

National Service Committees of the British Isles

Talk One: November 20, 2010

Impressions from Assisi

I was invited to speak on “Baptism in the Spirit and Catholic Charismatic Renewal” held Oct. 25 – 28, 2010 at a conference on this same theme in Assisi organized by the Catholic Fraternity of Catholic Covenant Communities and Fellowships. There were two conferences taking place side by side, one for bishops that I was invited to address and one for leaders of member communities. It was a very encouraging experience that led me to reflect on how things are changing and developing in relation to the Renewal. It is these impressions that I feel led to share with you.

The overall impression I had was how the understanding and stance of those responsible in the Vatican and of many bishops are changing. How? I can express it in the following points:

1. There is an increasing awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit. This was very clear in the address of Cardinal Rylko at the end of the conference. There was an emphasis on being attentive to the Holy Spirit and on depending on the Holy Spirit in a way that I was not hearing a few years ago. The Cardinal was also speaking with an enthusiasm that I had not heard before. I also see a similar development within the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Is this just due to the impact of the Renewal? It is one factor, but this trend has been becoming clearer in official Vatican documents since the 1980s.
2. There is a greater recognition of the distinctive character of the Renewal. As you presumably know in the Vatican structures the Renewal comes under the responsibility of the Pontifical Council for the Laity where it has been treated as one of the new ecclesial movements that characterize the post-conciliar Church. In most countries the episcopal conferences appoint one bishop to relate to the new ecclesial movements as a whole. This pattern had advantages and disadvantages. The big advantage is that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal was recognized and accepted by the Catholic Church and has a place and voice within its structures. The big disadvantage is that the Renewal is just seen as one of the new ecclesial movements and its distinctive features are played down. It becomes one more good thing that Catholics can legitimately choose without it being seen as key for the future of the Church. Over the years, some key leaders like Fr Raniero and Charles Whitehead have always insisted that CCR is not one movement among many, that unlike the other movements it has no human founder and is a distinctive work of the Holy Spirit needed by the whole Church. But the hierarchy and the Vatican did not echo this. However in Assisi I was hearing something different. I think one major reason is the explosive growth of the Renewal in the Third World. For example, there were 20 or so bishops at this meeting just from Brazil, where over 8 million Catholics are active in the Renewal. In this context you can hardly think that CCR is the same kind of thing as movements with a membership of a few hundred or at best of a few thousand.

3. Everyone in the Renewal knows that Baptism in the Holy Spirit is the distinguishing mark of the Renewal. Two years ago there was a Consultation on Charisms in Rome organized by PCL and ICCRS. This was held just after the publication by ICCRS of the booklet *Guidelines on Prayer for Healing*, primarily written by Dr Mary Healy and myself. Largely because this had been well received by Renewal leaders, a demand arose at the Consultation for a similar booklet on Baptism in the Holy Spirit. So ICCRS agreed to this proposal, and because of the “success” of the first booklet, Bishop Joe Grech asked Mary Healy and I to be responsible for the preparation of the new booklet. Just last month the latest draft was circulated to all those, both leaders and scholars, being invited to a Consultation in Rome next March to discuss it. In this draft we have had to address this question: Is BHS for all? Or only for some? This question is a variant on whether the Renewal is distinctive and for the whole Church or whether it is just one NEM among many. In our draft we have made a distinction between the Renewal as a current in the Church marked by BHS and as an organized movement, so that we can say the heart of BHS is for all but not everyone has to be brought into the organized movement. In my Assisi talk, I also presented this understanding of BHS, and it was interesting that nobody objected to this point. In earlier contacts, the PCL seemed reluctant to recognize any way in which the Renewal is for all. But in Assisi I was sensing a change is taking place. We will discover how much this is true by what happens when our document is submitted to PCL and to CDF.

4. Also becoming evident is the awareness that the Renewal has a unique capacity to launch Evangelization on a large scale. I would say that the NEMs in general evangelize more than the rest of the Church, but that CCR has greater impact in evangelization than the other NEMs. I saw in Assisi a clear recognition of this potential among the bishops from Africa, Asia and Latin America. We know that this power flows from Baptism in the Holy Spirit. What is it about BHS that produces this evangelistic power and energy? We defined and described BHS as based on a new level of intimacy with the persons of the Trinity, leading to personal revelation of who Jesus is in His fullness, through a lifting up of the believer to a new level, in effect to know our position in the risen Christ. “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col. 3: 3). This intimacy and revelation is connected to the sovereignty of God's action in BHS that establishes a directness of relationship and action of the risen Lord.

