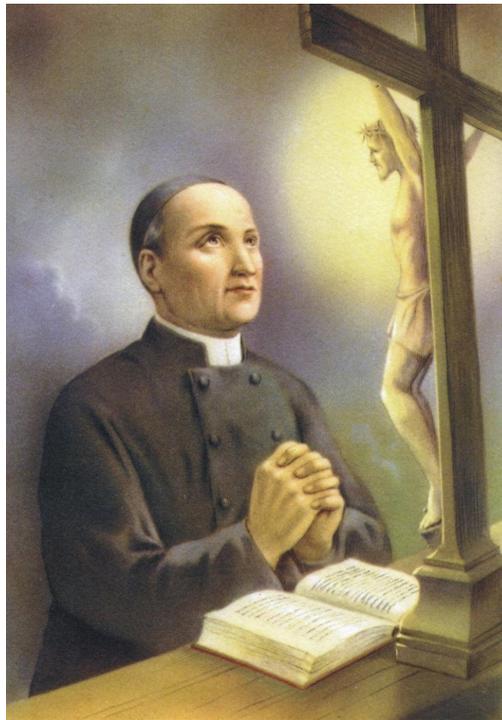


Holy Abandonment: The Fundamental Spirit of the Stigmatine Founder



Rev. Joseph Charles Henchey, CSS

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I. Charisms in General

A. Centered on Jesus Christ

The charism of a Founder, or Foundress, is a unity made up of a rather wide variety of elements, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in accord with the human nature of the individual and with the contemporary needs of the Church. Among the Founders, some of these following elements would be in common: a great faith in God, a developed devotion for Jesus Christ and the Eucharist, to the Blessed Mother, to the Saints - or, to one in particular, often chosen as a model [e.g., St. Ignatius of Loyola chose St. Ignatius of Antioch, he name-sake, as his model; St. Gaspar Bertoni chose St. Ignatius as his model].

Some of these elements might predominate in an individual to the extent that a particular charism might be called "Trinitarian", "Christological", "Pneumatological", "Mariological". The Founders of the Trinitarians and the Missionaries of the Most Holy Trinity would have a Trinitarian charism; the Jesuits, the Redemptorists [even though St. Alphonsus Liguori wrote so much and so beautifully about Mary], the Passionists, the Resurrectionists and the Stigmatines - would have a Christological Charism. The Missionaries of the Paraclete, or of the Holy Spirit, would have a "Pneumatological" Charism. A good many Congregations and Orders are founded with a clearly Marian Charism: the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Servites of Mary.

It would seem that the fundamental devotions of these various religious groups would flow from whatsoever their basic charism is. In some ways, it would seem that the main devotion of the Congregation would be inspired by its charism.

B. Various Factors

The Charism of any Founder is a complex reality made up of a variety of elements. This was brought out in one of the papers delivered during the Holy Year of 1975, for the second centenary of the death of St. Paul of the Cross, the Founder of the Passionists. A Congress was held in Rome to commemorate both events, entitled: **The Wisdom of the Cross Today.**

1. Personality, Grace, History, Doctrine, Experience, Church: a Passionist Father developed the charism of his Founder, St. Paul of the Cross. In the course of his study, he pointed out that according to many interpreters, these might be considered as some of the basic elements comprising a "charism" of a Founder:

- the personality of the Founder, with his qualities, or natural and supernatural characteristics;
- his historical background, or environment and times, as well as the society in which any given foundation, or spirituality came to light;

- the special grace from God, as the supernatural elements which moved and accompanied the work of the foundation of a religious family, and therefore, of its spirituality;
- the preference for a certain truth of the faith, or at least, for a particular manner of conceiving, emphasizing, and formulating that truth - this is the so-called doctrinal factor.
- a determined virtue, or several virtues, which a spirituality suggests to be achieved in a particular manner, and this in imitation of Christ, in accord with the teaching and experience of the Founder;
- the end, and both the immediate and secondary specific scope, remembering the traditional distinction from the “primary” end, which was understood as the sanctification and salvation of the members - and which is common to all religious. The sixth element here is more the Mission within the Church which the initiator of a foundation and of a spirituality proposes. From this ultimate element in some way, proceed many other aspects ¹.

