

... From the Goodnews archives, January/February 2008

Strategy for Renewal

Fr Peter Hocken, who gave the main address at the Moment of Opportunity meeting for a group of invited leaders of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in England, reflects on what he sees as the key areas to ensure that the Charismatic Renewal remains prophetic in the life of the Church.

I am taking as my launching pad a statement of Fr Raniero Cantalamessa: "The Renewal is nothing if it is not prophetic". For me, the opposite of prophetic is domesticated. So my question is: what is needed to ensure that the Renewal is truly prophetic and does not become tamed or domesticated?

1. Becoming a Biblical Church, a Church of the Word, a Church soaked in the Scriptures.

We have to become people of the Word. Faith comes through hearing and believing the Word. The Word produces conversion. Without the Word there is no clear-cut conversion (no inner "death") so that spiritual ambiguity flourishes. There is a widespread Catholic mentality that the Word of God is a helpful extra! This shows up in the ease with which homilies are omitted, or with which sermons are given without any biblical content. It is a survival of the attitude that the sacrament is the real thing, and the liturgy of the Word is merely prior adornment. It is largely through the Renewal that Catholics have responded to the Vatican Two appeal for all to have full access to the Scriptures. But while many of us have come to a much greater knowledge of bible texts, it is probably also true that few of us are as yet deeply soaked in the Scriptures. It is not really possible to be deeply soaked without a profound sense of the roots in Israel and of the faithfulness of God to all his promises.

The Bible comprises two Testaments, Old and New. The doctrine of inspiration is that both are inspired by the Holy Spirit, not that the New is more inspired than the Old. God is consistent. He has one plan from the beginning, that is expressed in words like kingdom and mystery. Some discussion groups have reported a sense of not knowing where God was leading. I feel that this lack comes from not being soaked in the Word. The whole Bible is an unfolding of the one plan, which reaches its first climax in the first coming of the Lord, and which will reach its second climax in his second coming.

The biblical pattern is always that God chooses one (election) to bless the many; this process begins with Abraham; it continues with Jacob, with Moses, with David and reaches its climax with Jesus. God never begins with the general or the universal, but always with the particular. "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners. so also through the obedience of the



Fr Peter Hocken

one man the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5: 19). “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” (1Cor. 15: 21).

Then the Word always involves events and promises. God speaks to Abraham, the father of faith, and makes him promises. Abraham believes the promises. Through the angel God speaks to Mary, the mother of faith, and makes her promises. Mary believes the promises. Faith always includes promises for the future. “Christ has died, Christ has risen (events), Christ will come again (promise). Biblical faith begins with Abraham; Mary enters into a heritage of faith. If we emphasise the mother of faith without the father, we produce a distortion.

How can we help people in the Renewal to become soaked in the Scriptures? Especially the young people. I am often approached by young Catholics who long for a deep biblical formation, and they come and ask: where can I get this? They know that they will not find what they are seeking in academic Catholic biblical studies. I feel there is a deep need for Catholic Bible schools, and I cannot really see this coming from any other source than the Renewal.

2. Becoming a Church of the Word Incarnate, a Church of living Liturgy, celebrating the full Mystery of Christ.

The Word of God is never just naked Word. It is always the Word made flesh. God speaks, God promises, and Abraham believes. Then God makes a covenant with Abraham and seals the covenant with blood sacrifice. So the proclamation of the Word, eliciting faith, leads to the liturgy of covenant sacrifice. So Catholic renewal will restore the proper place of the Word, which will then lead into revitalized liturgy. The Liturgy is the biblical Word enacted in signs. It goes beyond mental acceptance of the Word to a total feeding on the Word Incarnate.

In this liturgical context, Catholics will receive from a profound immersion in the Scriptures the following benefits:

A • A profound reverence for God; learning from Israel a sense of the holiness of God, the awesomeness of God, and the tenderness of the Father’s heart; amazing Hebrew words: *Hesed*¹, *Shalom*, that come out of Israel’s experience of God;

B • a holistic vision for all creation, for the whole human race, for all components of the human person (body, soul, spirit); all creation was disturbed by the Fall: “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3: 8);

C • the pattern of WORD and SACRAMENT: first, the proclamation of God’s Word; second the celebration of a covenant sacrifice (see Exodus 24)

D • the rhythm of feast and fast, of particular seasons, of years and of weeks, as a communal experience and formation; “a time to rejoice, a time to weep”;

E • the understanding of the liturgy and sacraments as belonging to “the age of the Church” between the first and second comings of Jesus (CCC, 1076);

F • the understanding of the repeated pattern of disobedience, disaster, mercy and repentance in history; “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.” (Rom. 11: 32);

G • An understanding of the Trinitarian structure of Almighty God and of his mission in the world; the mission(s) of the Son and of the Spirit.

