

Ecclesial Movements and New Communities
The Response of the Holy Spirit to Today's Challenge of Evangelization
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1. The greatest challenge facing the Church at the beginning of the new millennium is the task which has always been entrusted to her: evangelization. The Church is called in every epoch and therefore in our own, to embrace anew the missionary mandate of the Risen Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20).

For Matthew, making "disciples" and making "Christians" are one in the same. [1] "Making disciples" is at the very heart of Church's ongoing vocation and mission. The Church, founded by Christ, is sent to evangelize the world; it lives in a permanent state of mission and finds its very reason for being in that mission.

The evangelization of today's world -- the new evangelization and of such great interest to and so often spoken about by the Servant of God John Paul II -- is a task in which the Church places great hope; yet the Church is fully aware of the innumerable obstacles she faces in this work due to the extraordinary changes happening at a personal and social level and, above all, to a postmodern culture in serious crisis.

The expanding process of secularization and an authentic "dictatorship of relativism" (Benedict XVI) have produced a tremendous absence of values in many of our contemporaries, which is 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).

This situation, so sadly prevalent in countries of ancient Christian tradition, is contrasted with a type of "religious boom" characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity. The Holy Father mentioned this phenomenon in Cologne last August, saying: "I do not wish to discredit everything that fits this description (...). But often religion is turned into a consumer product. One picks and chooses what he wants, and some even know how to draw profit from it." [2]

Consider the invasion of religious sects, the spread of New Age attitudes and lifestyles, and pseudo-religious phenomena such as magic and the occult. In truth, the globalized world has become a gigantic mission territory. As the Psalmist says so dramatically: "The Lord looks down on the sons of men if any are wise, if any seek God" (Psalm 14:2). It is more urgent than ever today to preach Christ in the great modern areopagus of culture, science, economy, politics and the mass media. The evangelical harvest is great and the laborers are few (cf. Matthew 9:37). This vital field of action for the Church requires a radical change of mentality, an authentic new awakening of conscience in everyone. New methods are needed, as are new expressions and new courage. [3]

As the Servant of God John Paul II exhorted the Church at the beginning of the third millennium: "I have often repeated the call for a new evangelization during these years. I repeat it again in

order to emphasize that we must renew that original impulse and allow ourselves to be filled with the zeal of the apostolic preaching after Pentecost. We must awaken in ourselves those sentiments of St. Paul who exclaimed: "Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

And in his words to the German bishops in Cologne, Pope Benedict XVI manifested a profound apostolic desire: "We must reflect seriously on how we might carry out a true evangelization today, not just a new evangelization, but often a true first evangelization. People don't know God, they don't know Christ. A new paganism is present, and it is not enough just to maintain the community of believers, although this is very important. (...) I believe that together we must find new ways of bringing the Gospel to today's world by preaching Christ anew and by establishing the faith." [5] The words of these two Popes will serve to guide our reflection on the connection between the evangelization of today's world and the ecclesial movements and new communities.

2. Among the many fruits 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. [6]

Once again the Spirit has intervened in the history of the Church, raising up new charisms that possess an extraordinary missionary dynamism which responds in an opportune way to the challenges of our time, great and dramatic as they are. The Servant of God John Paul II, who followed these new ecclesial realities with particular attention and pastoral care, affirmed: "One of the Spirit's gifts to our time is truly the flourishing of the ecclesial movements which, from the beginning of my pontificate, I have seen and continue to see as a reason for hope for the Church and for society." [7] The Pope was deeply convinced that these ecclesial movements were a manifestation of a "new missionary advent," of a great "Christian springtime" prepared by God at the threshold of the third millennium of the Redemption. [8] Truly this was one of the great prophetic moments of his pontificate.

The ecclesial movements and new communities contain a precious evangelizing potential urgently needed by the Church today. Yet their richness has not yet been fully recognized or valued. John Paul II said: "Often in today's world, which is dominated by a secular culture that proposes models of life without God, the faith of many is greatly tested and often suffocated and put out. Therefore there is an urgent need for a strong testimony and a Christian formation that is solid and deep. 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! What great there is of living Christian communities! 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!" [9]

Here the Pope notes 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.

3. The first and greatest priority is, therefore, Christian formation. Here we touch on a central point, since today the very foundations of the educational process of the person are being weakened. As Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out, "a dictatorship of relativism is being created that sees nothing as definitive, and whose only limit is the personal "I" and its whims." [10] The dominant culture of our time tends to produce fragmented, weak, and inconsistent personalities.