2. A Basic Christian Experience: for the Passionists, the Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ is the unifying center of a certain style of living Christianity. Christ is the point of convergence and the living center for all Christians. The Christian experience appears, therefore, as a series of relationships with Christ, the Savior: at times, in a “Pneumatological”, or “Mariological” charism, achieved through the Holy Spirit, or through the Blessed Virgin Mary. These multiple relationships are all posited by the faith: each one of them incarnates an aspect of faith in Jesus Christ, realizing an aspect of union with Christ, a manner of existing before God, and before His word, which characterizes the Christian experience.

3. Directly through Christ, Indirectly Through Mary: Christ asks His Apostles to teach, to baptize, to govern - but, Jesus Himself remains the soul of all this, the invisible power in the Holy Spirit, sustaining the entire Apostolic Mission. The “Christian experience” appears therefore as a net of relationships all centered on Jesus Christ: either directly, through some mystery of His life, or indirectly through the Blessed Mother, or one of the saints. These relationships might be summed up in the word of “adherence” to Christ, based on the data of divine revelation ².

4. The Church genuinely “experiences” Christ: the experience in the Church is the baptismal, sacramental experience of Jesus Christ - in that the meditation of the Church of each age is to render actual, in time, the mediation of Jesus Himself. Christ is the “Way”, in that by means of Him, as presented through the Church, we accede to the Father.

¹ cf. Piergiorgio Nesti, CP, quoting A. Matanic’, OFM, Pont. Athen. Roma 1971, p. 17; Fr. Nesti’s article entitled, *Principio biblico teologico della Spiritualita’ Passionista*, in: *La Sapienza della Croce oggi* 2 1975, Torino: LDC pp. 81, ff].

² cf. J. Morroux, *L’esperienza cristiana - Introduzione a una teologia*. Brescia: Morcelliana 1956, pp. 117, ff.

II. A Gradual Formation of the Charism of St. Gaspar Bertoni

A. Centered on Jesus Christ

1. Abandonment into the Hands of the Father: the spirituality of Fr. Bertoni developed in an atmosphere of total abandonment into the hands of God, and total availability to the Church. The fundamental example of his daily life was Jesus Christ. Fr. Bertoni experienced this consciousness of his own nothingness resulting from the concept of creation: all was in the hands of God, having originally flowed from the Creator. From this basic attitude of faith, Fr. Bertoni gradually developed a very solid spiritual life, totally imbued with a reverential fear, or profound respect, tender love and confident hope.

a. Follow God, not Precede Him: Fr. Marani, who was his first successor, stated:

.. ‘We ought to follow God, and not go ahead of Him’ - my most beloved Founder and Father repeated so often through his life...³

‘...Let us leave room for God to act - He knows what to do, and how to do it... Let us leave it up to the Lord, He Who has disposed all things well!...

These are basic principles in the spirituality of Fr. Bertoni, found in his letters to Mother Naudet.

b. Fr. Bertoni’s ‘experienced’ Stigmata: during the more critical moments of his life, he remained within the serenity of abandonment into the hands of God. He never received the stigmata, of course, as did St. Francis of Assisi, but perhaps various painful moments of his life could be considered as the great wounds, or his vivid experience of Jesus Christ. This would be the type “lived Stigmata”:

- deaths that visited the Bertoni home during his formative years, from about 9 years of age until he was 14;
- the separation of his father and mother;
- the life-long illnesses that he endured - a veritable martyrdom;
- the slow development of the Congregation that he founded - on the day of Fr. Bertoni’s Beatification, Pope Paul VI made reference to the “second miracle” being the Congregation itself!
- his extreme apostolic limitations brought on by his confinement, always adapting to do whatever he could - with some ministries perhaps, humanly speaking, having failed.

