

DOES THE CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT BUILD OR BREAK BRIDGES WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS?

Reginald Alva, SVD[♦]
Nanzan University, Seto

Abstract

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was the turning point in the life of the Catholic Church. It not only advocated overall renewal and reform of the Church but also encouraged ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, which started in 1967, considers itself as the fruit of the Second Vatican Council. It strongly emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual renewal of an individual's life. However, some critics of this movement point out that Charismatics tend to be more fundamentalist in their approach. They insulate themselves as a bunch of spiritually elite. In this paper, we shall study whether the Charismatic movement neglects Vatican II's teaching on interreligious dialogue. We shall also examine whether the Charismatic Movement is a fundamentalist movement and if it can build bridges instead of walls especially with people of other faiths. We shall base our study on Church documents and documents on Charismatic Renewal.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, religious pluralism is a reality and therefore dialogue has become an important component of human existence. In order to engage with the other, one has to be open to dialogue with the

[♦]**Reginald Alva** is a Catholic Priest belonging to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). He is an assistant professor at Nanzan University, Japan. He is also involved in pastoral and renewal work in the Catholic Church of Japan. He holds degrees in English Literature, Social Work, Political Science, Philosophy and Theology. He has a licentiate in Biblical Theology and he took his doctorate in Theology (Spirituality) from Pontificia Università San Tommaso D'Aquino, Angelicum, Rome. His publications include *Mary and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (2012) and *The Spirituality of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement*, (2014). Email: reginaldalva@yahoo.com

other, whether he or she belongs to a different Christian denomination, other faith or having no religious affiliation. The Second Vatican Council recognized the reality of religious pluralism and thus encouraged all Christians to enter into a fruitful dialogue with others.

Charismatic Renewal Movement, which started in 1967 within the Catholic Church, claims to be the fruit of Second Vatican Council's teachings.¹ However, it falls short in the area of interreligious dialogue. Critics of this movement, point out that Charismatics are often fundamentalists who stress on their religious identities and discount the religious experience of people of other faiths. Even though this criticism may be partially true, there are many features in the Charismatic Renewal Movement, which have a great potential to carry out a meaningful interreligious dialogue. In addition, it can also carry out a dialogue with people who do not have any religious affiliation.

We shall attempt to study the various features of Charismatic Renewal Movement, which can help build bridges with people of other faiths. We shall also suggest ways to build bridges instead of fences with people holding different perspectives on religion. We shall base our study on Church documents and documents relating to Charismatic Renewal Movement.

2. Brief Study of Second Vatican Council's Teachings on Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

The Second Vatican Council prepared the Church to read the 'signs of the times.' It produced documents like *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* which highlighted the need for interreligious dialogue.² Moreover, the successive Popes since the Second Vatican Council also encouraged interreligious dialogue. Pope Paul VI instituted a special cell within the Roman Curia called 'Secretariat for Non Christians,' which was later, renamed as 'Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue' in 1988. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has published two important documents, *The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions: Reflections on Dialogue and Mission* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991). One of the prominent teachings of *Nostra Aetate* is as follows:

¹In this paper the term Charismatic Renewal Movement refers to the ecclesial movement within the Roman Catholic Church.

²See Conciliar Documents *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8, 16; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22; *Nostra Aetate*, no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and *Ad Gentes*, no. 3, 11 for reflections on the attitude of Catholic Church towards other religions. All these quotes point to the necessity to acknowledge the genuine goodness found in other religions and promote harmony and dialogue among religions.

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.³

The Conciliar as well as the various post-Conciliar documents of the Catholic Church have consistently stressed the need to enter into a fruitful and meaningful dialogue with people of other faiths in order to build friendship and bridges with all people of good will. The Catholic Church has consistently maintained the need for entering into dialogue with people who belong to other faiths to promote communal harmony and peace in the world.

