

Concrete Gifts of Grace for Spiritual People in a Developing Church: An Exegetical Study of the Noun χάρισμα (chárisma) in First Corinthians

Dons concretos da graça para pessoas espirituais em uma igreja em desenvolvimento: um estudo exegetico do substantivo χάρισμα (chárisma) em 1 Coríntios

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Abstract

This article on First Corinthians 12 examines the meaning of the noun *chárisma*, best translated as a “particular gift of grace”, in relation to the divine *cháris* “grace” at work in the lives of the Corinthian believers for the edification of their developing church. This significant topic, so central to the apostle Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit at work in the struggling community at Corinth, still has many insights to offer the globalized Church of our day. First, it presents a general overview of the importance of the *charismata* by means of a brief lexical study of the noun and its various occurrences in the NT. Second, it then focuses specifically on the First Letter to the Corinthians. The author begins by examining the dynamically growing church of the Corinthians as a particular Christian community under construction, yet one also marked by many divisions and pastoral challenges. He then proposes a quick reading of the two most relevant biblical passages, 1Cor 12:1-11 and 12:28-31. Third, this article proposes various concluding reflections on the importance of the particular gifts of grace in First Corinthians, both then and now. The Second Vatican Council underscores the significant role of *charismata* in the Church, specifically in paragraph 12 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium). Pope Francis’s and Pope Leo XIV’s ongoing call for a more united, solidary and synodal Church clearly finds its foundation in the teaching of the Apostle to the Gentiles, especially as articulated in First Corinthians 12.

Keywords

Grace (*cháris*).
Particular gift of grace (*chárisma*).
Pauline ecclesiology.
Pauline pneumatology.

Resumo

Este artigo sobre 1 Coríntios 12 examina o significado do substantivo *chárisma*, melhor traduzido como “dom especial da graça”, em relação à *cháris* divina, a “graça” que atua na vida dos crentes de Corinto para a edificação de sua igreja em desenvolvimento. Este tema significativo, tão central para a compreensão do apóstolo Paulo sobre o Espírito Santo em ação na comunidade em dificuldades de Corinto, ainda tem muitas ideias a oferecer à Igreja globalizada de nossos dias. Primeiro, ele apresenta uma visão geral da importância do *charísmata* por meio de um breve estudo lexical do substantivo e suas várias ocorrências no NT. Em segundo lugar, ele se concentra especificamente na Primeira Carta aos Coríntios. O autor começa examinando a igreja de Corinto, em crescimento dinâmico, como uma comunidade cristã específica em construção, mas também marcada por muitas divisões e desafios pastorais. Em seguida, ele propõe uma leitura rápida das duas passagens bíblicas mais relevantes, 1Cor 12,1-11 e 12,28-31. Em terceiro lugar, este artigo propõe várias reflexões finais sobre a importância dos dons particulares da graça na Primeira Carta aos Coríntios, tanto naquela época quanto hoje. O Concílio Vaticano II sublinha o papel significativo dos *charísmata* na Igreja, especificamente no parágrafo 12 da Constituição Dogmática sobre a Igreja (*Lumen Gentium*). O apelo constante do Papa Francisco e do Papa Leão XIV por uma Igreja mais unida, solidária e sinodal encontra claramente o seu fundamento no ensinamento do Apóstolo dos Gentios, especialmente tal como articulado em 1 Coríntios 12.

Palavras-chave

Graça (*cháris*).
Dom particular da graça (*chárisma*).
Eclesiologia paulina.
Pneumatologia paulina.

Introduction

The Importance of charísmata, then and now

What precisely does the Apostle Paul teach about the numerous “concrete gifts of grace” (χαρίσματα, *charísmata*) which believers have freely received from God through the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ? An exegetical inquiry into the use and meaning of the New Testament lemma χάρισμα (*chárisma*) poses a challenging task even for the most competent Biblical scholar. After centuries of relative silence on the topic, the word “charism” has now entered into our religious vocabulary in the Roman Catholic Church thanks primarily to Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Other significant ecclesial events in the twentieth century also helped bring the question to center stage: the Pentecostal movement among Protestants, the Charismatic renewal among Roman Catholics, and the

publication of another important decree of the Second Vatican Council, i.e. *Perfectae Caritatis*, on the renewal of religious life.

- Among Protestants. Now a worldwide phenomenon, this movement begins with a small group of Methodists in the United States of America who, thanks to their preacher the Rev. Perham, desired to search the Scriptures in their desire to grow in holiness (See Sullivan, 1982, p. 47-55). Their attention soon focuses on the first Pentecost as described by Luke in Acts 2:1-12. Agnese Ozman's baptism in the Spirit and her subsequent speaking in tongues through the imposition of hands took place on January 1, 1901, in the state of Kansas (USA). Within days, thirty others in their group had also received the gift of tongues; within a few more years, their new form of worship had spread around the United States and Europe.

- Among Roman Catholics. The classic work on the origins of this Catholic movement was written by Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., then a professor of theology at the Gregorian University (See Sullivan, 1982, p. 56-75). In these pages, the author first proposes a brief history of the movement and then an in-depth analysis of various Pauline texts on charisms. He treats especially the gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues and healings (all of which are developed and explained by the Apostle in First Corinthians) and offers a cogent and well-balanced interpretation of these gracious gifts.

