

A RENEWAL STILL STRONG AND GROWING

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**"We, though many, are one body... We have different gifts, but one Spirit."
(Rom 12:5-6)**

How well St. Paul here describes what the members of the ICCRS Council report, and what I have experienced about the Catholic Charismatic Renewal worldwide. My contacts with the Renewal around the globe have given me a very hopeful perspective on this channel of God's Holy Spirit. In my position with International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services, I am often asked the following questions by people who are genuinely concerned about the future of the Charismatic Renewal and its impact on the Church and the world.

Is There Growth in the Renewal?

While we often hear of numbers decreasing in prayer groups and conferences, there is new growth, steady growth, and growth in the midst of great difficulties in many parts of the world. Here are a few examples.

In Eastern and Central European countries there is a great religious awakening happening with many people eager to learn about God. The Pentecost pilgrimage to the ancient icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa, organized by the Charismatic Renewal in Poland, has grown from 20,000 in 1992 to over 150,000 in 1995.

After years of growth, ICCRS council members from Latin America and Oceania report that the Charismatic Renewal continues to flourish in places like the Dominican Republic and Brazil, and continues to increase steadily in Melbourne, Australia, the Philippines and Malaysia.

In the midst of an extremely difficult social, political and economic situation, both English- and French-speaking Africa report the good news of growth in numbers and spiritual depth. Slow but amazing growth is taking place in Papua, New Guinea, where the vast, remote and inaccessible areas make communication difficult.

I personally saw the multitudes of Catholic Charismatics that gather in Korea.

What are the Major Trends and Developments?

Evangelization continues to be a major focus of the worldwide Catholic Charismatic Renewal, with both familiar and new initiatives. Stadiums and gymnasiums are filled with crowds of 20,000 to 160,000 in places like Italy and Brazil as people gather for praise, preaching and healing events.

A new emphasis in an increasing number of charismatic conferences is that they (as did ICCRS in our First International Healing and Evangelization Seminar) are building into their program outreaches to people in the area, ministering to them and inviting them back to the conference.

Pakistan reports many Muslims and Hindus attending meetings, receiving healings and giving testimonies. In Australia, the aboriginal people are being reached out to by the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

With growing familiarity, schools of evangelization have boosted the thrust and readiness to evangelize in many countries where the Catholic Charismatic Renewal had settled in with dwindling numbers in groups. The schools have opened a new way to challenge many people to a greater commitment to service. I had the joy of staying with one such school in Katikamu, Uganda, where a covenant community has sprung up as the fruit of the school. I was impressed with the maturity and commitment of the young African men and women who have been raised up to leadership.

Another experience that is growing very strong in the USA and Europe is the Parish Cell System. The seventh annual European Cell System workshop held last year in Milan, Italy, drew over two hundred people from nineteen countries. The description of the early community in the Acts of the Apostles is coming to life in this form of parish renewal.

Most areas of the world seem to be working to respond to the Lord and to Pope John Paul II's call to evangelize youth, and the Holy Spirit is anointing their efforts. In one example, the small country of Panama had four thousand young people attend their Catholic Charismatic Youth Conference.

Family conferences are another way some areas are responding to this call. In the Family Conference in Malaysia I saw deep healings that took place when grandparents, parents and children prayed over one another, replanting and forgiving each other. In England's Family Catholic Charismatic Holiday

Conference, held at a holiday camp in an English seaside resort, I experienced the renewing effect of praying and playing together as a family.

A somewhat newer trend that I rejoice in is the increasing activity on the part of the Catholic Charismatics in the social and political arena. In Argentina the national team for Catholic Charismatic Renewal held the first National Meeting of Social Promoters, attended by 117 brothers and sisters working in politics, trade unions, economics and social promotion. In Lithuania the Catholic Charismatic Renewal has been involved in evangelization in the army, organizing charismatic meetings in several military bases. In the Congo and Zaire, Renewal participants are working on a great rally for peace. Charismatics in Pakistan worked with prayer and fasting for the release of two Christians wrongly imprisoned.