These rather painful lived experiences of his routine existence continually offered the matter for his daily holocaust, and, at the same time, they afforded the opportunity of adapting his Apostolic Missionary response.

³ cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *Il Modello di S. Abbandono*, p. 210.

2. Heroic Faith, Hope and Charity in lived Events: these various elements formed a specific spirit, an attitude of his life of heroic faith, hope and charity. Fr. Bertoni received great hope from the spiritual direction and education that he received - but the events of his life offered him the foundation for this life of Holy Abandonment.

3. His Boy-hood Sonnet: “Wounds of Love” and the Nuptial Theme: Indications of his charism which was taking shape may be found at various periods, dispersed throughout his life of which we have some written record, often in his own hand - as well as what others close to him said about him. There is an extraordinary sonnet attributed to him about the time of his First Communion - which shows a level of Italian which to any non-Italian might seem extraordinarily advanced. In this composition there are fused the elements of the nuptials together with wounds of love, perhaps taken from the Dominican-Carmelite Tradition noted above [cf. pages 22-26 of these notes above]. There follows here an “approximate translation of this poem:

...From that day in a hidden distinct valley,
 Seated on the banks of a small lake reflecting like a mirror,
 That I gave myself over to contemplating the beautiful visage of love itself;
 I suffer from a wound that cannot be medicated⁴,
 Since I no longer saw it again; all that remained was
 The burning arrow which had penetrated my heart
 O, my poor heart! Separated from my soul,
 What kind of life could you ever expect to live in that state?
 I groaned trying to hide my suffering from my soul
 Which no one could ever heal, except for the One Who had wounded me.
 Who could ever believe this?
 To medicate my wound, it was sufficient to see that
 Today, a long procession of pierced hearts,
 Follows the love that triumphs⁵.

4. Parallels with St. John of the Cross and his *Spiritual Canticle*: the lamentations of the “Spouse” in the “Spiritual Canticle” of St. John of the Cross seems to be expressed in this Sonnet that has remained among the papers of Fr. Bertoni. It would seem to those not familiar with the Italian education system of two centuries ago that this was a later composition than the period of his First Holy Communion. He expresses himself as languishing from the wound that cannot be medicated, from what he was able to contemplate as in a mirror, the most beautiful visage of love. With his heart seemingly separated from his soul, because of that flaming arrow that had pierced it, he was unable to explain to anyone his suffering, because no one could ever have medicated it, except the One Who had wounded him. This concept is found in a variety of places in Scripture:

⁴ cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 1, n. 2

⁵ cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *La Gioventù*, p. 253, cf. also Ps 41:4; 38:3; Rm 12:15].

Pity me, Yahweh, I have no strength left, heal me! [cf. Ps 6:2]

Yahweh, the Restorer of Jerusalem. He brought back Israel's exiles, healing their broken hearts [cf. Ps 147:3].

He has torn us to pieces, but He will heal us... He will bandage our wounds.... [cf. Ho 6:2].

5. Fr. Bertoni's Jesuit Models: "Indirect" Imitation of Christ: in this same poem, one can see a characteristic of the Stigmatine Founder: his repeated choices of models to follow in life. In his early years, as a young man, his model was the Jesuit saint, St. Aloysius Gonzaga. The concept of "imitation" was not reduced to an imitation of exterior acts, but it was rather a consistent quest of this way of life which governed his activities and attitudes. It was an indirect imitation of Christ. Therefore, the "Best Man", or "Cupid", who arranges the marriage, as St. Paul [cf. 2 Co 11:2], arranging the marriage between the Corinthians and Christ, from the "heavenly star" to draw the soul to the most chaste embraces of the Chaste Spouse of the soul.

6. A Kind of Apostolic, Missionary "Marriage Attendant": from the almost physical description of the gentle Spouse, the "Best Man", or "Cupid" arranging the marriage, takes the next step to issue the formal invitation to the marriage with the sole condition of leaving everything else behind:

If you want to see Him, you will look for Him in vain,
 If first you do not love Him.
 Just remember this: that He speaks to the heart -
 But, gently and slowly - Keep your ear attuned.
 Therefore, if the noise of this world deafens you,
 Go out from your land, leave your fatherland, your home -
 And forget your own people and home [cf. Gn 12:1, ff.; Ps 45]:
 The King loves you and He gives Himself to you;
 Because that Love, that Beauty, that Breast,
 All this is the reward and crown of outstanding virtue.