- Vatican Council II. Truly a ground-breaking decree, *Perfectae Caritatis* decreed clear norms to every religious family in the Church, calling them to continuous, ongoing renewal in their witness of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) as well as renewed faithfulness to the spirit of their founders. As a result, the word "charism" quickly enters into our post-conciliar vocabulary, along with the Italian word *aggiornamento* (updating, revision, renewal). For decades, U.S. Jesuits were invited to "work out our aggiornamento" thanks to *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*. Under the able direction of Fr. George Ganss, S.J., the first issue of this new review appeared in September 1969. It represents a significant response on the part of the Society of Jesus in the United States to implement the teachings of Vatican II under the leadership of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit Superior General at that time.

Even the new code of Canon Law, promulgated by Pope John Paul II on January 25, 1983, indicates that the charisms of each religious Institute in the Catholic Church now constitute norms to be followed and implemented by men and women religious according to the unique witness and gifts of their founders.¹ Yet even if a significant biblical word like *chárisma* now finds its place in our contemporary ecclesial lexicon, there is often little clarity about its exact meaning in the New Testament.

Yet a quick glimpse at a Biblical concordance reveals its unmistakable Pauline origin and importance: the noun χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is found seventeen times in the New Testament, with sixteen occurrences in the Pauline corpus and only one in the First Letter of Peter (cf. 1Pt 4:10). Hence, we can conclude without hesitation that the noun (translated variously by scholars as “gift, free gift, gift of grace, grace-gift, special grace, concrete expression of grace”) is exclusively Pauline. The Apostle to the Gentiles was the first to use this Greek word, infusing it with its Christian meaning. St. Paul, in fact, always wanted to promote the cultivation of diverse special gifts in the various Christian communities which he had founded and visited during the course of his missionary journeys around the Roman world (cf. Rom 1:11). In our search for greater clarity, we begin our inquiry into what the missionary from Tarsus teaches about particular gifts of grace with a brief lexical study followed by a short catalog of the noun’s occurrences in the Pauline corpus.

χάρισμα (*chárisma*) – a Brief Lexical Study

We begin with a brief lexical investigation (Berger, 1993, p. 460-461; Harrington, 2010, p. 156-164; Vanhoye, 2011, p. 32-35). The Greek noun χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is derived from the verb χαρίζομαι (*charízomai*), “to say or to do something pleasing (to someone),” “to show oneself generous,” “to give a gift (to someone).” The suffix -μα expresses the result of an action, in this case the result of the action of giving, i.e. “a gift, a proof of favor, a

¹ The Code of Canon Law quotes Rom 12:6, which contains the Greek word *charisma*, and translates it into Latin as *donationes*. See e.g. Canon §577: “*donationes differentes secundum gratiam quae data est*”.

benefit.” The verb also gave birth to another noun, χαρισμός (*charismós*), a much-rarer word that means “the action of doing or bestowing a favor,” “the action of giving a gift” (this noun is created by adding the suffix -μός). In the first century, Greek speakers in the Roman Empire easily grasped the meaning of χάρισμα (*chárisma*) and just as easily understood its place in its semantic field. In short, χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is closely related to the verb it derives from, i.e. χαρίζομαι (*charízomai*), as well as to the nouns χάρις (*cháris*) “grace” and χαρισμός (*charismós*). Other related words belonging to χάρισμα (*chárisma*)’s family tree: εὐχαριστῶ (*eucharistô*) “to thank”, “to give thanks”, along with εὐχαρίστος (*eucharístos*), χαριστερίον (*charisteríon*) and especially εὐχαριστία (*eucharistía*) “Eucharist”, another important Greek word that today also belongs to our post-conciliar vocabulary, as well as the verb χαίρειν (*chaírein*) “to rejoice” and χάρα (*chára*) “joy”. Hence, the English words “charism” and “charisma” come from the Greek χάρισμα (*chárisma*), a word that always kept its general meaning of “something given out of generosity”, “the effect of an act of benevolence”, “a generous gift”, “a gift freely and graciously given”. In English translations of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, we find the translation “special grace” (Sullivan, 1982, p. 12-13). Also in his significant monograph on this topic, Sullivan proposes another possible translation of *charísmata* as “grace-gifts” (Sullivan, 1982, p. 29). Hence in the New Testament, the noun χάρισμα (*chárisma*) refers exclusively to divine gifts that are related to God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other words, human beings are not capable of giving χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) to one another, since this gift-giving is strictly a divine initiative.

However, since Greek has another word for gift, i.e., δωρεά (*dōreá*), and since St. Paul also uses this noun in his letters, It is thought wise, for the sake of clarity, to make a distinction in English between the two nouns. Hence, in order to capture the linguistic relationship between the Greek nouns χάρισμα (*chárisma*) and χάρις (*cháris*) “grace”, It is believed that a more precise translation of the term χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is a “particular gift of grace”. The English noun “gift” (= “showing divine grace”), and so this translation will help remind us of the essential role of God’s grace both for

Paul's theology in general and for our study of charisms in particular. In his article in the *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, Fee offers another excellent translation: "The noun has been formed from *charis* ("grace"), referring to a concrete expression of grace, which is what it means in every instance in Paul" (Fee, 1993, p. 340). Later, in the revised edition of his commentary, Fee will translate it variably as "gifts, gracious giftings, manifestations (of the Spirit)" (Fee, 2014, p. 649-650). Given the plurality of translations in the scholarly literature, It is chosen to translate as a "concrete gift of grace" so as to underscore its particularity, its gratuitous nature and also its intrinsic provenance in divine grace.

