

# CHARIS AND THE CALL TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

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### **0. Intro**

One of the main dimensions of CHARIS is the clear insistence on the ecumenical dimension. A quick look at the Statutes show this.

- The first sentence of the Preamble recognizes that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is part of a wider current of grace, that started in other Christian denominations: "What we know now as Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) is part of an ecumenical current of grace" (CHARIS Statutes, opening sentence).

- For this reason, one of the central purposes of CHARIS is to work for the unity of Christians, the unity of the Body of Christ. It is even the second "Purpose" exposed by the Statutes, just after presenting the mission to promote the current of grace itself and communion among its members: "Recognizing Catholic Charismatic Renewal as part of an ecumenical current of grace, CHARIS is an instrument to promote and work for unity in the body of Christ, as expressed in the prayer of Jesus" (Jn 17)" (CHARIS Statutes, Purposes, §2).

- It is mentioned again in the General objectives: "To promote the ecumenical dimension of the CCR and foster the commitment to serving the unity of Christians" (art. 3, f).

- It is the second role in the presentation of the role of the Moderator, after fostering and developing CCR: "To promote the work of unity in the Body of Christ"

Let us reflect on why and how.

### **1. The Charismatic Renewal is born ecumenical and is part of God's design of unity**

It is fundamental to recognize that the CCR is a current of grace that is "born ecumenical". This is an expression of Pope Francis, who insisted on this point two years ago at the *Circo Massimo* for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCR: "(We are celebrating) a flood of grace, the flood of grace of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. A work that was born... Catholic? No. It was born ecumenical! It was born ecumenical because it is the Holy Spirit who creates unity, and the same Spirit who granted the inspiration for this." Relationship with other Christians and the call to unity of Christians is part of our DNA.

This is a historical fact: we know that the group of Catholics from Duquesne University who received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1967 had been praying and reading the Bible with Protestants during the year the preceded. Indeed, the CCR comes from and was born into a current that started with the Pentecostal communities and spread firstly among ecclesial communities from the Protestant world. That is a first reason why we are called to put unity of Christians at the heart of the existence and mission of CHARIS. It is a question of gratitude: we have received this gift of God through others. Who takes a present and runs away with it, cutting the bridges with the gift-giver? It is also a question of humility. I repeat, we have received this gift from others... Isn't it irritating when you have an excellent idea that you just air out over a drink with a friend and this "friend" presents it to your boss as his own stroke of genius? In Universities there is a very strict rule and sanctions against plagiarism... In the end, it is a question of politeness or decency.

However, there is a deeper, spiritual reason. God chooses the gifts he will give us, but he also chooses the way he gives them. If he has given us this gift through other Christians, it means something and we need to

discern what he is telling us. We can imagine God saying: “I give you this gift through others because it is a gift that unifies, it is a gift of unity.” The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is the divine person who sets us in communion with God and with others. He is the Spirit of love, of communion, of unity. God has graced us with a renewed outpouring of the Spirit so as to renew the Church, and part of this renewal is the unity of all Christians. The current of grace we are part of spills over the borders and over the walls of divisions of our Churches and communities precisely so as to bring these walls down and to overcome these borders.

Fr Raniero Cantalamessa insisted on this point, also at the Vigil of Pentecost two years ago: “God has poured out his Holy Spirit on millions of believers who belong to almost all the Christian denominations and, lest there be any doubt about his intentions, he has poured out his Spirit with the identical manifestations, including the most unique one of speaking in tongues.” Fr Raniero explains that we are left to draw the same conclusion that Peter did when he was in front of Cornelius and his household who had received the Holy Spirit although they were not Jewish like the Apostles (Acts 11): “If God then has given them the same gift he gave us, who are we to continue to say that other Christian believers do not belong to the body of Christ and are not true disciples of Christ?”

Unity of Christians, carrying the current of grace together: this is an incredible responsibility. It is our joy to have here with us brothers and sisters from other Churches and ecclesial communities. It is a spiritual joy, the joy of the Kingdom of God already present in our midst.

