

THE BASIC EXPERIENCE OF THE RENEWAL

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CARDINAL SUENENS

Let me begin by describing the basic experience which is the soul of the Renewal. Progressing beyond superficial analogies, we have to understand the Renewal as a grace that re-actualises baptism and confirmation, as a kind of personal Pentecost involving conversion, a re-acknowledgement of Jesus Christ, a new openness to the Holy Spirit. Inevitably, most definitions are incomplete, and it is up to the theologians to look for the best formulation. The danger of the term ‘baptism in the Spirit’ is that it may cause us to overlook the one Baptism which incorporates us into the life of Christ; in the same way, the term ‘personal Pentecost’ must never allow us to forget that Pentecost, the day on which the Church was founded, remains a unique event.

But whatever expressions we use, the fact is that an experience of conversion to a new life is clearly seen in the Church. It is sweeping through the five continents like a breath of profound rechristianisation, like a wind fanning the smouldering embers and rekindling them into a blazing fire. *‘I have come to cast fire upon the earth’,* said Jesus, *‘and would that it were already kindled!’*

In response to the prayer of John XXIII and Paul VI, this religious awakening is continuing the mystery of Pentecost – not exclusively, but in a memorable way. What is new for those who have welcomed it is that the Holy Spirit, the permanent object of our faith, has become a living experience for them. This is the mainspring of the Renewal. As Father Sullivan, S.J., Professor of Theology at the Gregorian University, writes:

“The Charismatics do not for a moment question that the Holy Spirit is given in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and that he dwells in everyone who is living in the grace of Christ. At the same time, they believe that the Spirit, even though already present, can become present to the same person in a decisively new way; that is, by making his presence, previously a matter of faith, now a matter of experience:

- *by new manifestations of his working in that person’s life;*
- *by a striking increase of that person’s power to bear Christian witness;*
- *even by conferring charismatic gifts.*

It seems undeniable that such a new presence of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life would be a precious gift of grace... Their interpretation of their ‘baptism in the Spirit’ is that it is the initial experience of such a new presence and working of the Spirit in their lives.

Looking, as they do, on the distinctive Pentecostal experience as the beginning of a new presence of the Spirit, they insist that the emphasis should be put, not on the initial experience as such, but rather on the ‘new life in the Spirit’ that should follow upon it and must be nourished and sustained, if the original experience is going to bear its fruits.”¹

To this analysis – this testimony – I would like to add the following lines by a historian, Richard Quedeaux, who, in his book *The New Charismatics*, very accurately defines the implications of the charismatic experience:

¹ F.A. SULLIVAN, ‘The Pentecostal Movement’, offprint from *Gregorianum* (1972), vol. 53, fasc. 2, p. 249. See his book published under the title *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982).

“When Christ promised his disciples that he would bestow upon them the Holy Spirit after departing from them, he anticipated three practical needs the Spirit would satisfy in their lives:

-confirm faith,

-bring joy in the midst of suffering and

-assure, guide and teach those who would choose to follow Christ.

-Yet too many, if not most Christians, Christ’s promise of his indwelling Spirit may be accepted intellectually, but it is not received experientially.

-Hence the promise is meaningless, and the question is raised again and again: How do I ‘know’ that the Holy Spirit dwells within me?

-Charismatic Renewal offers an answer to the question. The baptism of the Holy Spirit, a powerful experience that convinces the recipient that God is real, that God is faithful to what he has promised and that the same ‘signs and wonders’, described in the Book of Acts, can happen today, to me.”²

Such is the Renewal’s contribution to the keener awareness of the Holy Spirit acting in the Christian life.

This ever-present action of the Spirit is indeed what struck Pope John Paul I, to whom I had sent my book *A New Pentecost?* when he was still Patriarch of Venice. One very significant sentence in his warm and friendly letter of thanks summed up his reaction: *“As far as the content is concerned, I have to confess that while reading it, I too felt obliged ‘to reread with new eyes the texts of St Paul and of the Acts of the Apostles.’ Your book was, and will remain for me, a precious guide in rereading the Acts.”* The Renewal lives by this rereading of the New Testament.

PRAYER

Let us express, in a prayer of thanksgiving, all our gratitude to the Lord for his Spirit’s action in the Church throughout the ages:

Lord God, the creation of man was a wonderful work; his redemption is still more wonderful. May we persevere in right reason against all that entices to sin and so attain to everlasting joy.

PRAYER OF THE EASTER VIGIL

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² R. QUEDEBAUX, *The New Charismatics* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p.2.