The Occurrences of χάρισμα (chárisma) in the New Testament

Another introductory observation before we analyze the Biblical text: Where precisely does the noun χάρισμα (*chárisma*) occur in the Pauline corpus? (Vanhoye, 2011, p. 35-42). We noted above that the noun appears sixteen times. Χάρισμα (*chárisma*) in fact is found in only five of Paul's letters: in three undisputed—First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Romans, and in two Pastorals—First Timothy and Second Timothy. The first three epistles are unquestionably authentic, having been written by Paul in flesh and blood, while the Pauline authenticity of the final two is vigorously debated by Bible scholars today. The apostle to the Gentiles always associates it with two other key words, *cháris* (grace) and *pneúma* (Spirit), in his presentation of God's salvific activity. The term occurs only once in Second Corinthians (cf. 2Cor 1:11), First Timothy (cf. 1Tm 4:14) and Second Timothy (cf. 2Tm 1:6), while χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is found much more frequently in the two remaining Protopauline letters: six times in Romans (cf. Rom 1:11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6) and seven times in First Corinthians (cf. 1Cor 1:7; 7:7; 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31).

In an effort to limit our work for the purposes of this article, I have decided to focus on the meaning of χάρισμα (*chárisma*) in First Corinthians. This undisputed letter merits our full attention primarily due to the word's highest concentration in the Pauline corpus. Conzelmann deftly summarizes

Paul's teaching on gifts in chapters 12-14: "The Corinthians stress tongues, but Paul shows the ambivalence of ecstasy, makes confession of the *kýrios* as the norm, argues that God gives individual gifts for the church's upbuilding, views these as future possession in provisional form, and finds a *charisma* in everything that edifies" (Conzelmann, 1985, 1306). It occurs for the first time in the letter's salutation: "so that you are not lacking in any grace-gift (*chárisma*) as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Cor 1:7). Paul always introduces the main themes he intends to treat in his letters' thanksgiving section, and First Corinthians is no exception. In this initial section we note that mention of concrete grace-gift in v. 7 follows his mention of divine "grace" (*cháris*) in v. 4: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God (τῇ χάριτι τοῦ θεοῦ) that has been given you in Christ Jesus." Hence for the letter sender, "God's grace (1Cor 1:4) finds concrete expression in the rich number of *charismata* he has bestowed on this community (1Cor 1:5, 7)." Paul presents the first example of one of these special graces in the term's second appearance in the letter in 7:7 in his detailed description of the calls to celibacy and marriage: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a concrete gift (*chárisma*) from God, one having one kind and another a different kind." By bestowing his various *charismata*, God calls some believers in Christ to the married life and others to virginity.

In fact, chapter 12—with its five occurrences—offers the most informative and instructive pericope on *χάρισμα* (*chárisma*) in the entire New Testament. In 1Cor 12 the noun is found in the plural five times, twice at the beginning of the chapter (cf. vv. 4, 9) and three times at its end (cf. vv. 28, 30, 31). Thus, throughout this important text, the founding father of the Corinthian church makes a point of insisting on the diversity and plurality of the numerous concrete gifts of grace that his addressees have already received by divine favor. But there is a still more important reason for us to focus on chapter 12, and it is profoundly theological: Paul highlights the relationship between *χαρίσματα* (*charismata*) and the Holy Spirit only in vv. 1-11, 28-31. In these significant brief passages, Paul teaches the Corinthians that God bestows various divine gifts through the agency of the Holy Spirit to

those who believe in Jesus Christ. The list of the grace-gift manifestations of the Spirit in vv. 9, 28, 30 indicate specific examples of physical healing among the Corinthians. In v. 4, however, the diverse varieties of *chárismata* refers to a general manifestation of the Spirit at work in the believing community. Lastly, the occurrence of the term in v. 31, the chapter's concluding verse, has created a *crux interpretum* for exegetes over the centuries: "But strive for the gracious gifts (*charísmata*). And I will show you a still more excellent way." Does the plural *charísmata* here refer to the preceding list of believers, ministries and Spirit manifestations as listed in chapter 12, or rather does it introduce his argument on community order and intelligibility which Paul will develop in chapter 14? We note that 14:1 also uses a verb in the imperative mood: "Pursue love and strive for the gifts of the Spirit, and especially that you may prophesy." After his stirring encomium of love in chapter 13, in 14:1 now replaces the plural noun *charismata* with the plural noun *ta pneumatika*, literally "the things of the Spirit," which clearly are concerned about the Spirit's many manifestations among the Corinthians during their worship. This is precisely the case also in 12:4-11. Thus for Fee, throughout chapter 12 the term *chárisma* "seems to be limited to Spirit manifestations in the community, and thus probably means something like 'concrete expressions of grace manifested through the Spirit's empowering'" (Fee, 1993, p. 340). The apostle to the Gentiles assigns a clear and distinct role to the Spirit who distributes divine gifts as he pleases in the Body of Christ. As a result of the Holy Spirit's activity in the divine giving, the χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) can thus be understood as "particular spiritual grace gifts", thus the exegetical basis of our common understanding of charisms as spiritual gifts.

