

Livets Ord, Uppsala

Wednesday November 8, 2006

Talk 2: The Renewal of the Roman Catholic Church

The big surprise of the Spirit at the start of the charismatic movement was that the gift of Pentecost and of spiritual gifts was being experienced within the historic churches and denominations that had ignored or scorned the Pentecostal movement fifty or sixty years earlier. Whereas the term **revival** was used by Evangelicals and Pentecostals, the term **renewal** was favoured by the charismatics in the historic churches. The two terms are instructive. The term revival means new life: what was dead or moribund becomes alive. This corresponds to the Evangelical and Pentecostal understanding of evangelism and conversion. The term renewal means new life, but does not presuppose death. And renewal has a more social application, and does not just apply to individual believers. So in the historic churches, charismatic renewal refers to all dimensions of the functioning of the Church being given new vitality through the preaching of the Lordship of Jesus and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Renewal in the Catholic Church did not begin with the charismatic movement. In fact, without some prior renewal, it would have been impossible for the Pope and the Catholic bishops to have welcomed a charismatic renewal that began outside the Catholic Church. The first whiffs of renewal really go back to the late 19th century, and the election of Pope Leo XIII in 1878. Until this point, the CC was on the defensive first against the Protestant Reformation, then against the rise of secularism and atheism in Enlightenment rationalism and in the French Revolution. I have been reading some books about Puritan eschatology, and it is interesting now that the prophetic currents in 17th century Protestantism predicted two major works of God: the crushing of the papacy and the downfall of Islam.

Central for renewal of the Catholic Church has been the Second Vatican Council held between 1962 and 1965. However, it is a mistake to see everything beginning with Vatican Two. The Council involving some 2,300 bishops could only accept some new direction that was already being advocated by a significant minority of reform-minded bishops. And there were reform-minded bishops because there had been pioneering figures in certain key areas since the time of Leo XIII, but increasingly steadily until the Council. Leo XIII wrote an encyclical letter on the Bible, and encouraged the renewal of biblical studies and new biblical translations. He also wrote a letter on the Holy Spirit, and in response to messages from a visionary nun, he consecrated the new century to the Holy Spirit on 31st December, 1900. (Jack Hayford in Dallas, May 2003). Leo XIII was also the founder of Catholic social teaching, writing an influential letter on the right of workers, which was also important because he looked out beyond the Catholic flock to the suffering of workers in general.

I want to describe briefly the renewal desired by Vatican Two and how it opened the door to the charismatic renewal. I see two revolutionary steps taken by Vatican Two that made a fundamental renewal possible:

1. The Important Place given to the Scriptures. This had many dimensions: the place of the Bible in theological studies; a greater place for the Bible in Catholic liturgy, and the results of changing to vernacular language; the opening of the Bible to all the faithful. It represented an overcoming of the Catholic fear of opening up the Bible, caused by the upheaval and trauma of the Reformation. The Word of God is given a constitutive place in Catholic teaching.
2. The Dignity of the Human Person. Several influences came together at the Council to insist on the dignity of every human person: a deeper reflection on the sufferings of humanity in the 20th century, especially under Nazism and Communism; a more biblical understanding of faith as the free act of each believer; the attacks on human life in abortion and euthanasia and in new medical experimentation.

Both of these points represented a major shift from the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. Both are needed for authentic renewal. The exaltation of the Word of God is foundational for the renewal of faith: faith comes from hearing the Word. But the dignity of the human person is also key. Faith is a free gift of God received freely by each believer without pressure or coercion.

If you want to see how much more biblical Catholic teaching has become, you have only to look at the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, issued in 1994, and compare it with previous catechisms. A Messianic Jewish leader-friend is one of the few people I know who has read every paragraph of the Catechism (2,865 paras). He told me he was amazed by two things: first, how biblical it is, and second, how much he agreed with (he estimated 90%).

