

Pastoral Statement on the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Netherlands

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Nowadays more and more often Catholics come across something that is, at least for the Roman Catholic Church, a new phenomenon, namely the Charismatic Renewal.

We feel time has come for us as Bishops of the Netherlands to express our opinion about it. With this statement we want to encourage the community of the faithful to become acquainted with the Charismatic Renewal. We hope that the words of Pope Paul VI, who called the Charismatic Renewal an opportunity for the Church and the world, may also become a reality in our country.

What is the Charismatic Renewal?

The term indicates a special way of being a believer. It is a lifestyle in which the presence and activity of God, of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, is directly experienced. It is a typical way of speaking in which that experience is expressed.

The Charismatic Renewal recaptures the founding event of the Christian faith, the day of Pentecost. On that day, after Jesus had accomplished his work of redemption, the Spirit of God was poured out over the believers. It is not, however, merely a recapturing. By opening themselves up to the timeless coming of the Spirit, people experience anew the descent of the Spirit; a renewed experience of Pentecost. We think that this experience is something very important which is why we want to bring it to the attention of the community of the faithful. In what follows we will describe some of the characteristics of the Charismatic Renewal, not only to supply information, but in order to put into words what we as Church are called to be. It is not at all simple to define the Charismatic Renewal. It is not so much a movement within the Church, as Church on the way. The term charismatic comes from the Greek word *charisma*, meaning gift of grace of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit plays an important part within Charismatic Renewal.

The charismata in Holy Scripture

Concern for the work of the Holy Spirit, as is appearing again in the twentieth century, is present in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament mentions the outpouring and operation of God's Spirit in, among other places, Isaiah 32,15; Ezekiel 36,26 and in Joel 3,1-12. In the New Testament the Greek term *charisma* occurs frequently. Often it is referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12,1-12 and 28-30; Rom. 12,6-9; Mk. 16, 17-18; Lk. 24,49 and Eph. 4,11): the gift of prophecy, of instruction or words of wisdom, of discernment of the spirits, of works of service. The gift of preaching, of healing of the sick and of speaking in tongues. The Church begins with the sending of the Spirit by Christ the Lord (John 14,25-26). In Acts 2,1-22 the followers of the Lord receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always present in the Church, manifesting itself in many ways throughout history by its permanent assistance. The community of God is assisted and led by the Holy Spirit. The specific charismata, visible in the Church in manifold diversity, are an expression of her continuous vitality.

*+1) vertaling van de brief van de
nederlandse bisschoppen.*

Also by the charismata the faithful are equipped for tasks which are essential for the Church. Thus it is written: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Cor. 12,7). In Luk. 11,13 the Spirit is promised to those who ask for it. It is not a new Baptism, but of re-awakening in oneself through the Spirit of baptism and confirmation. One is caught anew by the Spirit of God, and enters in an intimate bond with the Risen Lord.

The Charismatic Renewal in recent christian tradition

In the history of Christianity are spiritualities marked by special concern for the gifts of the Spirit. In this tradition the present Charismatic Renewal occupies a special place. It would therefore not be correct to suggest that concern for the activity of the Spirit only takes place within Charismatic Renewal. It is of a much older date. What is new, however, is the use of the name Charismatic Renewal.

The Renewal has its roots in the United States of America. There are movements, of Anglican and Protestant inspiration, that stress personal sanctification and make copious use of hymns of praise, imposition of hands and prayer for healing. The Charismatic Renewal also owes a lot to the Pentecostal Movement and it is difficult to say where the one ends and the other begins although there are practical and theological differences between the two. A remarkable difference is that Charismatic Renewal groups tend to stay within their respective Church communities and have not developed denominational structures of their own.