The Liturgy and Devotions

The Liturgy and Devotions

Historically, devotions grew up in the Catholic Church as a substitute for living liturgy (the Orthodox Church has no tradition of non or extra-liturgical devotions). There is a big spiritual battle in the Catholic Church for liturgical renewal versus a reversion to “devotions”. Authentic renewal in the Catholic Church will be strongly liturgical and will in this way be deeply biblical. The devotions are for the most part not strongly anchored in the Scriptures, tending to produce religious sentiment rather than to promote conversion. Liturgical pioneers such as Beauduin in Belgium and Parsch in Austria noted that devotions do not form character; they do not produce prophets. Devotions tend to become instruments for domestication, because they lack the prophetic thrust of the biblical Word.

I am not advocating the abolition of all devotions, which are in any case very varied in content, but noting that they do not have the formative renewing power of biblical liturgy. In any case, it is always foolish to abolish when there is no proper replacement. I am not arguing for a preoccupation with liturgy. I am urging a personal and corporate drawing from the whole biblical revelation that issues in an authentic celebration of the biblical sacramental signs by the whole people in real fellowship. I.e. Word become flesh today. A living liturgy forms the Church in the biblical vision, in the eschatological hope, and is profoundly transforming. The liturgy forms the Church, already pregnant with the Kingdom, emotionally, affectively, aesthetically, intellectually and culturally.

3. Becoming a humble Church, confessing our sin and acknowledging our weaknesses.

Renewal is impossible without profound cleansing. Often we want a renewal that will bring new life, new zip, but without any upset! No big challenge, no humbling. It is an illusion.

John Paul II's call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past (1994) was truly a prophetic step with enormous implications for the future. He saw that without confession and repentance for the sins of the last millennium, they would be repeated in the next millennium.

The humbling of the Church is already happening in many places: especially through the shortage of vocations, through child abuse scandals, through loss of church power and influence. But we tend to be suffering these passively, without entering into God's spiritual dynamic. When the Church's liturgy was shaped in its beginnings, the Church took over and adapted the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost (for obvious reasons). But the Church did not take over two other major Jewish observances: Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and the Feast of Tabernacles (the feast of harvest completion). These two feasts say a lot, I think, about two of our greatest weaknesses as Church. The lack of corporate repentance, and the lack in Messianic hope.

Currently, we have no mechanism (like Yom Kippur) to confess our sins as Church. Because we do not have any mechanism to confess our sins as a people, we also seem unable to address the real spiritual situation of the Church openly and honestly. So while our bishops have learned many lessons about being more open as they handle the crisis of child abuse, there has not as far as I know been any liturgical celebration of a diocese humbling itself before God because of this scandal. In the same way, our bishops now seem to be becoming increasingly managers of church decline! They are in an unenviable situation! But does not the whole message of the Scriptures tell us that the only answer is for God's people to humble themselves before the Lord, to confess their sins, and to beg for the Lord's mercy?

4. The Renewal has to be ecumenical or it will be domesticated, in effect nothing.

Renewal was ecumenical in its origins. I wrote about this in my book, *One Lord One Spirit One Body* (1987). It is amazing how there was an ecumenical element in the origins even in many countries with a Catholic majority, including several Latin American countries. Divisions happen because of sickness and weakness in the Church. What is neglected or denied in one part of the Body inevitably springs up somewhere else. This is God's goodness and mercy, not disorder. The process of restoring unity is then a restoring of the fullness. The term "Catholicism" has to be about fullness. The word "fullness" is used twice in Vatican Two: once to refer to the fullness of divine revelation, and once to refer to the fullness of the means of salvation.

The Pentecostals speak of the "Full Gospel" (Jesus as Saviour, Healer, Baptizer in the Spirit and coming King). The Scriptures speak of the fullness (pleroma) of Jesus and the Church (Eph. 1: 23; 4: 13), of the fullness of the Word of God that is the mystery of Christ" (Col. 1. 25 – 26), of the fullness of Israel (Rom. 11: 12) and the fullness of the Gentiles (Rom. 11: 25), of the fullness of time.

Renewal has to be concerned with fullness: with all the gifts, all the ministries, all the equipment of the Spirit for building up the whole body. This requires the work of the Holy Spirit in every Christian body. John Paul II said: "Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an 'exchange of gifts.'" (Ut Unum Sint, para. 28). We cannot become fully biblical, soaked in the Scriptures, without the help and the witness of Protestant and Orthodox Christians. We need them, and they need us.

Footnote

1 "Hesed means indeed more than grace. It includes all that is suggested by the Greek words charis, agape, eleos, and by the English words, 'goodness,' 'kindness,' 'mercy.' It is best rendered by the beautiful word 'lovingkindness,' which we owe to Coverdale. Hesed is used of God's love to man rather than of man's love to man or to God. It is a mercy which comes down, a divine condescendence, a pure gratuitous gift." (Lev Gillet *Communion in the Messiah*, p. 135)

<< Top Home >>

919,772 919,773