

The Catholic Church and the Charismatic Gifts

By Greg Witherow

Some time ago I was approached by a parishioner after Mass and was asked my opinion about the charismatic gifts. The man had doubts of their legitimacy based on his understanding of scripture and observances of charismatic services. To clarify, the charismatic gifts in question are typically referred to as speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues, a prophetic word and gifts of healing.

By way of background, neither I (nor my wife Kathy) have ever spoken in tongues nor do I believe I have any of the charismatic gifts. While we were students at the University of Vermont Kathy and I attended an Assemblies of God church, which is the largest Protestant charismatic denomination. In doing so we got first hand face time with the charismatic movement. While I found some aspects of charismatic services appealing, at the time I could not square it with my understanding of scripture. After we were married Kathy and I moved into the Calvinist world. One aspect Calvinist teaching is the belief that the charismatic gifts were only a temporary phenomenon that God used to strengthen the infant Church. This however was not why I was a Calvinist (I had other reasons) and while I didn't believe the gifts were still valid, I was never anti-charismatic.

I knew early on in my conversion that I would have to alter my views if I were to become a Catholic (and I have altered my views). Below are numbered paragraphs taken from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I will let mother Church speak for herself. I have put in bold print the words that speak directly to our topic to make it easier.

“2003 Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us. But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church. There are *sacramental graces*, gifts proper to the different sacraments. **There are furthermore special graces, also called charisms after the Greek term used by St. Paul and meaning "favor," "gratuitous gift," "benefit." Whatever their character—sometimes it is extraordinary, such as the gift of miracles or of tongues—charisms are oriented toward sanctifying grace and are intended for the common good of the Church.** They are at the service of charity, which builds up the Church.”

“1508 The Holy Spirit gives to some a special charism of healing so as to make manifest the power of the grace of the risen Lord. But even the most intense prayers do not always obtain the healing of all illnesses. Thus St. Paul must learn from the Lord that "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," and that the sufferings to be endured can mean that "in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church.”

“**768** So that she can fulfill her mission, the Holy Spirit "bestows upon [the Church] varied hierarchic and **charismatic gifts**, and in this way directs her." "Henceforward the Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth the seed and the beginning of that kingdom.”

“**798** The Holy Spirit is "the principle of every vital and truly saving action in each part of the Body." He works in many ways to build up the whole Body in charity: by God's Word "which is able to build you up"; by Baptism, through which he forms Christ's Body; by the sacraments, which give growth and healing to Christ's members; by "the grace of the apostles, which holds first place among his gifts"; by the virtues, which make us act according to what is good; **finally, by the many special graces (called "charisms")**, by which he makes the faithful "fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church.”

Charisms

“**799** Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, **charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit** which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world.”

“**800 Charisms are to be accepted** with gratitude by the person who receives them **and by all members of the Church as well**. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.”

“**801** It is in this sense that discernment of charisms is always necessary. **No charism is exempt from being referred and submitted to the Church's shepherds.** "Their office [is] not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good," so that all the diverse and complementary charisms work together "for the common good.”