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CHARISMATIC RENEWAL AS A HELP TO CONTEMPLATION

We have all seen how charismatic renewal has touched upon so many areas of our church life. In the late 1970's I was privileged to visit India (Bombay and Kerala State) for six weeks and there I saw so many wonderful things going on-especially among priests. Although charismatic renewal has become especially noted for some of its more visible, spectacular manifestations, such as healing, nevertheless it also has been a less visible influence upon the contemplative prayer life of thousands of people. Certainly, the ideal of charismatic renewal is not just an explosion of Charismatic gifts, but rather the *fruits* of the Spirit—such as love, joy and peace—which are the goal of the gifts, and the norm of the spiritual life.

Recently two Catholic scholars, Fathers George Montague, S.M. and Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., wrote a very important study, *Christian Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit*,¹ showing that, in the early church, the so-called Baptism in the Holy Spirit was considered *normative*. The early Fathers of the Church expected that the charismatic gifts would ordinarily be poured out during the rites of initiation. Among these gifts are such aids to contemplation as tongues, wisdom, and prophecy.

In commenting on *Acts* 19:6, Montague states that the "presence of the Spirit is manifested by tongues and prophecy, . . . For Luke it is the proof that the Spirit has been received. Whether Luke considered this the *only* possible proof of the reception of the Spirit is surely questionable, but that he expected *some* experiential or charismatic manifestation to follow reception of the Spirit is certain."² He further states that, "It is clear from the paradigmatic nature of *Acts* 2:1-38,

1. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, USA, 1991. This Press also puts out a shorter version titled *Fanning the Flame*.

2. Montague and McDonnell, p. 39.

10:44-48, and 19:5 not only that the gift of the Spirit belongs essentially to Christian initiation, but that some external expression of its reception is normal. Among these expressions, tongues and prophecy have a privileged place. If I may phrase Luke's view another way: the Spirit cannot be known to have been poured *in* unless it somehow pours *out*."³

More than 300 years later St. John Chrysostom was preaching that "whoever was baptized at once spoke in tongues, and not only in tongues, but many also prophesied; some performed many other wonderful works."⁴ Chrysostom also stated that *all* who were baptized during the Apostolic age received charisms such as prophecy, wisdom, healing and the *charism of prayer*.⁵ Chrysostom laments that the Church of his day did not still experience the charisms and, for that reason, it was hard to understand what Paul was talking about in his famous listing of Charisms in I Cor.12.⁶ In fact, "The present church is like a woman who has fallen from her prosperous days. In many respects she retains only the symbols of that ancient prosperity."⁷ And yet, Joseph Hazzaya, one of the great Syrian mystics, is still able to write, 300 years after Chrysostom, about a "flow of spiritual speech" (tongues), and "a knowledge of both worlds (word of knowledge and wisdom)," in addition to "joy, jubilation, exultation, praise . . ."⁸

In many ways our church today is like that of Chrysostom, where many people lack the experience of the varied charismatic gifts. Yet, thank God, we find now, not simply a renewed theological interest in the power of the spirit, but many millions of Catholics have now experienced these gifts in their own lives.

I have been privileged to many of these contemporary Catholics (and Protestants) who have experienced these gifts, and I find that they truly do contribute to a contemplative life of prayer. We all know that the Church's tradition has always been that the higher reaches of prayer depend more upon what God does than upon what we do. In the early stages of the spiritual life we tend to perform many activities and

3. *Op.cit.*, p. 40.

4. *On 1 Corinthians*, 29, PG 61:239.

5. *On Romans*, 14; PG, 60:533.

6. *On 1 Corinthians*, 26; PG 61:239

7. *Op, Cit.*, 36; PG 61:312

8. As quoted on p. 19 of *Fanning the Flame* by Montague and McDonnell.

have many devotions in our life of prayer. In a way we rely on what we ask in our prayers. Then God removes some of the enjoyment of prayer and we undergo the dark nights until we learn to wait upon God. In beginning prayer we say our prayers; in mature prayer, we learn to receive more and more – it God who acts.

I think what happens in charismatic renewal is that the whole process is speeded up. When ordinary people receive the Baptism in the Holy Spirit (which I understand to be a full release of the Holy Spirit's power – the Spirit who has already been received in Baptism and confirmation) most of them have an experience of the presence of Jesus Christ from within. Their, of course, is a gift and is at the very heart of a life of prayer (which, as St. Teresa of Avila says, is a heart to heart conversation with God who loves us.) God is no longer distant but is sensed within us.

In addition, most people who receive the fullness of the spirit begin to pray in tongues, and this seems to help us *praise* God more easily than ever before. Paul states (1 Cor. 14:5) that he would like us all to have the gift of tongues (although, in community prophecy is far to be preferred) and, for its purpose, he states that, "Anybody with the gift of tongues speaks to God, but not to other people (1 Cor. 14:2). Paul says that, with tongues, we pray in our spirit (but not in our understanding), so the Holy Spirit helps us pray, Spirit to spirit, in a way which is beyond our ordinary human powers. My experience has been that, generally speaking, charismatic groups sing and praise God with a far greater joy and exultation than do groups that have not experienced the gift of tongues. They also seem to pray longer (sometimes, a lot longer). I do not mean that an ordinary group of Christians does not have the Spirit – only that the gift of tongues and the Baptism in the Spirit are meant to help us pray better, longer and more easily.

Furthermore, many people who have experienced the Baptism in the spirit seem to receive visions of Jesus (or the saints or angels) or receive prophecies.

Since I have not myself ever experienced any visions, I can simply register my opinion, as an outside observer, that a vision of Jesus can be a great help to a person's prayer life. Clearly there are attendant dangers of pride or elitism (as there are with any spiritual gift, but *in itself* an experience of Jesus' love for us can be a great encouragement

in our life of prayer. I know some friends whose lives have been turned around by a God-given prayer experience. For instance, at the celebrated International Catholic Charismatic Conference in Rome (1975) I prayed for one woman who seemed to hear God speaking to her, "Repent." She took their warning to heart and it changed her life. Just this past week another friend of mine had a two-hour long prayer experience during a prolonged medical examination (an "MRI") during which she felt great peace as God lifted from her the concerns for this world, the "weeds and thorns" which had choked her life. Not only did she emerge from the hospital without her anxieties but without the physical pain which had caused her to go through the medical examination. These experiences are fairly common place among Christians who have first-hand experience of the charismatic gifts - especially tongues. These gifts are a help, not only in expressive public praise, but in solitary, contemplative prayer. Several of my friends, whom I believe are five mystics, begin their prayer time alone by praying quietly in tongues; then, after a time they lapse into silence and simply wait upon the Lord, for whatever he should choose - or not choose - to reveal.

In short, I would see the Charismatic gifts as a great help in contemplative prayer. They are not a reward for heroic virtue, but are a great help as we *begin* the life of prayer. All prayer is a charism, a gift, because we need God's gifts of faith and receptivity; it is all God's work. But when we open ourselves to receive the charisms listed by Paul, I believe we will more quickly drawn into praise and contemplation. If *Knowing Christ*, is the heart of Christianity and the heart of Christian prayer life (see *Phil. 3: 8-12*), we need God's gift to be able to do that. We absolutely depend upon grace, God's gift. And the very center of charismatic prayer leads us to a radical dependence upon the Holy Spirit to receive the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ that is far beyond our human capacity!