As one commentator warns: "the very ability of an entire generation of adults to educate its children is presently in crisis. For years there has been preached from the 'new pulpits' -- the schools, universities, magazines and television -- that freedom is the absence of history and foundation; that one can become great without belonging to anything or to anyone, but simply by following personal choice or whim. Today it is the norm to think that everything is essentially the same, that in the final analysis nothing has value except money, power and social position. People live as if the truth didn't exist, as if the desire for happiness which is at the heart of human experience is destined to remain unanswered." [11]

Christians are not exempt from the influence of today's culture. It produces individuals whose Christian identity is weak and confused; faith is little more than a routine practice often influenced by a dangerous syncretism of superstition, magic and New Age. Membership in the Church, often superficial and distracted, fails to impact their choices and behavior in any significant way. Today we are witnesses to a worrisome lack of educational environments not only outside the Church, but even within the Church. The Christian family is no longer capable on its own of passing on the faith to the next generation, and neither is the parish, even though it continues to be the indispensable structure for the Church's pastoral mission in any given place.

Parish boundaries, especially in large urban centers, are frequently too extensive -- and where the parish is little more than a bedroom community -- for meaningful personal relationships that could serve as a place for true Christian initiation. What are we to do? Precisely in these cases the ecclesial movements appear as places for a Christian formation that is both solid and deep. The movements and new communities are characterized by a wide variety of methods and educational approaches of extraordinary effectiveness. And what is the motivation behind their pedagogical strength? The "secret," so to speak, is found in the charisms which have produced them and which constitute their very soul. It is the charism which produces the "spiritual affinity between individuals" [12] animating a community and a movement.

And thanks to this charism, the fascinating original experience of the Christian reality, of which each founder is a witness, can be relived and reproduced in the lives of many people and of many generations of people without losing its novelty and freshness. The charism is also the source of the extraordinary educating power of the movements and new communities. Here I refer to a formation whose departure point is a deep conversion of heart. It is no accident that these new ecclesial realities include many converts, people who "come from afar."

At the beginning of this conversion process there is always a personal encounter with Christ which radically transforms life; an encounter made possible by credible witnesses who relive in

the movement that unique experience of the first disciples: "Come and see" (John 1:46). There is always a "before" and "after" in the lives of those who belong to ecclesial movements and communities. For some, the conversion of heart is often a gradual process which takes time. For others, the conversion is an unexpected and all-encompassing "lighting bolt" experience.

But in both cases the conversion is lived as a free gift of God, a gift that fills the heart with joy and becomes a spiritual benefit for the whole of one's life. How many members of movements and new communities can repeat the words of the convert André Frossard: "God exists, and I have experienced him."

Formation is the privileged environment in which the various movements and communities express their charisms. Each group bases its formative process [of the person] on a distinct, specific pedagogical approach which is typically Christ-centered. It focuses on what is truly essential, which is the awakening in the person of that baptismal vocation or identity that characterizes true Christian discipleship. It is radical in the sense that it refuses to dilute the Gospel by proposing holiness as an ideal worthy to be pursued. It develops within small Christian communities which serve as an indispensable reference point and support, in great contrast to today's "atomized" society where loneliness and depersonalized relationships are the norm; and it is integral in the sense that all the dimensions of life are embraced and challenged, producing in the member a complete sense of belonging.

Yet this sense of "belonging" is distinct from membership in other religious groups or circles. The member of a movement or new community typically manifests a strong sense of belonging to, and love for, the Church. Therefore, there is no danger in affirming that these new movements and communities are true schools for the formation of Christian "adults." As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote some years ago, they are "forceful ways of living the faith that stimulates individuals, giving them joy and vitality; their faith really means something for the world." [13]

Our picture would not be complete without some mention of the role these groups can play in the context of the Church in Latin America, where popular piety is deeply rooted and diffused. The ecclesial movements and new communities offer pedagogies of evangelization capable of shaping this religiosity: The important aspects of popular piety can be assimilated and deepened, and their value in the life of the people can be retained. [14]

4. The movements and new communities respond to a second urgent need of great importance, which is the need for "strong testimony." All Christian formation ought to have a missionary element because the Christian vocation is, by its nature, a call to apostolate. Missionary outreach helps baptized persons discover the fullness of their own vocation; it helps them overcome the temptation of egoistic selfishness and the subtle danger of seeing the movement or community as a refuge or a way to flee the problems of the world in an environment of warm friendship.

