

## The challenges and promises of communities and movements

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“Even when we are old, we don't know

what we will do when we grow up” (Lucio Corsi)

### Summary

The life of spiritual communities, especially those originating from the charism of a founder, face challenges that can be summarised in three dimensions: the people, the charism and the community. This paper is organised around these three axes.

The Bible and the history of the Church offer us images and metaphors to understand what a charism is. Among these are the Gospel images of the *seed* and the *pearl*. These are two useful metaphors that help us understand the essential dimensions of the gift which, with Paul, we call “charism”. The *pearl* emphasises the unchangeable dimensions of a charism: something very precious that must be safeguarded because losing it means losing ourselves as individuals and as a community. The *seed*, on the other hand, focuses on the dynamic and evolutionary dimension of the charism: the Spirit sows it, then it becomes a shrub, then a tree; the tree is not the same as the seed that has grown large, it is a transformation of it, sharing its DNA, which makes that small seed become something very different, although similar in its profound nature. Of course, what the seed will become depends on its DNA (charism), but also on the soil it finds, the trees nearby, the entire forest, fires, drought, local and global climate change. So, outside of the metaphor, what a charism – and its communities – will become tomorrow will depend on history, and on human beings with their vices, mistakes, virtues and love, as well as the love of others, the spirit of the times, and the care of its future gardeners.

When the metaphor of the pearl prevails in a community, however true and co-essential it may be, energy is spent on the relationship with the past, on preserving the memory and the *ipsissima verba* of the founders, on not losing a single iota of what was done and said in the first generation. As a consequence, generally unwanted, innovation, experimentation, reform and peripheral paths are discouraged, perceived as potential betrayals of the true nature of the charism, which is deemed to have been already fully revealed and completed by the founder.

Today, at this stage in the history of the Church, of religions and of humanity, it is crucial that communities *prefer the metaphor of the seed*, without abandoning the pearl, because there is also in every community a healthy and necessary dimension of conservation of the past and its memory, as there is in the Bible and in the Church. Seeing charisma as a seed creates that freedom of spirit that allows for experimentation, risk-taking, difficult choices, under “the veil of ignorance” about what tomorrow will bring for charism. Indeed, no seed knows what tree it will become, what its shape, height and reach will be. This creates in people the dignity to continue to feel themselves protagonists of the work: composers, and not simply performers of already written scores. This freedom then becomes a mechanism for selecting new creative, free and high-capable members.