Theologically they differ insofar as people within the Charismatic Renewal do not consider baptism by the Holy Spirit to be a separate moment in the way to salvation, but rather as an increasing consciousness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church in the United States is originated especially under the influence of the Pentecostal Movement it is remarkable that the movement first caught on in the 1960's at some universities. Especially in the beginning many young people became involved. Initially they were small separate groups, later formed into bigger communities. They met regularly and discovered that even in the Holy Scripture, there are texts describing the things that were happening to them. They also appealed to the documents of Vatican II, particularly to the dogmatic constitution about the Church (Lumen Gentium, nr. 12). The Popes have regularly spoken positively about the Renewal. Pope John Paul II, in his talk of 15th May 1987, to representatives of prayer-groups throughout the world, called the Charismatic Renewal an eloquent manifestation of the present vitality of the Church.

A Worldwide process

Since the 1960's the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is spreading all over the world in a very short time. Of the 800 million Catholics many today feel some affinity with it. Particularly in the Third World one may speak of an explosive increase. In the 1970's the worldwide expansion of the Charismatic Renewal led to the establishment of an office to coordinate the Catholic Charismatic Renewal: the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Office (ICCR).

Its first aim is to promote communication between the various national organizations. It does this, among other things, by maintaining contacts, but also by organizing each year a worldwide congress for representatives of charismatic prayergroups. The Holy See has appointed advisors who support the ICCRO by means of regular consultations.

The Charismatic Renewal in Western Europe

In Western Europe the Charismatic Renewal is rather young. The Belgian Cardinal Suenens, who already much earlier came into contact with a group of enthusiastic young people in the United States, greatly contributed to the growth of the Renewal in the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe. He invited young people from the United States to come to Europe, in order to propagate the Charismatic Renewal here.

The Charismatic Renewal in the Netherlands

In 1974 the Charismatic Working-Community in the Netherlands (CWN, a National Service Committee for the Charismatic Renewal in the Protestant Churches), together with representatives of the Old-Catholic Church, undertook a special initiative. They invited a number of Flemish and Dutch Roman Catholics involved in the Charismatic Renewal, for joint reflection. Partly as a result of this the Dutch Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal has always had a strong oecumenical identity. This Protestant and Old-Catholic initiative formed, with Cardinal Suenens' initiative, an important stimulus for the origin of the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Netherlands. At this moment there are in this country more than 2,000 people meeting regularly in 150 different Roman Catholic prayer-groups.

Very early a National Service Committee was formed in the Netherlands with the task to give countrywide support to the Roman Catholic prayer-groups: It is called "Building At a New Earth" (BANA). It is the official association for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in the Netherlands. The first aim is to coordinate and support the 150 prayergroups connected with it. Every year around Whit Sunday BANA organizes a national meeting, open to everyone, where people celebrate their faith together, exchange experiences and discuss the future of the Renewal of the Church. Also BANA regularly organizes national meetings for representatives of these prayergroups. This is called the National Charismatic Council (LCO), a kind of general meeting that elects the members of the National Service Committee (LPK). The LPK forms the day-to-day administration of the LCO with a special responsibility to study future policy. In 1981 the Bishops Conference established a liaison Committee for the Charismatic Renewal. Besides this, liaison officers have been appointed in most dioceses. The LPK maintains good contacts with these diocesan liaison officers and with the members of the Bishops' liaison Committee

What are prayergroups?

Prayer-groups are formed by people who feel the need to pray with and for one another. Of course one can pray in solitude, but many people find it to be a considerable support when they can come together on regular basis for common prayer, and exchange experiences. By these prayer-services they are inspired. Prayergroups frequently are entirely different from one another. Every prayer group has its own identity. There is no uniformity. To an outsider this may

be confusing: all those prayergroups, and each of them with its own spirituality! However, it allows people to search for a prayer-group that fits their needs and experiences.

