

NEW ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS: HARNESSING THE NEW WIND OF MISSIONARY FERVOUR

Edward A. Edezhath[♦]

One of the notable reasons for the dynamism and vitality in many dioceses and regions across the globe has been one or the other new generation Catholic associations called Ecclesial Movements. They are there in a variety of hues and forms all over the world, making perceptible difference. To think of specific instances, there is Focolare, founded in 1943 at Trent in Italy, having more than 5,000,000 adherents spread over 182 nations; Neocatechumenal Way had its beginnings in Madrid and has now more than a million followers around the world; the Catholic Charismatic Renewal with its beginnings in the United States in 1967 has touched millions of lives in almost all the countries of the world; there is Opus Dei, Communion & Liberation, Couples for Christ, and host of other movements now flourishing in the Catholic Church, making the Mother Church ever more youthful and leading it to fresh and verdant pastures.

They are, at the micro level, so influential and unique, transforming lives and initiating far-reaching missionary strides in the local church, but at a macro level they are numerous, making the Catholic Church

[♦]**Dr. Edward A. Edezhath** is Associate Professor of English at St. Albert's College, Ernakulam, South India and lives near Cochin with his wife Audry and three children. He is currently the Joint Secretary of the Office of the Laity of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India (CBCI) and the Secretary of Education Commission of the Kerala Latin Catholic Bishop's Council. He is one of the initiators and present International Animator of Jesus Youth movement. His Ph. D. thesis is on "The Characters in the Dramatic Narratives of Robert Frost", and is presently working on a UGC sponsored major research project on the Remnants of the Portuguese Colonization of Cochin. E-mail: edward.edezhath@gmail.com

and its faith relevant for the contemporary times, infusing abundant dynamism and missionary fervour. Observed closely, we can discern that these movements follow a pattern of origin, development and societal involvement. With his characteristic effusion of the Spirit Pope John Paul II of happy memories exclaimed, "What a great need there is today for mature Christian personalities who are aware of their baptismal identity, of their call and mission in the Church and in the world!... This is where the ecclesial movements and new communities appear: they are the answer which has been raised up by the Holy Spirit to this dramatic challenge at the end of the millennium. You are this providential answer!"¹ At present the Vatican lists² 122 of these movement formally recognised by the Pontifical Council of the Laity and many more of them are surely on the way.

1. Context of a Changing World

These new Ecclesial Movements in the Catholic Church are necessitated by and finds relevance in the rapidly changing ecclesial and world scenario. Communication facilities backed by powerful technological resources have made possible great leap of closely networking the whole face of the globe. And the individual has become, so to say, 'all knowing' and 'all powerful' which in turn promote a sense of self assurance, often resulting in excessive independence. While we often hear of the pernicious effects of this over confidence, today's new movements in such prolixity are in one way the direct effect of this newfound boldness of the ordinary man and woman.

Furthermore, in the Catholic Church there is a wind of change: there is a mind-set, at least in the higher echelons, ready to welcome this boldness as well as the resultant initiatives wherever it springs from. The great openness brought forth by the Second Vatican Council followed by the unstinting encouragement of the two recent Popes has had a highly positive impact on the emergence of these new movements. The current President of the Pontifical Council of the Laity, Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko sums it up: "Among the many fruits

¹John Paul II, "To members of ecclesial movements and new communities," at the vigil of Pentecost, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Spanish language edition), June 5, 1998. Quoted by Rylko, Archbishop Stanislaw. "Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: the Response of the Holy Spirit to Today's Challenge of Evangelization," 2.

