

Remember those early days...

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Reflections on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal,
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Teaching outline

1. The Charismatic Renewal is for the whole Church
2. The Charismatic Renewal is for the “essentials” of the Christian life
3. Courage and... let's get down to work!

I would like to turn our attention to certain shadowy areas that give rise, it seems to me, to concerns about the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, or, if you prefer, to certain dangers that we ought to address.

1. The Charismatic Renewal is for the whole Church

There are countries where the Church is strongly polarised. On the one side are those who have come to be variously defined as liberals, progressives, or innovators; on the other side are the traditionalists or conservatives. Everything is judged according to this measure. It is a little like it used to be among us Italians up to a short time ago, when everything was judged on the basis of whether it was Communist or Christian-Democrat.

The word “liberal” in the English-speaking world, and especially in the United States, has a meaning that is a little different from the meaning it has elsewhere. It signifies those who are more open to novelty. Among them there are some whose positions are frankly unacceptable and extreme. But there are also those who simply identify with Vatican II, which they would like to see implemented a little more courageously in the matter of pluralism, inter-cultural dialogue and the question of decentralisation.

On the opposite side, in reaction to things that are seen as too innovative and secularised, a current has developed that is strongly attached to the theology and practices of the past. Here too there is a whole spectrum, ranging from well-known extremists to people who are perfectly balanced and full of zeal and love for Christ and the Church. Within reasonable limits this kind of tension is not only legitimate but necessary, since no one person, standing alone, can realise by himself, the demands of fidelity and of progress in equal measure.

What is the danger as far as we are concerned? That the Charismatic Renewal, which came into being for the renewal of the whole Church, should end up by becoming identified purely and simply with one segment of the Church, the more conservative one. Reading religious publications from various countries, it is clear to me that some of them see the new ecclesial movements, including the Renewal, as conservative forces, if not as downright reactionary.

This does serious harm. The Charismatic Renewal is a gift for the whole Church, not for just a particular part of it, and so it must remain. Indeed, in its early days, like every “prophetic” movement, it was seen as a great sign of newness and openness, a forward thrust on various fronts, the ecumenical outreach included. As such, it was welcomed by the Catholic Church

hierarchy, and it has no need to change its appearance to make itself acceptable. Cardinal Suenens, who was for years its principal sponsor and ecclesiastical spokesman, was, during and after the Council, one of the most authoritative promoters of the need for “aggiornamento”: giving contemporary impact to the practices and beliefs of the Church.

And now, it is with infinite sadness that I see that the Charismatic Renewal has ended up confined to one part of the Church only, and regarded by the rest as something so alien that they feel fully justified in keeping well clear of it. Let me say again, the Charismatic Renewal was born to renew the whole Church and not just one part of it. When I say “the whole Church”, I mean, naturally, the Church that positions itself firmly in the mainstream of orthodoxy and the magisterium; that is ready, if necessary – on one side or the other - to submit obediently to the appointed authority (the bishop or the pope, as the case may be), but not before having born prophetic witness to the goals that are close to its heart, according to the sound dialectic that has always been the Catholic Church’s strength and the root of its capacity for self-renewal.

We need to look squarely at this situation and do what has to be done to prevent it becoming even more widespread, and to correct it where it has become established. This is not a matter of taking this or that stance, but of being faithful to the Spirit who has no fear of differences and who is always able, according to Irenaeus, “to create a beautiful symphony out of many voices”, as he did on the day of Pentecost.

2. The Charismatic Renewal is for the “essentials” of the Christian life

The second danger is devotionalism. Here too, we need to remember how it all began. The Charismatic Renewal was born with a powerful drive to return to the essentials of the Christian life: the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of Christ, the Word of God, the Sacraments, the charisms, prayer, evangelisation. This is the secret of its explosive power. This characteristic of the Renewal is clearly shown by the fact that it has no recognised founders, nor any particular “spirituality”, but that it simply accentuates what should be common and “normal” for every baptised person.

This has been my personal experience and, I am sure, it has been the same for many of you. The Bible becomes a living word, breathed by God and breathing God, as St. Ambrose used to say. I remember a definition of the Charismatic Renewal given by someone in those early days, that has always struck me as the most true: “Giving back the power to God!”. What convinced us was that we found ourselves clearly in the presence of God’s holy action. God present and active in history! That was the miracle that always filled the biblical prophets with awe and caused them to leap for joy: “Shout for joy, you heavens, for Yahweh has been at work! Shout aloud, you earth below!” (Isaiah 44, 23).

