

Is Charismatic Revival Exploding Among Catholics?

Much has changed since the massive renewal in the late 1960s, yet Catholic charismatics still comprise one of the largest groups of Spirit-filled believers on the planet. So how is this once-thriving movement fairing in America today?

According to a new document titled *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, published in Rome by the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services (ICCRS), more than 120 million Catholics in 238 countries have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Though that may be a conservative figure, it indicates the Pentecostal/charismatic movement remains alive in the modern Catholic Church. And the demographics of the movement are changing.

I spoke at the 45th annual national conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal held in Philadelphia this summer. Of the approximately 2,500 attendees, 800 were Haitians, 800 were Hispanics, 700 were Anglos and 200 were Filipinos—an accurate depiction of the Catholic renewal in America. For example, there are about 60 prayer groups in the diocese of Orlando, Fla., with nearly 50 percent a combination of Filipino, Haitian and Hispanic. In the Archdiocese of Washington, about 5,000 Hispanic Catholics worship regularly at charismatic services in 16 parishes.

For many years there has been a decentralization of the renewal in the U.S. The large national conferences of the 1970s and '80s have yielded to many regional and diocesan conferences and a variety of different language and ethnic groups, communities and ministries. These groups join forces for events with the encouragement of the National Service Committee.

Worldwide Renewal

There are signs that the renewal continues to grow rapidly in Latin America, Africa, Australia, Brazil and Asia. South Korea held an open rally in 2009, drawing more than 50,000. In 2011 about 32 countries were represented at the second Pan-African Congress of the Catholic Renewal in Cameroon, with more than 400 delegates from Nigeria alone.

According to statistics compiled in 2000 by ICCRS, there were 13,631 prayer groups in Asia, where 15 percent of Catholics are involved in the renewal. In August, a regional conference in Osaka, Japan, sported 300 delegates. Asia is second only to Latin America, where 16 percent of Catholics officially claim to be part of the renewal (though this percentage is likely higher given the ongoing revivals there).

As of press time, we believe that 12 million people have been baptized in the Holy Spirit in Brazil, a country with about 21,800 prayer groups. National gatherings there can attract approximately 350,000 people, and charismatic covenant communities like Canção Nova and Shalom run evangelistic radio and television stations. The Catholic renewal is also flourishing in places such as the Dominican Republic, Australia, the Philippines and Malaysia.

Sister Nancy Kellar, a Sister of Charity (N.Y.) who was a member of the first charismatic house of prayer in the U.S., has written a hopeful perspective on the movement around the world: "A somewhat newer trend that I rejoice in is the increasing activity on the part of the Catholic charismatics in the social and political arena. In Argentina, the national team for Catholic Charismatic Renewal held the first National Meeting of Social Promoters, attended by 117 brothers and sisters working in politics, trade unions, economics and social promotion. In Lithuania, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal has been involved in evangelization in the army, organizing charismatic meetings in several military bases. In

the Congo and Zaire, renewal participants are working on a great rally for peace. Charismatics in Pakistan utilized prayer and fasting for the release of two Christians wrongly imprisoned.”

Age Gap in the West

Except for the membership of some of the covenant communities and other occasional bursts that reengage youth, the Anglo renewal in North America and Western Europe is composed largely of older people. It is often referred to as “graying” of the renewal. The earliest apostles, pastors, teachers and evangelists of Pentecost among Catholics in the late 1960s were graduate and undergraduate students. With much work to do, the Lord found an army of youth to serve Him.

With many Spirit-filled youth today—our true future hope—enthusiastic for the gospel, it is our duty to mentor and teach them, to allow the Holy Spirit to fire their imagination. It is our task to help them discover new ideas, and to channel their energy to help future generations know the power of God. Part of this mentoring involves an understanding of our history.

Retracing the Roots

The Catholic renewal sprang from a retreat held in February 1967 in Pittsburgh with some faculty members and students from Duquesne University. It quickly spread and was, in time, almost universally accepted by church authorities. The United States Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal noted, “It is our conviction that baptism in the Holy Spirit ... is part of the normal Christian life.”

In 1975 Pope Paul VI said, “The church and the world need more than ever that the ‘miracle of Pentecost should continue in history.’ ... How could this spiritual renewal not be a chance for the church and the world?” In 1979 Pope John Paul II followed this up by saying, “I am convinced that this movement

is a sign of the Spirit's action."