Other major changes and developments at Vatican Two included:

3. A reform of Catholic liturgy. For the first time in the Roman rite, the liturgy could be celebrated in the vernacular (local) language. One of the major guidelines was the promotion of “the full and active participation by all the people” (SC, para. 14). “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful.” (SC, para. 51). Another was to make the biblical signs in the liturgy more simple and free them from later and more complicated symbolism. Another was to say that preaching in the liturgy should normally be an exposition of the biblical readings of the day. (Importance of liturgy often hard for free church Protestants to understand: this is the heart of the authentic tradition, and it is deeply biblical).

4. A teaching on divine revelation that made clear that revelation is not first of all a list of doctrinal statements, but is the revelation of a Person, Jesus Christ “in whom the entire Revelation of the most high God is summed up” (DV, para. 7)¹.
5. A promotion of lay people within the Church. The Council said that all the baptized are called to holiness – dispelling the long-standing Catholic idea that if you are serious about prayer and holiness you have to become a monk or a nun. The service of lay people in the Church is based on their baptism, and not on invitation from the priest. The new Code of Canon Law, drawn up after the Council, acknowledges for the first time the right of all members of the Church to form associations for advancing the Christian life.
6. A recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in other Christian Churches, also for the first time. The Catholic theology of the Church is adjusted to recognise that other Christians are within the one Church of Christ: the Catholic language since then is one of “imperfectly within”, but nonetheless within. There is a recognition that some elements of Christian faith may be better developed and more deeply lived in other Christian traditions.
7. For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, there is teaching on the Jewish people. The Council repudiated the long-believed replacement teaching that God had rejected the Jewish people, because of their rejection of Jesus; and affirmed that God’s covenant with the Jews is still in force. The Jews are not to be regarded or treated as an “accursed” people.

The Holy Spirit’s work of renewal in the Catholic Church did not begin with the Catholic charismatic renewal. The Pentecostal leader David du Plessis, who was invited to Rome as an observer, was heavily criticised for having anything to do with Catholics, and was disfellowshipped from the Assemblies of God. His answer to his critics was: “I am free to go wherever the Holy Spirit is free to go.” In hindsight, we can see important ways in which the Council prepared for the charismatic renewal. The Council brought the term renewal into the centre of Catholic terminology. Renewal was the stated purpose of the Council. Then the recognition of the Holy Spirit being at work in other Christian churches opened the way for the Catholic authorities to accept the charismatic renewal when it began less than 2 years after the end of the Council.

Also of particular importance was a debate on the **charisms**. This paralleled the long-time Protestant debate about cessationism, the theory that the supernatural gifts were only for the first generation of the Church. Except that in the Catholic Church there had always been faith in the miraculous: so the debate was not about whether such

¹ “he himself – to see whom is to see the Father (cf. Jn 14,9) – completed and perfected Revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees. He did this by the total fact of his presence and self-manifestation – by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth.” (DV, para. 4).

gifts and phenomena were possible, but whether they were ordinary or extraordinary, whether or not they were to be welcomed. And the decision was in favour of the charisms. This is what was said:

“Allotting his [the Holy Spirit’s] gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 12: 11) he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church, as it is written, ‘the manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit’ (1 Cor. 12: 7). Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church.” (LG, 12).

This statement was truly providential, because it provided the official theological grounds for affirming the validity of the spiritual gifts in the charismatic movement. In fact, when the CCR began, tongues was not an issue for the Catholic bishops, unlike the reaction in the Protestant churches. The Catholic bishops were challenged by the inter-denominational character of CR, not by the supernatural. And in fact, the Catholic Church accepted and welcomed the charismatic movement faster than any Protestant Church. Paul VI in Rome in 1975.

During the 1970s the Catholic charismatic renewal spread rapidly in North America and somewhat less rapidly in Western Europe. The most significant impact in Europe was in France, where several major new communities developed that are now found in most continents. In the last 20 years, CCR has declined in the USA, except among the ethnic minorities, but it has continued to spread in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as also in some of Eastern Europe.