²Pontifical Council for the Laity: International Associations of the Faithful Directory. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_pc_laity_doc_20051114_associazioni_en.html>

produced for Church life by the Second Vatican Council, the 'new associative moment' of the lay faithful undoubtedly holds a special place. Thanks to the ecclesiology and the theology of the laity developed by the Council, many groups referred to today as 'ecclesial movements' or 'new communities' have appeared alongside the traditional associations."³

This new openness to lay initiative is further manifested in the definite space provided for these movements in the organisational arrangement of the Church as is reflected in the Canon Law. The two broad categories of movements that the Canon Law speaks of, in one way clearly defines the nature of the contemporary movements and hints at the special consideration that the Church gives to these lay initiatives. They are the public and the private associations of the lay faithful. "Associations of the faithful which are erected by competent ecclesiastical authority are called public associations (Canon 301§3)." Only the Holy See, a conference of bishops or a diocesan bishop has the authority to erect a public association of the faithful (Canon 312). In contrast, private associations (to which category the ecclesial movements belong) exist by private agreement, freely made among members of the Christian faithful and after examining them the Church can accord official recognition to them. While ecclesiastical authority maintains a certain degree of vigilance over private associations, the guidance and direction of the association comes from the members themselves in accord with their statutes (Canon 321).

In this context it is significant to note that the Church upholds the right of the lay faithful to establish and operate their own associations. And once examined and recognised by the official Church it assumes a special status within the body of Christ. This positive and encouraging attitude that finds its expression in the canons has had a salutary effect on the emergence of these movements, as it lent confidence to the lay leaders.

2. They Are Encouraged by the Church

As we look at this comparatively recent phenomenon in the universal Church, it is pertinent to ask: once they have come into existence, how does the Church view them? And what is their place in the Church? On the Pentecost Day of 1998 at the invitation of the Pope

³Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, "Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: the Response of the Holy Spirit to Today's Challenge of Evangelization," 2. <http://www.piercedhearts.org/communion_hearts/ecclesial_movements.htm> Accessed on 21 Sep.2010

the significant Ecclesial Movements of that time met together in Rome and addressing them he said, new ecclesial movements “represent one of the most significant fruits of that springtime in the Church which was foretold by the Second Vatican Council.” Vatican II had a huge impact on the Church’s understanding of the lay apostolate which enabled the birth of many of these new ecclesial communities. This re-awakening of the laity to their proper role in the Church and the emergence of a vibrant lay spirituality re-oriented the Church back to its apostolic roots where all the baptized considered themselves equals and all saw themselves as active witnesses for Christ. No doubt this is at the very heart of these new Ecclesial Movements.

In his 1990 Encyclical Letter on Church’s missionary mandate, *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II specifically referred to Ecclesial Movements that are filled with missionary dynamism, as a new development occurring in many Churches. He said, “they represent a true gift of God both for new evangelization and for missionary activity.”⁴ The Pope specially wanted them to spread, especially among young people and be used to give fresh energy for Christian life and evangelization.

More than anything, this sprouting of faith life is an important need of the times. The present Pope and the then organiser of the Movements Meet of 1998, Cardinal Ratzinger saw these as in the tradition of the apostolic movements that appear in ever new forms throughout history – necessarily, because they are the Holy Spirit’s answer to the changing situations in which the Church lives. In a letter to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in May, 1998, Pope John Paul II defined a movement as “a concrete ecclesial entity, in which primarily lay people participate, with an itinerary of faith and Christian testimony that finds its own pedagogical method on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes.”

We should indeed be happy and should be praising God that our pastors have discerned in these movements a true ‘move of the Spirit’ and are ready to acknowledge and encourage them. Among the positive elements highlighted in the Asian Synod that gave the Church a hope for a “new springtime of Christian life” in Asia, the pope specially refers to “the increasing number of better trained, enthusiastic and Spirit-filled lay people, who are more and more

⁴John Paul II. *Redemptoris Missio*, 72.

aware of their specific vocation within the ecclesial community.”⁵ And he speaks of movements that are “a gift of the Spirit” that bring “new life and vigour to the formation of lay men and women, families and the young.”