Looking to the future, we must understand that the Catholic Church environment is changing. When Roman Catholics began experiencing the baptism of the Holy Spirit in large numbers in 1967, society as a whole experienced a great spirit of openness—particularly the Catholic Church. Great excitement stemmed from the Second Vatican Council about the renewal of the liturgy, the exercise of the priesthood of all the baptized, full participation in the life and mission of the church by lay people, openness to charismatic gifts and the rediscovery of Protestant and Orthodox Christians as our genuine brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the greatest areas of both optimism and caution from the beginning of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal was its strongly ecumenical dimension. Classic Pentecostals, as well as Protestant and nondenominational charismatics, provided us with a practical understanding of what we were experiencing and helped to sustain the movement. The alliance proved mutually beneficial. For example, the 1977 Kansas City Conference, which brought together 50,000 Pentecostals, Catholic and mainline Protestants and nondenominational charismatics in a genuinely ecumenical context, was a milestone moment for many and should, like other similar moments, remain integral to our story.

Reasons for Decline

Though many have worked hard to keep this ecumenical dimension of the renewal alive, openness to ecumenical engagement appears to be diminishing. Why have we experienced this decline? While discovering great possibilities for mutual fellowship, cooperation and even outreach, we also found that sustaining mutual respect and understanding is hard work.

Organizing large ecumenical events became increasingly difficult not only for financial and logistical reasons, but

also because despite our best efforts, we encountered difficulties maintaining ecumenical sensitivity while working together—mostly through some public doctrinal and pastoral confusion.

Meanwhile, on the local level of prayer groups and congregations, the ecumenical vision wasn't reaching people's hearts. It soon became easier for many to put effort into cultivating their own garden. It is clear to me, however, that the initial strong ecumenical dimension of the renewal must be recovered. We are all descendants of Azusa Street.

How should we proceed in an atmosphere that may be less open and perhaps more suspicious about what we consider the graces of the Pentecostal outpouring? Surely we Catholic charismatics love the church and are called to live in fidelity and obedience to the church. In this changing Catholic culture, we sense a fresh prophetic call upon the renewal to reemphasize the importance of living life baptized in the Spirit, accepting and using the charisms, preaching and witnessing in power, stretching out our hands in effective healing, interceding with problem-solving faith and engaging the enemy in victorious spiritual warfare. The fact that our church culture may appear to be less receptive to this Spirit-led work than in the past is not an excuse for our inconstancy.

Pressing Forward

If you look for the fruit after 45 years of renewal, you will find that many people who are involved in parish ministry have at one time or another experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Those who serve as Eucharistic ministers, lectors, visitors to the sick, on parish councils, in religious education programs—many of whom will say that they were baptized in the Spirit and remain open to the gifts of the Spirit—are now ministering in the Catholic Church.

Moreover, there is ongoing participation of Catholic

charismatic leaders in Vatican-sponsored meetings on healing, charisms, deliverance and ecumenism. Overall, the church has formed new charismatic religious orders of men and women, nurtured vocations to the priesthood and to the diaconate, launched more houses of prayer, paved the way for worship music to flourish, and continued to serve the poor.

For example, Lay Apostolic Ministries with the Poor (LAMP), founded by Tom and Lyn Scheuring, has been serving in New York for more than 30 years. Jim Cavnar's Cross International serves those in extreme poverty in Haiti. Our Lady's Youth Center in El Paso, Texas, continues to serve the underprivileged. These are only a few of many examples.

Our 45-year journey hasn't always been a series of high points. We didn't always "fly through the air with the greatest of ease." There have been times when it felt more like traveling over mountains and through deserts in a Conestoga wagon, hitting pothole after pothole. There have been problems and bumps in the road—squabbles among leaders (often about power), persecution from within and from without. Some have withdrawn from the ecumenical imperative of the renewal; some have wandered into New Age practices or withdrawn from witness into private piety, forgetting the primary entrustment of the renewal is the charisms—the gifts of the Spirit.

But God isn't done with His purposes for the renewal. Despite our weaknesses and failures, any opportunity to think about where we've been and what God has done leaves us all dumbfounded. We believe that if our focus remains on the basic entrustment of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the charisms, we can trust in the Lord for an even greater future.

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