## **2. The two currents of grace are necessary to each other**

In a nutshell: both the ecumenical movement and the CCR need each other. The CCR loses energy and credibility if it is not ecumenical, and the ecumenical movement is empty and only a human endeavor without the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is impressive to see that that two currents of grace started at the same time.

More or less at the same time as the Holy Spirit initiated the first manifestations of the current of grace of the Renewal in the Pentecostal communities, at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the Spirit also inspired the different Christian denominations to yearn and strive in a new way for Christian unity. This is what we call the “ecumenical movement”.

How did the “ecumenical movement” start? The Church has always prayed and labored for her unity: we see this already in Paul’s exhortations in First Letter to the Corinthians and throughout all the history of the Church. But it has taken a special form in the XX<sup>th</sup> c. In Scotland, in 1910, at a congress of Protestant missionaries, the representatives from the southern countries expressed their gratitude for the Gospel that had been preached to them, but at the same time lamented the divisions that had been exported with the Gospel: “Why have you preached us love and brought us divisions?...” A great desire for unity and a worldwide commitment to do all that was possible to accomplish it started at the time, through prayer (week of prayer for Christian Unity) and associations. Some Protestant Churches actually united. This started outside of the Catholic Church but, as with the current of grace of the Renewal, it too was recognized by the Catholic Church as “fostered by the Holy Spirit” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1) – a recognition which happened during the Second Vatican Council. And the Catholic Church gave it a major boost when she started being part of it.

Why does the Charismatic Renewal need the ecumenical movement? The question can also be formulated as: does the Charismatic Renewal need other Christian brothers and sisters? Vatican II recognized that the Church of Christ, although she “subsists” fully in the Roman Catholic Church is not enclosed in the borders of the Catholic Church (see *Lumen Gentium*, 8). And if the Body of Christ is wider, that means that these borders are a wound to this body. The Church is called to be “sacrament” of unity, sign and instrument of unity, for the world – a sign of love. How can she be a sign of love and unity if we are divided?

More concretely, we have treasures that we need to put in common. We are a bit like a soccer team that is divided and asked to play with just the attackers or just the

defenders... Or like an orchestra that is divided: it is possible to play music with just one or two instruments but the music will be of poorer quality. Concretely, Catholics have been inspired to read and love the Bible through contacts with Protestants, and to read the Church Fathers through contacts with the orthodox. We can also repeat here that we have received the current of grace through contacts with Pentecostals and Evangelical Christians. And others have learned to appreciate the Eucharist and to seek for visible unity through their contact with Catholics. What a treasure we would have missed if we had not believed that we should grow closer and that we could learn from each other.

Why does the ecumenical movement need the charismatic current of grace? Vatican II insists that the ecumenical movement does not concern only the pastors and leaders: "all Catholics are exhorted to take an intelligent and active part" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4). There have been many attempts by Church leadership to rebuild unity during the history of the Church, but the difference now is that it is for all. And the CCR has helped all the faithful recognize their calling to holiness, active Christian life and ministries. All essential dimensions of Christian life concerns each faithful, and ecumenism is one of them.

Moreover, only God can give unity to the Church. Jesus himself prays for unity: "Father may they be one..." (Jn 17:21). The ecumenical movement is in dire need of the power of the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit can overcome the barriers our sins have set up. Only the Spirit can reconcile us after centuries of division, animosity, lies about each other... Supernatural power is needed! And we do not know *how* unity will come: it cannot be done according to our plans. Abbé Paul Couturier used address God in the following terms: "we pray for unity, according to your will, according to your paths". Much has been done so far on the path towards unity, and we have grown in truth and faith. However, there is always the risk of trying to obtain unity through human effort alone. This is why we sometimes have the impression that some paths of classical ecumenism are stalling. The ecumenical endeavor needs an outpouring of the Holy Spirit!

### **3. What should we do? The power of common prayer, common witness, love**

How should we retrieve this heritage, this part of our DNA? And what are the fruits of unity? I will just stress three aspects.