It seems clear from this Poem that the invitation to leave his own home took root in him from his deep desire for union with God, to listen to his own contemplation the whispered voice of the Divine Master, far from the chaos of the world ⁶.

7. The Gift of Fear brings Abandonment to its Height with Hope: developing the spirit of abandonment into the hands of God, the Gift of the Holy Spirit of Filial Fear pushes to its highest possible level the movement of one's hope in God. When one is truly "in the hands of God", one is in the best disposition to await with strength and really to receive the help of God. This total abandonment to God, which Hope

⁶ cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, *La giovinezza*, pp. 253, ff.

accomplishes only little by little [***a piccola goccia***], and never perfectly, the Gift of Fear brings t the highest level, under the direct impulse of the Holy Spirit ⁷.

8. Meditation on "First Kings": Wait for God!: in one of his Meditation on 1 K, Fr. Bertoni stated:

...A man of prayer takes what comes as though from the hands of Providence. Such a one does not precede God, nor anticipates Him: all is in order, he is at peace. He is not hasty, not precipitous. He awaits the right time, and the proper circumstances. He does all that waiting for God.

a. Not knowing how to wait, impedes development: in these few words, according to Fr. Dalle Vedove ⁸, it can be said that we have Fr. Bertoni's essential thought concerning Holy Abandonment. Holy Abandonment is certainly encountering all that happens as disposed by Divine Providence is that of not knowing how to wait when the divine plan is not all that clear. So often, one compromises the execution of the Divine Will by an inordinate propensity to action.

b. Hope helps One await the Lord: Fr. Bertoni had recourse to the state of Abandonment as that which guaranteed the most tranquil, but yet the most sure state of expectancy. Precisely speaking, it is hope that gives assurance to our waiting for the future life, and for all that leads to final union with god. Hope is based on that unshakable rock of divine omnipotence placed at our disposition for our assistance, cooperation.

c. For Fr. Bertoni, Holy Abandonment is the Supreme Exercise of Hope: The classical authors who treated Holy Abandonment ⁹ have left unsolved the matter of its theological foundation. Fr. Bertoni seems to have placed "abandonment" as the highest form of the virtue of hope. St. Francis de Sales and others saw Holy Abandonment as a superior form of love - DeCaussade ¹⁰ states that the state of abandonment is a living to the full of pure faith, pure hope and total love. Many spiritual writers have made of Abandonment a synthesis of all the theological virtues, and also of all the moral virtues: it is simply considered to be the height of the Christian life.

9. Abandonment as Hope does not eliminate Faith and Charity: in choosing hope as the central point of the state of Abandonment, of course, the virtues of faith and charity are not excluded. However, following Fr. Bertoni's thought, one would remove the indistinct, or imprecise conception which would result if it were considered as a simple conformity to the Will of God.

⁷ cf. Fr. Nello Dalle Vedove, CSS, *Modello di S. Abbandono*, p. 76.

⁸ cf. l.c., pp. 199, ff.

⁹ cf. Dictionnaire de Spiritualite', Vol. I

¹⁰ cf. J ean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. Doubleday: Image New York.

a. Conformity with Christ is Christian Perfection: it is generally agreed that conformity to Christ is the most direct way to reach perfection in the spiritual life which does conform our will with that of God, whenever the Will of God is incorporated in some specific precept: and that is then called “obedience”.

b. [Fr. Feuillet]: Christ emphasized Union of Will: a modern exegete has noted, however, that there are only two texts in all of St. John’s Gospel on love where the Son of God explicitly states that He loves the Father - and both of these texts are found in the discourse of the Last Supper, just before His Passion and Death:

...the world must be brought to know that I love the Father and that I am doing exactly what the Father told me... [cf. Jn 14:31].