Before presenting our quick reading of the Pauline verses which we intend to analyze, it will be helpful to give first a brief discussion of the occasion of First Corinthians and then literary composition of 1Cor 12 in light of its larger literary unit chapter 12-14 and indeed in its unique place and purpose in light of the entire letter.

First Corinthians

The Church of the Corinthians: a Local Community under Construction Marked by Many Divisions and Pastoral Challenges

There is now broad consensus among Scripture scholars with regard to the correct interpretation of a biblical text: it is always essential to appreciate the cultural background and particular circumstances that occasioned its writing (Vanhoye, 2011, p. 53-56). Our present study of First Corinthians offers us the chance to apply that principle to the text we wish to exegete. Paul dictated personal letters to his communities with the intent to explain his Gospel in a more detailed way and to exhort his addressees to live out their new lives in Christ in greater conformity to Gospel values. The founder of the church in Corinth wrote this long and substantial letter from Ephesus, capital of the province of Asia, sometime in the spring before the feast of Pentecost (cf. 1Cor 16:8). But in what year? The dates proposed by exegetes today oscillate between the years 52-57. However, it is preferable the later dating, since it closely conforms to the traditional chronology of Paul's life. In his commentary, Fitzmyer writes: "The letter that is commonly called 'First Corinthians' was written from Ephesus towards the end of Paul's three-year ministry there, either toward the end of A.D. 56 or, more likely, at the beginning of A.D. 57, before Pentecost" (Fitzmyer, 2008, p. 48). At the start of his epistle, in chapters 1-4, the letter sender had already cautioned his community about the dangers of their being divided into separate groups and factions. One verse in particular captures his words of warning to the church: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose" (1Cor 1:10). It seems that the Corinthian Christians shared the same consumer values of their fellow citizens thanks to the competitive market economy of their prosperous commercial city. In his superb commentary, Thiselton explains the important role Corinth's market economy had on the moral values of its residents, especially with regard to their striving for financial wellbeing and ever-greater social status. It seems that many in the young Christian community there still shared in these values and thus also brought this competitive spirit to spiritual matters as well (Thiselton, 2000, p. 3-4). As

a result, individuals and groups sought to build themselves up at the expense of the community and the common good. In sum, in spite of their baptism into the body of Christ, the Corinthians were still thinking and acting egoistically and inconsiderately: they were not yet concerned enough about the common good of their brothers and sisters in their small yet growing believing community.

In order for us to properly understand 1Cor 12:1-11, it is necessary to read this passage in its broader literary context, namely as the introduction to the larger block of text as found in chapters 12-14. Paul reveals his precise intentions only at the end of this longer passage when he describes the actual pastoral problem of the Corinthian church that necessitated his apostolic intervention: “What then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1Cor 14:26). With these words, Paul merely suggests in an implicit way the particular matter that was causing all the problems in their church. He goes on to spell it out in his concluding command: “Let all things be done for building up” (1Cor 14:26), in addition to his instructions that follow on speaking in tongues and prophecy. In short, Paul is criticizing the Corinthians’ behavior when they gather together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. It seems that speaking in tongues had become a sort of status symbol among Christians in this very status conscious Greco-Roman city (Collins, 1999, p. 442).

In short, he is not primarily concerned with their personal lives as Christians or with their prayer as individuals. Rather, the Apostle is troubled by their community gatherings that tended to give the worshipers more opportunities to contend and compete with one another out of petty jealousy and rivalry. It seems that some boasted of their superiority, believing to have received more important and exotic concrete gifts from God, while others suffered from a sense of inferiority, believing to be unworthy and less important as a result (Harrington, 2010, p. 157-158). It was in fact the Corinthians’ unbridled competition and their narrow-minded struggles for advantage and vainglory that seriously put at risk the unity of their fledgling community and the good order of their worship as believers in Jesus Christ. The proud and self-righteous behavior of the few engendered confusion,

friction and conflict for the many. In contrast, the founder of their local church intends to teach them the crucial importance of group harmony, fraternal solidarity and Christian unity. It seems that the Corinthians were especially intent on showing off two of their grace-gifts, i.e. speaking in tongues and interpreting them.

Paul, for his part, wants to prize the importance of these two gifts of the Holy Spirit, but he does so by putting them in a much broader liturgical and theological context which underscores instead the community's ongoing edification. Although all particular gifts are important in themselves, some of the χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) are more important than others when it comes to ecclesial harmony. In a word, what builds up the community must always take precedence over what builds up an individual. Paul will reinforce this notion of “building up/edification” even more in chapter 14 where the verb occurs three times (cf. 1Cor 14:4[2x], 17) and the noun, four (cf. 1Cor 14:3, 5, 12, 26). Since one day prophecies will cease and tongues will be stilled (cf. 1Cor 13:8), Paul invites his addressees to focus instead on the most important gifts of all: faith, hope and love, “and the greatest of these is love” (1Cor 13:13). Chapter 13, perhaps the most famous and beloved passage in the entire Pauline corpus, illustrates the rhetorical expression of praise called *encomium*. In his dictionary, Marchese gives this helpful definition: “Espressione di elogio, in versi o in prosa, affine al panegirico. Primo esempio di tale genere è l'*Encomio di Evagora* di Isocrate.

