

This is the Charism

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I was walking toward the largest public housing site in St. Paul, Minnesota, to attend a community meeting of nearly 500 people. As I crossed the parking lot, I thought, "This is the charism. This is the real, living GIFT OF THE SPIRIT responding to the needs of this multicultural community!"

The people attending this meeting were newly-arrived refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Also attending were Mexicans, African-Americans, and European-Americans living on welfare. This community of 4,000 people had come together to urge city officials to reduce the depth of a public pond where two boys from the housing project had drowned.

This was not as easy as it may seem. McDonough Public Housing included people from many cultures who spoke different languages. The McDonough Organization with Respect and Equality for people (MORE) evolved because of one School Sister of Notre Dame and people from each of these ethnic groups. It was born from groups of people who had violently hated one another. It became an organization that empowers people of many races, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds to live and work in peace.

At this particular meeting, which the mayor and city officials attended, there was a slight problem. Most of the people did not understand English. I thought to myself, "How are we going to pull this off?" I was about to attend our General Chapter in Rome, and the idea of language groups came to mind. We could form language groups and train those with some English to be interpreters.

We did just that. We had Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, English, and Spanish language groups where people could express their needs in their own voices. (Try that with 500 people!) As interpreters expressed the needs of the people, the city officials patiently listened to faulty English, heard the concerns, and filled in the pond.

Through this whole time, I thought of our international community and the means we use to communicate with each other. More importantly, I realized how deeply the "charism" was imbued within me and within the organization that I cofounded to make one in this violent, multicultural community.

Our loving God continues to call us, School Sisters of Notre Dame, to respond to the urgent needs of our world. Our challenge is never to accept the "status quo," just maintaining our present ministries. We need to be open to hear the "call" wherever it leads, trusting that the charism is deeply imbued within each one of us.

I wanted to share this particular experience because I have become aware of an amazing truth. We do not impose our charism. Instead, urgent needs can move society to experience prophetic transformation and to embrace the charism.