

The Birth of CHARIS and its Importance for Catholic Charismatic Renewal
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Introduction

I am grateful for this opportunity to come and speak in front of so many leaders in Catholic Charismatic Renewal about the vision, which has brought CHARIS into being, and about why CHARIS is important for the future of Charismatic Renewal and for the Church. In particular, I would like to thank Jean-Luc Moens the Moderator of CHARIS and Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa O.F.M., the Ecclesiastical Assistant, and greet the members of the International Service of Communion.

CHARIS: a Papal Initiative

When speaking of the beginnings of CHARIS, the first thing to point out is that the idea comes directly from Pope Francis himself. I think he surprised almost everyone when he wrote to the Presidents of ICCRS and of the Catholic Fraternity in 2015 asking them, initially, to reflect on the advantages of forming one single service for Catholic Charismatic Renewal worldwide, and then, in a second letter, asking them to enter actively into the process which led to the creation of CHARIS.

I think it is clear to all of us that the Holy Father's principal objective was not organizational, but pastoral. It is as a good shepherd that he has accompanied the process from day one. I can tell you that during the three-year period leading up to the establishment of CHARIS, the Holy Father frequently asked me for news on how the project was progressing.

A Special Time in the History of Charismatic Renewal

Pope Francis' letters concerning CHARIS say clearly that the testimony that Charismatic Renewal gives to the Church is more effective when it is a testimony of unity and of service, that those who lead must strive for this, and that it is absolutely necessary

to strengthen unity in International Charismatic Renewal. He also underlines that we are currently in a special time in the history of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, after fifty years, it is a good time to take stock of things, and think honestly about how best to serve the Lord and his Church.

We should not be surprised that the Holy Father has very specific ideas about the role of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, because he has himself explained that, as a Bishop, he slowly came to appreciate the growth in an authentic Christian life that Baptism in the Holy Spirit brings; and at the end of his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires he was also the Argentinian Bishops' Conference delegate for Catholic Charismatic Renewal¹. The vision that Pope Francis sets out for Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and the tasks that he has set for its leaders and for its members, form part of how Pope Francis exercises the charism of Peter, and of how he seeks to fulfil his mission as Pastor for the Universal Church.

What the Pope asks of Catholic Charismatic Renewal today and for the future requires that it understand itself as a pastoral instrument in the service of the Successor of Peter. This means that we must enter with profound docility into an understanding that Catholic Charismatic Renewal does not belong to its members, but, rather, to the Church. This might surprise us: after all, the Renewal was not an episcopal or a pontifical initiative. Charismatic Renewal really has grown from the bottom up, from person to person, through a series of private initiatives, powered by the Spirit, like a forest fire pushed by a powerful wind.

It is a fulfilment of Jesus' desire: "I have come to set fire to the earth, and would that it were already kindled" (Lk. 12: 49). And yet, this is often how the Spirit moves the Church: changing people's lives through a personal encounter with Him, compelling Pastors to take notice - to discern and then to confirm the presence of the Spirit and encourage His divine work. There are examples of this throughout the history of the Church. It is enough to consider the life of Francis of Assisi, a layman who allowed God to shape his life and in doing so set the spark for a profound renewal of the Church whose fruits are still visible today. Indeed, when Pope Francis talks of the Catholic Charismatic

¹ FRANCIS, *Address to Participants in the 37th National Convocation of the Renewal in the Holy Spirit*, Olympic Stadium, Rome, June 1st 2014 (hereafter, *Olympic Stadium*).

Renewal as a “current of grace”², it reminds us of how the then Cardinal Ratzinger talked of the gift that has been given to the Church through the docility of Francis of Assisi³. Yes, there are Franciscan orders and communities, but there is a spiritual current that envelops them and goes beyond them and which has become the patrimony of the whole Church. In the same way, Catholic Charismatic Renewal has given birth to specific communities and institutes, but this current of grace goes beyond them, and does not belong to any of them.

Pope Francis calls on the Renewal, therefore, to enter into an ever-deeper ecclesial maturity concerning its identity and its mission, and CHARIS is the instrument given in the service of this process of maturity. Catholic Charismatic Renewal, because of this ecclesial identity, receives the confirmation of its identity from the Pastors of the Church.

The gradual maturing of Catholic Charismatic Renewal and its ecclesial identity is something that all the Roman Pontiffs who have known the Renewal have encouraged and accompanied.

