

# Charism: Gift and Challenge

by Sister Mary Catherine Jarema  
SS. Peter and Paul Parish, Merrillville, Indiana

What is that individual magic of a John F. Kennedy, a Corazon Aquino or a Martin Luther King, Jr.? Charisma, we say. The dictionary defines it with its twin, "charism," as "a gift of influence from God." Vatican Council II urged religious communities to rediscover the charism of the women and men who started their congregations.

In the last twenty years, we 7500 SSNDs worked through a process of prayerful reflection and international dialogue to articulate the charism of Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, our foundress. The result is our constitution, *You Are Sent*, — what we believe it means to be an SSND at this time in history.

This type of renewal through reflection is ongoing. Here five sisters have responded to two questions: 1) How do you personally describe Mother Theresa's charism? 2) How do you see the charism alive in you?

**SISTER JOAN GIETZEN**  
Local Leader, St. Isidore Convent  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Mother Theresa was free...not free from, but free to do God's will. And she had the ability to lead others to live in this freedom by example in preference to words.

She did not wait passively for God to act. She could be quiet before Him, then rise from prayer, full of determination and enthusiasm for His work.

As a community we have inherited

her freedom and devotion to God's will. Individually and as a congregation we struggle to maintain it.

Mother Theresa has become a star of light leading me to see what God wants. The more I turn to Jesus in the Eucharist, the more I am freed to say to the Father, "Do with me whatsoever You wish."



Mother Theresa would have enjoyed living in the 1980s because she dared. She constantly searched for the needs of the Church and the world. Despite pressure from custom or culture, she looked to the future in freedom.

**SISTER MARIE VIANNEY BILGRIEN**  
Latin American Missionary (Home  
for Study), Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Mother Theresa named us "Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame," imitating Jesus and Mary by opting for the poor before that was fashionable. Adept at reading the signs of the times, she risked everything financially and socially to serve God's lowly.



I have been blessed to have had many opportunities to work with the poor. They have affected me, showing me Christ much more than I have served them. During my years of teaching in Mississippi, the poorest state in our country, I remember talking with many of our older sisters. They amazed me with their stories so like mine of living poorly, struggling to keep schools open where parents could not afford them.

I sensed a great love for the poor in those sisters. How easily they understood needed changes in our customs enabling us to be more at the service of the poor. Their bottom line seemed to be: If anything helped the poor, it was good; if it did not, it was

to be rejected. We need the clearer insights of Jesus, Mary, and Mother Theresa to direct us, like divining rods, pulling us in the direction of the poor. Then, like Jesus, we will know how to help our brothers and sisters.

**SISTER GLADYS MARIE COURTADE**  
Elem. Teacher; Drug/Alcohol Counseling  
Aide, Milwaukee, Wisconsin



Growing in relationship to Mother Theresa, I'm continually challenged by her hunger for God's will in her life. For me it's an evolving process of becoming attuned to the inner urgings of the heart in response to a world hungering for unity. Trust must be at the core of my ministry in relating to the needy — only after acceptance of my own vulnerability and dependence on God.

Whether in my inner city classroom or rapping with recovering addicts on the drug unit of a hospital, I'm aware of this microcosm of a global Church in need. Befriending the poor has stretched my boundaries and called me to prioritize my life. Feelings of mutuality have been born since I've come to know myself as the "learner" in a culture other than my own. In this receptive disposition, I have the openness to read the signs of the times and respond with a compassionate heart.





**SISTER MIRIAM LOUISE DUFOUR**  
*Clinic Nurse, Foot Health Clinic, St. Anthony Hosp., Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

Mother Theresa's charisma closely correlates with the hospital mission statement: "St. Anthony Hospital commits itself to serving the needs of the poor, and to restore wholeness of health and dignity of the human person through care and teaching."

As a clinic nurse for three doctors, I have found myself faced with the new challenge of setting up a specialty clinic for foot care. This has called for new training and has led me to serve varied clientele — professional people, college students, and street people.

It is not unusual during the course of a day to search out housing, give out socks to frostbite victims, and sign transportation vouchers. The poor come not only for foot care, but for the feeling of being treated as human beings with dignity.

There is joy in working with the poor, but also frustration in not being able to do more because of red tape and subsidy cuts. Frustrations were part of Mother Theresa's experience in working with God's people, too.

If she were alive today I feel she would welcome the challenge set before me and all of us: "If I then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you shall wash each other's feet. I have given you an example that you may copy what I have done to you." (Jn. 13: 14-15)

**SISTER MARY JO FEDERSPIEL**  
*Elementary Teacher, St. Nicholas Parish, Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

Mother Theresa experienced her own call by God to serve children through education, feeling particularly drawn to educate girls to live and work in a rapidly changing society — an unusual viewpoint in her time. In addition, she possessed the courage and energy to travel to an unknown land, the United States, taking five sisters to set up schools for immigrant children.

Like her, I have touched children by teaching the basic skills, religious truths and spiritual values. I have not been called to cross an ocean, but I *have* moved from place to place to teach wherever needed.



I find within myself what seems to me to be her greatest gift: the dynamism which drew other women to live with her. The prologue of our constitution states: "In these gifts of the Spirit of our foundress . . . we recognize the evolving charisma of our congregation." I believe that I experience our charisma in a new way each day in giving and receiving the gifts of community: sharing faith and prayer experiences, work, laughter, tears, support in my weakest moments, and the challenge to grow. The externals of community life today differ from the lifestyle of those first communities 150 years ago. But our reason for being is the same. Together we try to live, as did Mother Theresa, the spirit of Mary, Mother of the Church and of our congregation: "Do whatever He tells you." (Jn. 2: 5)