La letteratura encomiastica ha per lo più tratti oratori e retorici spiccati. Etim.: dal gr. *enkómios* = canto (in occasione di una festa)” (Marchese, 1995, p. 91). In this central chapter of the marcounit, Paul personifies the virtue of love of God and neighbor and praises its exercise among believers in Jesus Christ. In short, all the different χαρίσματα (*charísmata*), true authentic grace-gifts given to individual believers through the agency of the Spirit, must always be reevaluated and reappraised in light of the three theological virtues given by the Father to all believers in Jesus Christ (Brodeur, 2013, p. 63-72). In a word, love is eternal, perduring into the life to come, while the other concrete expressions of grace are ephemeral and thus limited to this passing age.

The Literary Composition of 1Cor 12-14

Our observations and insights so far can help us make further sense of 1Cor 12-14 and appreciate its concentric composition (A, B, A') (Basta, 2020, p. 137-138; Manzi, 2013, p. 170; Vanhoye, 2011, p. 50-53).

A. Spiritual gifts in general: diversity and unity 12:1-30

B. Love is the most important gift of all 13:1-13

A'. Two gifts in particular: speaking in tongues and prophecy 14:1-40

In order to develop his argumentation Paul uses five interconnected concentric compositions in 1Cor 12-14 (Manzi, 2013, p. 168-207)².

1Cor 12-14 Gifts of grace and love

- 1Cor 12 The question of spiritual phenomena in their diversity and unity

- vv. 1-11 Different gifts of the one Spirit of Christ

a The Spirit's activity in the confession of Christ vv. 1-3

b Different gifts of grace and the oneness of the Triune God vv. 4-6

a' The Spirit's activity by means of personal grace-gifts vv. 7-11

- vv. 12-31 Different members to form the one Body of Christ

a vv. 12-14 Similarity: like the members of a body, so the baptized in Christ

b vv. 15-20 Nonsense of the inferiority complex of the weak

c vv. 21 Nonsense of the superiority complex of the strong

b' vv. 22-27 The care of God and Christians for the weak

a' vv. 28-31 Application of the similarity: let each one perform his function in the Body of Christ

- 1Cor 13 Praise of love

a vv. 1-3 Without love, the gifts of grace do not benefit

b vv. 4-7 Portrait of love

a' vv. 8-13 Without the gifts of grace, love remains

- 1Cor 14 Two problematic spiritual gifts: glossolalia (gift of tongues) and prophecy

- vv. 1-25 Different gifts of grace and the edification of the one Church

a vv. 1-5 Superiority of prophecy over the gift of tongues for the edification of the Church

b vv. 6-11 Examples on the limits of the gift of tongues

c vv. 12-13 Invitation to seek gifts of grace for the edification of the Church

b' vv. 14-19 Other examples on the limits of the gift of tongues

² For the following concentric divisions, subdivisions, and section titles, it is closely followed F. Manzi's commentary, making only a few minor adaptations while translating his text.

a' vv. 20-25 Demonstration of the superiority of prophecy for the edification of the Church

- vv. 26-40 Ecclesial use of the different gifts of grace

a v. 26 Let everything happen for the edification of the Church

b vv. 27-39 Practical directives

a' v. 40 Let everything happen with decorum and in order

A Quick Reading of the Biblical text

1Cor 12:1-11

The interpretation of the brief introduction (vv. 1-3) of the chapter has proven rather problematic for many exegetes, since the connection between the three verses is not at all clear. Nevertheless, v. 1 plainly presents the theme that Paul wants to develop in the next three chapters: “Now in regard to spiritual things/persons (*tōn pneumatikōn*),” and the introductory formula used here appears frequently in the letter (cf. 1Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). Yet even in this introductory verse the precise meaning of its key word *tōn pneumatikōn* has presented a *crux interpretum* for scholars over the centuries. If we understand it as neuter, then it refers to “spiritual things,” i.e. the spiritual gifts of grace Paul is about to treat in the verses to follow³. If instead we understand it as masculine, then it refers to “spiritual ones”, i.e. spiritual people or spiritual persons, those who have received the Holy Spirit thanks to their faith in Jesus Christ⁴.

The Apostle already used this adjectival noun with this meaning earlier in the letter: “The spiritual person (*pneumatikós*) can discern all things, yet is not himself subject to judgement by others” (2:15). The hypothesis preferred is of the minority becomes it also forms a clear *inclusio* with the conclusion of Paul’s argumentation in 14:37, where *pneumatikós* again clearly refers to a spiritual person, a member of the church. The antithetical transition between the end of v. 1, “I do not want you to be ignorant” and the start of v. 2, “You know that...” allows the letter sender to praise his addressees for what they know and instruct them about what they do not yet know. The figure of antithesis, “This kind of style is pleasing, because contraries are easily understood and even more so when placed side by side, and also because

³ The majority of commentators and translations seem to prefer this interpretation.

⁴ This is the interpretation of the minority of commentators and translations.

antithesis resembles a syllogism; for refutation is a bringing together of contraries”, was well known to Greek speakers at the time, and it permeates the Apostle’s detailed explanation of spiritual realities (Aristotle, 1926, p. 3.9.8).