3. The Task of Charismatic Renewal Movement in Building Bridges with People of Different Christian Denominations, Faiths or Beliefs

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement that started after the Second Vatican Council has strong resemblances to Protestant Pentecostalism.⁴ Even though there are some differences, like Protestant Pentecostalism it stresses the phenomena of baptism in the Holy Spirit, use of charisms and study of Bible.⁵ However, the Charismatic Renewal Movement claims itself to be the fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John Paul II acknowledged that Charismatic Renewal Movement has indeed helped in the spiritual growth of Christians. He noted that, "The Catholic Charismatic Movement is one of the many fruits of the Second Vatican Council, which, like a new Pentecost, led to an extraordinary flourishing in the church's life of groups and movements particularly sensitive to the action of the Spirit."⁶

The Catholic Church has accepted Charismatic Renewal Movement as a powerful and important movement that has given freshness and vigour to the Church.⁷ The Charismatic Renewal Movement being a movement within the Catholic Church faithfully follows all her teachings.⁸ Even though Charismatic Renewal Movement may

³NA, 2.

⁴See Vinson Synan, "Classical Pentecostalism," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, 553-555.

⁵See Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Development Worldwide*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, 156-159.

⁶John Paul II, *Address to the National Service Committee of the Italian Renewal in the Spirit, April 4, 1998, Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 21.1, 1998, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 701-703.

⁷Paul Thigpen, "Catholic Charismatic Movement," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, 465-466.

⁸John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Christifidelis Laici*, no. 29, 30, AAS 81 (1989) 443-448.

appear to be a conservative and fundamentalist group, it has great potential to promote interreligious dialogue as suggested by the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Unlike Protestant Pentecostal denominations, Catholic Charismatics are integral part of the Catholic Church.⁹ The ecclesial authorities guide this movement and therefore they are not anti-interreligious dialogue. Following are some of the prominent features of Charismatic Renewal Movement which can be instrumental in conducting a meaningful dialogue with people belonging to other faiths or professing no faith at all.

3.1. Openness to the Holy Spirit

The focus of the Charismatic spirituality is the worship of the Holy Trinity.¹⁰ However, it emphasizes on the role of the Holy Spirit in nurturing the faith lives of Christians. Charismatics stress on the need of experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit, which they call as the phenomenon of baptism in the Holy Spirit. Even though this phenomenon is not a sacrament, it is a life-changing experience. It leads to openness to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit not only in the Church but also in other religions.¹¹

Jesus promised that, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13). The Holy Spirit leads a faithful "into all the truth," implies that human mind is finite and it cannot grasp the entire truth at a time. The Holy Spirit progressively reveals it. Jesus is the truth (Jn 14:6). The Holy Spirit does reaffirm the truth in Jesus but it also has a prophetic function too. The Holy Spirit gives a new meaning and interpretation of the truth.¹² Johannine scholar, Raymond Brown notes, "The best Christian preparation for what is coming to pass is not an exact foreknowledge of the future but a deep understanding of what Jesus means for one's own time."¹³ The Holy

⁹ See Asonzeh Ukah, "Contesting God: Nigerian Pentecostals and Their Relations with Islam and Muslims," in *Global Pentecostalism: Encounters with Other Religious Traditions*, ed. David Westerlund, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, 98. The author here refers to the difference between Nigerian Pentecostals and Catholic Charismatics in their approach to Muslims. The former are aggressively following a fundamentalist line, whereas the latter, following the teachings of their mother Church, are not aggressively carrying on the agenda of proselytization.

¹⁰ See Reginald Alva, *The Spirituality of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement*, New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2014, 29-34.

¹¹ See Amos Yong, "'Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows': On Envisioning a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions," *Journal Of Pentecostal Theology* 14 (1999) 100. See also Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006, 128.

¹² See John Paul II, Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 4, AAS 78 (1986) 814.

¹³ Raymond Brown, "The Gospel According to John," in *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 2, London: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1966, 716.

Spirit helps a believer to understand the interpretation of truth in Jesus, which is relevant to his or her time.

