

When I'm teaching about charisms, I often reassure people that God won't suddenly remove a long-term charism and replace it with something totally different. No one goes to bed a **happily married administrator** and wakes up the next morning as a **celibate exorcist**. But in the last month, I've been reminded that God can throw you some astonishing curves. God will not radically alter your charisms while you sleep, but He's quite capable of altering your *life* with dizzying speed.

The **Spiritual Gifts Discernment Program** has grown dramatically over the past 3 ½ years. As I write this in the summer of 1997, five different parishes in the Seattle archdiocese have either begun or are planning to begin parish-wide gifts discernment programs in the next year. Although we've done almost no advertising, the program has begun to attract inquiries from all over the United States. We've received orders for Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventories from New York, Texas, and Australia. The sheer volume of the interest has required me to begin to train other people to conduct gifts interviews and teach the program.

In the midst of

all this, exciting things have also been happening at my parish, **Blessed Sacrament** in Seattle.

Blessed Sacrament has been run for the last 80 years by Dominican friars. Dedicated to preaching and "conversion by means of the truth," they are men with a mission. The recent pastor, **Fr. Michael Sweeney, O.P.**, is no exception. When he came to Seattle four years ago, he had a deep desire to

reach the lapsed and unchurched. In the spirit of St. Dominic, he found it intolerable that the Church should be ineffective in this most critical area. Although he had had no previous contact with the charismatic renewal, he was impressed by the fact that many of the

parishioners who shared his concerns were **charismatics**. The plot thickened when Fr. Michael was put in charge of planning for all Dominican parishes of the Western Province, which covers the west coast of the United States.

Two years ago Fr. Michael called a small group of parishioners together to study Church teaching on the **role of the laity**. Out of our discussions came the idea of having a conference for all Dominican pastors of the west coast that would explore how to make Dominican parishes centers of evangelization. To my astonishment, Fr. Michael, who had never heard me speak, asked me to address the pastors on role of the laity and of the parish in the Dominican mission of evangelization. Nothing in my past life as a Baptist had prepared me for the prospect of speaking to 35 Dominican priests! My knees were shaking uncontrollably when I rose to speak that November, but I might have never made it to the podium if I had understood the long-term results of that half hour talk. The Dominicans were excited and challenged by the real possibility of their parishes becoming **centers of evangelization** and were eager to make it happen.

Meanwhile, our experience at Blessed Sacrament was helping us see the enormous creativity possible when the clergy and laity begin to **collaborate** together in the Church's evangelizing mission to the world. We also realized that while priests and religious receive significant **formation** for their mission, lay people seldom receive anything beyond a basic preparation for the sacraments. Priests have seminaries, sisters and brothers go through an extended novitiate, but where could

lay apostles receive their formation? The parish was the most obvious, most accessible **house of formation** for lay Catholics. We began to explore what it would take to make Blessed Sacrament such a house of formation. Fr. Michael quickly recognized how essential the discernment of the charisms of each parishioner was if we were serious about fostering collaboration. And so the Spiritual Gifts Discernment Program became one of the key pieces of the developing lay formation program at our parish.

Then, out of the blue, we received a stunning blow. Fr. Michael's Provincial received a letter from Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, **Master General** of the whole Dominican Order, asking that he transfer to Vancouver, B.C. Since the development of a lay formation program in our parish was the result of a true **collaboration** between parishioners and pastor, it seemed nearly impossible to continue our work, which was just beginning to show fruit.

Fr. Michael stayed up all night writing a letter to Fr. Timothy, explaining our situation and describing our work (including an extensive paragraph about the

Gifts program) and asking him to reconsider his decision in light of this new information.

Two days later, we were thrilled to learn that the Provincial had received a fax from the Master General, asking Fr. Michael to stay in Seattle and continue the work of lay formation, which Fr. Timothy called "**important and fascinating.**" Fr. Michael's Provincial asked him to give up the pastorate in order to work full-time developing the lay formation program, asked me to continue to work with Fr.

Michael, and offered us a start-up grant to get going. Within a single week, we had experienced the sudden death of all our hopes and an equally dramatic resurrection. As I told my friends, the whole experience made me realize that I had become more Catholic than I knew. I had an overwhelming desire to walk barefoot to some ancient and distant shrine in thanksgiving to God for his deliverance!

As of this writing, we are in the process of incorporating the brand-new **Catherine of Siena Institute: Center for Co-Responsibility in Ministry** as a program of the Western Dominican Province. In addition to the Gifts Program, we are working on parish-based resources on the lay office and mission, collaboration between the clergy and the laity, discernment and moral decision-making, and creative evangelism.

One of the reasons that I am excited about our new work is that it will help make accessible to parishes and dioceses throughout the larger Church the greatest gift of the renewal: the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through the charisms and lives of ordinary Catholics!

When I contemplate my responsibilities

as a pastor it occurs to me, now and then, that my priestly formation was inadequate. I pursued studies in philosophy and theology. I ought to have had courses in architecture ("The mullions are cracking and need immediate attention!" "... What, exactly, is a mullion?"), in accounting and economics, in management, and in (horrible term that it is) human resources. The parish is meant to be a **crucible** for discerning and acting upon all of the most significant issues of modern life (see *Christifideles Laici*); it is far more likely to be a maelstrom of administrative and personnel misadventures. This, at any rate, is the problem as I see it: how to emphasize the **mission of the Church** to the world while maintaining a very complex structure of human needs and relationships called a parish, and pay for it.

My Order was founded to preach, most especially to the unchurched. One thing has become utterly clear to me: if we are to **evangelize** our world, we must

mobilize our

laity. I cannot afford to think of the laity as a chaotic agglomeration of personal and pastoral "needs"; they must be my collaborators in a common work. Having met Sherry—and so many others in our parish and beyond with whom I have begun the adventure of a real collaboration—I am happy to report that "needs" are no longer our agenda. Our laity have been endowed with **supernatural gifts** which, from a pastor's point of view, are ripe for the harvest. We are to work together, not simply to administer and maintain our parishes, but to bring Christ to the world.

G.K. Chesterton once remarked that

Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* is a book which everyone has a vague sense that he or she has read. I fear that the same thing can be said of the documents of the **Second Vatican Council**: everyone has a vague sense that he or she has read them. We hear of the "spirit" of Vatican II. When, however, we "take up and read" we discover that the council fathers have offered us a **blueprint** for the work of the Church in the modern world. We discover, for example, that to govern a parish is not merely to administer the community; rather, it is to discern and call up the **charisms** which are present among the laity in order to commission them for the work of the Church. We discover that there are two essential expressions of Christ's ministry in the Church, equal in dignity: that of the hierarchy and that of the laity. We discover that pastors are not merely to delegate tasks to the laity, but are to **collaborate** with them (I delegate to a subordinate, but I collaborate with a colleague, an equal). We also discover that there is a great deal of work to be done if our parishes are truly to realize the spirit—and the letter!—of the Council.

This is, very simply, the task which we are setting for ourselves: to implement the teachings of the Council and of Paul VI and John Paul II through a formation program which can be accessible, through every parish and Newman Center, to every Catholic. Then we will see what we can accomplish together.