The disclosure formula of v. 1 with its double negative, “I do not want you to be ignorant,” offers a fine example of the rhetorical figure of litotes⁵, which serves to highlight his desire to teach his fledgling church about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a detailed and comprehensive way. Unfortunately, the Greek text of v. 2 is uncertain and it still poses a challenge for textual critics. At any rate, this example of rhetorical antithesis serves to heighten the stark contrast between the Corinthians’ own religious experiences: in the past, as pagans, they worshipped “mute idols” but now, thanks to the Gospel, they worship in the “Spirit of God/Holy Spirit” (v. 3) and speak their prayer to the Lord as sons and daughter of “the living and true God” (1Thess 1:9). We note in v. 3 yet another contrast between two competing Corinthian slogans, the formula of praise, “Jesus is Lord” (the distinctive sign of Christian identity and positive profession of authentic Christology (cf. Rom 9:3) and the formula of blaspheming, “Jesus be accursed.” All believers who profess Jesus as Lord do so only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the next three declarative sentences (vv. 4-6), the Apostle begins his presentation of the Christian experience of life in the Spirit with three different nouns in parallel fashion, i.e. “concrete gifts of grace χαρίσματα (*charísmata*)” (v. 4), “services διακονία (*diakonía*)” (v. 5) and “workings of divine power ἐνεργήματα (*energēmata*)” (v. 6), all three in the plural. Paul connects them with the three Persons of the Trinity, each one in the singular: “the same Spirit” (v. 4), “the same Lord” (v. 5) and “the same God” (v. 6). For purposes of our present study, we note the significant link in v. 4 between the variety of grace-gifts and their connection with the Holy Spirit. It is primarily due to this link that many contemporary bibles translate *charísmata* as “spiritual gifts,” although such a rendering it is not entirely accurate.

⁵ Definition of litotes: an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary. Paul had just given an example of this figure in 1Cor 11:22, “in this I do not praise you.” For another example of the phrase, “I do not want you to be ignorant” in the Pauline corpus, cf. 1Thess 4:13.

With regard to the term *chárisma*, we do well to appreciate Fee's insightful point: "On its own the word has nothing to do with the Spirit; it picks up Spirit overtones only by context or clear qualifiers" (Fee, 1993, p. 340). Verse 4 offers a clear example of the importance of the literary context. Since elsewhere in the chapter Paul ascribes these three charisms first to the Spirit (cf. 12:11) and then to God (cf. 12:28), it seems best to interpret the Trinitarian formula as a way of emphasizing the divine origin of the χαρίσματα (*charísmata*). Without a doubt, "Spirit" represents the key word of vv. 4-11; its occurrence in v. 4 and v. 11 serves to form an *inclusio*, a ring construction that delimits this sub-unit from what precedes and from what follows. As is usual for the Apostle, the title "Lord" here clearly refers to Jesus Christ: the Spirit, the Lord and God (the Father), in perfect intent and harmony, actively enrich the Church with countless divine blessings. Yet again the author uses the figure of antithesis, this time to contrast the plurality of charisms so freely distributed among the Corinthians and the one divine source from which they all spring. The parallelism of the three sentences, therefore, underscores the similarity of the internal relationship of the three pairs, i.e. the relationship between diversity and identicalness. The plural noun χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) in v. 4, repeated in v. 9, captures our attention for the purposes of this text. As we noted already, it is a uniquely Pauline term that, in the plural, conveys how God distributes his many gracious gifts in differentiated and various ways.

In vv. 7-10 Paul next provides a list of gracious gifts that illustrates his statement in v. 4. The theme of diversity and difference is accentuated by the repetition of "to one/to another" (the Greek word ἄλλος (*állos*) occurs 5 times and ἕτερος (*héteros*) twice), while the contrasting theme of uniformity and unity is stressed by the repetition of the noun "Spirit" (the Greek noun πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) appears 5 times). "To one/to another", therefore, emphasizes more the idea of distribution than the idea of universality. To the different χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) corresponds the verb "is given" (repeated twice in the text, first in v. 7 and again in v. 8, but understood as coupled with every particular gift listed), a classic example of the divine passive that deftly reveals the divine nature of "the Spirit" who apportions these gracious

gifts to certain believers in Christ. Some Christians receive “the manifestation of the Spirit” (v. 7), i.e. the external expression of the Spirit, both for their own good as well as for the good of the church. In this sense, a χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is also useful for the person who receives it, since it builds up his or her relationship with God and so serves to enrich God’s family. The Greek syntagma πρὸς τὸ συμφέρον (*pròs tò sumphéron*) is best translated, “for some benefit”, “for some profit”, since all the various charisms are meant to be useful and to build up the community, i.e. to edify the church.

In vv. 8-10 Paul lists nine distinct charisms, each allotted by the Holy Spirit, in two categories: the first two and the final four concern speech while the three central χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) involve activity (2 + 3 + 4). So the concentric order: A. word, B. deed, A’ word serves to reflect the broader concentric composition of the surrounding text (both 1Cor 12 in itself and 1Cor 12-14 as a whole). The rhetorical figure of repetition underscores the sheer accumulation of the gracious gifts given to the Corinthians, thus showing the importance of the list itself as opposed to clear and distinct definitions of each particular charism (which is not Paul’s aim here, as much as we would like it to be). The first two χαρίσματα (*charísmata*), “message λόγος (*lógos*) of wisdom” and “message λόγος (*lógos*) of knowledge” (v. 8), pick up the connection between “message/word” and “wisdom” that Paul had already made at the start of the letter. A word of knowledge offers an insight into reality (cf. 8:4) while a word of God’s wisdom (cf. 2:7) refers to that divine wisdom which was once hidden from the world’s leaders but has now been revealed through the Christ event. In fact, Paul identifies the wisdom of God with Christ Jesus in 1Cor 1:30 (Sullivan, year, p. 32). The next three charisms, “faith,” “healing” (v. 9) and “miraculous powers” (v. 10), concern doing, i.e. putting something into action. Let us analyze the biblical text one verse at a time, beginning with v. 9: “to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit”.