Saint Paul VI, addressing the International Charismatic Congress in Rome in 1975, posed an authentic ecclesial discernment when he affirmed Catholic Charismatic Renewal as “a chance for the Church and for the world”⁴, and underlined three principles of discernment set out by Saint Paul in order to better “test everything and hold fast to what is good” (I Thess. 5:12). These principles are:

- 1) Fidelity to the authentic doctrine of the faith - if something contradicts the faith it does not come from the Spirit;
- 2) Giving priority to the higher gifts – the higher gifts are those gifts given in the service of the common good;
- 3) The pursuit of charity – because love alone binds all gifts together and perfects them (Col. 3: 14).

² FRANCIS, *Vigil of Pentecost and Ecumenical Prayer on the Occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, Circus Maximus, Rome, June 3rd 2017 (hereafter *Circus Maximus*); FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*.

³ J. RATZINGER, “The Ecclesial Movements: A Theological Reflection on their Place in the Church”, in PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM PRO LAICIS, *Movements in the Church, Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements, (Rome, 27-29 May 1998)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999) 23-51.

⁴ PAUL VI, *Address to Participants in the 3rd International Congress of Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, Rome, May 19th 1975.

When Saint John Paul II spoke to the participants of the Fourth International Leaders Conference in 1981, he repeated these principles as being fundamental for those who lead Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and noted how, since 1975, the leaders of Renewal had already “developed a broadened ecclesial vision and [...] made efforts to make this vision increasingly a reality for those who depend on them for guidance”⁵.

It was also Saint John Paul II, during the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, in a message to the World Meeting of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, who called on Charismatic Renewal - and the communities within Renewal in particular - to step forward to greater ecclesial maturity, and tasked the international leadership with helping to further develop this ecclesial awareness⁶.

When Pope Benedict XVI spoke to a gathering of Catholic Charismatic Renewal on the eve of Pentecost in 2012 he invited them to welcome the power of the Holy Spirit in order to “grow in trust and in abandonment to his will, in faithfulness to our vocation and in the commitment to become adults in faith, hope and charity, [...] mature and responsible, [...] lowly, humble and a servant before God”⁷. For this maturity he underlined the importance of a “humble and disinterested” exercise of gifts for the common good, building solidly on the rock of the Word of God (Mt. 7: 24-25), and guided in this by docility to the Magisterium of the Church⁸.

Clearly, this journey of ecclesial maturity, as affirmed by Pope Francis, is entering a new phase, and CHARIS is an instrument wanted by the Holy Father in the service of this. At the evening in Circus Maximus, during the Golden Jubilee in 2017, the Holy Father invited us all : “I wish you a time of reflection, of remembrance of your origins; a time to leave behind all things added by the self, and to transform them into listening and joyful welcome of the action of the Holy Spirit”⁹.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Participants in the Fourth International Leaders' Conference of Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, Rome, May 7th 1981 (hereafter, *Leaders 1981*).

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Message to Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, April 24th 2000 (hereafter, *Message 2000*).

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Participants in the Meeting Sponsored by Renewal in the Spirit*, St. Peter's Square, May 26th 2012 (hereafter, *Benedict 2012*).

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ FRANCIS, *Circus Maximus*.

Renewal today is a spiritual force permeating the lives of millions of people through their individual Baptism and Outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As well as an organized form of apostolate; it also takes on tasks and missions that go beyond the autonomy that the faithful have to organize themselves for evangelizing and for seeking holiness. Catholic Charismatic Renewal, in this sense, receives its mission from the Church. In a very specific way, it is the Holy Father Pope Francis who, in our days, has given clear indications of what this mission is. It is because of the ecclesial mission vested in Catholic Charismatic Renewal that Pope Francis inspired the creation of CHARIS. Also, it is because of the public nature of this ecclesial mission that CHARIS has been dotated with public juridical personality.

So what is this mission?

The Holy Father has told Catholic Charismatic Renewal that the whole Church needs its help in order to live the Gospel. When the Holy Father speaks to Catholic Charismatic Renewal he addresses at the same time each and every person who shares in this current of grace, and also those who serve in leadership roles, because all are responsible, each according to his or her own situation and role, for how the Renewal serves the Church.