The work of the Spirit of truth is not limited to the spiritual realm. This is because truth is not restricted to religious territory alone but every facet of human life. In this sense, works of art, scientific discoveries, development of technologies and progress in medical field, which are for the genuine good of all, bear the mark of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides the artists, scientists, engineers, physicians and other experts to discover the truth in their respective fields for the overall development and progress of humanity. The Holy Spirit's active role in the creation and sustenance of the entire cosmos is conspicuous for people who have a deep pneumatological experience.¹⁴

Charismatics can make use of their spiritual experience to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in people belonging to other religions. They must "recognize, preserve and promote the good things,"¹⁵ that exists in other traditions and faiths. Charismatics must gratefully accept the values found in other religions, which do not contradict the values of Christ as the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The Holy Spirit's work is not restricted to the Church but envelopes every act of genuine goodness and truth.¹⁷ A charismatic approach of the workings of the Holy Spirit offers a greater scope for building bridges with people who may not profess to be Christians but live for the values of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸

3.2. Discernment in Prayer

Prayer is a grace of the Holy Spirit whereas discernment is one of the charisms of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). Prayer is indispensable for making discernment in the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "Those who are spiritual discern all things (1 Cor 2:15). Great saints were masters in discernment because of their strong spiritual lives. Charismatics recognize the importance of prayer life as well as the use of the various charisms of the Holy Spirit for the good of all.

Charismatics give importance to reflective reading of the Word of God. However, some Charismatics tend to read the Bible literally and

¹⁴AG, 4. See also Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 17 AAS 84 (1992) 420. See also Amos Yong, "Poured Out on All Flesh," *Penteco Studies* 6, 1 (2007) 30.

¹⁵NA, no. 2.

¹⁶NA, no. 2, See also Yong, "'Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows,'" 110.

¹⁷See Tony Richie, "Approaching the Problem of Religious Truth in a Pluralistic World: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution," *Ecumenical Studies*, 43, 3 (2008) 357-369.

¹⁸NA, no. 2.

become fundamentalists. They must read the Word of God with an open heart and an ear keen to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The document of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome 2008 states that “Furthermore, because of the Word of God that dwells in our midst (see Jn 1:14), the same Spirit stirs us to seek to discern the new ways in which the Word is at work among the people of our time and to gather the aspirations and challenges of humanity concerning the Word.”¹⁹ Here we see that the Synod documents speak of the Word of God in a wider context than the text of our Christian scriptures. The Synod documents emphasize that God speaks His Word in new ways, and the Spirit helps us to discern these new ways and calls on us to be attentive listeners of the Word of God in our daily life situations. The Spirit calls upon us to enter into a dialogue with all the people. “[Dialogue] is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills.”²⁰ It is through the power of the Spirit we are able to discover the “seeds of the Word,”²¹ that are sowed by God in different cultures, religions and societal situations of entire humanity. The Spirit reminds us that we should always be ready to explore the new and unexpected depths of faith. This is possible only if we are willing to set aside time for reading scriptures, prayer and discernment of God’s will. An authentic dialogical relationship with the people of all religions and traditions calls us to pass over from egoism to a spirit of openness, solidarity and love.²²

However, to exercise the charism of discernment is not an easy task because it is very difficult to set the criteria for discernment. The following 2 biblical texts make faith in Jesus as the criteria to discern whether one belongs to God or not:

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (1 Jn 4:1-3).

¹⁹Synod of Bishops 2008. *The Word of God in the Light and the Mission of the Church*, no.23, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html [accessed on 15 July, 2014.]

²⁰John Paul II, Encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, AAS 21, 83 (1991) 268.

²¹AG, no.11, 15.

²²Ichiro Okumura, *Kami Ni Mukau Inori*, vol. 8, Tokyo: Oriens Shukyo Kenyujo, 2008, 56. [Original in Japanese.]

If we strictly apply the criteria mentioned in the above 2 biblical texts, we will bracket out all other religious traditions which do not conform to faith in Jesus. This will make interreligious dialogue an impossible task.²³ However, as all other biblical texts these 2 texts too have a hermeneutical significance for a particular background and time. To overstretch the interpretations will be detrimental for any cause of interreligious dialogue.

In spite of the above difficulty, we can find a concrete criterion for discernment given by Jesus Himself: "You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Mt 7:16-18).

Charismatics can use the above biblical criterion to discern the genuine workings of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ If an individual or community belonging to any faith tradition contributes for the integral well-being and development of the whole world, then we can feel the presence of the divine there, at least in some degree. In contrast, if an individual or community's act destroys the dignity, well-being and growth of humanity or promotes disharmony in the world, then we can conclude that these acts are not bearing the presence of God's Spirit. The Catholic Church cautions the faithful to discern well before becoming partners in interreligious dialogue.²⁵ This is because Christians cannot accept values or acts of individuals/religions that are against human life, human dignity, peace, justice, and sustainable development of the world.

