THE CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

Pope Francis' Assessment of its Challenges

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A note to the reader: the direct quotes from Pope Francis' address in this article are taken from the English translation of the address provided in the papal documents section of the Vatican website. For ease of reading, text from this source has been placed in quotation marks but is not succeeded by parentheses specifying its source. All other direct quotes have their sources specified in this way.

A First Look at the Text

Pope Francis' June 2014 address to the 37th National Convocation of Renewal in the Holy Spirit challenges leaders of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, hereafter termed the CCR, to abandon attitudes and practices which the pontiff contends have contributed to 'infighting' within and amongst CCR groups. Given the brevity of this address and its focus on identifying and critiquing the root cause of this discord it contains only two examples of divisive attitudes and practices and does not speak to their prevalence. Instead, Pope Francis uses the two examples he discusses as evidence in support of his central contention: that the disunity in the contemporary CCR is symptomatic of an unnecessary and damaging effort on the part of its leaders to control its activities.

The first example discussed in this address pertains to leadership of entire CCR groups. Pope Francis admonishes leaders in the CCR who exceed the role of facilitators and instead attempt to direct the activity of CCR groups without due regard for other members' dis-

cernment of the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis borrows the phrase 'the danger of getting too organised' to refer to this first factor contributing to the disharmony in the contemporary CCR, but it is perhaps more readily understood as the executive approach to leadership. The pontiff contends that adopting this approach causes a leader in the CCR to think 'of himself or herself as being more important or greater than the others'. In place of this executive model of leadership, Pope Francis' address promotes a return to the servant leadership model which characterised the early CCR. He argues that this latter model allows the Holy Spirit to lead the CCR and therefore promotes harmony 'because unity comes from the Holy Spirit'.

The second divisive attitude which Pope Francis discusses is related to the first. Having identified the need to return to a 'servant leadership' model with respect to entire CCR groups, Pope Francis identifies the need for change with regard to the approach taken to leadership of individuals in the CCR. The pontiff admonishes those leaders of the CCR who have sought to become what he terms 'arbiters of God's grace' taking upon themselves the right to determine who may receive 'the prayer of outpouring or Baptism in the Spirit'. Pope Francis clearly feels, therefore, that the 'executive approach to leadership' must not be adopted towards an individual wishing to experience charismatic prayer or become initiated into the CCR. Pope Francis presses this point by contending that this attitude is not in

keeping with the freedom with which the earliest members of the CCR received charisms, engaged in ecumenical activities and evangelised.

Placing This Address in (an) Historical Context

Notably, Pope Francis's address does not make explicit what he believes precipitated the change away from servant leadership in the CCR. However, sections of this address do allude to a cause when they are read in the context of the historical development of the CCR. Moreover, it would seem that Pope Francis intended this address to be understood with this background in mind, since he intersperses references to the development of the CCR in it *passim*.

The early history of the CCR can be categorised in two phases. The first of these two phases, the 'movement's birth', did not include any significant theological reflection on the CCR's mission and place within the broader Catholic Church. The overriding concern for those involved in this first phase of the CCR was sharing what they described as a powerful and life-transforming outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was first experienced in the context of a Protestant, Pentecostal prayer group.

The seminal work on this first phase of the CCR *Catholic Pentecostals*, written by Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan and published in 1969, is an ideal source for evaluating Pope Francis' portrayal of the early CCR. Not only does it describe the initial structures and activities of the CCR during its early years in detail, it is also listed as recommended reading in the works of Cardinal Suenens, whose texts and contribution to the development of the CCR Pope Francis praises in this address. Moreover, *Catholic Pentecostals* is referenced in the statutes of the ICCRS, a body whose 'service of the worldwide renewal' is also praised in the pontiff's address.

Catholic Pentecostals depicts the CCR



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as a movement intent on promoting a strong affective response to shared prayer, which it terms Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Each of the many testimonies the Ranaghans reproduce in their text recounts how the experience of Baptism in the Holy Spirit imbued the person providing the testimony with certain gifts and prompted in that person a strong desire to share this experience with others. The most frequently referenced charism described as a manifestation of Baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Ranaghans' work is glossolalia, a 'spontaneous verbal expression, in which syllables succeed one another, forming phrases that are unintelligible'. (Leo Joseph Cardinal Suenens, A New Pentecost? 1974, 99). However, Catholic Pentecostals does not present 'speaking in tongues' as an absolute indicator that 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit' has occurred since this experience and the discernment of charisms is presented as an entirely subjective process.

Nevertheless, the Ranaghans do outline a method for obtaining Baptism in the Holy Spirit. They direct anyone seeking renewal to gather with others to ask Christ in prayer to 'renew in him the gifts and fruits bestowed in baptism but not fully actualized in a living way'. (Catholic Pentecostals, 144) While it is made clear in subsequent passages that this prayer for renewal is just that: 'a prayer, not a sacrament,' (Catholic Pentecostals, 150) this seems to be more a concession to the demands of orthodoxy rather than a point of conviction, as evidenced by the subsequent addition of 'if such a radical distinction needs to be made'.