1) The first step of ecumenism is common prayer. Prayer is powerful! Common prayer is even more powerful. Jesus said that when two or three are gathered in his name, he will be in their midst (see Mt 18:20): "Amen, I tell you. If two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (18:19). This is true of course at an individual level. It is true in a couple: when a couple agrees on something, when a couple agrees to ask God for the same thing, how can he resist?... It is true among generations: when young and old, children and their parents, grandchildren and grandparents pray together, Jesus is happy. When people from different nations pray together, especially nations that have fought or are fighting, how powerful that will be! And when Christians from different denominations, who have sometimes fought bitterly, pray together, what a source of blessing it is. It pleases pleases God in an extraordinary way and is extremely powerful...

Of course, this also means being attentive to the way we pray. Some forms of prayer are very specific to one denomination, very Catholic, very Evangelical, very Orthodox. There is of course a beauty in welcoming the treasure of others. But it is also good to help the other be at ease. So when we pray together we need to ask ourselves: what is easiest for all denominations to accept? Prayer with the Bible, the word of God, will be the first answer in many cases, but one needs to be inventive and many ways are possible.

2) Another dimension of Christian life that is given tremendous power by being done together is witnessing to the Gospel: "If you have love for one another, people will recognize you for his disciples" (Jn 13:35). Our lack of unity is a major obstacle to evangelization. We probably cannot imagine how the world would now be, how many more Christians there would be, how much more love and unity there would be, if we had not been divided for centuries. One day, a friend was evangelizing in the streets with a mixed Catholic and Protestant group. They were

giving out flyers for a concert of Christian music, and on the flyer was the sentence: “Together, Catholics and Protestants, we announce Jesus Christ”. People would often refuse even to take the flyers, or change sidewalks when they saw the group from far enough, but those who did look at the flyer always reacted the same way: “What, Catholics and Protestants together?!” They didn’t react about “announcing Jesus Christ” but about Catholics and Protestants together. And they would ask how it was possible, why they were doing it. They were intrigued and impressed. There was beautiful fruit...

Of course, one may be afraid of evangelizing with someone from another ecclesial community. What if the people we talk with enter into another denomination?! I have had experiences that have obliged me to reflect on this. I was asked to preach on a Sunday in an Anglican Cathedral and the priest, when he introduced me, forgot to say I was a Catholic. At the end of the Eucharist people came to speak to me. There was a young couple who introduced themselves: he was Anglican, she was Catholic. They told me that they went sometimes to the Anglican Cathedral and sometimes to the Catholic one, and that they didn’t know which one to choose. And then they said: “Your sermon was great. It has helped us choose. We will come here, to the Anglican church!”. Gently I told them that if they were a mixed couple it was better if they kept going to both...

The Catholic Church does give indications about such questions. The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993) insists that “ecumenical cooperation” is an important sign for the world, a sign that faith in Jesus Christ is more important and more powerful than our divisions. And then it adds: “Catholics would want all who are called to Christian faith to join with them in that fullness of communion they believe to exist in the Catholic Church, yet they recognize that in the Providence of God some will live out their Christian lives in Churches and ecclesial Communities that do not provide such full communion” (*Directory*, 206).

And there is a form of witness about which there is not much to debate about, because it is the strongest and the most common: martyrdom. Christians are

persecuted throughout the world: it is said that Christianity is the most persecuted religion, in absolute numbers, today. Now these are not only Catholics, or Orthodox, or Protestants. We are already together in what the last Popes have called an “ecumenism of the blood”. Let me quote Pope Francis: “There is an ecumenism of blood: when they kill Christians, we have so many martyrs.... starting with those in Uganda, canonized 50 years ago: half were Anglican, half Catholic, but the ones [who killed them] didn't say: ‘You're Catholic.... you're Anglican....’ No: ‘You are Christian’, and so their blood mixed. This is the ecumenism of blood” (In-flight press conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Istanbul to Rome, Sunday, 30 November 2014).