“Back to basics”, as they say. Let us once again offer to the Church this taste for what is essential. The basic work of the Spirit is his sanctifying activity (see 2 Th 2,13; 1 Pt 1, 2), by which he transforms human beings, giving them a new heart, not the heart of a slave but the heart of a child of God’s family. Next comes his charismatic activity, by which he distributes a variety of gifts for the good of the community. This is what he did at Pentecost: he transformed the apostles, making new men of them, then he had them speak in tongues and prophesy, and he gave them all the gifts they would need for their mission. In the Charismatic Renewal too, we need to respect this hierarchy: personal sanctification must come first, and only then, in second place, the experience of the charisms. The Holy Spirit does not set out merely to clean up the dress of his Bride, the Church. His first aim is above all to renew her heart.

Why do I think it necessary to mention all these things? I believe that the words of the letter to the Hebrews are addressed to us too: “Remember the earlier days... Be as confident now...” (Hb 10, 32. 35). The Charismatic Renewal, and Catholicism generally, runs the risk of again becoming overgrown and weighed down, after the Council’s great effort to restore simplicity and essentiality in doctrine and practice. In many things, for example in the devotion to Mary, the Council sought to bring back to Catholic practice a sobriety that was lost in the course of the centuries, especially during the age of the Counter-reformation.

Little by little we have seen this fruit of the Council being lost. There has been a return to an excessive insistence on what is optional. The Charismatic Renewal itself has become sucked into this whirlpool, to such an extent that in some places it has become identified merely by association with certain devotions, apparitions, individuals and particular messages. Certain of these things are in themselves quite legitimate, and a sign of the richness of the Catholic Church, but they need to be kept within their proper sphere and not imposed on all and sundry as a measure of the greater or lesser extent of their “catholicity”.

This is not a question of taking position against any of these things. The point is whether the Charismatic Renewal ought to be characterised by this kind of thing, or by something else. We already have all that we need to become holy and to spread the Gospel. Even in the matter of devotion to Mary, if we were to take seriously and deepen our appreciation of what Scripture and the liturgical and dogmatic tradition of the Church have to offer (for example, the title of “Mother of God”), we would be able to offer her all the honour we desire, without feeling any need to scurry about after the latest message or apparition. In this way, we would render our devotion to Mary more acceptable to other Christians, and we would be hastening the day when, instead of being an object of division, she would become a positive factor in the unity of Christians. (Would not harmony among her children be the thing a mother desires most?)

Our task as spiritual guides is to help our brothers and sisters to be open to the great mysteries of the faith and never to shut themselves up in any short-lived devotionism, which can never serve to re-evangelise the world. To concentrate on essentials does not mean depriving the faithful of all space for free expression, or all personal preference, and reducing everything to a bland sameness. There is certainly room to cultivate one’s personal devotion as well, but this needs to be kept within the ambit of what is personal. We must not confuse what is demanded of everyone with things that are to be left to individual choice.

3. Courage and... let’s get down to work!

I would like to end on an encouraging note. There is a perception in some places that the Charismatic Renewal is at a standstill, or shrinking, declining in enthusiasm and numbers. It is true, and it is normal in movements of this kind. They are not made to become institutions, but as the late Cardinal Suenens once said, to transmit an impulse, “a current of grace”, and then if necessary to disappear, like an electric charge that is dispersed in a mass of matter. However, one thing remains the same today as in the early days of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and that is the power of the Holy Spirit. “The arm of the Lord is not shortened!” We see it achieve today, in those who come into contact with it for the first time, exactly the same effects as in the early days. Every time we allow him to act, every time we provide suitable occasions for his coming, where people gather as in the Cenacle with expectant faith, he does come down. I have had opportunity to see it again very recently. Every time it is a whole new world that opens up before the person who receives him.

Visible signs of the coming of the Spirit are generally the rebirth of courage, of hope and of joy. Even in the opinion of the public at large, the Charismatic Renewal is seen as a movement of joyful people, who clap or raise their hands, who seem transformed, with smiling, almost ecstatic faces. This is not a wrong perception. Joy is in fact one of the signs or fruits of the Spirit. I hope we will all cultivate the signs: courage, hope, joy; and avoid the dangers I have tried to bring to your attention (if my tone has been somewhat high-handed, please forgive me). May the Holy Spirit help us to carry with us the flame of Pentecost, undimmed, into the new millennium, so that it may continue to transform the lives of many men and women of our time, and bring them all to Christ.

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