

CANADIAN BISHOP'S
PASTORAL LETTER ON
CHARISMATIC RENEWAL IN
CANADA - PENTECOST 2003

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Charismatic Renewal in Canada, we, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, wish to address this pastoral letter to all the faithful. With deep gratitude and a renewed sense of hope in our hearts, we invite everyone to join us in celebrating the many blessings and gifts that the Charismatic Renewal has brought to the life of our Church in Canada during these past 35 years. We also wish to take this opportunity to highlight some of the new challenges that the Charismatic Renewal faces at a time when the Church seeks to launch out into the deep of a new millennium.

Before taking leave of his disciples, Jesus reassured them with these words: "And the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). He renewed their hope by promising them that he would not leave them orphaned, that his Spirit

would come upon them, and that he would continue to be with them. If we needed a tangible sign that the risen Lord has kept his promise in this regard, the presence of the Charismatic Renewal in our Canadian Catholic Church is certainly one such telling sign.

From its spontaneous emergence in Canada in 1968, from coast to coast and in places far removed from one another, the Charismatic Renewal quickly resulted in a great upsurge of spiritual vitality and renewal. Prayer groups sprang up in virtually every diocese across the nation and very soon service teams and diocesan committees were set up to unite and assist these. In the French sector, as early as 1974-75, the ACFRCC (Assemblée canadienne francophone du Renouveau charismatique catholique) came into being, becoming ten years later the ADDRC (Association des diocésains du Renouveau charismatique). Soon thereafter, in order to unite and assist the Charismatic Renewal leadership at the national level, the CCRSC

(Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services of Canada) was established for the English sector, and for the French sector, the CCRC (Conseil canadien du Renouveau charismatique). Each sector has an official magazine: The Bread of Life and Selon Sa Parole. Today over 1 million Catholic Canadians have been touched or in some way influenced by the Charismatic Renewal in Canada. There are some 862 prayer groups in roughly 16% of all Catholic parishes in the country.

What is particularly remarkable about the history and rapid growth of the Charismatic Renewal is the way it sprang up quite spontaneously and organically from the grassroots level of the faithful to become very quickly a nation-wide phenomenon in the Catholic Church of Canada. This is all the more remarkable since the Charismatic Renewal does not owe its origin to some inspired founder or charismatic figure. It has no

membership lists and is not unduly bound by internal structures or rules. The Charismatic Renewal is a highly diverse collection of individuals, prayer groups, communities, and activities. Yet all share and espouse the same goals, namely, to foster a personal and continuous conversion to Jesus Christ, receptivity to the presence, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit, a deep love for the Church and its work of evangelization, a strong fellowship, and joyful zeal for the Gospel. One can say that the Charismatic Renewal has been and continues to be the sovereign work of God, realized through the Holy Spirit. It touches the lives of men and women in every walk of life, renews their faith, and enkindles in them a joyful love and zeal to serve God and his People. These lay faithful, priests and religious have allowed themselves to be surprised by God, surprised at the experience of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It is most fitting, therefore, that as we review the 35-year history of the Charismatic Renewal, we lift up our hearts and give thanks for the many spiritual gifts and blessings it has brought to the life of

the Catholic Church in Canada. We invite all the faithful to join us as we make these words of Pope John Paul II our very own:

How can we not give thanks for the precious spiritual fruits that the Renewal has produced in the life of the Church and in the lives of so many people? How many lay faithful men and women, young people, adults and elderly have been able to experience in their lives the amazing power of the Spirit and his gifts. How many people have rediscovered faith, the joy of prayer, the power and beauty of the word of God, translating all this into generous service in the Church mission! How many lives have been profoundly changed![1]

SPIRITUAL FRUITS OF THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

In order to better celebrate the blessings which the Charismatic Renewal has bestowed and indeed continues to bestow upon the Church of Canada, we wish to highlight and name here some of its more notable spiritual benefits.

EXPERIENCE

What perhaps best explains the enthusiasm of participants in the Charismatic Renewal is that it stems from deep

personal religious experience. The Charismatic Renewal is not a teaching or a program as such, but first and foremost a personal experience or close encounter with God's Spirit. For example, there is a big difference between experiencing a region or country by travelling there oneself instead of simply reading about it in a travelogue. The former has a much deeper and more lasting impact on the individual. So too when a Christian has the personal experience of having been touched or overtaken by God's Spirit. With varying degrees of intensity, it often marks a change in the person's whole outlook and being. There is henceforth in that person an overriding sense that God's spirit is really alive, powerful and trustworthy even in today's secular world. In this respect, the Charismatic Renewal serves the Church well by eliciting from every member a personal discernment of the workings of the Holy Spirit and a real assent to the Spirit's presence in their lives and in the Church. It is of course true, however, that such a personal experience of the Spirit is not reserved to just a select few members of God's family. It can and does occur constantly in the

life of every Christian who is alive to his or her baptismal vocation. The experience is always bound up with the witness of the Apostles and the living faith of the Church down through the centuries.