3) Many other things are possible: to put ministries and charisms in common, to have formation in common. Why waste energy in replicating things we could do together? However, what counts the most is not what we do. It is communion. And communion is made up of relationships, friendship, love. Pope Francis often speaks about walking together. Relational ecumenism is the type of ecumenism all are capable of doing and all are called to do. It really is a question of love. Fr Raniero expressed the same idea at Pentecost 2017: Christ did not command us to love only those who think the way we do. If we love only those we agree with, what is special about that, since the pagans do the same (cf. Mt 5:46)?...

#### **4. Reconciliation and repentance in the Catholic Church and in the Charismatic Renewal**

So far, I have spoken about ecumenism, about the unity of all Christians. However, the call for unity that is addressed to us does not only concern the relation between the Catholic Church and other Christians. It concerns the Catholic Church herself. She too needs communion and peace: between “Charismatics” and “non-Charismatics”, between groups in a parish, between different conceptions of liturgy, between different ideas of what is the center of faith, of what can or should change or not change, between those

who are “right” and those who are “wrong”! And there are so many struggles for power, or struggles not to lose power. In this situation, how can we be a sacrament, a sign and an instrument of God’s unity for the world? How can we be a sign of God’s love?

This is unfortunately true inside of the current of grace of the CCR. I do not want to be too simplistic but I believe we can say that we started off in the 1970s as a beautiful current with a sense of a common treasure and a common purpose - one big stream or river. But in the 1980s already many divergences and struggles divided us and the river became dozens and hundreds of streams that barely touched each other.

As we know, two years ago the CCR celebrated its 50 years, its Jubilee. CHARIS is a first fruit of the Jubilee. However, we must remember that in the Jewish tradition a Jubilee is not only a moment of thanksgiving. It is a moment of repentance: we look back and see our sins. We repent and ask those we have

wounded for forgiveness and forgive those who have wounded us.

Repentance and forgiveness are central for unity of Christians: there are deep wounds to be healed before even thinking of doing things together. The same is true for unity of the Catholic Church, and the unity of the current of grace of the Renewal. Repentance and forgiveness are a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit convicts us of our sins, his light shows us both God’s love and our sin. How many of us here have had this experience of “conversion”, of deep regret for our sins that has changed our lives? This is what we are called to live also at an ecclesial level: to repent for the divisions between our Churches and in our Churches. Division is not God’s will; it comes from stiff human necks and sinful hearts. Reconciliation, on the other hand, can open all closed doors and all paths towards the other. It is the way of Christ, so that all may be one and the world may believe.

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#### Who is Fr. Etienne Vetö?

Born 28 November 1964 in Milwaukee, U.S.A., his mother being French and his father Hungarian. He is both a French and an American citizen. Since 1987 a member of the Chemin Neuf Community, where he was ordained Priest in 1997.

He has obtained both an Agrégation in Philosophy (equivalent of a PhD in the French system) and a doctorate in Theology. Since 2014, professor of Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Since September 2017, Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies and Jewish-Christian relations of the Gregorian University.

Involved in youth ministry and ministry for couples and families, as well as preaching and accompanying spiritual exercises. Head of youth activities for the “Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000” (Rome, 1999-2001).

Involved in accompanying physically handicapped people and homeless people. Elected to the Community Council of the Chemin Neuf Community in 2016. Member of the Doctrinal Commission of ICCRS.

**Source:** [www.charis.international/en/international-service-of-communion/](http://www.charis.international/en/international-service-of-communion/) October 15th, 2019

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*More texts from the CHARIS-conference in Rome 6-9 June 2019 at [www.stucom.nl](http://www.stucom.nl):*  
0458uk Pope Francis on CHARIS June 8<sup>th</sup> 2019 (Dutch: 0459)  
0456uk Pope Francis homily on Holy Spirit June 9<sup>th</sup> 2019  
0457uk Raniero Cantalamessa to leaders June 8<sup>th</sup> 2019

More and in other languages: [www.charis.international](http://www.charis.international)

Dutch report on CHARIS-conference 6-9 June: [www.kcv-net.nl/kcv/historie/6-9-juni-2019-charis-start](http://www.kcv-net.nl/kcv/historie/6-9-juni-2019-charis-start)

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