Last year writing to Cardinal Josef Cordes on his 75th birthday, speaking of his role in recognizing the Pentecostal character of these movements and ‘working passionately so that they would be welcomed by the Church’s pastors’, the Pope Benedict XVI said, these movements “are gifts to be grateful for.” He continued “It is no longer possible to think of the life of the Church of our time without including these gifts of God within it.”⁶

3. Reservations Regarding these New Phenomena

While the Pastors highly praise the role of the movements in the contemporary Church, some of the concerns that they express should also be seriously taken note of. “Of course, these movements needed to be ordered to and brought within the totality; they needed to learn to recognize their limits and to become part of the communitarian reality of the Church in her proper constitution together with the Pope and the bishops,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote to Cardinal Cordes, “Thus they need a guide and purification to be able to reach the form of their true maturity.”

Most of these movements were born of the transforming spiritual experience or the enduring vision of a person or a group and a majority of these initiators has been lay people. Many of them have had very simple and humble beginnings and the deepening and spreading took place in course of time. People come in contact with these movements at different stages of their maturity and consequently, many people have been put off by their unfinished appearance. So it is not surprising that many ecclesial movements have come under fire in different regions and dioceses, for varying reasons.

A few years ago *La Civiltà Cattolica* carried articles on Ecclesial Movements referring to “the Seven Capital Vices of the Movements,”⁷

⁵John Paul II. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 9.

⁶“Pope: The Ecclesial Movements are Gifts for the Whole Church” Catholic Online <http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=35092> on 24Dec.2009

⁷Giuseppe De Rosa, “The ecclesial movements today,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*. June 19, 2004. Quoted by, Sandro Magister. “The Seven Capital Vices of the Movements” <<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/7057?eng=y>> on 21Jan.2010

such as, i) a Legal Vacuum or need for better provisions in the Canon Law, ii) Dual Membership or the presence of religious who belong to other institutes, iii) Non Catholics in the house, iv) Priests torn away from the dioceses, v) Tendency to make absolute their own Christian experience, vi) tendency to close themselves off or refusal to collaborate with other ecclesial organisations, and vii) Tendency to cut themselves off from the local Church, that is, Diocese and parish.

These criticisms are perhaps in line with the risks – or the “infancy sicknesses” as Pope Benedict XVI calls them – to which the movements are exposed, such as tendencies to exclusivity and one-sidedness leading to the absolutization of the movement, and conflict with the local community making them unable to insert themselves into the life of the local churches.⁸

There are perhaps two major areas of criticism levelled against the ecclesial movements. One is regarding the structural confusion that the movements bring in and the other is regarding their discordant styles. Catholic Church is quite familiar and comfortable with well-ordered ecclesiastical structure in which the diocese, parish, the clergy, religious, laity, lay organisations and so on have a proper place. The new movements appeared bypassing many of these familiar parameters and their roles. Consequently serious criticisms such as disregarding the traditional order and community discipline of the local Church, building parallel structures, insubordination to ecclesiastical authority, etc. have been levelled against a number of ecclesial movements. Traditional lay organisations have a well ordered structure at the parish, diocesan and national level and many of them function under a priest, often a director or chaplain that the Bishop appoints. The organisational structure of these lay organisations often coincides with the parish-district-diocese structure of local Church. The new movements emerge in the ecclesiastical horizon upsetting this orderly structure of the local Church. The role of the local Church in the functioning of these movements, to say the least, is uncertain. Their unfamiliar structures and functioning are often perceived as sign of insubordination, bypassing of the clergy and secretive style of functioning.

Many of the new movements appear with styles of spirituality, organisation and operation quite unfamiliar to the Church authorities as well as the community. For instance, Neocatechumenal Way

⁸Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *New Outpourings of the Spirit: Movements in the Church*, Trans. Michael J. Miller and Henry Taylor, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, 21.

introduced radical changes in liturgy and faith formation styles; parishes and dioceses took serious exception to this. Charismatic Renewal promoted new prayer styles and even clergy reacted negatively. In many parts of the world Opus Dei was viewed with suspicion.

