

Holy Spirit, Visit Us Again

The charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church has waned. But at a recent gathering in Pittsburgh, the faithful prayed for another touch.

The atmosphere in the auditorium was charged with fervent emotion. Hands were in the air. People were quietly praying in tongues. A man standing in front of the audience announced that God wanted to touch someone in a wheelchair.

"Please come forward. God wants to heal you," pastor Bob Canton told the crowd. An elderly woman was pushed to the front, and after Canton prayed for her she stood up and took a nervous first step. Slowly, Canton walked with her through the aisle.

The woman, grinning from ear to ear, walked back to the front by herself. She clapped her hands as she walked. People around her were clapping too.

A typical Pentecostal healing service? Not hardly. Nearly all those gathered at this conference in Pittsburgh last fall were devoted Roman Catholics.

Canton, who is Filipino, is part of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement—which today touches at least 119 million Catholics worldwide. The priest has conducted monthly healing services at St. Luke's Catholic Church in Stockton, California, since 1992. He reports that tumors have disappeared, sight and hearing have been recovered, and people bound to wheelchairs have walked after receiving prayer.

"People from other states come to our services," the priest

told Charisma.

This fervor for miracles—along with a fresh emphasis on leading others to Christ and into the fullness of the Holy Spirit—characterizes the 35-year-old charismatic renewal among Roman Catholics. These charismatics, who include collared priests and robed nuns sporting crucifixes and rosaries, seek to take Pope John Paul II's charge "to put out into the deep" seriously.

The 82-year old pope, who last visited North America in July to address the World Youth Day in Toronto, has publicly blessed the charismatics more than once. In a message to Catholic charismatic leaders in Rome in November, he encouraged charismatics to be "living signs of hope" and "beacons of Christ's good news."

The pontiff also told them: "Your contribution to the life of the [Catholic] Church, through your faithful witness to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, has helped many people rediscover in their own lives the beauty of the grace given to them at baptism—the gateway to life in the Spirit."

Breathing Life Into the Church

The Pittsburgh event marked the 35th anniversary of the Catholic charismatic renewal, which began in 1967 when a group of Catholic students at Duquesne University were baptized in the Holy Spirit during a prayer meeting. Those who gathered here last September were well aware that their church is in greater need of renewal than ever.

In fact, holiness became a major emphasis during the

conference. It was a timely theme in light of the clergy-sex-abuse scandal that has rocked the Catholic Church recently. Though the clergy scandal has not directly touched the charismatic renewal movement, Bishop Sam Jacobs—a leading spokesman for charismatic priests—urged people to repentance and unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ. So did Ralph Martin, another veteran leader of the renewal, who is president of Renewal Ministries, an organization promoting discipleship and evangelism.

“This [scandal] is a judgment for corruption in the Church and a call for cleansing and a deeper union with Jesus Christ,” Martin told Charisma. “As shocking and painful as it [the uncovering of sexual immorality among clergy] is, it’s God’s mercy. It’s actually very encouraging. Corruption and sin have to be exposed so that we can be healed.”

The Catholic charismatic movement has seen livelier days. In its heyday in the early 1970s, Spirit-filled prayer groups sprang up in parishes all over the United States, and hundreds of thousands of Catholics were introduced to the gifts of the Spirit. An annual conference for Spirit-filled Catholics hit its peak in 1973, when 30,000 people came together for services that blended Catholic liturgy with Pentecostal-style worship, healing prayer and fervent sermons.

That fervency has waned today, and the crowds have shrunk. At the Pittsburgh event this fall, only 3,400 Catholics attended—a disappointing showing for organizers.

Across the nation, charismatic prayer groups have lost their momentum, and the movement has aged. Vinson Synan, dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University and a historian of the Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements, has been

closely connected with the Catholic renewal for 30 years. He believes that the current decline is a combination of several factors.

“The renewal has become ‘old hat,’ losing a lot of the shock value it had in the early years,” Synan says. Also, many have left the Catholic Church and joined Pentecostal groups or have become what he calls “post-charismatics.” And many have become active in various lay ministries within the Church, thus funneling the renewal into local parishes, he believes.

Martin believes that Catholic charismatics are a vital part of what God is doing in the world today, and he encourages Catholics to adopt an ecumenical view that embraces other denominations. “We know that together we are part of something the Lord is doing, although we each have our own vineyard we have been given to work in,” he says.

At the conference, Bishop Jacobs prophesied that a new spiritual springtime was coming to American Catholic charismatics.

Marvin Mottet, a priest from Sacred Heart Cathedral in Davenport, Iowa, participated in the Pittsburgh conference after a 10-year break. “I have been hearing that there is not the fire that was evident in the early days,” he says. “But I thought there was plenty of fire here in Pittsburgh.” He characterized the conference as a “renewal of the renewal.”

Sparks and Flames

According to Synan, what became the most active renewal movement in charismatic history began in February 1967 at a

retreat at Duquesne University, a Catholic school in Pittsburgh.