(Catholic Pentecostals, 150)

Indeed, many of the testimonies the Ranaghans reproduce in Catholic Pentecostals contain passages which suggest that, in the first phase of the CCR's history Baptism in the Holy Spirit was understood in a way that is inconsistent with the Catholic understanding of the Sacrament of Confirmation. To provide but one example, while describing part of the student retreat conducted at Duquesne University in 1967 during the weeks immediately following the founding of the CCR, one of the participants, David Mangan, states that he 'realized what my reception of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation was supposed to be and how I didn't participate in it'. (Catholic Pentecostals, 25) This account, and many of the others which were published and promoted in Catholic Pentecostals, therefore implies that the reception of grace at Confirmation is contingent on an act of the will on the part of the one being confirmed.

Their weak protest to the contrary notwith-standing, throughout *Catholic Pentecostals*, the Ranaghans clearly present Baptism in the Holy Spirit as a means by which the Holy Spirit effects a change in the life of a Catholic which may not have been conferred through the reception of the Confirmation. This disregard of the objectively conferred, ontological change which occurs at Confirmation is inconsistent with Catholic theology and is the product of the entirely subjective approach to discernment and religious experience prevalent in this first phase of the CCR.

The lack of theological reflection which characterised the activity of the early years of the CCR was seen as a dangerous omission by Cardinal Suenens, whose involvement in the CCR began the second phase in its early history, approximately six years after the first CCR retreat at Duquesne University. Suenens saw the deficiencies in the sacramental understanding of the early CCR as symptomatic of its origins in Protestant Pentecostalism and the exclusive emphasis on subjective experience therein:

On the level of actual experience, we can and indeed must admire classical Pentecostals for their faith in the action of the Holy Spirit. However, as everyone knows, as Catholics we cannot follow them on a doctrinal and exegetical level in their interpretation of 'baptism in the Spirit' nor in the matter of speaking in tongues (*A New Pentecost?* 79)

Hence, this second phase in the CCR's early development was characterised by the effort to safeguard the CCR from the danger of syncretism. Suenens and others who shared his concerned attempted to achieve this through the introduction of what can be termed 'an objective theological framework' which would allow the subjective experiences in the CCR to be evaluated and expressed in terms which were more consistent with Catholic theology.

Suenens sought to introduce this objective theological framework by emphasising two key aspects of the Catholic understanding of charisms not evident in the first phase of the early CCR. Firstly, Suenens sought to ensure that charisms were understood as gifts which the Holy Spirit imparts primarily for the good not of the individual, but of the whole Church. This was explored briefly at the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution Lumen Gentium, which defines charisms as the means by which 'faithful of every rank' may 'contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church'. (Lumen Gentium, par 12) Secondly, Suenens sought to promote awareness of the need for objective discernment of charisms by 'those who are appointed leaders in the Church, to whose special competence it belongs'. (Lumen Gentium, par 12) This was a topic of no small import to Suenens, who recounts in his text A New Pentecost? that he had strongly advocated for the inclusion of this section on charisms in Lumen Gentium while acting as a moderator of the Second Vatican Council. (A New Pentecost? 25)

A New Pentecost? was written partially as a response to Catholic Pentecostals and therefore outlines some aspects of early CCR

thought which he considered theologically problematic. Specifically, while taking great care to commend many of the laudable aspects of the work of those involved in the first phase of the CCR, Suenens rejected the contention that *glossolalia* is in every instance a charism. Instead, Suenens situates it 'on a natural plane' (*A New Pentecost?* 101) and only concedes that it might, rarely, have been an instance of a supernatural gift.

For Suenens, the lack of a direct corporate, ecclesiological benefit of glossolalia is the primary reason that it is to be considered more properly as one 'among the fruits of grace'. (A New Pentecost? 104) When describing how he came to arrive at this understanding of glossolalia, Suenens specifies that he first 'had to disassociate it from a vocabulary and theology which had their origins in classical Pentecostalism'. (A New Pentecost? 223) Clearly, Suenens felt that this vocabulary and theology were present in the CCR when he first encountered it, and hence that glossolalia was considered at least by some in the CCR to be 'an infused gift enabling someone to pray in a real language which he himself does not understand'. (A New Pentecost? 99)

