

## "Charism as an Inspiration for Mission, Vision and Values."

**CHARISM AS AN INSPIRATION FOR MISSION, VISION AND VALUES[1]**  
**Sister Judith Ann Heble, OSB**

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How many of you heard my presentation 11 years ago at the first Pedagogy Conference held in Lisle, Illinois?

How many of you are religious sponsors of a college or university? Trustees? Presidents? Deans? Faculty? Staff? Other?

Hopefully, all of you will see the implications in what I will share for your role as a leader at your college or university.

How many of you have a mission statement? A vision statement?

How many of these statements have been brought up-to-date in the last 1 to 2 years?

How many of you utilize the 10 Hallmarks as the pervading values in your college or university?

Today, I would like to share some ideas on charism as an inspiration for mission, vision and values.

From Wikipedia: "A charism (plural: charismata) From the Greek, *charis* – grace; the divine influence on the receiver's heart, and its reflection in his or her life[2]) A power, generally of a spiritual nature believed to be a freely given gift by the grace of God."

"In the study of church matters, it also refers to the particular grace granted by God to religious founders and their organization which distinguish them from other organizations within the same church." [3] So you can have a charism that is Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, etc. within the same Church.

Charism is a gift of the Spirit that provides the inspiration for the mission, vision and values of an organization.

Any charism that is genuine is a pure gift of God. It is an expression of the Spirit's gift for use and witness in the larger Church – in the world.

Charism attracts people to engage in an overall task together. Charism can be recognized as a lived and living reality. It is a seed planted in fertile ground that takes root, grows and multiplies abundantly, and bears fruit.

A charism can be transplanted to other climates, cultures, and eras. It can transcend what we do at a particular juncture in history. It can transcend ethnic differences, social and economic classes, and several generations alive at a given time. This gift – a charism – has the potential to transform people's lives no matter who or where they are.

In *Evangelica Testificatio*, Pope Paul VI said in 1971 that charism provides a constancy of orientation while allowing for internal growth and change.[4]

Recently Pope Francis met with the Union of Superiors General of religious men

at their General Assembly in Rome. He called them to "Wake up the World" by being "witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! – a counter-cultural way of life that relies on generosity and self-forgetfulness." [5]

When Pope Francis urged religious to Wake up the world!, he further added that this 'radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all.' He said that 'our charisms are not bottles of distilled water. They are more like juice in ferment. We must now take another look at them and see that they are activated by the yeast of an apostolic spirit.' [6]

Charisms do not exist, cannot exist merely for their own sake or merely for the sake of those who embrace them. Rather, they exist for the mission of the Church to the world and the extension of the charism. A charism is our patrimony to and for the Church; to and for the world.

Charisms live only in people, not in documents. They are gifts given to people. They captivate and transform the recipients. No amount of concerted effort can create a charism. It is a pure gift of God.

What is the charism we are speaking about today that should influence the mission, vision and values of a college or university? Where did it come from? It did not just drop out of the sky recently.

Over 1500 years ago a charism was gifted by God to St. Benedict. Over the centuries, that charism was likewise gifted to numerous founding Benedictine women and men as monasticism spread throughout Europe and eventually was brought to the United States in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As a Benedictine, I believe that the charism can be articulated as “to seek God in community life according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*. ”

That same charism given to St. Benedict was gifted to the founding members of your sponsoring community. Those members of the founding community chose to share the charism with your college or university community, to have it permeate and influence every aspect of life and learning in your institution, and to have it pervade the local area in which you are located.

That charism, to seek God in community life, according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, still exists in the lives of the monks and sisters who work at your college or university, in those among you who allow that charism to penetrate the very life and learning of your college or university.

It is in the air you breathe and the water you drink.<sup>[7]</sup> It is the brick and mortar that holds your buildings together. It is the very foundation upon which your college or university was built and upon which it continues to exist. It is visible in the most ordinary and sometimes most extraordinary ways.

