

# Pope Benedict XIV (1675-1758) on the Charisms in 1 Cor 12:8-10

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Witness to Uncompromising Discipleship

## Pope Benedict XIV on the Charisms in 1 Cor 12:8-10

Pat Collins C.M. shares with Goodnews some of the teaching of 18th century theologian, **Prospero Lambertini**, who later became Pope Benedict XIV, on the importance of the biblical charisms and their meaning in the life of the Church.

Prospero Lambertini was born in Bologna in 1675. By the age of 19 he had received doctorates in theology and in canon and civil law. He was so widely read that he was reputed to be one of the most erudite men of his time. He lived in the Age of Enlightenment when the Church was being attacked by rationalist philosophers and challenged by absolutist rulers. In 1712 he was appointed canon theologian at the Vatican and assessor of the Congregation of Rites. In 1731 he became Archbishop of his native city. Later in 1740 he was elected Pope following a consistory which lasted six months! He took the name of Benedict XIV and is considered by many scholars as the most learned Pope the Church has ever had. He died in 1758 at the age of 83.

While he was at the Congregation of Rites, Lambertini had the responsibility of assessing the causes of people who had been put forward for possible beatification and canonization. It raised the question in the bishop's mind, what criteria should be used? Eventually, he wrote a massive work entitled *On the Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God*. In 1850, the English Oratorians translated part of the Latin version into almost unintelligible English and published three volumes with the collective title *Heroic Virtue*. The last of these mainly dealt with the charisms in 1 Cor 12:8-10. Although he was heavily influenced by St Thomas, he did not classify the gifts as his theological mentor had done. Instead, Lambertini examined

St Paul's list one by one.

### **Wisdom and Knowledge**

Lambertini began by acknowledging that 1 Cor 12:8 was not referring to the gifts in Is 11:2. Speaking of the utterance of wisdom and knowledge he wrote: "The word of wisdom, then, is the external word of Divine things; by which a man without human study and labor, so discourses of Divine mysteries as to make it manifest that the Holy Spirit speaks in him, and none may contradict him, by whom unbelievers are converted to, and the faithful confirmed in, the faith. And the word of knowledge is nothing else but discourse or speech on moral matters, relating to everlasting salvation, going forth readily without human study and labor, in writing or by word of mouth, whereby those who hear it, understand that it proceeds not from human power, but Divine." Having defined how the gifts involve revealed knowledge, he gave examples of the way gifted men and women brought about remarkable changes in their listeners by the power of their anointed words e.g. St Louis Bertrand baptized 15,000 Indians who had been converted to the faith as a result of his preaching.

### **Faith, Healing and Miracles**

#### **A) THE CHARISM OF FAITH**

Unfortunately, Lambertini did not offer his own definition of this charism. He believed that it was a gratuitous grace in virtue of which miracles and healings were performed by people who had firm confidence in God. He wrote, "the grace of faith is nearly identical with the grace of healing and miracle working." He observed that, though related, the gift of faith was separate from deeds of power because they are performed by God to confirm what the person of faith has proclaimed.

#### **B) THE CHARISMS OF HEALINGS AND MIRACLE WORKING**

Lambertini also considered the question, how does the charism of healings differ from that of miracle working? He gave a number of answers. Firstly, he did not think that either the charisms of healings, or miracle working, were a permanent endowment. He felt that they were given afresh, by God, on each occasion they were exercised. Secondly, although he thought that healings and miracles were abundant in the early Church in order to demonstrate the truth of the apostolic teaching, he did not think that they had completely died out afterwards. Like St Augustine, he was convinced that healings and miracles continued to be

experienced in the Church as a result of such things as trust in the sacraments, the use of holy relics and the prayers and ministry of saintly people.

### **Prophecy**

Lambertini devoted no fewer than seventy six pages of his book to the gift of prophecy. He said that, “A prophet, then, is he who foretells future events, or reveals to others things past, or presents things hidden; although generally, and for the most part, prophecy is confined to the foretelling of future events.” He said that although prophecies are inspired by God, they are often made possible by the mediation of angels. He added: “it is necessary for prophesying that the mind should be raised to the highest contemplation of spiritual things, this may be prevented through violent passions and inordinate attention to outward things.”

Having quoted: Do not put out the Spirit’s fire, do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good” in 1 Thess 5:19“, Lambertini went on to suggest three main criteria that could be used in the assessment of a prophecy. Firstly, was it in accord with the teachings of Jesus, the Apostles, and Church law? Secondly, what was the interior state of the prophet when s/he spoke? False prophets, he observed, speak when their minds are disturbed, because they cannot endure the assaults of the devil, who influences them. But he added: “they whom God moves, speak with gentleness, humility and modesty.” Thirdly, “How can we know when a message has been spoken by the Lord?” asked Lambertini, “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, then a genuine message has not been spoken“

### **The charism of the discernment of Spirits**

Lambertini suggested that there were two ways of understanding discernment of spirits. Firstly there is the art of discernment which can be conducted in accordance with rules set forth by people like Evagrius of Ponticus and St Ignatius of Loyola. Then there is the gift mentioned in 1 Cor 12:10. He defined it as follows: “The gift of discerning spirits is therefore nothing else but an enlightening of the mind, with which man being endowed, easily and without error decides from what source his own thoughts and those of others, which are subjects of choice, proceed, what is suggested by a good, or evil spirit.”

### **Speaking in Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues**

Bishop Lambertini saw the gift of speaking in tongues exclusively as xenoglossi i.e. the gift of

speaking an unknown language/s. For example, when the cause of St Francis Xavier was being examined by the Rota in Rome, the official report said: “Xavier was illustrious for the gift of tongues, for he spoke with elegance and fluency the languages, which he had never learnt, of different nations, to whom he went for the sake of preaching the Gospel, just as if he had been born and bred among them; and it happened not infrequently, that while he was preaching, men of diverse nations heard him speak each in his own language.” Unlike St Thomas he thought that it was possible that the gift of tongues may have referred to an ability of the hearers to understand the foreign language being spoken by the evangelist. For example, he cited the fact that St Antoninus recounted how this gift was granted to St Vincent Ferrer: “This was astonishing, and an apostolic grace, that preaching in Catalonia in the common language of the country, he was understood by other nations who knew it not.” Given that Lambertini only interpreted the gift of tongues as xenoglossi, his understanding of the gift of the interpretation of tongues was necessarily influenced and even distorted by that fact. He said that the charism could be understood in two ways. Firstly, as an ability to translate the foreign words spoken by an evangelist and secondly, the gift might have referred to a graced ability to “teach the mysteries which lie hid in the words.”

## **Conclusion**

Because Lambertini had so little personal experience of the subjects he wrote about, he was more like a man writing an article for an encyclopedia or theological dictionary than a creative theologian. Although his work demonstrates immense learning it is not as innovative as the writing of St Thomas, his great teacher on the charisms. There is an inherent tension in his approach, as there is in St Thomas. On the one hand, although he was at pains to point out that the exercise of the gifts was not dependant on personal holiness, on the other, he thought the exercise of the charisms could be seen as an indication of holiness in those who lived lives of heroic virtue. In spite of these caveats, Prospero Lambertini’s account of the charisms is not only significant, because he later became the Pope, it would also be true to say that, up to the time of the Second Vatican Council, it was the most authoritative summary of Catholic teaching on the gifts of the Spirit.

If you want to read what Benedict XIV actually said, you can download his book at [www.archive.org/details/heroicvirtue03beneuoft](http://www.archive.org/details/heroicvirtue03beneuoft)

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