- The first *chárisma* is charismatic faith πίστις (*pístis*). Here the noun does not refer to the general kind of faith that justifies sinners (cf. Rom 1:17) and, as such, is proper to all Christians, but rather to the particular concrete gift of

faith that works miracles. This extraordinary charism can move mountains (cf. 1Cor 13:2b; Mt 17:20) and cause the lame to walk (cf. Acts 3:6).

- The second particular expression of grace concerns the gift of healings *χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων* (*charísmata iamátōn*), which is mentioned three times in this chapter (cf. 12:9, 28, 30), thus underscoring its importance for the Apostle Paul. Each particular act of healing is itself a distinct charism.

And next to v. 10: “to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”

- The third grace-gift, workings of deeds of power *ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων* (*energēmata dunámeōn*), describes miracles and exorcisms. These miraculous powers call to mind the powerful activity of Jesus and his first disciples as well as Paul’s own apostolic activity (cf. Acts 19:11-12; Rom 15:19; 2Cor 12:12). The list comes to an end with four more charisms related to speech: “prophecy,” “discernment of spirits,” “varieties of tongues” and “interpretation of tongues.” Prophecy *προφητεία* (*prophēteía*) is inspired, intelligible speech that comes from the Lord and edifies the community. Since it builds up and teaches the congregation, prophecy is superior to the gift of tongues. The discernment of spirits *διακρίσεις πνευμάτων* (*diakríseis pneumátōn*) is the gracious gift that allows its receiver to judge whether the one speaking words of prophecy is inspired by the Holy Spirit or by the evil spirit. Lastly, as regards the varieties of tongues *γλῶσσα* (*glōssa*), Paul is describing a kind of prayer that is articulate yet unintelligible, hence a speech that needs to be interpreted and explained to others. For him, speaking in tongues is primarily beneficial in private worship. The unintelligibility of this gracious gift calls forth the final charism mentioned, i.e. the interpretation of tongues. Later, in chapter 14, the father of the Corinthian church will give explicit norms for the exercise of these correlated gracious gifts: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be two or at most three, and each in turn, and one should interpret. But if there is no interpreter, the person should keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God” (1Cor 14:27-28). The fact that Paul places glossolalia at the end of his list serves to criticize his addressees, who prized this particular gift too highly and boasted about it to one another

in excess. For the Apostle of the Gentiles, it is neither the most unique gift nor the most important one. Thus the purpose of this pericope.

Finally, in v. 11, Paul concludes his brief teaching on the χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) with an essential point of his pneumatology: “the one and the same Spirit” acts freely, as “he wishes”, always in conformity with the will of God and always for the general good of the church. The Spirit’s able and providential distribution of the gracious gifts absolutely excludes the possibility that any form of division or disunity in the Corinthian community could find its origin in God. Thus, in v. 1-11, “the Spirit” or “the Spirit of God” or “The one and the same Spirit” is the sole protagonist who accomplishes both unity and diversity in the Body of Christ thanks to his divine authority, which comes from God himself.

1Cor 12:28-31

Our chapter’s concluding four verses form a short micro-unit in which the letter sender adds a brief list of diverse charisms: the plural noun χαρίσματα (*charísmata*) appears three times: vv. 28, 30 and 31. “And God has appointed in the church first apostles [...] then gifts of healing (χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, v. 28); “Do all possess gifts of healing? (χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, v. 30); “But strive for the greater gifts (τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα, v. 31). While this new list is somewhat similar to the first generic one given in vv. 8-10, the letter sender begins this second list by naming those who have important leadership roles among the Corinthians: the apostles, the prophets and the teachers. Over the course of the chapter, Paul has progressed from the rather generic to the more specific, now applying his understanding of the church’s edification in a more specific and personalized way (Manzi, 2013, p. 182). The noun’s threefold repetition highlights the importance of these concrete grace-gifts for the Corinthian church and thus constitutes an inclusion to the chapter’s opening declarations on the importance of charisms in vv. 4-11.

In this way the letter sender concludes his general teaching on the Spirit’s role in the granting of the various and sundry particular free gifts among believers in Jesus Christ. The subject of the principal verb of v. 28 also captures our attention: “God appointed in the church first apostles...” In this

way, Paul concludes his general teaching on concrete gifts of grace and the Holy Spirit on a theo-logical note. It is always God who initiates every aspect of salvation history, including the believers in Jesus Christ at Corinth. The single and unified divine effort at work in the building of this local church was already made clear by his mention of “the Spirit of God” in v. 3. The numerous rhetorical questions which follow in vv. 29-30 serve to reinforce the letter sender’s argument that the varied multiplicity of the many charisms all find their vibrant expression in the one body of Jesus Christ, the Church of God, which is edified, justified and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Manzi, 2013, p. 182).

Concluding Reflections on Concrete Gifts of Grace in First Corinthians, then and now

In conclusion, it is useful first to summarize some important points we have examined in the course of this text and then to offer some suggestions on how we might apply Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians to the Church in our time.