To seek God in community according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* is the charism that should inspire your mission, vision and values. It is in community – it is together – not as isolated individuals – that we go into the heart of God.<sup>[8]</sup> (RB 72:12)

No amount of concerted effort can create a charism. Charisms are gifts of the Spirit to and for the Church; to and for the world. Charisms are the work of the Spirit in time and place and in person.

Though charisms live only in people not in documents, nevertheless, rules, constitutions, bylaws, mission and vision statements, articulation of core values, and other fundamental documents are all important. They suggest: If you follow this form of life, you will not be led astray from your true end because the charism that inspires them is of God. But documents can do no more than suggest the cumulative richness of the lived experience and self-understanding of the community that was initially gifted with a charism.

Only people actually embody a charism. If all of the documents were destroyed but the members were still to survive, others would still be able to grasp the full import of the charism through the living members. If all the members were to cease to exist, but the documents survived, could others be able to grasp the import of the charism? Or would they understand it only superficially? Would they be able to embody the charism? Or does the charism cease to exist?

In a time of chaos and disharmony, the living witness of any genuine charism matters. It announces uniquely with specific and recognizable characteristics that to seek God according to the Catholic and Benedictine tradition still has meaning.

To say that your college or university has been inspired by a charism involves a conscious and radical decision. It involves a life-long endeavor to live according to this charism; to allow yourselves to be influenced by it; to permit yourselves to be formed and informed by it, for it and because of it.

The charism belongs to those who here and now allow the charism to color, nuance, undergird all you do and are, your role in your college or university and your very manner of being.

The best expression of the Benedictine charism is that observed, discovered, noticed, and present in living persons, hopefully in you as a leader in your college or university.

If there are fewer monastics on your campus, where does one look? The entire college or university community needs to put down roots deep into the earth, deep into the charism.

The best articulation of the Benedictine charism is found in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Do you know it? Have you read it? Is it important to you in your ministry in your college or university? Is it important in your life?

This “little Rule”[\[9\]](#) (as St. Benedict calls it in RB 73:8) gives us something to hang on to, something to lead us in a given direction, something to point out the road, something to articulate the charism, something to inspire the mission, vision and values of your college or university.

This “little Rule” gives us the essentials of what to seek God in community life looks like.

The Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine education formulated by this Association give you the ten essential values found in the *Rule of St. Benedict*: love, prayer, stability, conversation, obedience, discipline, humility, stewardship, hospitality and community.

These are but some of the Benedictine values in the Rule. The immersion of these into your college or university’s mission and vision is essential. Your immersion into them is a mark of your absorption of the charism, a sign to all that you are a particular Catholic and Benedictine college or university.

Though St. Benedict says it’s but a “little Rule” “for beginners” (RB73:8)[\[10\]](#) not meant to be “harsh and burdensome,” (RB Prologue 46)[\[11\]](#) these Benedictine values may demand a total change, certainly a total focus in the way you relate to life, in the way you function at your college or university. The *Rule of St. Benedict* shows you how to do that.

The Ten Hallmarks transcend time. These values are the filter through which to view the world. They provoke you to see the life around you in fresh, new ways. You cannot keep these values to yourself. You must take them from wherever you have them displayed and share them with the world.

St. Francis said “Preach the Gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words.” Preach these values at all times; if necessary post them somewhere! If these values are not shared, they die. They belong to everyone. They are not private property. They must inspire new life in others.

I think that these ten hallmarks – these Benedictine values – are the “mission” within what is stated as the “mission” of the college or university.

These values summon you to be mindful and to respond in a particular sort of way. They guide your work at your college or university. You bring something different to your ministry because of these values. You bring a Benedictine mindset.

In agreeing to work at your college or university, you agree to accept the Benedictine charism, to put on that Benedictine mindset and permit it to have an impact on all you do in your place and in this time. That charism colors and nuances the mission and vision. You cannot go out and buy a charism. It is a gift shared with you. The charism must captivate you and must permeate your very being. Are you open to it?