...If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept the Father’s Commandments and remain in His love [cf. Jn 15:10].

In these texts, and in so many other texts from the Fourth Gospel [cf. 4:34; 5:1, 9, 30, 43; 6:38; 8:28; 10:18, f.; 12:49, f.; 15:10, 15], the love of Jesus for the Father has as its synonym His unconditional attachment to the Father’s will - an attachment that will lead to Calvary for the redemption of humanity ¹¹.

c. Abandonment is Particular Imitation of Jesus on the Cross: St. Francis de Sales represents Christ as a “Model of Holy Abandonment” in the various stages of His mortal life - but, especially, during all His sufferings ¹².

d. Sin is a rejection of the Divine Will: whenever the Divine Will is considered in itself, or, at least, as not expressed in some specific commandment, that is quite clear, then conforming oneself to it still remains a general obligation, and being in opposition to it is one of the generic elements that is included in the traditional theology of sin.

e. Conformity to the Divine Will is trust in His Mercy: such a dedication to the Divine Will is based upon the conviction of the infinite power and mercy of God which, in full accord with the divine promises, gives us security for the present as well as for the unknown future, far ore than if any human being were to place full confidence in his/her own resources.

f. This Hope reinforced by Knowledge: this great knowledge of Divine Providence is supplied by faith, leading toward charity. It enables one, with God’s grace, to choose to accept these principles:

... Nothing ever happens that God has not foreseen, or willed, or at least permitted.

¹¹ cf. A. Feuillet, *Le mystere de l’amour divin dans la theologie johannique*. Paris: Gabalda 1972, pp. 69, ff.

¹² cf. *Love of God*, Bk IX, c. 15 - cf. DS I, Col. 6].

God does not will anything, or permit anything, except for the manifestation of His goodness and infinite perfections, for the glory of His Son, and the ultimate Good of those who love Him.

St. Thomas Aquinas called this reinforced hope by the name of con-fidence. Holy Abandonment is the traditional Christian spirituality, gives assurance even when human supports are taken away.

B. The Espousals of Mary and Joseph: A Mirror of Christ

These unique, but authentic nuptials, seem to mirror the abandonment, the ***obsequium*** of Jesus to His heavenly Father. They exemplify the human nature of Jesus serving as the “instrument” of the divine Person - and they seem to reflect this total trust in God.

Fr. Bertoni has a spirituality of abandonment: on the personal, ascetical level, as well as in the apostolic choices and, as a consequence, a type of “geographic: abandonment. It was the total commitment of an entire Congregation, and of every member in it [abandonment of the personnel, or a personal abandonment], each according to his talents, or ecclesial service, t any form of the Ministry of the Word of God whatsoever [“apostolic” abandonment].

C. The Views of Fr. Anthony Rosmini

He seems to have applied perhaps “Ignatian Abandonment” to his apostolic choices:

...The sole principle, my dear brothers [i.e., those pronouncing their first vows], from which are deduced all of our duties, is charity. Other Holy Founders have chosen as the essential end of their Congregation, one or more determined external ministries, useful to their neighbor and to the Church: as, for example, preaching, teaching, or something else.

... However, our Congregation seeks to find in justice alone its sole essential regulation, and its only essential scope; so much so that whoever makes profession in this community, with the sole quest of a perfect justice, not stably tied to any determined good work, obtains all that the Institute has proposed for itself, and fully carries out its vocation ... The faithful followers of this Institute are not limited either in the affections of their hearts, or in the work of their hands to any special ministry, or to any special work of charity. The members of this Congregation, thus offer themselves to the Divine Providence of their heavenly Father, and they must be ready to assume all those ministries and those works in which grater acquisition of justice and holiness might be a expected by divine grace.¹³

¹³ This was Fr. Rosmini’s homily for the Profession Ceremony of the Institute of Charity on the Feast of the Annunciation on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, at Sacro Monte Calvario, Domodossola, 1844. cf. *Discorsi sulla Crita’*. ed. Paoline. Ut innotscant, 48, Pescara 1963, pp. 55-57/