CHARIS is intended to be in the service of all these persons and group, in order to help them answer these expectations:

1) The Holy Father expects permanent personal conversion to the love of Jesus, witnessed in a life grounded in the Gospel and consistent with it¹⁰.

For this personal conversion we should note that it flows from Baptism in the Holy Spirit and the personal encounter with Christ. We all know that the adhesion to the Gospel is not first of all a moral effort of obedience, but rather willingness, time and time again, to choose discipleship.

¹⁰ FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*.

2) He expects us to share with all people in the Church the grace of Baptism in the Holy Spirit¹¹.

3) He expects us to evangelize using the Word of God to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and that his love is for all people¹².

We have already noted Pope Benedict's reminder in 2012 that building our house on the rock that is the Word of God (Mt. 7: 24-25) requires docility to the Magisterium of the Church. He takes this further when he says, on the same occasion: "It is therefore necessary to form consciences in the light of the Word of God and thus give firmness and true maturity; the Word of God from which every ecclesial and human project draws meaning and an impetus, also for building the earthly city (Ps. 127:1). The souls of institutions must be renewed and history must be made fertile with the seeds of new life"¹³.

During the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, Saint John Paul II exhorted Charismatic Renewal: "Always seek Christ! Seek him in meditation on the Word of God, seek him in the sacraments, seek him in prayer, seek him in the witness of your brothers and sisters"¹⁴. In his invitation to come back to the essential of what Renewal has received, Pope Francis exhorts us to rediscover the Word of God as our first love. "In the early days, they used to say that you charismatics always carried around a Bible, the New Testament [...] Do you still carry one today? [...] If not, return to this first love"¹⁵.

4) He expects us to be a people of prayer and praise¹⁶.

5) He expects us to be close to the poor and the needy¹⁷.

Pope Francis exhorts the Renewal to stay close to the poor. He says, "In their flesh you will touch the wounded flesh of Christ"¹⁸. Although this insistence surprised some people, it has been ever present in what the Popes have asked of Catholic Charismatic

¹¹ FRANCIS, *Circus Maximus*; FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*..

¹² FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Message 2000*.

¹⁵ FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*

¹⁶ FRANCIS, *Circus Maximus*; BENEDICT, 2012.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Renewal. In 1975, Saint Paul VI said: “There are no limits to the challenge of love: the poor and needy and afflicted and suffering across the world and near at hand all cry out to you, as brothers and sisters of Christ, asking for the proof of your love, asking for the Word of God, asking for bread, asking for life”¹⁹. Saint John Paul II, in 2000, said “Serve Christ in those close to you, serve him in the poor, serve him in the needs and necessities of the Church. Let yourselves be truly guided by the Spirit! Love the Church”²⁰. In loving the poor and binding their wounded bodies, we love Christ. Moreover, if docile to the Holy Spirit, we can decide to give to these concrete gestures a further meaning as gestures of love for the Church. In the Golden Jubilee meeting at Circus Maximus, Pope Francis reminded us that the testimony of the first Christian community in Jerusalem is that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4: 34), and that Baptism in the Spirit, praise and the service of our brothers and sisters are “indissolubly joined”.

6) He expects us to give a witness of spiritual ecumenism, as something owed to our brothers and sisters in other Churches and Ecclesial communities²¹.

In Circus Maximus, Pope Francis identified Catholic Charismatic Renewal as an instrument of choice for the Church’s ecumenical effort. It is a sign of the providence of God that the same renewing of the Pentecost experience has emerged in all Churches and Ecclesial Communities. There is therefore a shared spiritual experience across Charismatic Renewal for Christians of all denominations. Charismatic Renewal is providentially placed as an experience that unites Christians: it was born as something ecumenical²². In the maturing of its ecclesial identity, Catholic Charismatic Renewal is called by Pope Francis to participate in *his* task, as the successor of Peter, of reconciling Christian Churches and Communities, ‘so that all might be one’. On the same evening, Fr. Cantalamessa reminded us that this ecumenical path of love could begin at once: each person can do it now. At the same time, he continued, the shared spiritual experience of Christians in Charismatic Renewal provides a context in which brothers and sisters who share the same Spirit can strive to “speak the truth in love” on the questions that separate us, and in this way strive towards Christian unity. Clearly, with Pope Francis involving Catholic Charismatic Renewal in this institutional ecumenical effort, there is an onus on CHARIS to promote,

¹⁹ PAUL VI, 1975; also cited in: JOHN PAUL II, *Leaders 1981*.