5. Another major shift lies in the area of the ecumenical character of the Renewal flowing from its origins. As most of you know, I have been identified with this view for many years. In 1989, I presented a one-page paper on the ecumenical character of the Renewal at the first meeting of ECC in Disentis, Switzerland. To be more accurate, I presented it at a meeting of the Catholics there who stayed on an extra day for a Catholic meeting. This paper was well received, and amended following various suggestions. To my surprise everyone there was willing to sign the amended paper. They included Fr Paul Lebeau, SJ, who had been Cardinal Suenens' theological adviser for many years. But within two months the position expressed in this paper was denied by Bishop Paul Cordes at an international Renewal conference in Rome. So what we had called the Disentis document was dead. Kim Kollins has since shared with me that Cordes' position was not simply a reaction to this paper, but was part of a bigger issue to do with the whole

ecumenical expressions of Renewal. But what was interesting in Assisi is that 1989 was the time when Bishop Cordes was beginning the process of encouraging the formation of what became the Catholic Fraternity, now meeting in Assisi some 20 years later. At the beginning there was a policy of encouraging explicitly Catholic communities and the ecumenical body of which the emerging Fraternity had been the Catholic expression began to fade from the scene. My impression was that Bishop Cordes wanted to protect CCR, he wanted to encourage the Catholic communities, but that he saw the ecumenical dimension as more a problem than an opportunity. This position was upheld by the first President of CFCCCCF, Brian Smith from Australia, whose community had begun as ecumenical but which had serious difficulties. But today the second President is Matteo Calisi from Bari, Italy, who has been a major promoter of ecumenism within the Renewal for the last 20 years. What was encouraging for me in Assisi is that Matteo spoke strongly about this ecumenical dimension at every opportunity before the assembled bishops. He has encouraged ecumenical guests at the Fraternity meetings, and in Assisi, they included Anglican bishop Graham Cray, in charge of the initiative “Fresh Expressions” in England. The first speaker on the opening morning was a biblical scholar from Rome, the French Jesuit Cardinal Albert Vanhoye, who to my amazement started talking about Charles Parham at Azusa Street and William Seymour at Azusa Street as at the start of the appearance of BHS in the twentieth century. Again my affirmation of the Renewal's ecumenical character, origins and potential was positively received by the bishops and nobody raised alarms about it. In fact, a Brazilian bishop who gave a presentation later in the conference cited the leading Pentecostal theologian in Latin America with approval. And when one old Brazilian bishop spoke very negatively of all Pentecostals as sects, he was quickly answered by other Latin Americans.

6. Another impression concerns statements made by bishops at Assisi and particularly by Vatican officials along the following lines: (a) CCR and the NEMs have given rise to new patterns in Catholic life, e.g. priests and lay people living together in the same house, which is in some way a consequence of the Council's teaching on the universal call to holiness; (b) this includes the ordination of new priests for large communities primarily made up of lay people, for which no canonical provision has yet been adequately made; (c) the significance of these new elements and of CCR and BHS in particular need many years to be fully appreciated and rightly understood and how they relate to the tradition to be worked out. I had already spoken of the inadequacy of the dominant Catholic theological presentations, especially the McDonnell – Montague view of release or coming into conscious experience of graces originally bestowed in baptism.
7. This experience throws another light on the discussions in the last two years of the right interpretation of Vatican Two. Pope Benedict has used the phrase “a hermeneutics of continuity” arguing that the Council can only rightly be understood in relation to the whole Catholic tradition and as in a fundamental harmony with it. However, the Pope's comments are highly nuanced, as always, and his words carefully chosen. Some other Vatican officials have spoken less carefully virtually denying any really new elements. I do not think this stands up to historical examination, as it is hard to see how the teachings on ecumenism, on the Jewish

people, on dialogue, and on religious freedom are in complete continuity with the positions of the past. This is of course the argument of the Society of St Pius X, who say that Vatican Two was heretical on these points and who show no signs of flexibility on this. In the Assisi conference where the focus was not on issues to do with continuity and newness there was a freedom to recognize various areas of creative newness flowing from the Council.