While there are often valid reasons in these criticisms and the movements have to do their homework to address these issues, most of the contemporary pastors in the Church see these difficulties as the birth pangs of a new order bringing in certain relevant remedies for contemporary challenges. As Cardinal Rylko reiterates, "the ecclesial movements and new communities are a truly "providential gift" of God to the Church, a gift that should be received with a living sense of gratitude and responsibility so that the opportunity they represent is not squandered. This gift is both a task and a challenge for the lay faithful and the Church's Pastors."⁹

4. Certain Practical Challenges

There are complaints that a number of these movements are very near the modern day sects. Some of them at least have given rise to quite a few splinter groups. It is pertinent to ask if there are some typical errors that these movements should take care to avoid. If so what are they? While focus and sharpness of mission form the core strengths of the Ecclesial movements, its flipside, namely, narrowness and shallowness become their catastrophe. This constriction in leadership, doctrine, community, social participation, spiritual practices and missionary approach become the bane of these movements, often on the one hand leading to conflict with the Church as well as society, and on the other, leading to their disintegration and eventual eclipse. What are some of the serious pitfalls of these ecclesial movements? Surely we speak of a large body of Catholic entities and hence these observations apply to them in varying degrees.

Deification of leadership: Charism of the founder and leadership of the key individuals are significant determinants in these initiatives. While these impart strong inspiration and clear direction for the participation as well as mission of the adherents of these movements, sometimes these leaders become unquestionable demigods for the followers, resulting in blind conformity, occasionally leading to grave

⁹Rylko, "Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: the Response of the Holy Spirit to Today's Challenge of Evangelization," 5.

aberrations. Recent development in Legionaries of Christ is perhaps a most telling example of this.¹⁰

Parochialism and insularity: Strong mutual bond that help people really belong to a vibrant Christian community is a distinguishing characteristic of almost all of these movements. Though this is a genuine Christian quality, in its degenerated form some of the groups in these movements can be reduced into narrow cliques, helping them to escape from the challenges of dialoguing with the larger society.

Fundamentalism: Effective teaching and doctrinal formation assumes great significance in most of these movements. Unfortunately where there is not sufficient cross pollination of doctrine and lack of broader vision the groups may tend to take fundamentalist stances in faith and doctrine, often causing not just ideological conflicts with genuine Christian leadership, but sometimes resulting in irreparable damage to the understanding of a large body of the faithful regarding the life and mission of the Church.

Elitism: In the course of the focused and streamlined growth of some of these movements there is a tendency on the part of the adherents to look down upon others in the wider body of the Church. Once the movement cross the youthful growth phase, its members will better understand the structures of the Church and its earlier movements, but during its vibrant phase the adherents may evoke in others serious reactions through their elitist attitudes. There is need for much guidance to see to it that the professionalism manifested by these movements should not become elitism.

Over-spiritual styles of functioning: The 'word becoming flesh' is integral to the life and mission of the Church. Sometimes the one-sidedness of certain of the new movements results in much discomfiture in the Church community. An incarnational approach that will effectively plant the spirituality in the here-and-now of the Church and the world is what the wider community expects from the movements.

Over ambitious growth: Growing too fast and spreading too thin has become the nemesis of certain vibrant groups and movements. In the name of "urgency of evangelisation" and with the zeal to multiply, some of them have solely focused on spreading and not on rooting.

¹⁰Vatican Statement on Legionaries of Christ." Zenti.org May 1, 2010. <<http://www.zenit.org/article-29109?l=english>>

Sentimentalism: Contemporary generation has immense affinity for experience and consequently today's movements have much that will appeal to the heart and feelings. This emphasis on experience has sometimes veered people away from certain depth of spirituality inherent to the Catholic heritage. Wordiness in prayer and certain gimmicks in spiritual exercises, while attract ordinary people to the path of spirituality, at a further phase seem to restrain them from going deeper. Charismatic prayer styles, though brought millions to active prayer life, have kept many well-meaning traditional Catholics at arm's length.

Intolerance: While missionary dynamism is the strength of most of these movements, this focus has sometimes swerved some groups from the catholicity of the Catholic Church that view different cultures and faiths with sympathetic tolerance and even maternal love. Some of the groups have interpreted zeal for mission in terms of xenophobia and condemnation of other shades of faith. This is not forgetting some of the great strides of dialogue taken by movements like Focolare and San't Egidio.