Meetings in prayergroups offer ample opportunity to get acquainted. For this purpose many groups organize special introduction sessions. There are also bigger meetings or conventions that last several days, in which nonmembers too can take part. People who want to involve themselves in the Charismatic Renewal can follow the so-called "life in the Spirit Seminar", a sort of instruction in the faith. Participants are also introduced to the prayergroup, but not enrolled as members. The profoundly personal experience of being a christian does of course not take place only within the charismatic prayergroups, but also in the celebration of the eucharist or in the sacrament of reconciliation. The Charismatic Renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, in the Old-Catholic Church and the Protestant churches have different characteristics. In the Roman Catholic Church there is a strong emphasis on the Sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist, as well as on the devotion to Mary, the mother of the Lord. As said before, the Renewal is not an organization one joins to become a member.

In the prayergroups people come and go. Still there is a certain structure. There is freedom, but also commitment. After a first contact followed by the "Life in the Spirit Seminar", people grow towards a renewed awareness of the Spirit. But a lot has to happen first. Most important is the inner conversion that brings about a change in people's lives. That is noticed in their surroundings as well. All this is being done by the special and renewed awareness of the Holy Spirit. It is something for which they fervently pray in community, usually with imposition of hands.

By the already mentioned instruction in the faith and the process of inner conversion, a person prepares him, or herself, for a new and conscious life in the Spirit.

Some special characteristics of the Charismatic Renewal

A Personal Bond with the Risen Lord. People in the Charismatic Renewal foster a very personal communication with the risen Lord. They seek Him. They try to discover who He is and to surrender to Him totally. This personal relationship does not only have its effect on praise, thanksgiving and supplication, but also on the daily life of the believer.

Holy Scripture.

Especially the Roman Catholics have developed a greater familiarity with the Holy Scripture. It is very good to see that the faithful are reading the Scriptures. On the other hand it does happen that people begin to look upon their own personal interpretations as the only valid ones. They therefore should allow themselves to be guided by the faith and the teaching of the Church.

Witnesses of the Spirit.

Charismatic meetings give a lot of attention to bearing witness, which follows almost naturally from one's experience within the prayer-group. Bearing witness can then be defined as an intense need to share with others the love and gifts one has received. It also stimulates to speak with joy about their union with the Lord. (cf. Apostolicam Actuositatem nr. 3 and Gaudium et Spes nr. 22).

Personal and spontaneous prayer.

The Renewal stresses personal and spontaneous prayer. This can take the form of glossalalia or speaking in tongues. Tongues are for many an expression of their being caught by the Holy Spirit.

Service of Healing.

Also characteristic for the Renewal is the service of healing, equally a charisma. People pray for their own healing and for the healing of others within or outside the prayergroup. At first prayer for healing is aimed at inner conversion and healing. Besides the healing of a faltered relationship with God one may also think in this context of psychical traumata, of personal grief and loneliness. A condition for every form of healing is forgiveness. We are reminded of the healings done by Jesus Himself, but also of the words of James (5,14-17) "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord". Prayer-services for spiritually wounded and bodily sick people are, together with the Sacrament of reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Sick, signs of God's salvifying and healing work. Even Exorcism or the deliverance from the power of the evil one, is a form of healing. Expelling devils and evil spirits is a New Testament practice, which the Church has always recognised. But in this matter the Church has always acted very cautiously. Only with the explicit permission of the authorities of the Church can anyone proceed with exorcism. In the Charismatic Renewal this rule is carefully observed.

Community of Love.

A charismatic prayer-group wants to be a community of love: a love for one another in Christ that expresses itself in real friendship. People want to form a community in which they can care for each other, for the sick and the lonely and for people who suffer from oppression. This care shows itself not only in praying for each other, but also in tangible practical care.

The aim of the Charismatic Renewal

The Charismatic Renewal is not a new organization, among other church organizations. It wants to be the work of the Spirit Himself. Proceeding from religious experience, people want to contribute to a renewal of life in Church and society. Starting point here is the opinion that this is ultimately a vocation for all the faithful. They do not want to be an organization within an organization, they want to be leaven in bread.