In the classical theology of the Church, the Holy Spirit is the love shared between the Father and the Son, or in St. Bernard's beautiful image, the kiss or embrace of the Father and the Son. St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the third person of the Trinity as the breathing back and forth of the Father and the Son, the pulse and living heartbeat of God. The Father and the son go out of themselves in a sort of mutual ecstasy and that ecstasy is the Spirit. This is not just an abstraction. It is at the very heart of the Christian life. This is what the Charismatic Renewal has experienced, and lest we forget, this is what it seeks to make us all aware of, namely, that the risen Lord wants us to share in God's inner life and love, that he wants us to experience his own Spirit, his own divine Ecstasy.

PRAYER

If there is one thing that characterizes the Charismatic Renewal, it is the high premium that it places on prayer, especially that of praise and

thanksgiving. It has resolutely taken unto itself St. Paul's exhortation: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit" (Thess 5:16-19). The main purpose of prayer and prayer groups is to give glory to God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. A typical prayer meeting generally consist in songs of praise and spontaneous prayers addressed to the Father, the Son and to the spirit. It is punctuated with scripture readings, periods of silence, sharing, and prayers for healing, often ending with personal testimonies and thanksgiving. These prayer meetings take their inspiration from St. Paul's advice: "When you assemble, one has a psalm, another an instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (Cor 14-26). Or again, as when St. Paul invites Christians to "be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalm and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and praying to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ to God the Father" (Eph 5:18-20). This insistence on prayer, both personal and communal, is very much in keeping with Pope John Paul's own exhortation. In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, he speaks of prayer as the "the very substance and soul of the Christian life," which, he says is "wrought in us by the Holy Spirit" (n32). It is almost as though the Pope was thinking of the Charismatic Renewal when he urged all Christian communities to become "genuine schools of prayer" (n33) for indeed that is basically what the Charismatic Renewal is all about.

NEW EVANGELIZATION

Pope John Paul II first called for a "new evangelization" in 1983, an evangelization that would be "new in ardor, methods and experience." The heart and wellspring of this new evangelization are to be found in the "inscrutable riches" (Eph 3:8) of Christ and the need to proclaim God's saving love as shown forth in Jesus Christ. Evangelization begins with a deep conversion to the person of Christ. It is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus, through the Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Charismatic Renewal has

made a great contribution in this area as well. It has always understood personal conversion as the goal of evangelization, that is, a complete surrender to the person of Jesus Christ, a surrender that in turn releases the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what gives the Charismatic Renewal its ardent desire to be baptized in the Spirit. It seeks to experience the fullest possible release of the Holy Spirit and be confirmed in the "new life" that results from this release. The expression "baptized in the Spirit" denotes an experience with God that produces several things in the subject: a new or greater desire for prayer, a substantial increase in the hunger to better understand Scripture, a keener awareness of God's Spirit, and a personal desire to foster the Church's mission of evangelization.

This is not something new in the Church: the Holy Spirit has always been active in the Church, and the New Testament presents this as being quite normal for every Christian. What is new and what the Charismatic Renewal brings to the Church today is a renewed and lively awareness of the active presence and workings of the Spirit. This remains the

heart and central focus of the Renewal's spirituality. The Charismatic Renewal therefore does not regard itself as a movement set apart from the Church. To the contrary, it sees itself as a spontaneous ecclesial consequence of what happens when the fullness of Christian initiation is embraced and taken seriously. This is why Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have both insisted that the Charismatic Renewal is a grace within and for the whole Church.

GRATUITOUS SERVICE TO OTHERS

The Charismatic Renewal would constantly remind us that charisms are foremost gifts from God and "are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church." [2] These gifts are given to individuals primarily for the benefit of others. Members of the Charismatic Renewal have always been very mindful of this servant quality that flows from the bestowal of God's gifts. In this, they heed the words of St. Peter: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gifts each of you have received" (1 Pet 4:10). This of course is not to say that only those in the Charismatic Renewal receive such gifts; on the

contrary, every Christian is so gifted through the sacrament of baptism and confirmation: "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another having another" (1 Cor 7:7). Yet the Charismatic Renewal has certainly been a good and faithful steward in preventing us from neglecting the importance of God's gracious gifts to his pilgrim Church. Members of the Renewal are not only quick to recognize the gifts of others, but they are ever ready to share and serve others with whatever gifts from God they themselves have received.

The Charismatic Renewal thus renders an invaluable service to the Church in what may be called its "memorial function": it obliges us all to remember and keep constantly in mind something we know through divine revelation, but in practice often tend to forget, namely, the grace-given character of our Christian existence. In this memorial capacity, the Charismatic Renewal serves as a living sign to all the faithful that the Holy Spirit both surrounds and inhabits the family of God. It serves as a powerful reminder that we must all assume an attitude of openness and grateful

availability for every gift that the Spirit wishes to pour into our hearts. Such gifts are ultimately bestowed for the building up and edification of the ecclesial community.

HEALING

Another salient feature of the Charismatic Renewal is its healing ministry. Very early on, the Renewal recognized that healing was an integral part of Jesus's ministry and that he empowered his followers to heal as well. Faith seems to have been a crucial element in at least some of Jesus's healings, as when he uses the phrase: "Your faith has made you whole" (Mk 10:52). On other occasions, by contrast, disbelief and lack of faith on the part of his listeners sometimes prevented healing from occurring (Mk.3 6:5-6).

The Charismatic Renewal sees healing as one of the powers of the Holy Spirit and so embraced this ministry as an integral part of its mission. It also recognized that with human beings, there are different