First, some significant findings. Paul uses the technical term χάρισμα (*chárisma*) exclusively with regard to particular divine gifts. Since χάρισμα (*chárisma*) expresses a clear relationship with grace (χάρις), it is proposed “concrete gifts of grace” as a possible translation. In short, charisms belong to the order of grace and, as such, are not to be confused with natural gifts, talents or ordinary human situations (like one’s race, sex, social condition, profession, etc.). The principal characteristic of the noun χάρισμα (*chárisma*) is that it describes a special grace given by God to certain chosen members of the Church for the benefit and profit of the whole believing community. The sheer diversity of particular gifts reveals the superabundance of divine life that God chooses to communicate to those who believe in Jesus through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to our reading of 1Cor 12:1-11, 28-31 which highlights the essential role of the many χαρίσματα among the Corinthians, we noted how the letter sender underlines the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the distribution of these particular gifts in a way that is quite unique in the Pauline corpus. The Spirit is active, energetic and very dynamic; he does what

only God can do, and thus he is indeed divine, both the Spirit of God (cf. Rom 8:9a; 1Cor 6:11; 12:3) and the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom 8:9b; Phil 1:19). The Holy Spirit is hard at work, enlivening believers to cooperate with him for the building up of the Church under construction, “the body of Christ” (1Cor 12:27), the holy temple of God (1Cor 3:17; 6:19; 2Cor 6:16).

The many different charisms ought not to cause rivalry and competition among believers, nor should they instigate feelings of superiority or inferiority in the worshipping community, but instead God wants them to produce joy, harmony and profound gratitude among all the brothers and sisters. The Spirit freely distributes his many concrete gifts of grace so as to draw believers towards greater love (cf. 1Cor 13), more genuine “life and peace” (cf. Rom 8:6) and more authentic justice: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of justice/righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). The Corinthians (and all believers in Jesus the Lord) are already united into the one “body of Christ” thanks to the Christ event, his death and resurrection from the dead. The Holy Spirit prods us to become ever more what we already are, i.e. ever more one in love, one in worship and one in service. The Spirit distributes God’s concrete gifts as he chooses—not as we choose—and then he invites the faithful to use them freely out of love. God treats his adopted sons and daughters as adults and calls them to cooperate responsibly with him in his plan of salvation. From the perspective of Pauline eschatology, 1Cor 12:1-11 describes the “already” dimension of divine activity in the Church. The Holy Spirit is already at work transforming us into the New Creation that will reach its full completion on the Lord’s Day when Christ will return in glory. Through the giving of particular gifts of divine grace, the Holy Spirit constantly and steadfastly renews and enriches God’s temple, the Body of Christ, to become evermore the sacrament of salvation for the world.

What do these findings say to us today? Cardinal Suenens, whose famous conciliar speech on the importance of charisms in the Church helped shaped paragraph n. 12 of the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), writes this in his congratulatory forward to Sullivan’s important book: “At the Council we underlined the importance and the perennially up-to-date

character of the charismatic aspect of the church” (Suenens, 1982, p. 7). It is believed that it is imperative for us today, sixty years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, to make his words our own. The many gracious gifts are important for the Church in every age, both universal and local, since it is through them that the Spirit continually renews the Body of Christ. The Charismatic Renewal, as a movement clearly guided by the Holy Spirit, constitutes a gift to all the baptized in as much as it reveals the Spirit’s boundless generosity and activity in the lives of so many members of the Body of Christ.

Many particular gifts have indeed been poured out by the Spirit for the benefit of this movement as well as for the benefit of the whole Church. Given this ecclesial reality, ongoing renewal and constant *aggiornamento* are crucially important for all the faithful, i.e. for all the baptized (i.e. clerics and lay people together), and it is imperative to maintain always a positive and receptive attitude towards the Spirit’s numerous and diverse gifts and activities. This extraordinary variety, since it comes from God, is neither a problem to be solved—it is a gift to be accepted and celebrated for the good of the Church, nor a threat to be neutralized—indeed, the fruitful and effective ministry of us who are ordained ministers of the Gospel undoubtedly depends on it.

The risen Lord continues to invite all Christians to be more mindful of our numerous concrete gifts of grace as well as the principal theological virtues of faith, hope and love in our lives (cf. 1Cor 13:13). As the Apostle Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13). Pope Francis chose the theme of hope for the ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025. In short, it is essential for us to reclaim and renew “the joy and peace in believing” that the Lord Jesus is constantly communicating new life and new dynamism to a synodal Church through the Holy Spirit. To suffer and rejoice: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1Cor 12:26).

Pope Francis’s and Pope Leo XIV’s call for a more united, solidary and synodal Church clearly finds its foundation in the teaching of the Apostle to

the Gentiles, especially as articulated in First Corinthians chapter twelve. A half a century ago, during the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics keenly sensed the new source of living water offered by the Holy Spirit and exuberantly rejoiced in grateful recognition of his many gifts. It is hoped that this article can help to remind us all of the pressing need for the New Evangelization—as consistently stressed by all five post-conciliar popes—the proclamation of the Good News to one and all. God the Father, through the numerous concrete gifts of grace distributed by the Holy Spirit, is always at work everyone who believes in Christ for the benefit and ongoing building up of his Body, the Church.

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Trabalho submetido em 16/01/2026.
Aceito em 18/06/2026.

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