



What are your Gifts?

By Julie Carroll

If you've ever watched TV late at night, chances are you've seen infomercials featuring people who seem to have consumed eight too many cups of coffee selling an array of products – from Orange-Glo cleaner to Body by Jake exercise equipment. They all promise to change your life... with just a few easy payments.

But if you've ever purchased any of those "revolutionary" products, you've realized that salvation doesn't come in a \$169.95 machine that can make juice out of broccoli.

Want to know the real secret to a successful, happy life? It's written on your soul.

At baptism, every Christian receives special gifts from the Holy Spirit called charisms. No one knows how many different charisms there are, but a few common ones are hospitality, leadership, knowledge, service, encouragement, teaching and faith.

Some people receive extraordinary gifts such as healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues. But all 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," according to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church."

Discovering your charisms can be a major clue in determining God's plan for your life, as well as your role in God's plan for humanity. Knowing your charisms also can help you make better decisions, simplify your life, excel at work, free yourself from envy and better appreciate your family members' gifts.

To help people discern their charisms, the Catherine of Siena Institute in Colorado Springs has developed a questionnaire called "The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory." The test helps people sort through their life experiences to identify patterns that may indicate a charism, explained Siena Institute co-founder Sherry Weddell.

The inventory identifies 24 of the most common charisms, drawn from the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4), Catholic tradition and Weddell's experience helping more than 14,000 people in 50 dioceses around the world discern their charisms. The inventory, audio tapes and other resources from the Siena Institute can be purchased through the Web site at www.siena.org.

Charisms are the supernatural tools we've been given to help us carry out our mission in life, or our vocation, Weddell said.

Our talents serve God

As Christians, we are called to offer everything we have — including our natural talents, personality, education and experience — to the service of God and our neighbor. However, charisms are not the same as skills or natural talents, which we can use for good or evil independent of our relationship with God, Weddell said. Charisms are special abilities given to us by the Holy Spirit which can only be used for good.

Charisms have only one purpose, Weddell said: "To make us channels of God's love."

Of course, God also can use our natural talents for his purposes, or even transform them into supernatural charisms, said Weddell. But the difference is that charisms enable us to accomplish things beyond our natural, human abilities.

For example, a doctor with a charism of healing might find that her patients recover either more quickly than normal or against the odds.

Charisms also differ from the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in Isaiah 11 and the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5. Whereas those gifts are given to us to keep for our own spiritual growth, Weddell explained, our charisms are given to us to give away. Both kinds of gifts complement each other in that the more Christ-like we become, the better we are able to exercise our charisms for others.

Charisms are always focused outward, Weddell said. "You can't just hold onto them for yourself. There's a restlessness until you share them with someone."

Charisms channel God's grace

Our charisms are the channel God often uses to enter the world, she said. When we develop our charisms, we allow God to make better use of us as instruments of his love

"There's somebody out there this very moment who is waiting for what you have been given to give, and their life hangs in the balance," said Weddell.

"The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory" provides a useful tool to identify possible charisms. However, the inventory itself is not discernment, Weddell stressed. Rather, it provides a starting point for the discernment process, which can take weeks or months.

Weddell recommends choosing one possible charism to experiment with for two hours a week. For example, if you discern that you might have a charism of hospitality, try inviting people to your home or volunteering to serve on your parish's hospitality committee.

There are three signs of a charism that should be consistently present over time, Weddell said. They are:

- Effectiveness. If you have a charism of healing, people will get well. If your charism is teaching, people will learn.
- A positive experience. Using your charisms should be life-giving and shouldn't require too much effort.
- Response or affirmation from others. Positive feedback is a good sign. Affirmation also can be indirect, based on what people request of you.

If you discern that you don't have a particular charism, that information also can be helpful, Weddell said. "It's success to know how you are not gifted because it frees you up to concentrate on other things."

Responding to Needs

Our charisms usually don't show up all at once, she said. "At different points in our life, charisms take different prominence depending on the needs around us and what God is calling us to do now."

Once we identify particular charisms, we need to develop them. "But it's not like developing your backhand in tennis," Weddell said. "You develop your charisms by drawing closer to God, intentionally seeking out situations where that charism would be needed, removing obstacles and fear, . . . and developing skills that support the charism."

Most of us will exercise our charisms in the secular world, rather than in a religious context, she said. "We are secular apostles." For example, a person with a charism of hospitality who works in a restaurant could consciously welcome everyone he meets as if they were Jesus. Or someone with a charism of music doesn't always have to sing glory and praise songs for her music to impact people in positive ways.

J.R.R. Tolkien, who had a charism of writing, Weddell said, wrote "The Lord of the Rings" without ever mentioning God. But people have converted to Christianity after reading his works, which communicate truth and beauty — signs of a true charism.

Scott Moyer, 39, was running a software business in San Francisco when he attended a Siena Institute workshop in Seattle seven years ago. Moyer discerned pastoring and teaching charisms, which led him to "change direction" in his life.

Now he leads the adult faith formation program at St. Dominic parish in San Francisco, where he helps other young adults discern their charisms.

"I feel like I'm doing something more meaningful that's more in line with what God created me to be," he said.



But change didn't happen overnight. Moyer continued his discernment by volunteering with the young adult group at his parish. Then he created faith formation programs. When his business ended, Moyer decided to work for the parish full time. Now he is earning a master's degree in theology.

"It was very empowering to realize I actually had a role in this whole faith thing, that there was a part of Christ's mission that was my mission," Moyer said. "I was 32 years old at the time and thought somebody should have told me about this earlier."

Moyer said people of all ages have gone through his discernment workshop, but it especially attracts people in their 20s and 30s who are just beginning to discern their vocations.

He also has noticed how discernment changes the way people see the parish.

"We can easily slip into this mode of being a kind of hospital for the walking wounded instead of empowering people to be Christ's messengers in the world," he said.

God calls Us

Eryn Huntington, 34, was ghost writing for a business consultant in Bellevue, Wash., when she attended a discernment workshop at her parish.

"What I wanted was a sense that I was on the right path," she said. Huntington discerned that she did indeed have a charism of writing, but God was calling her to use it in different ways.

When Weddell mentioned she needed help writing a workbook for the discernment workshop, Huntington volunteered. "I had a feeling like God had put his finger on my chest and said, 'That's you.'"

Now she is working on a novel while caring for her two young children at home.

Huntington also discerned a charism of knowledge.

"It made perfect sense," she said. "I could look at the patterns in my life and how I helped people around me."

Huntington said she encouraged her mother to return to the church and her husband to become Catholic through her knowledge of the faith. She continues to develop her charisms through prayer.