, but you have to manifest this through your actions.

The statement that I started with from the Talmud states nearly exactly what Jesus Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount *“Let your light thus shine in front of others so that seeing your good deeds, they will give praise to your Father who is in heaven.”* The amount of light that your deeds radiate is always proportionate to the amount of joy we invest in doing those deeds. This joy is going to come to you and to me by listening to the Word of God, by being sensitive to God’s action. It is God who acts and we who react. We react by allowing this light that God has infused inside of us to be shown outwardly through our actions, to the same extent that Jesus Christ Himself has said *“You call me master, teacher and you are right, yet here I am among you as one who serves. I have set in front of you an example so that the way I wash your feet, **you ought to** wash one another’s feet.”*

To wash the feet of another means to die. This chapter of John, chapter 13 is a process of *“dying”*. To wash another’s feet means to die. *“Laying aside his garments”*, laying aside His life, *“When he finished he took again his garments”* taking back His life. The good shepherd laid down His life for His sheep *“I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it back again. This command I have received from my Father.”* Once He received that command, that Word instilled joy in Him. And that is why when you and I are synchronized with the Word of God, the Word of God instils joy in us. It is magical. Yes, it is magical.

As soon as Zacheus heard the invitation of Jesus Christ, *“Zacheus, come down. Today, I must stay at your house. He came down quickly and received him joyfully.”* As soon as Mary said *“Let it be done to me according to your word”*, that Word instilled a joy in her, a joy that everyone who meets her is going to be contaminated with it. **Contaminated - literally**. When she greeted Elizabeth, the reaction of Elizabeth was *“How is it the mother of my Lord comes to me? Because as soon as I heard your greeting, even the child in my womb leapt for joy.”*

Prayer is one of the elements of Teresian Charism. It is not to talk about prayer, rather it is a matter of becoming a prayer. It is not to be intellectual about the notion of prayer, but that people will see *“when they see your actions they will know”*. *“From their fruits, you will know them.”* When you and I take this positive attitude towards our history, towards the events of our life - when you and I allow the Word of God, which is an event, (the

word “*davar*” also means an event) to sink deep down into our hearts, then automatically we have the courage to render service. Service as Albert Einstein has said “is the rent we pay to God for the space we occupy here on earth”. It is also Einstein who said “example education is the best education”. It is no wonder that Jesus Christ says “*I have given you an example so that the way I wash your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.*” It is no wonder that St Paul can say “*Imitate me as I imitate Christ.*”

St Teresa also uses those same words; that we have to look at her and imitate her in this aspect, allowing this prayer to become part and parcel of our lives.

It is not a matter of saying many words, it is a matter of meaning what you say. The Psalmist says in Psalm 19, “*May the meditation of my heart and the words on lips be pleasing to you, O Lord my God.*” May what I have in my heart be exactly what I am saying with my lips. May I not say ‘thank you God’ and deep down I am saying ‘You know what, You could have given me something different.’ It is not saying one thing, and with your heart mean something different. You cannot say that you are a prayer, you might say with your lips that you are a prayer, but you are not.

So the **first** element when we speak of Teresian Charism is the openness for the Spirit to continue to teach us how to pray, because we don’t know how to pray. The Church, when she looks at St Teresa of Jesus, who we sometimes call St Teresa of Avila, recognizes her as the Doctor of Prayer. She is the one who teaches us how to pray, not by presenting in front of us a theory, but by presenting in front of us an experience, to the extent that she can say as St Paul says “*Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.*”

One has to draw a distinction between Charism and Spirituality. **Spirituality** is more a **life-style**. It is a lifestyle. But **charism** is your **life span**. I was talking to one of you earlier, and she said that she was awaiting test results from her doctor and they called her from the office to tell her that her test results were ready. She asked, ‘is it going to make a difference in my life span?’ They replied, ‘no, don’t worry, these tests are not going to effect your life span, only your life style.’ The lifespan is like charism, you have it. But now, in order to continue to possess it, we have to live it. Either you use it, or you lose it.

When we speak about Teresian Charism the first thing that comes in front of us, in our eyes, in our hearts, in our ears, is prayer.

When we speak about Carmelite or Teresian Spirituality that’s different. When I hear the expression “Carmelite Spirituality”, in my mind it is Biblical Spirituality. There is no difference. Carmelite Spirituality **is** Biblical Spirituality, so much so that it is in our Rule that we should meditate on the Word of God day and night. It is a beautiful quote taken from Joshua, chapter 1, verse 8 – 9. “*This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, have I not commanded you, be courageous, do not be afraid, neither be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*” Only then you will be transformed. That is Spirituality, and that is Carmelite Spirituality, that we allow the Word of God to become flesh in our hearts, flesh through our actions.