And the solution, surely, is to follow the urging of Pope John Paul II at the turn of the millennium, 'Duc in altum!' that is 'to put out into the deep' (Lk. 5:4).

To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings... We need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up.¹¹

5. Distinguishing Marks of these Movements

In his bold statement on the theological foundations of the ecclesial movements *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, Cardinal Ratzinger, our present day Pope shares his initial impressions about them: "For me personally it was a marvellous event when at the beginning of the seventies I first came into close contact with movements ... and thus experienced the enthusiasm and verve with which they lived out their faith and felt bound to share with others, from out of the joy of their faith what had been vouchsafed to them."¹² Many would join

¹¹John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

¹²Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 19.

with him and say that these new generation realities play a key role in today's Church and society. Without them the Church cannot be what it is today, nor will be what it should be tomorrow. The church comprises predominantly of the laity, and the emergence of these numerous ecclesial movements is in fact the silent masses awakening in faith to fulfil their role in the Body of Christ. In an age in which the ordinary citizen is self-willed and powerful, these movements are mostly the result of the felt need of many individuals to lead a meaningful and lively Christian discipleship and fulfil their Christian mission.

Focus on charism: In Pope John Paul II's description of Ecclesial Movements, referred to above, there is mention that they are built up "on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes." The core distinctness and vitality of any movement is closely linked to this core charism. And what is this charism that we speak of: "The charism is a gift whereby the Spirit *marks certain of the baptized*, makes them fall in love with Christ *in a special way*, *gathers* them in a spiritual homeland, assigns them particular tasks for the building up of the Church, and educates them with the *pedagogical persuasiveness* that characterizes the charism."¹³ In a movement there is constant reference to the charism of the movement and the members are urged to live it in its fullness.

Active role of the laity and close collaboration with the clergy and the religious: The lay character of these movements is not just in the fact that a large number of the significant movements have lay initiators, but the key leadership roles have been filled in by active laity. This is in contrast to some of the earlier lay movements mostly started by the clergy and often guided by them. But this does not mean that the clergy and the religious are dwindling in their importance in the Church or in these movements. Most of these movements have well-defined role for the priests and the religious in the organisational structure as well as community life.

Towards a counter culture of a Catholic life style: In a rapidly growing secular culture with attendant values and lifestyle, developing alternative styles become essential. A clear catholic lifestyle and the setting of an aligned Christian community together form the remedy that these movements propose for ensuring a Christian life in the contemporary context. Each of these groups has distinct patterns but

¹³Antonio Maria Sicari, "Ecclesial Movements: A New Framework for Ancient Charisms," *Communio: International Catholic Review* (Summer 2002), 293.

they all meet on the same Catholic plane with pegging on prayer, word, sacramental life and living and proclaiming Catholic faith.

Ensuring continuity and growth: The distinct character of these movements is also manifested in their dynamic and organic nature, in contrast to the static mode of some of the earlier organisations. In the Church, the very *locus standi* of these movements is perhaps the program of life that they offer to the lay faithful. Externally people may see only some meetings and trainings, but there is a dynamics of continuity in all these Ecclesial realities. There is even criticism that they do not limit themselves to one stage of life nor with one section of the Church's organisation or mission. Ecclesial movements propose a journey of Christian maturity and guidance that accompany a person through stages of life. Most of the Charismatic communities have step by step sessions that follow up a person's maturity in spiritual life. Neo Catechumenal Way has well defined steps of study and formation leading to the realisation of the rich potential of baptism. For an individual the participation in these movements becomes not just a membership in an organisation or any office of appointment, but a safe bet to conform to an itinerary of spirituality resulting in personal Christian maturity.