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Message 2000*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² FRANCIS, *Circus Maximus*.

discern and help shape how the Renewal participates in this. As Saint John Paul II said already in 1981: “Let us be confident that if we surrender ourselves to the work of genuine renewal in the Spirit, this same Holy Spirit will bring to light the strategy for ecumenism which will bring to reality our hope” that all be truly one in Christ.²³

7) He expects us to seek and foster unity within Catholic Charismatic Renewal, because such unity is the sign of the Spirit²⁴.

CHARIS will accompany the Renewal as it prays and strives to let the Holy Spirit come down again, as in a new Pentecost. To paraphrase Pope Francis on Pentecost Sunday 2017: the Spirit resting on each person and then bringing all together in fellowship, giving new gifts to each person and gathering all into unity, the same Spirit creating unity and diversity. It is in this logic that CHARIS will serve Catholic Charismatic Renewal, in the service of all expressions of Renewal, giving support, providing training and formation, helping in discernment, encouraging mission, and assisting those who serve at all levels to avoid the recurrent temptations of seeking diversity without unity and of seeking unity without diversity.

CHARIS will seek ways to encourage all people who share in the graces of Baptism in the Holy Spirit to accept a personal responsibility as men and women of communion, where the renewed experience of “forgiveness received and forgiveness given” makes hearts new, and builds us up like new people for the service of the Lord ²⁵. As Ezekiel prophesied: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. [...] You will be my people, and I will be your God” (Ez. 36: 26-28).

Advice to Leaders

Please allow me to finish with some considerations specifically for those among you who are leaders in Catholic Charismatic Renewal. I borrow several points from Saint

²³ JOHN PAUL II, *Leaders 1981*.

²⁴ FRANCIS, *Olympic Stadium*; FRANCIS, *Circus Maximus*.

²⁵ FRANCIS, *Holy Mass for the Solemnity of Pentecost*, St Peter’s Square, June 4th 2017.

John Paul II, speaking to people like you in 1981, for they help us understand how, within CHARIS, each of us is called to be a servant.

Firstly, “The role of the leader is, in the first place, to give the example of prayer [...] with confident hope, with careful solicitude, it falls to the leader to ensure that the multiform patrimony of the Church’s life of prayer is known and experienced by those who seek spiritual renewal”.

“Secondly, you must be concerned to provide solid food for spiritual nourishment through the breaking of the bread of true doctrine. The love for the revealed word of God, written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is a pledge of your desire to ‘stand firm in the Gospel’ preached by the Apostles [...] Take care, then, that as leaders you seek a sound theological formation designed to ensure for you, and for all who depend upon you for guidance, a mature and complete understanding of God’s word. ‘Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another’ (Col. 3: 16-17)”.

“Thirdly, as leaders in the Renewal, you must take the initiative in building bonds of trust and cooperation with the Bishops, who have the pastoral responsibility in God’s providence for shepherding the entire body of Christ, including Charismatic Renewal. Even when they do not share with you the forms of prayer which you have found so enriching, they will take to heart your desire for spiritual renewal for yourselves and for the Church”.²⁶

Please allow me one final point.

Taking stock of what we have received and looking to what must be done for the future requires of us that we plan for a new generation of leaders. One of the functions of good leadership is the capacity to plan for a time when others must come to the fore and, like the Precursor John the Baptist; we must diminish and make way (John 3: 30). In the Church, this is a requirement of good health, and this is why the Statutes of CHARIS include clear references to the renewal of our leadership teams²⁷. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis refers to various temptations among those

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Leaders 1981*.

²⁷ CHARIS, Statutes, arts. 10 and 14.

who serve in the Church. Among other points, he talks of the challenge of providing young people with a sense of belonging in our communities and structures. He notes that the Holy Spirit “blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality”²⁸, so the challenge for Catholic Charismatic Renewal is that of making our existing communities places where we allow young people to lead us forward in holiness and mission.

Conclusion

My reflections today have made little mention of Mary, but when we talk of life in the Holy Spirit she is rarely far away. My prayer for all of us is that we might learn from her, this Pentecost and every Pentecost, how to better receive the Holy Spirit and become disciples. At the end of the day, this is the reason for CHARIS.

²⁸ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24th November 2013, no. 105.