Sometimes we think that Carmelite Spirituality is more the Spirituality of Mary rather than the Spirituality of Martha. One has to be very careful because if you can say that Teresian Charism includes these three elements, **prayer, community** and the **apostolate**, when we open our ears to the Word of God, then the Word of God presents a challenge to us, and then it will send us on a mission. The words *missio* and *apostolate* are interchangeable. *Missio*, in Latin means **to send**, *apostolate*, in Greek, means **one who is sent**. *“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”*

But we cannot be good heralds if we are not good hearers. That is an expression that is repeated many times in the document *Verbum Domini* whose anniversary was celebrated yesterday, the Feast of St Jerome. In the year 2010, September 30th, Pope Benedict XVI signed the document, a famous document which will continue to carry the church for at least the next forty years. This document “*Verbum Domini*” “The Word of the Lord”, speaks about the importance of Sacred Scripture in our lives, how this Word has to become our food, *“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, you will not have life within you.”*

Jesus Christ said, *“My words, are spirit and life. It is the Spirit that gives life. The flesh is of no avail. My words, they are Spirit and they are life.”* When you and I learn to open our hearts to the Word of God, then that Word will transform us into a prayer. A Prayer! That is why St Paul says to *“present your bodies as a living sacrifice”* a living worship to God that we become a prayer, not just pray.

It is beautiful to pray but it is not enough for you and for me as Carmelites. It is our mission to become a prayer. Then people who meet us will get this charism. They will be challenged to live the Carmelite Spirituality and also to be of service to the Church.

This is why I repeat this statement. It has been repeated many times in the document *Verbum Domini*, ‘Only those who are good hearers can become good heralds.’ Only those who learn how to hear the Word of God properly can become people who are worthy of bringing it to others. You hear it, you receive the challenge, and then you are on a mission.

Mary heard that Word. You and I as Carmelites come under her protection. Mary did not challenge that Word. On the contrary, it is a dialogue. *“How can this be?”* Not like Zechariah. Zechariah challenged that Word. *“Impossible! Impossible! I am old. My wife is old. You know, Impossible.”* Deep down in his heart is this word impossible. With Mary, no. She was told *“You are going to be with child.”* Mary said, *“How can this be since I am a virgin? I have had no relationship with a man.”* How is this going to be? What part do I have to play so that what you are telling me will become a reality? *“Here I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.”* ‘Handmaid of the Lord,’ immediately the Word took flesh in her. She cooperated with this Word and with the joy and the energy that she received, she went uphill to be of service to Elizabeth.

This is one of the notions that you and I have to carry constantly deep down in our hearts. If you and I want to be Carmelites, want to be Teresians, want it to be so, then prayer has

to be something that we live. We must live it in such a way that people can sense that we are people of prayer, not people who speak about it, an empty terminology.

The second is the **community**. We live it in community, because it is there that love is manifested. To love does not mean to look at each other but to look together in the same direction. Which direction? Jesus Christ. As we said yesterday, ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Jesus Christ.

The more we live Carmelite Spirituality the closer we are to manifesting Carmelite Charism. But they are two different things, distinct, complementary - but different. Sometimes we mix them up. We speak about charism and spirituality as if they are the same thing. They are not. A person can be spiritual but he has no charism to communicate to the Church and the only way he can communicate charism is by being of service.

Then there is this notion of the **community**.

To love does not mean to look at each other and sometimes that's what we level the community to. We look at each other with jealousy, with envy. If that guy is doing this thing, I want to do it too. I have to do it better. I want to do this. I want to do that. Why not allow that person to do what he is doing and you try to do something else. Why do we look at each other? It is like the spokes of the wheel. At the circumference they are separate, at the axle they meet. The same it is with you and with me. When we look at Jesus Christ, we meet, we get to know each other - and to know a person is to love him. To know a person is to love him.

Then there is the third element, the **apostolate**. We are apostles of prayer and prayer can take on different aspects. Living the Eucharist, not just coming for the Eucharist. We live the Eucharist! A Christian is a person of gratitude not attitude. We have an attitude. Is it worth catching? If it is an attitude of gratitude then it is worth catching. If it is an attitude - my God run away from him or her.

Unfortunately this is what is happening many times in community. Because brothers and sisters, the more we approach the centre the more stillness there is. The further we go from the centre [Jesus Christ], the more there is speed. It is like the wheel of the axle, at the circumference of the wheel there is more speed than there is at the centre.

*'In silentium et spe'* our Rule says, quoting Isaiah, *'erti fortitude vestra'* *"in silence and hope shall be your strength."*

Yes we are living in a world where we learn the elements of prayer, which according to our Mother, St Teresa are **humility**, **detachment** and **love of our neighbour**. **Humility** has to be expressed in our obedience. **Detachment** is expressed in our promise of poverty. **Love of our neighbour** is expressed in our promise of chastity according to our state of life. When we see these virtues and we incarnate them in our daily lives, you can rest assured that then we have arrived to the point of becoming a prayer.

I will conclude with this. There are three words in Hebrew which are very important to know and to know their meaning. Adam, *adamah* and *adameh* Adam is mankind, human. *Adamah* is the earth, the dust. *Adameh* is to emulate. Humanity that has been made out of the dust, God has infused into this dust the capacity and the power to become a prayer. That is why in the Scripture we can read and acknowledge it. *“Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. Be perfect because I the Lord your God am perfect.”* Because God has given us this power to become like Him. There is this *adameh*, this emulation- you can become, you can be capable of it, because God has infused it. Surely the robe that we sew is the robe of prayer. That is why today there is a great need in the world for Teresian Charism, because essentially **Teresian Charism is the charism of prayer**, a prayer that can change the world for better. We have a very important mission and the world is waiting for us to fulfill it.