Approach to formation: A contemporary styles and fidelity to the magisterium distinguishes the formation programs of these Ecclesial movements from other similar ones. The founders of many of these movements and their key leadership have come from the ranks of highly placed secular organisations and they have the background of focused and result oriented leadership training and skill equipping. Naturally these groups have very effectively made use of their professional communication and managerial skills, translating them judiciously into a Catholic setting. This insistence on relevance and focus in subject matter has also resulted in the development of quite orthodox yet highly creative Catholic content in these trainings. The focused Catholic content of Opus Dei, the effective faith equipping approach of Fondacio, the transforming family approach and content of ME (Worldwide Marriage Encounter) and CFC (Couple for Christ), creative and effective faith equipping in Jesus Youth Fulltimers Training and Cultural Exchange are only some of the numerous highlights of the formation by these movements.

Emphasis on Mission: The emergence of these numerous Ecclesial Movements is seen by many as an offshoot of the Second Vatican Council more so because of the prime place that these movements accord to some of the key concerns of the Council. One such

emphasis is the primacy of mission in the life of the Church.¹⁴ Invariably the Ecclesial Movements lend almost the top notch place in their vision to the carrying out of the final commandment of the Master (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). The emphasis on formation that is at the fore of most of the movements is in reality a focus on formation for mission. They not only train people in the Catholic doctrine, but communicate the need and urgency of evangelisation together with very practical “how” of mission. They literally send out the trainees on mission, which serves as exposure and hand-on experience for direct evangelisation. It is interesting to compare this with the training approach of Jesus (Mt 10:5; Mk 6:7; Lk 10:1) who sent them out. It was highly formative and quite successful (Lk 10:17; Mk 6:30) and surprisingly it works even today as is testified by the sending out modules of contemporary movements. Cardinal Rylko remarks on

...the two fundamental priorities of evangelization, of ‘making disciples’ of Jesus Christ today: a ‘solid and deep formation’ and a ‘strong testimony’. These are two areas in which the new ecclesial movements and new communities are producing stupendous fruits for the life of the Church. These groups have become true ‘laboratories of faith’ and authentic schools of Christian life, holiness, and mission for thousands of Christians in every part of the world.¹⁵

Rooted in the Catholic identity: These convinced and proud breed of modern Catholic laity, most of them very young, prove to be one of the greatest assets of the Church in the contemporary times. They not just carry the Bible around, but are thorough with the Catechism of the Catholic Church and some are even well versed with Canon Law, most of them have a passion for saints, many spend long stretches before the blessed sacrament, and what is more, there is a great harvest of vocations from the ranks of these vibrant movements. They truly answer the challenge posed by the Pope, “we need to be contemporaries with the people of today, but without ceasing to be contemporaneous with the Church of all times.”¹⁶

6. A Time to Reap a Great Harvest

The Catholic Church of the day is faced with severe challenges. Coupled with the work of the vested interests there is the growing reality of a highly secularized attitudes and style of living exceedingly detrimental to a Catholic culture. Cardinal Rylko speaks of the extraordinary challenges to faith at a personal and social level

¹⁴Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 35.

¹⁵Rylko, “Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: ...”, 2.

¹⁶Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 88.

posed by “The expanding process of secularization and an authentic ‘dictatorship of relativism’... a tremendous absence of values in many of our contemporaries... accompanied by a joyful nihilism that ends in an alarming erosion of faith, a type of ‘silent apostasy’ (John Paul II) and a ‘strange forgetfulness of God’ (Benedict XVI).”¹⁷ The prospects become all the more murky when we contemplate on the impact of the all-pervading Net as well as the other media suffused with these values influencing our children and youth.

When darkness deepens over the face of the earth, the life giving breath of the Spirit blows (Gen 1:2) and blows where it wills (Jn 3:8). It is often remarked that today’s Ecclesial Movements are the fruit of the Council that was launched with the prayer of Pope John XXIII: “Renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost.” And the Lord indeed had, so to say, a new out pouring of the Spirit in the abundant graces showered through these movements. Surely some of the concerns of these movements squarely address certain critical challenges faced by the Church and the society.

More than all else these realities propose a relevant Catholic alternative to the highly secularised world. When ordinarily an individual finds oneself alienated and confused in the wide world, the movements offer a safe haven of faith and fellowship.

