

A Classic Encounters Catholics

Pentecostal Charismatic

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I will never forget my first impression of the Catholic charismatic movement. It happened in 1967 at the Notre Dame campus in South Bend, Indiana. A small group of students from Michigan State had journeyed down for a spiritual retreat. The result was a weekend of prayer and teaching which some have referred to as the birthday of Catholic Pentecostalism.

At Calvary Temple (Assembly of God), where my father served as pastor, we had been hearing all about the proposed retreat. Days before, one of our deacons had told us that several Catholics had been baptized in the Holy Spirit in his own home prayer meeting. In those years such a remark would have horrified the average classical Pentecostal pastor. It just couldn't happen. Instead Dad was curious. When we heard word of the retreat, I was sent out to take a look.

At Notre Dame I saw all characteristics of Pentecostal worship: spontaneous praise, prophecies, lively choruses with something more.

The cigarette, for example. By that I mean there were some participants who smoked in between prayers. This activity seemed so contrary to the traditional Pentecostal norm that I could hardly see anything else. I studied the little bulges in shirt pockets to determine the brands and could hardly restrain from laughing at the thought of persons in our own church and how they would indignantly respond to such a sight.

Still, it was not my first experience of seeing students

puffing in between prayers that struck me the most. Rather it was the spiritual atmosphere. I remember forming words to describe the sensation. One word was "joy." I had never seen such joy, it radiated from the faces. Another word as "love." There was hugging and laughter.

I soon discovered with surprise that I was rattling off the fruit of the Spirit. When I got to the word temperance, I stopped. Pentecostals will never accept this, I thought. No matter how provincial and inconsistent our views on temperance may be, we could never change.

One thing for sure, we Catholics and Pentecostals were quite a distance apart. First, theologically and second, culturally. (The cigarette fit into one or the other category depending on whether you were a "conservative" or "liberal" Pentecostal).

Finally there was no future in any Catholic-Pentecostal rapprochement, even if it could be attempted. After all, our preachers had told us for years that the Catholic Church was the scarlet lady prophesied in Revelation. Sooner or later a Pope would learn this and assume his role as "false prophet."

I must say that the initial Catholic encounters with Pentecostals were even more disappointing. Pentecostals descended on the Notre Dame campus with tape recorders, proclaiming innocently, "We are so glad that you Catholics are becoming Christians too."

Catholics and Pentecostals felt so far apart that after a few days everyone gave up any ideas of understanding each other. Everyone relaxed, shook their heads in bemusement and just watched.

As Pentecostals, we expected them to soon leave the Catholic Church and join us. They would have to quit smoking, of course. The Catholics, on the other hand, spoke about this being the work of the Holy Spirit who was achieving some sort of ecumenism. This we thought quite naive and it always

brought smiles to our faces.

Ecumenism, that unholy religious union and vehicle of the Antichrist, was like some invisible, insidious, exotic disease. Didn't the Bible warn the very elect might be deceived? No, we Pentecostals weren't going to fall for that!

It seemed as if the Notre Dame experience were destined to die. It was premature and so tender. It could hardly survive in the Catholic Church and sadly it seemed that we Pentecostals would not make room for it either.

Of course, it did survive. Out of the Michigan State weekend an annual conference emerged. The following year a hundred people showed up. Now the problem was how to justify this movement within the tradition and doctrines of the Catholic Church.

It was a very precarious business. The original group became quite gifted in explaining that their movement was authentically Catholic but new charismatic prayer groups were appearing spontaneously all over the world. In many places the movement was misunderstood. Some sort of organization was inevitable.

The years 1969-1970 were significant years in Catholic charismatic history. The American Council of Bishops surprised a lot of people by deciding that the movement "should not be inhibited but allowed to develop."

After a great deal of soul-searching regarding motives and objectives the Catholic Pentecostals decided to continue their annual conference with the result that in 1970, 1,300 people registered. A service committee of eight was formed to coordinate activities. A communications center was established and a newsletter was launched.

If Catholic Pentecostals were surviving in their own church, some traditional Pentecostals were opening up too. The

fellowship was lively and joyous, but there were problems.