Well over seven years later [on October 10, 1851], Fr. Rosmini, in another Profession Ceremony, described the four qualities of charity, as he saw them: breadth, length, height, and depth. He went on to say that the depths of love could be seen in the intensity of suffering that one would endure. He saw the Cross as an “august sign” of this love, and stated:

... May this august sign, my beloved brothers, remain always impressed on the minds and hearts of all of us, as a kind of brief formula which synthesizes the entire sublime message of Charity; may it also be profoundly impressed in our hearts and in all the faculties of our souls, with its strength, bring about those chaste and faithful ones to Him Who has espoused us with His blood, and bring those tireless imitators of the works of His Charity. And finally, may this most glorious sign of the Cross of Jesus Christ, the instrument and symbol of such Charity, be also the authentic seal of this, my oration, or marriage message: that the Cross is more than anything else, a matrimonial poem for your happy nuptials, my beloved brothers - because truly with the religious profession that today you make in the Institute of Charity unites your virginal souls to the Divine Spouse with a new, perpetual, indissoluble, most happy and fruitful bond...¹⁴

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Conclusion

Both St. Gaspar Bertoni and his spiritual son, Fr. Anthony Rosmini, offer a rather broad program of service in their presentation of the Apostolic Mission. For St. Gaspar, this is described in his first two Constitutions: the Stigmatines are ***Apostolic Missionaries for the assistance of Bishops*** [CF 1]. The Latin word that Fr. Bertoni used for *assistance*, is taken from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans 12:1: ***...I beseech you, therefore, by the mercy of God that your present your [lives] a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service ...*** This is reminiscent of the Eucharistic offertory, making a complete gift to God of one’s life,. To be consecrated in the Apostolic Mission, leading to an eternal Holy Communion.

St. Gaspar goes on to describe the ***Manner, just how*** the Apostolic Missionaries are to do this in his second Constitution. In this ideal, the Saint presents seven different words describing ***ecclesial obedience*** of Stigmatines: ***... work under the direction of and dependence on Bishops ... totally submissive to them ... they are to receive the [Bishops’] permission... along with the necessary faculties, always observing the guide-lines set down by the [Bishops]*** [CF 2]

Part 9 [CF ## 158-186] of St. Gaspar’s Original Constitutions describe the Principal duties of the Professed Apostolic Missionaries: work among the youth; any ministry of the Word of God whatsoever, and developing vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life.

St. Gaspar Bertoni’s ideal is to live the Apostolic Life: through the intercession of the Holy Spouses, Mary and Joseph, the Stigmatine to serve Jesus Christ as the

¹⁴ cf. o.c., pp. 181-183.

Apostles served Jesus Christ – Who was sent into this world to carry out the Mission the Father personally confided to Him in the Holy Spirit, which he revealed on Easter night, breathing upon them, and showing His Sacred Stigmata; ***As the Father has sent Me, I also send you...*** [Jn 20:21].

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(*) *The Author:*

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He spent 32 years in Rome - 10 years as General Councilor - and also taught at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas [ANGELICUM] [PUST] in Rome for more than 20 years.

From 2002 to 2005 he was Assistant Spiritual Director at Blessed Pope John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts, for second career men, desiring to spend their last years as priests. From 2005 to 2008 he was in charge of the Paluch Chair of Theology at St. Mary of the Lake University (Mundelein Seminary), nearby Chicago, IL and from 2009 to 2014 he served as Professor of Theology and a Spiritual Director at St. Joseph Seminary (Dunwoodie) in Yonkers, NY.

For all of his Stigmatine life, Fr. Henchey has been a student of St. Gaspar Bertoni, the founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata.

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Note: This article is an excerpt of the study: 'Stigmatine Devotions: Sacred Stigmata and the Espousals of Mary and Joseph', by the Author, in the website: www.st-bertoni.com, under 'Charism'.