They offer precisely this joyful experience and a spirit of familiarity that is indispensable in a large-scale society... The movements, it seems to me... have this specific feature of helping the faithful to recognize in a world-wide Church, which could appear to be more than a large international organization, a home where they can find the atmosphere appropriate to the family of God and at the same time remain part of the great universal family of the saints of all times.¹⁸

Most of these have some specific prescription for active Catholic life, for the families, youth, children, and even for those laity who remain single for life. This lifestyle-specific and sometimes even career-oriented-life-equipping approaches result in highly formative as well as evangelistic outcome. Ecclesial movements are seen primarily as agents of evangelisation for today’s world. “One outcome of this period in church history is precisely the emergence of the movements

¹⁷Rylko, “Ecclesial Movements and New Communities,” 1.

¹⁸Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 90.

as powerful instruments of evangelization, means by which the church carries out its mission today.”¹⁹

Perhaps the most pertinent aspect of these movements is that they are the response to the contemporary realities from inside out, or from down upward. This spontaneous character makes them all the more vibrant and relevant. These new movements, as often noted, are of the laity, by the laity, but for the whole church and the world. May be for some this is a sign of contradiction or sign that is spoken against (Lk 2:34), but for a growing number of Church leaders they are not just a significant reality of today, but the most potent hope for the future of the Church.

The present Pope repeatedly urges every leader of the Church to “be conscious of his responsibility to accept these initiatives, which are gifts for the Church and give her new vitality,” but at the same time “help the movements to find the right path, by means of corrections made with great love, with great understanding, with the knowledge that he must not reject a gift of the Holy Spirit.” The bishops and parish priests have a duty, he says, “to see to it that the movements participate in the life of the diocese and of the parish... It is necessary both to guide and help the movements, and to help normal people who perhaps find some of the forms and practices of the movements a bit strange or odd.”²⁰

One of the major pastoral challenges of today is the effective incorporation of the ecclesial movements into the life and structure of the Church. Even the Canon Law, it is remarked, does not clearly address these realities, as there is only directions for the ‘associations of the lay faithful’ and not for ‘ecclesial movements.’ This, surely, poses challenges in the contemporary pastoral care of the local Churches.

At the International level as well as in some continents and countries, networking bodies often named ‘Fraternities’ have come into existence, to offer support and guidance to the movements. The pastoral wisdom of the Church has learned at these levels that such dialoguing bodies definitely promote mutual support and correction. But the presence of sympathetic pastors is indispensable here. Now there is need at the local levels also for such structures of dialogue and guidance.

¹⁹Allan Figueroa Deck, “Where the Laity Flourish,” *America: the National Catholic Weekly*, Aug 14, 2006. <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4910>

²⁰Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 77.

Accepting and promoting these 'gifts of the Spirit' entails fostering greater understanding of the movements, not just among the clergy, but also among the wider Church community. These novel ways of life and charism are looked upon as bizarre and, at the very least, just unnecessary. Broadening the vision as well as reading the signs of the times should be part of the exercise of pastoral planning of our communities.

Giving ecclesiastical and pastoral space and visibility to the movements in the various church forums and plans, even when not requested by them, is essential for integrating these with the wider community of the Church. Many of these movements have, due to their "infancy sicknesses" tended to be insulated and exclusive, and surely the anti-dote has to be invitation to and participation in forums of pastoral care. The 'talents' of the many movements are very profitably made use of by various dioceses now, bringing in greater dynamism and depth, and this welcome development has to spread.

7. Gratitude and Joy

As the Pope himself reminds us concerning these movements, we should above all be filled with "gratitude that the Holy Spirit is quite obviously still at work in the Church today and endowing her with new gifts, through which she can relive the joy of her youth."²¹ Contrary to the expectation of many who predicted the doom of the Church, the laity has come alive in an unprecedented magnitude and manner, visibly changing the face of the Church. And reciprocally the Church has discerned the true worth of these movements and increasingly widening the berth for their rootedness and development. May the Spirit who inspires all that is good and beautiful, help these new realities in the Church to bear abundant fruits!

²¹Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Spirit*, 60.