Notable among the characteristics of missionary commitment found in ecclesial movements and new communities is the indisputable ability to awaken the apostolic enthusiasm and missionary courage of the laity. They know how to draw out the spiritual potential of the laity by helping them smash the barriers of timidity, fear, and false complexes of inferiority which today's secular culture creates in the hearts of so many Christians. Many of their members have experienced a

deep inner transformation, at times to their own surprise; in fact, many never would have imagined themselves preaching the Gospel in this way or participating so actively in the Church's mission.

Movements know how to awaken a desire to "make disciples" of Jesus Christ, a desire that often moves individuals, married couples, and even entire families to leave everything in order to embrace the mission. The movements and new communities propose not only personal example, but also the direct announcement of the Christian message, thereby rediscovering the value of the kerigma as a method of evangelization and catechesis. In this way the movements and new communities are responding to one of the most urgent needs of the Church today, which is the catechesis of adults, understood here as an authentic Christian initiation manifesting the value and beauty of the sacrament of baptism.

One of the greatest obstacles to the work of evangelization has always been routine or habit, which eliminates the freshness and persuasive power of Christian missionary outreach and witness. The movements break with the habitual way of doing apostolate; they re-examine the methods, approach, and propose new forms. They direct their efforts courageously and naturally at today's modern areopagus which is present in culture, in the mass media, politics and the economy. They give special attention to those who suffer, to the poor and marginalized. How many social works have been born of their initiative!

They do not wait for those no longer practicing the faith to return to the Church on their own: They seek them out. They do not hesitate to reach out by taking to the streets and city squares, by entering supermarkets, banks, schools and universities and wherever people can be found. Their missionary zeal carries them "to the ends of the earth." And they grow -- showing that the charisms from which they spring are capable of feeding the Christian life of men and women of all places, cultures and traditions.

And not just this. Present as they are within the fabric of the local Churches, they are transformed into eloquent signs of the universality of the Church and its mission. Their special relationship with the ministry of Peter's Successor finds its origin here. Indeed, it is truly surprising to witness the missionary vision which the Holy Spirit has raised up today by means of these new charisms. The movements and new communities have become true missionary "schools" for so many lay people. In today's Church there is much talk of evangelization: congresses, symposia, seminars on the topic are organized; book and articles on the topic are published, and official documents promulgated.

While we do well to discuss evangelization in this way, since it is so vital to the Church and to the world, there exists a very real danger of remaining at the level of pure theory, of making plans that remain, so to speak, inert on paper. But these new charisms generate groups of people -- men and women, youth and adults -- who are solid in their, full of zeal, and ready to preach the Gospel. Here we are not talking about theoretical concepts, but rather "living" projects experienced in the concrete, personal lives of individuals and in the life of so many Christian communities. These are projects ready to happen. ... This is the great richness of the Church in our day.

How we marvel at the quantity and quality of the fruits produced in the Church by the new charisms! The Gospel principle "you shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16) remains true today. Thanks to these charisms, many people have met Christ for the first time and believed in him or have returned to the Church and the sacraments after years of being away. So many people have gone from being Christians in name only to believers who are convinced and committed. How many fruits of authentic holiness of life! How many families that have been reconstituted in mutual love and fidelity! How many vocations to the priesthood, consecrated life, and new expressions of lay life according to the evangelical counsels! These new charisms proclaim this fundamental message to today's world: Christianity is truly worthwhile; following the call of Christ is worthwhile. Try, and see for yourself!

5. As we have seen, 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. What task and what challenge?

John Paul II never tired of insisting that the ecclesial movements and new communities are called to take their place "humbly" in dioceses and parishes, serving the Church with an attitude wholly devoid of pride or superiority with regard to other realities and with a true spirit of sincere collaboration and ecclesial communion. And at the same time the Holy Father insisted that Pastors -- bishops and parish priests -- ought to welcome these groups "cordially," recognizing and respecting their particular charisms and accompanying them with paternal care.[15] St. Paul's golden rule applies here: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20).

The great novelty brought to the Church by the ecclesial movements and new communities obviously raises frequent questions and causes a certain confusion with regard to the established way of doing things at the day-to-day pastoral level. As John Paul II said, "When the Spirit intervenes, we are always surprised. The Spirit causes events whose newness startles us." [16] As we have repeated so often, the movements represent a challenge and a healthy invitation to which the Church must respond by vocation. The movements' radical Christian "way of being" is an indictment of that "tired Christianity" (Benedict XVI) of so many baptized persons, that superficial Christianity rife with confusion.