All over the world there now seems to be among Catholic charismatics a new desire for unity, leading to new initiatives for unity. The gatherings of National Service Committee members and other Renewal leaders held for some time in Latin America and Europe are being followed by similar ones in Asia-Pacific and Africa. A gathering of national coordinators in Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Tanzania brought thirty-six people from seven different countries in eastern and southern Africa, while sixty-three delegates from nine Asian and Pacific nations attended their first general assembly. In the USA leaders from various streams and expressions of the CCR -- veterans of 28 years in the CCR to current youth ministries -- signed a statement committing themselves to do all in their power to strive for unity within the CCR.

The Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities continues to network Catholic communities and encourages them to work for unity with their local Renewal. I experienced the fruit of this when I returned to an area where the covenant community and the prayer groups -- which had previously worked separately -- now jointly sponsored a conference. The conference seemed especially blessed with power because of the new unity.

At the same time, Poland had one hundred delegates at its First Congress of Catholic Movements. The Irish Catholic NSC decided to drop its usual Pentecost celebration in Dublin in order to meet together with Protestants in Belfast to intercede for peace in Northern Ireland. Charismatics in the Czech Republic are tackling the very difficult problem of reconciling Catholics, Protestants and Hussites there. In Italy, a historic meeting of Catholics and Evangelicals brought healing and determined new efforts for unity.

What is the Impact on the Church?

I believe all of these initiatives in evangelization, parish renewal and youth ministries, plus social and political outreaches and efforts for unity are impacting the Church and the world by offering hope, healing and reconciliation to hundreds and thousands of people.

From Mark Nimo, one of our African ICCRS councilors, we hear: "God continues to wipe the tears of many and turns their mourning into dancing . This has become a common feature through the emergence of the Charismatic Renewal in most nations of Africa."

The Renewal is currently taking a leading role in many nations in developing Christian and leadership formation courses, and offering them as a service of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal to the Church.

The work of combating witchcraft and any involvement with demonic activity is another important ministry being spearheaded by Charismatics.

The recent meetings of music ministries in various places is highlighting the impact the Charismatic Renewal has had for some time on music and worship in the Church.

What are Some of the Struggles?

The Charismatic Renewal also has its continuing share of challenges. A major one I see is keeping the balance between being fully charismatic while also being sensitively discerning. On one hand, in some areas there is a tendency to become too formal, losing spontaneity, allowing guidelines, good in themselves, to dominate the Spirit, to stifle the gifts of the Spirit, and to hinder evangelization. On the other hand, in other areas there is a tendency to neglect discerning "anointings of the Spirit," mistaking excessive emotionalism and hysteria for authentic movements of God.

Another age-old problem is aging leadership! There is still a tendency to stay in command for too many years, failing to call new people into leadership and service.

The need to balance being fully Catholic and ecumenically open is another major struggle. On one hand, in some areas Catholics' efforts at ecumenism lead them to lose their Catholic identity and move into an "it doesn't matter what church you belong to" attitude. On the other hand, bad experiences in the past or fear of the unknown leave Catholics in other areas closed to ecumenical efforts.

The passivity and even hostility of priests and religious leaders towards the Charismatic Renewal is still a major problem in some areas. This is particularly serious in places where Catholics still will not accept lay leadership of prayer groups and diocesan service groups.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal, while struggling with challenges and problems, is indeed vibrant and fruitful. The challenge of the Renewal in every part of the world is to stay fully alive in the Spirit, allowing individuals and groups to continue to mature in their relationship with God and one another, increasingly integrating their experience into the life of the Church, while reaching out to the needs of the world.

May we rejoice in what the Spirit is doing in the many parts of the body of Christ and be encouraged by the witness of our brothers and sisters throughout the world to cooperate more fully with what the Spirit is doing in our own neighborhoods.