In place of what Suenens termed 'classical Pentecostal' theology, which considers subjective affect as paramount, Suenens sought to promote in the CCR an understanding that the subjective benefit an individual derives from receiving charisms is superseded by the primary benefit of charisms; meeting the objective needs of the Catholic Church as a whole. For Suenens, affirming the primacy of the objective was not equivalent to a rejection of the subjective dimension of charisms. To the contrary, in A New Pentecost? he describes in detail the significant affirmation he received through his experiences of glossolalia and Baptism in the Holy Spirit. However, of greater import to Suenens was the need to safeguard the integrity of the Sacraments in the Catholic Church.; Hence, Suenens argues that, for Catholics, Baptism in the Holy Spirit must be understood as nothing more than a 'reaffirmation, at a mature age, of the sacraments of initiation'. (A New Pentecost? 74) Given the danger Suenens saw in the term Baptism in the Holy Spirit implying 'a sort of super-baptism, or a supplement to sacramental baptism which would then become the pivot of the Christian life' (A New Pentecost? 82) Suenens therefore advocated the discontinuation of the use of this term in the CCR.

In summary, this second phase of the CCR's development can be characterised by the effort to preserve and affirm the value of the affective and subjective in the CCR while upholding the preeminent importance of remaining within the theological boundaries delineated by Catholic Tradition. Suenen's efforts to introduce objective discernment of charisms, and his advocacy of finding an alternative to the phrase Baptism in the Holy Spirit for the threshold experience through which an individual is initiated into the CCR were two ways in which he sought to safeguard the CCR from the danger of syncretism.

The Subtext of the Address

Pope Francis clearly had Suenens' concerns regarding the problematic implications of the use of the phrase Baptism in the Holy Spirit in mind when he exhorted CCR members to 'share with everyone in the Church the grace of baptism in the Holy Spirit (a phrase we find in the Acts of the Apostles)'. The pontiff's defence of the use of this phrase in this address, when coupled with his rejection of the effort to provide objective discernment for individuals, provides a strong indication that Pope Francis considers Suenens' work to be the greatest contributing factor to the introduction of an executive approach to leadership in the CCR.

Pope Francis' exhortation to leaders in the CCR to stop imposing the objective discernment of charisms on other members of CCR is based on two observations best understood in terms of Suenens' contribution to the development of the CCR. The first is that the circumstances which Suenens sought to address

through the introduction of objective discernment of charisms have changed. Although the pontiff does not explicitly state this position in his address, Pope Francis clearly contends that the CCR no longer lacks the theological reflection which led to the heterodox understandings Suenens observed in the CCR of his time.

In his address the pontiff makes several references to the wealth of theological reflection available to the contemporary CCR. Pope Francis refers his audience to Suenens' work and to the ongoing contribution of the ICCRS and Catholic Fraternity, two organisations whose service of the worldwide renewal the pontiff praises. Additionally, the theological guidance offered by contemporary CCR theologians such as Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, whom Pope Francis also praises and quotes in his address, is clearly seen by the pontiff as a sufficient safeguard against the re-emergence of heterodox theological positions in the CCR.

The second observation included in his address which demonstrates that the objective discernment of charisms is deleterious to the contemporary CCR is that it has led to an egoism in the minds of some leaders which has stifled the 'spontaneity and life of the renewal' (A New Pentecost? 93) in precisely the way Suenens warned against. Accordingly, Pope Francis makes clear that the ICCRS and Catholic Fraternity must not operate out of an executive approach to leadership any more than individual leaders ought to, exhorting all members of the CCR:

Let yourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, in freedom; and please, don't put the Holy Spirit in a cage! Be free! Seek unity in the renewal, the unity which comes from the Trinity.

Awareness that Suenens' work had been

selectively read and misappropriated to serve as justification for the executive approach to leadership may well be the reason that Pope Francis elected to be circumspect about the origins of the executive approach to leadership in the CCR. Indeed, there is evidence to support the contention that Pope Francis deliberately sought to ensure that his criticism of the executive model of leadership was not conflated with a rejection of Suenens. Firstly, Suenens is one of only three theologians Pope Francis commends by name in this address. Secondly, the only texts explicitly recommended by the pontiff in this address are the 'Malines Documents,' two of which Suenens authored and one of which he co-authored with another bishop. Pope Francis encourages members of the CCR to utilise these Malines documents as 'a guide, a reliable path to keep you from going astray', specifying Suenens' role in their composition in the process. Pope Francis can therefore be seen to have taken care to ensure that his rejection of some of Suenens' concerns in this address was balanced by the inclusion of repeated positive appraisals of Suenens' contribution to the development of the CCR.

In conclusion, the subtext of this address is a firm rebuke of those who see their knowledge of Catholic theology or experience in the CCR as license to direct the activity of the contemporary CCR or determine who is suitable for admission in CCR groups. Pope Francis clearly contends that this selective implementation of Suenens' call for the introduction of objective discernment into the CCR is a damaging source of disunity in the contemporary CCR, ignores important caveats which Suenens explored in great detail in his works, and is, in any case no longer necessary.

Let yourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, in freedom; and please, don't put the Holy Spirit in a cage!

-Pope Francis