Alexander Men, a Russian dissident priest assassinated in 1990, remarked provocatively during the years of religious persecution that the greatest enemy of Christians was not the militant atheism of the Soviet state, but rather the pseudo-Christianity of so many baptized persons.[17] These words jar our consciences. In the final analysis, the true and greatest enemy of the Christian is mediocrity and resistance to true faith in the Gospel.

With their overflowing passion for the mission, the movements also challenge our preconceived notions of "being Church" which are perhaps too comfortable and too adapted to the spirit of the age. A few years ago Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made reference to "a gray pragmatism in the Church's daily life (...) in which everything appears to be "business as usual," but in which faith is actually eroded and cast into confusion.[18]

The "calm conservation" vision of the Church which is so prevalent in certain circles today comes under direct challenge by the movements' vision of a missionary Church courageously projected toward new frontiers. This latter vision ought to help diocesan and parish pastoral programs recover a much needed prophetic, militant element. The Church of today is greatly in need of this. It must be open to the newness of produced by the Spirit: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19).

With regard to the ecclesial movements and new communities, the magisterium of Pope Benedict XVI has given perfect continuity to the teaching of John Paul II. The present pope has long been aware of the service they provide to the mission of the Church. While still prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, he wrote: "One notes that something new is beginning: Here Christianity appears as a new reality, and is perceived as a way to live -- to be able to live -- in today's world by people who have often come from afar." And he added: "Today there are "isolated" Christians at the margins of our strange understanding of modernity who are willing to try new ways of living. While they may not get much attention from public opinion, their way undoubtedly points to the way of the future." [19]

According to the then Cardinal Ratzinger, the ecclesial movements and new communities provide something new which makes them a type of prophecy of the future. And now as Pope, Benedict XVI continues to remain faithful to this very subtle and personal understanding of the situation of the Church. At the closing of World Youth day in Cologne in August 2005, he told the German bishops: "The Church must value these realities while guiding them with pastoral wisdom, so that they might contribute their own gifts to the building up of the community in the best way possible." And he concluded: "The local Churches and the movements are not separate realities, but rather both constitute the living structure of the Church." [20] These are important signposts that ought to serve as a compass in the Church's evangelizing mission today.

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NOTES

[1] Cfr. L. Sabourin, "Il Vangelo di Matteo. Teologia e Egesi," vol. II, Roma 1977, pp. 1069-1070.

[2] Benedict XVI, Holy Mass at Marienfeld, L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, Aug. 26, 2005.

[3] Cf. John Paul II, Discourse to the 19th General Assembly of CELAM, March 9, 1983, "Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II" VI, 1 (1983), pp. 690-699.

[4] John Paul II, apostolic letter "Novo Millennio Ineunte," No. 40.

[5] Benedict XVI, Encounter with the German bishops, L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, Aug. 26, 2005.

[6] Cfr. John Paul II, apostolic exhortation "Christifideles Laici," No. 29.

[7] John Paul II, homily at vigil of Pentecost, L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, May 31, 1996, No. 7.

[8] Cfr. John Paul II, encyclical "Redemptoris Missio," No. 86.

[9] John Paul II, to members of ecclesial movements and new communities, at the vigil of Pentecost, L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, June 5, 1998.

[10] J. Ratzinger, Holy Mass "Pro eligendo Pontifice," L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, April 22, 2005.

[11] "Se ci fosse una educazione del popolo tutti starebbero meglio. Appello," Atlantide, No. 4/12/2005, p. 119.

[12] John Paul II, "Christifideles Laici," No. 24.

[13] Cfr. J. Ratzinger, "Il sale della terra. Cristianesimo e Chiesa cattolica nella svolta del millennio," Edizioni San Paolo, Milan 1997, p. 18.

[14] Cfr. Paul VI, apostolic exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi," No. 48.

[15] Cfr. John Paul II, encyclical "Redemptoris Missio," No. 72.

[16] John Paul II, to members of ecclesial movements and new communities, cit. L'Osservatore Romano, Spanish language edition, June 5, 1998.

[17] Cfr. T. Picus, Aleksander Mien, "Verbinum Warszawa" 1997, p. 37.

[18] Cfr. J. Ratzinger, "Fede, Verità, Tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo," Cantagalli, Siena 2003, p. 134.

[19] Cfr. J. Ratzinger, Il sale della terra, op. Cit., pp. 145-146.

[20] Benedict XVI, Encounter with German bishops, cit.