The Foundation of the Charismatic Renewal

Foundation of the renewal is the faith in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, Redeemer of the world, by whose death and resurrection everything has been born again to a new life. So one does not primarily try to fulfil personal needs for warmth, affection, security, group identity or transcendence in the risen Lord. Being a Christian is to be a follower of Christ. This personal relationship is not reserved for priests or religious but open for the entire community of the faithful. There are features of the Charismatic Renewal that are not an essential part of it, but that do deter people from taking part in it. It is therefore necessary to say a few words about it.

The charismata are given by the Holy Spirit but received by men. Thus the charismata are known by their operation in people who have their limitations and restrictions. Because of the way in which people sometimes receive them the charismata can be thwarted and people can get themselves into problems. Therefore it seems useful to say something in detail about the significance of some aspects of the charismata.

Charismata and certitude of salvation

In these turbulent times people increasingly feel the need for certainty. However understandable this may be, the way of the Faith cannot be shortened, and people will have to accept, that incertitude and sometimes even doubt are part of the human predicament. No miraculous gift or charisma gives us a guarantee for salvation, nor some inner and personal confirmation of the Holy Spirit, but faith itself. Charismata are therefore not the only sign of the gift of the Spirit.

Charismata and election

Like the Pentecostal Movement, we sometimes come across a so-called "success-christianity", an alleged state free of incertitude, exhaustion, sickness, suffering and loneliness. But the Church is merely an imperfect, suffering community, and we live with the expectation that this will only change in God's own good time. Meanwhile we too have to take up the cross. Jesus Himself, after his baptism, was led into the desert. No triumph yet but the beginning of his suffering. To acknowledge this reality is of great importance for christian life.

Charismata and service

St. Paul stresses that charismata are services (I Cor. 12,5). They call for implementation and for action. The charismata, given by the Spirit, are to be activated for the service of the entire community of the Church. They must be productive. If this does not happen a charisma becomes a sort of private possession and it quickly deteriorates. Service to the community is crucial in the exercise of the charismata.

Charismata and Doctrine

The Charismatic Renewal can also be of oecumenical importance. This is evident not only because there are, besides specific Roman Catholic Protestant prayer-groups, but also because there also are many inter-church or oecumenical prayergroups. It likewise shows the cordial relations that exist between believers of different churches. Unfortunately the directives with regard to participation in the Eucharist or the Holy Supper are sometimes interpreted too freely in oecumenical prayergroups. Recognising one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord, and the joy about the essential things which unite us among all the diversity, does not yet abolish the existing separation between the churches. Directives on sacramental celebrations should be respected. From the prayer-groups arise impulses that bring christians of all denominations closer together. In this way they too follow the commandant of the Lord to preserve unity and mutual love (cf. Unitatis Redintegratio nr. 2).

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal is not yet known everywhere in the Roman Catholic Church of the Netherlands. When people come across it, they react to it in different ways: some reject it, others believe that a new era has dawned for the Church. Who knows but there really could be a new era and a new opportunity for the Church and the world! We should at least look with hope and respect at the possibilities that the Renewal offers. Already the Apostle Paul showed that charismata do not work separately but only within the community. To integrate the charismata into the community is a permanent challenge to the entire community of the faithful. This task has two sides. The community is called upon to accept members of the charismatic prayer groups, and they in their turn are called upon to turn to their own local community.

We make this statement and hope that all who in any way get in touch with the Charismatic Renewal will get more closely acquainted with the special gifts that are found there. We ask those who are part of the Renewal to maintain in their own community and to deepen the bonds with it. Finally we want to give expression to our esteem for the values that are more often and more clearly found in the Renewal.

Utrecht, 1st October 1988.
The Bishops of the Netherlands.

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More statements of bishops conferences on Catholic Charismatic Renewal are on www.iccrs.org.

Publications of Cardinal Suenens on Catholic Charismatic Renewal (Malines documents) are also on www.stucom.nl: see overview on <http://www.stucom.nl/document/0238uk.pdf>

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