In the Catholic understanding of renewal, graces and charisms are poured out to renew the whole Church, not just the recipients. This means that much CCR outreach is directed towards fellow Catholics, rather than with the totally unchurched. It also produces a tension not found so much in Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations: a tension between not causing too many ripples in the interests of acceptance and being prophetic witnesses whose presence may not always be comfortable to others in the Church. Issue of “ecumenism”.

The grace of renewal is meant to interact with all levels and dimensions of the Church’s life (worship, education and formation, evangelisation, service to the poor and needy, work for justice and peace, relations with other churches).

I wrote an article a couple of years ago (I have brought some offprints) about the impact of CCR on the RC Church. I started by saying that the impact had been less than charismatic Catholics had hoped, but greater than most Catholics were aware of. There is undoubtedly a much greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the CC today than 30 years ago. I do not think the CCR is the only cause, but it is a significant one. Catholics are undoubtedly reading the Bible much more. Here CCR has played a major influence, along with other new movements in the CC devoted to spiritual

renewal, like the Focolari, Cursillo, Foyers de Charité, Neo-Catechumenate, Sant' Egidio. Among lay people working full or part-time in the Church, a considerable percentage have been touched by CCR.

What is the effect of CCR on Catholic teaching? Well, it doesn't turn Catholics into Evangelicals or Pentecostals in doctrine. As you know, there are many ex-Catholics in Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. My experience is that most fall into two categories: (1) those who were never practising Catholics and who experienced conversion through Evangelical evangelism or Evangelical congregations, and who immediately joined them; (2) those who continued in the CC after their baptism in the Spirit, but then found they were not being fed with good teaching and pastoral care, and then left, sometimes with regrets. What happens with spiritual renewal within the CC is (1) the Spirit lifts up Jesus, his Cross and his Lordship as the centre of Christian faith with the result that all other doctrines are understood and lived in a newly Christocentric way, that is life-giving; (2) the Spirit gives a love for the Scriptures, so that everything is subordinated to a more biblical perspective; (3) the Spirit leads into a whole new experience of life with Jesus, of fellowship in the Spirit, and of spiritual battle with the forces of darkness – this experience guides one's reading, so that many charismatic Catholics start to find these same things in the lives of Catholic saints and other great spiritual heroes of the past.

There are obviously big differences between Renewal in an historic church tradition and the new Spirit-led churches and networks. In my book *The Strategy of the Spirit?* (1996), I spoke of these as two prongs of the work of the Holy Spirit in the last century. They are complementary and need each other. Let's look briefly at the major differences:

1. Renewal in the Historic Churches. The new work of the Holy Spirit has to interact with a whole heritage, within which the Spirit has nonetheless been at work in various ways since the beginning. None is totally dead. Renewal leaders here are not free to do what they want: they work under the authority of their church leaders. They often have to suffer misunderstanding, but this can be purifying and deepening. But most importantly, renewal means bringing what is there already under the penetrating gaze of the risen Jesus.
2. New Charismatic Churches and Networks. The new churches have been free – at least at the outset – to shape their corporate life around the doctrines and practices that the Holy Spirit has brought alive and shown to be central. This allows for the formation of new patterns where there is a creative freedom to give space to the Holy Spirit. It allows – especially in the first generation - for the emergence of leaders who truly lead. But it does not require an interaction with a heritage. This means, as I see it, that the new churches can be strong on what the Holy Spirit has shown, but there can be many aspects of biblical truth and traditional wisdom that are not on their screen.

The historic churches challenge the new churches to look beyond themselves, to look beyond the last and the next ten years, to enter more deeply into the Christian wisdom of the ages, and to discover areas that have not previously featured. The new churches challenge the historic churches to think creatively, to learn from new contemporary models of leadership and formation, to place structures at the service of the Lord rather than to be ends in themselves.