Charismatics can exercise the charism of discernment to promote the genuine good in the society and refrain from taking part in any activity, which goes against the spirit of the values of Christ.²⁶ Apart from their experience in the Holy Spirit, Charismatics have a wealth of resources on discernment, which they have inherited from the Church Fathers and saints down the centuries. Catholic Charismatics as a community have the benefit of exercising discernment in the

²³See Amos Yong, "The Holy Spirit and the World Religions: On the Christian Discernment of Spirit(s) 'after' Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004) 192.

²⁴See also the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Gal 5:22-23: By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

²⁵*Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 30, 78 AAS 84 (1992) 425, 442.

²⁶*Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 30, 78; Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 243-255.

light of the strong theological resources as well as their spiritual insight. Thus, communitarian discernment done in prayer, in the light of biblical teaching and tradition is very useful and helpful in choosing right partners for interreligious dialogue.

3.3. Fellowship

The bible highlights the importance of fellowship. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity” (Ps 133:1). Fellowship is one of the hallmarks of Christian life. This fellowship is not only for Christians but also for all people of good will. Warm fellowship is a characteristic feature of a Charismatic prayer group.²⁷ Charismatic prayer groups welcome all those who come to them. They make them feel that they belong to that group. It is not merely including all but making every individual feel that he or she belongs to that group. The group values and respects his or her being. This feeling of belongingness helps people to bond with their fellow group members. It also helps in nurturing mutual friendship and respect for each other. If the group is successful in creating an atmosphere of trust among its members then they feel free to share their day-to-day joys, sorrows and problems within the group. They know that the group will support them even if they are in trouble. This mutual respect for each other gradually leads to dispelling doubts, suspicions and prejudices about each other. This leads to integral growth of the whole group.

Suspicion and lack of reciprocity are some of the major obstacles on the path of the interreligious dialogue. People engaged in dialogue whether in formal or informal set-up tend to carry some prejudices and misgivings about their partners in dialogue. Genuine fellowship can break down these barriers. However, it takes time to nurture fellowship. It is a process. Charismatics can use their experience in developing fellowship in the context of interreligious dialogue. Fellowship is a grace from the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Every action done out of love and respect for the other helps in building bridges and destroying the fences of distrust and suspicion.

Moreover, in an atmosphere of cordial fellowship, Charismatics vividly express the communitarian aspect of their faith. They express the importance of faith in their lives and the need for mutual support in living and nurturing their faith. People belonging to other religious affiliations or having no affiliations recognize that they too like

²⁷Brian Smith, “A New Missionary Zeal,” in *Movements in the Church*, Vatican: Pontificium Consilium Pro Laicis, 1999, 168.

Charismatics have the need for communitarian dimension in their lives. Thus, we can say that these commonalities of fellowship and communion enjoyed in Charismatic prayer groups can serve as a very important platform for conducting and promoting a sincere interreligious dialogue.

3.4. Witness

Charismatic prayer meetings can offer a fertile ground for interreligious dialogue by being a powerful witness of their Christian convictions.²⁸ However, to effectively dialogue with people of other faith their actions must back their witness.²⁹ The Conciliar document *Ad Gentes* emphasizes the value of witness in interreligious dialogue:

For all Christians, wherever they live, are bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of the word, that new man put on at baptism and that power of the Holy Spirit by which they have been strengthened at Confirmation. Thus other men, observing their good works, can glorify the Father and can perceive more fully the real meaning of human life and the universal bond of the community of mankind.³⁰

The aim of witness is not to win an argument over the other but share one's deep conviction and religious experience. Where lofty words and dogmas can tear apart partners in interreligious dialogue, witnessing one's faith through concrete acts of love can work like a soothing balm healing the wounds of distrust and lack of mutual respect.