It began when two professors who were hungry for more of God began reading David Wilkerson's *The Cross & the Switchblade* and John L. Sherrill's *They Speak with Other Tongues*. They then attended a small interdenominational charismatic prayer meeting where they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. Soon after, they planned a retreat, which later became known as the "Duquesne Weekend" among Catholic charismatics.

Patti Gallagher Mansfield was one of the 25 students who attended that retreat. At one point, instead of gathering people for a planned birthday party, she found herself in the chapel kneeling down before the Lord.

"I began to tremble at His holiness," she told *Charisma*. "I was flat on my face flooded with His love." Then, half of the students were sovereignly drawn to the chapel and experienced a deep presence and love of the Lord accompanied by weeping and outbursts of laughter.

"The miracle of the Duquesne Weekend is not that He poured out the Spirit, or that He gave the charisms [gifts of the Spirit] and that we could speak in tongues," Mansfield says today. "The miracle is that it came through a bunch of kids and that it stayed."

The growth of the movement has been amazing, despite the fact that North American statistics show it has declined from 60 million in its heyday to 10 million now. According to David Barrett, head of the Global Evangelization Movement in Richmond, Virginia, there are now 119 million Catholic

charismatics in 230 countries. Of these, approximately 73 million live in Latin America, 16 million in Asia and 11 million in Europe.

At the Pittsburgh event, it was obvious that the renewal has become more international in its scope. After the main sessions, which included teaching, praying in tongues and prophetic ministry, there were mini-conferences for Filipinos, Haitians and Hispanics. When all these diverse groups came together for united worship, there was an explosion of joy and freedom as people rushed to the aisles to dance to songs that included "Days of Elijah" and "The River Is Here."

In one of the Filipino sessions and at the end of the Saturday evening meeting, Bob Canton ministered healing. One of the people he called forward through a word of knowledge was someone who had tried to commit suicide three times. A Hispanic woman from Texas responded.

"It took a while to build courage to go forward," the woman told Charisma. "I had strayed from the Lord because of severe back pain. When He singled me out in a multitude of people, I felt lifted in a tender, loving way. He spoke to me that I have a mission to encourage other people who have done what I have done."

Signs of Renewal

Where is the renewal headed? Some leaders say it has shifted to Catholic youth groups, which are experiencing new vitality in some parts of the country. Others say the fire has died out and that another revival is needed for a church entangled in tradition and burdened by a clergy crisis that cannot be swept

under the rug.

There are signs, however, that the same spark that lit a fire at Duquesne University is still at work, spreading to one parish at a time. For Father Bob Bedard, that spark has transformed him and the life of his congregation.

He experienced the power of the Holy Spirit as God started “doing His favorite work, the work of conversion” in St. Mary’s parish in Ottawa, Canada, in the late 1980s. Before the priest reluctantly accepted the pastorate in 1984, he had worked full time in the charismatic renewal and had a clear picture of what a congregation could look like: The liturgies would be joyful, Masses would have lively worship and new ministries would spring up as a result of members responding to God’s call.

After Bedard realized that the parish was breathing its last, he panicked. The only thing he knew to do was to get quiet before the Lord every day and pray. Then he felt the Holy Spirit ask him to give Him permission to move freely. After two long years of praying and teaching, the first visible sign of God’s work was that the men in his parish were crying. And people began to be converted right in the middle of Mass.

Since then, attendance at Sunday Mass at St. Mary’s has grown from about 120 to 1,200 people. Bedard, who currently leads a community of charismatic priests and seminarians called Companions of the Cross, says the liturgy is lively and that worship is marked by raised hands and spontaneous praise, which sometimes includes singing in tongues.

“The key is to find out what God is doing and do it with Him,”

Bedard says. "The pastor must allow some of the chaos that goes on when God goes to work."

The breakthrough in Bedard's parish did not come without pain. He has received angry phone calls and hateful letters from parishioners who didn't appreciate the changes. "I have been labeled a cult-master and accused of pandering to a right-wing group attracted by my conservative preaching," Bedard adds. "And I have been called a left-wing radical because of my emphasis on lively liturgy. But I believe the Lord wants us simply to stand in there and take it. It's all part of following Jesus."

Bedard and some members of St. Mary's have visited the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, where pastors John and Carol Arnott have led renewal meetings since 1993. Bedard finds the two churches' styles of worship very similar, in spite of the obvious differences of the Catholic liturgy and sacraments. (Except that in his congregation, Bedard insists, the Catholics engage in much more spontaneous praise, singing in the Spirit and shouting to the Lord.)

The questions today are whether what Bedard is experiencing in Ottawa will become widespread, and whether the same revival spirit that erupted in Pittsburgh 35 years ago will descend from heaven again. Aggie Neck, chairman of the renewal movement's National Service Committee, shares the view that a new springtime of renewal is coming.

Says Neck: "I have an anticipation in my heart of a great harvest and a constant alertness. I don't want to miss this move of God."

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