Your mission and vision statements must have a clear and concise expression of the unique purpose for which your college or university exists. They express a commitment to special distinctiveness. They set your college or university apart from others.

When you state your mission and vision, are you buying into the Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine education which give a common set of values, a common priority, a common meaning or purpose? A group must have a well-defined

purpose. Len Sperry said in 1990, "If you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else."[\[12\]](#)

Purpose gives direction, meaning and focus. Purpose releases power, energy, passion and determination to reach a specific end. Everything you do needs an end-point, something around which you rally, something around which to focus your efforts.

Proverbs 29:18: "Without vision, the people get out of hand."[\[13\]](#) To what end-point are you deeply committed? What will you make obvious efforts to achieve?

Having a common vision and mission – focusing on common Benedictine values – means that everyone in your college or university knows what you are about and what and where you want to be in ten or more years. Everyone out there should know what you are about. They should know from you that your college or university is Catholic and Benedictine. They should know that you bring a particular value, a particular nuance, a particular Catholic and Benedictine coloring to who you are, to what you do, and to why you do what you do. They should know that you are under the influence of that charism given 1500 years ago to St. Benedict: to seek God in community according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, and that it is very much alive at your college or university today.

Common values are the attraction factor. They are what make you effective, unique, distinctive and purposeful. They give meaning to the existence of your college or university and enlighten the mission and vision.

These Benedictine values have a prophetic character for they are under the inspiration of a gift of the Spirit. They are in many ways counter-cultural. They engage the surrounding culture at its deepest levels and respond to its most profound hungers.

Pope Francis said that "the charism is not a bottle of distilled water," he went on to say that it needs to be lived energetically as well as reinterpreted culturally in a very effective way.[\[14\]](#)

The challenge before you is to bring these Benedictine values to bear on the issues of our world today. Do they? You might want to ask yourself some questions:

- What is going on today that most needs Benedictine attention; that most needs the impact of Benedictine values?
- What is the great Benedictine need in your area; in our world; in this 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- What is it that must be promoted by you now?
- What is most related to the Benedictine charism?
- What is most translatable to your college or university?
- What Benedictine value, concept, idea needs to be brought to your situation?
- What Benedictine values can your college or university give to your campus; to the world of Benedictine colleges and universities; to our society today?

What are the values you hold most dearly as a college or university?

- What are the values most important to you personally?

They may be different from one college or university to the next. After all each college or university is distinct and unique and expresses the charism in a particular way.

Any commitment to something is worth the commitment of your lives, not just part of you, but all of you.

It is important to evaluate regularly: Did we do it? Did we live it? Did we be it?

Does commitment to these values cost money? Someone may be hired to give direct service to this purpose or mission. Someone may be appointed as Mission Integration Director, but, that person can do only so much.

It is the voluntary effort each one makes to internalize the mission, vision and values that will have them impact all that you do. Each one of you enables the focus to be possible regardless of your role in your college or university. Each one of you must bring that special Benedictine mindset to everything. This is what it means to have the Benedictine charism provide the inspiration for the mission and vision.

The rest of life and education does not cease. You go on living and working day after day after day. But the values – the mission within the Mission – becomes the focus, colors who you are, colors your activities, colors your college or university with that special rainbow of Benedictine values.

So that everyone within your college and university, especially the students, will say: This college or university is that place where the people are known for one or another of those values.

The corporate commitment to the mission, vision and values gives focused purpose, gives identity, bonds a community around a common goal, and gives the community a prophetic presence in society.

Fortunately, you don't have to build another building for this corporate commitment. Corporate commitment to the mission, vision and values is not found in a building, but in you. Your corporate commitment to the mission, vision and values will enable your college or university to continue to develop, change, grow and even expand without losing that centerpiece of its life.

Leadership must be the embodiment of the mission, vision and values, expressing visibly that the Benedictine charism is very much at the heart of life in your college or university.