A few Catholics feared that their people were becoming Protestantized. If the Catholic Pentecostal movement was to retain its credibility with the bishops, then relations with classical Pentecostals must be watched. Catholic Pentecostals began to retreat from fellowship with classical Pentecostals. A definite exclusivity emerged.

Those few traditional Pentecostals who had enthusiastically endorsed the charismatic movement found themselves suddenly unhinged. They were blacklisted as liberals or Ecumenists by leaders in their own movement, while the Catholics no longer needed their contacts and teaching.

In 1972 in Zurich, Switzerland, some traditional Pentecostals and Catholics sat down to talk together. No Pentecostal denominational leaders would participate, but it was a significant beginning. That dialogue has continued to this day and makes for fascinating reading.

I look back to my first Catholic Pentecostal prayer meeting with amazement.

First, theologically we have much more in common than we thought. Second, the fact that Catholic Pentecostals resisted many aspects of traditional Pentecostal culture resulted in a "cultural liberation" of sorts for us. Many Pentecostals suddenly learned they did not have to imitate every nuance of their revival tradition to remain truly Spirit-filled. In short, to my amazement it has been we classical Pentecostals who have changed culturally, not the Catholics.

Finally we learned, if belatedly, that the Catholic church is not the scarlet lady of Revelation. Perhaps she could become that some day and for that matter, so could we. The Bible clearly tells us that the spirit of antichrist denies that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John). The Catholic church, for all of the abuses and excesses we Pentecostals may attribute to

her, has never done that. Indeed, over entire centuries, she has been the very guardian of that principle to the point of teaching the actual blood and body of Jesus in the Eucharist.

By 1975 the Catholic Pentecostal movement involved several hundreds of thousands. The pastoral newsletter had become a major magazine with distribution in 90 countries. The annual conference was held in Rome, where Pope Paul greeted the Pentecostals with love. The labor and prayers and wisdom of many people had born fruit. The Catholic Pentecostal movement had been taken into the heart of the church.

In their first decade the Catholic Pentecostals had striven to establish their identity. At times they had been too Catholic for the Pentecostals and too Pentecostal for the Catholics but somehow with the Holy Spirit's gentle guidance they had emerged unscathed.

Enjoying a modicum of security in their own church, Catholic Pentecostals now begin to increase their ecumenical posture. The fact that they organized the conference on Charismatic Renewal in the Christian churches in Kansas City, which drew 50,000 worshipers, may herald that new decade.

Classical Pentecostal leaders may appear to be coming around too. At first they firmly declined a leading role in the Kansas City Conference, but when their own pastors began to protest some decided to attend as "observers."

One small Pentecostal denomination has gone on record against the charismatic movement and Catholics in particular. Another leading denominational head has taken a public posture endorsing the renewal while privately warning members of a World Pentecostal Conference that it is the greatest "problem" since the "latter rain" and the "Jesus Only" movements.

That remark, which leaked within hours, prompted one charismatic leader to say: "We are patient and willing to wait. We owe a lot to you and we love you. You will come

around.”

He then added with a smile, “It took us eight years to convince some of the leaders of the Catholic Church but you Pentecostals are a little more wrapped up in your tradition. You are just now getting around to the observation stage.”

The Assemblies of God, however, may soon take a role in building bridges between charismatics and old-line Pentecostals. A resolution to that effect passed overwhelmingly at a recent Assembly of God General Council. Many were surprised.

One denominational headquarters official had predicted it would split the movement down the middle. A St. Louis newspaper predicted a battle. Many leading pastors signed the resolution while openly declaring that it didn't have a chance, But it passed and the door may soon be open for loving fellowship among all Pentecostals, including the Catholics.

There is no doubt that the second decade of Catholic Pentecostalism will be as dramatic as the first. One must remember that Catholics outnumber classical Pentecostals 60 to 1. The Catholic Pentecostal movement may include millions of people before it reaches its saturation point.

Where will it all end?

While visiting a prayer group on the West Coast, I was once again struck by the love, joy and peace of that atmosphere. As I often do, I thought back to my first prayer meeting at Notre Dame.

It is amazing what the Spirit has done. The Catholics who have led the way are truly humbled by their role in this significant moment in church history. I found myself praying for them. “God, keep them open and give them courage. And, God, make us one.”