One of the features of Charismatic prayer meetings is powerful testimonies. People testify the wonders God has worked in their lives. This sharing of the religious experience has a profound effect on the listeners.³¹ The early Christian community thrived in a religiously pluralistic society because of their testimonies. They preached the resurrection of Jesus. Even though it is philosophically absurd to think that one can rise after death, they did not have the slightest hesitation to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus.³² They did it out of conviction. Their testimony corresponded with their actions in life. There was no gap between their teaching and living. They practiced what they preached. They lived a gospel-centred life. In spite of the persecutions, they boldly proclaimed Jesus and gladly accepted

²⁸Cheryl Bridges John, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998, 126-127. See also Tony Richie, "Translating Pentecostal Testimony into Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011) 157.

²⁹*Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 73.

³⁰AG, no. 11.

³¹Yong, "'Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows,'" 110.

³²Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 6-7.

sufferings as Jesus did. They lived a life that had an immense influence on the people around them. The Holy Spirit indeed taught them and made Jesus alive in their lives (Jn 14:26).

Charismatics like the early Christians can powerfully bear witness to the experience of God in their lives. Irrespective of religious affiliations, people are greatly fascinated towards genuine religious experience. Thus, the witness of the Charismatics can attract people to join them in prayer meetings. They too can share their religious experiences with the Charismatics. This can lead to mutual enrichment. People can learn from each other's religious experience, which can help them appreciate the good present in each other's religion.

4. Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement and Interreligious Dialogue

Ecclesial movements like the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, Communion and Liberation, Focolare, San'Egido, L'Arche and Communauté Chemin Neuf have taken lead to build bridges with people of other religious affiliations or no affiliations.³³ These movements, which adhere to the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council, have made interreligious dialogue an essential part of their movements.

Even though Charismatic Renewal Movement may appear to be fundamentalist in its approach because of its resemblance to the Pentecostalism in other Christian denominations, it is more open towards interreligious dialogue. Along with other ecclesial movements, Charismatic Renewal Movement has made efforts to enter into dialogue at a practical level with people of other religious affiliations or having no affiliations.³⁴

Interreligious dialogue is not a privy of theologians and experts alone. It is the need of the hour. In a global context, religious pluralism is a reality and Charismatics realize the need to engage with people belonging to other religions or having no religious affiliations for spreading peace and harmony in the world.³⁵

The Charismatic Renewal Movement has not organized yet any formal forum for interreligious dialogue. However, people associated with this movement have used their experience of charismatic spirituality to enter into a dialogue with people of other religions in

³³Brendan Leahy, *Ecclesial Movements and Communities: Origins, Significance and Issues*, New York: New City Press, 2011, 170.

³⁴Brendan Leahy, *Ecclesial Movements and Communities*, 170.

³⁵*Christifidelis Laici*, no. 35, AAS 81 (1989) 457-459.

their day-to-day life. They share their experience of faith with others, to find common ground to work for the good of the society. They invite all people irrespective of their religious affiliations to join them in prayers. They organize special intercessory prayer meetings to pray for the urgent needs of any individual, community or the world. They also arrange healing services to pray for the healing of body, mind and spirit. People irrespective of their religious backgrounds attend these services and experience a tremendous joy and peace in their hearts. Thus, the Charismatics are offering concrete places for dialogue with people of other religions or having no religious affiliations.

5. Conclusion

The Second Vatican Council realized the need for interreligious dialogue and recommended all the faithful to dialogue with people of other religions. Charismatic Renewal Movement in spite of its leaning towards Pentecostalism has encouraged interreligious dialogue. Charismatic Renewal Movement being a Spirit led movement, has great potential to use its characteristic features like experience of the Holy Spirit, prayer, discernment, use of charisms, fellowship and witness for promoting dialogue. They can make friends with people belonging to other religions or having no religious affiliations by welcoming them to their prayer groups.

However, Charismatics must be careful not to use dialogue as a means for conversion. They must respect the religious beliefs of others and find commonalities in their religious experience. On the other hand, Charismatics need not hesitate to profess boldly their faith in Jesus. They must share their religious convictions. Their experience of the power of the Holy Spirit must be evident through their lives. If their actions match their preaching, then they can have a great influence on their partners of dialogue.

Charismatics as individuals must engage with people belonging to different religions in their neighbourhood and places of work. Instead of building fences and isolating themselves, they would do well to build bridges with people of other religions to build a more just and better society. Such an interaction will lead to a dialogue of life, promoting the values of the kingdom of God here on earth.