"The university president is ultimately responsible to the board that the institution's mission is achieved and remains vibrant over time."[\[15\]](#) The Mission Integration Committee of the Board is established "to preserve and govern the religious purposes of the institution."[\[16\]](#) This committee serves "as the board's internal check-and-balance that the mission is being successfully achieved."[\[17\]](#)

Though it is the primary responsibility of the president, you are all leaders in your college or university in some way. What fits for the president, fits also for you. Your function is to subscribe to the mission, vision and values, to identify them, to internalize them, to model them. You are to instill, empower, impel and enable the mission, vision and values to be present and visible at every level of your college or university. You as a leader determine the relationship of everyone to these values and hold everyone accountable for living and instilling them. All of you must buy into these values. The mission, vision and values will not kill you. In fact, they just might make you a better person to be around.

For many years, your college or university has been influenced and inspired by that ancient charism – by that ancient, rich patrimony: to seek God in community according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*. You must continue to be immersed in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, to inculcate the history, culture and values from which the *Rule of St. Benedict* emerges. The more you do, the more you will also grow in appreciation of the spirit and commitment and story that brought the ministry to life in your locale.

It is the *Rule of St. Benedict* that gives the essential definition and character to your college or university. It offers "enduring principles and attitudes far beyond whatever culture embodies them."[\[18\]](#) Read it; study it; make it a part of your life. You can't just say, "I've gone through the *Rule of St. Benedict*." The question is: Has the *Rule* gone through you?

"Once embraced, the principles and values of the *Rule* will guide your way through whatever the psychological fads or religious practices or social philosophies of the time that offer comfort but lack staying power."[\[19\]](#)

"No matter how far a group goes in its attempts to be relevant to the modern world, it keeps one foot in an ancient one at all times. It is this world that pulls us back, time and time again, to the tried and true, to the really real, to a Beyond beyond ourselves. It is to these enduring principles that every age looks."[\[20\]](#)

This is your greatest challenge and your greatest opportunity, to pass on the heart and soul of what it means to be Catholic and Benedictine.

Take pride in the privilege of having been entrusted with carrying on that Benedictine charism – that Patrimony that your founders entrusted to you to instill and promote at all levels and campuses of your college or university.

**[1]** Information on “charism” taken from McDonough, Elizabeth, OP, *The Church and Consecrated Life*,

“Charisms and Religious Life”, *The Best of the Review-5*, 1996.

**[2]** Strong, James, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN:

Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001, ISBN 0-7852-4539-1), p. 270.

**[3]** Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charism>.

**[4]** Paulus P.P.VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*,#11, Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Paul VI on the

Renewal of Religious Life according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council, June 29, 1971.

**[5]** Kodell, Fr. Jerome, OSB, “Challenges for Consecrated Life”, *Benedictines*, LXX:1, 2017, Spring/Summer, p.7.

**[6]** Op. cit., p.11.

**[7]** Education within the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition (as edited and being used by Saint John’s

University), Prologue.

**[8]** Fry, Timothy, OSB, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press,

1982), Chapter 72:12, p. 95.

**[9]** Fry, op.cit.

**[10]** Ibid.

**[11]** Ibid., Prologue 46, p. 18.

**[12]** Sperry, Len, *Human Development*, Winter, 1990, Vol. 11, #4.

**[13]** Jones, Alexander, Gen. Ed., *The Jerusalem Bible, Reader’s Edition*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and

Company, Inc.,1968), Proverbs 29:18.

**[14]** Kodell, Op. Cit., p.7.

**[15]** Holtschneider, Dennis H., CM, *The Mission Committee*, (Washington, DC, Association of Governing Boards of

Universities and Colleges), 2015, p. 4.

**[16]** Ibid., p. 1

**[17]** Ibid., p. 2

**[18]** Chittister, Joan, *The Rule of Benedict, Insights for the Ages*, (New York, NY: The Crossroad

Publishing Co.), 1992, p. 49.

**[19]** Ibid., p. 50

**[20]** Ibid.