

**Commission of Theology
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A CCCB Pastoral Letter
The Charismatic Renewal in Canada 2003

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Charismatic Renewal in Canada, we, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, wish to address this pastoral letter to all the faithful. With deep gratitude and a renewed sense of hope in our hearts, we invite everyone to join us in celebrating the many blessings and gifts that the Charismatic Renewal has brought to the life of our Church in Canada during these past 35 years. We also wish to take this opportunity to highlight some of the new challenges that the Charismatic Renewal faces at a time when the Church seeks to "launch out into the deep" of a new millennium.

Before taking leave of his disciples, Jesus reassured them with these words: "And the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). He renewed their hope by promising them that he would not leave them orphaned, that his Spirit would come upon them, and that he would continue to be with them. If we needed a tangible sign that the risen Lord has kept his promise in this regard, the presence of the Charismatic Renewal in our Canadian Catholic Church is certainly one such telling sign.

From its spontaneous emergence in Canada in 1968, from coast to coast and in places far removed from one another, the Charismatic Renewal quickly resulted in a great upsurge of spiritual vitality and renewal. Prayer groups sprang up in virtually every diocese across the nation and very soon service teams and diocesan committees were set up to unite and assist these. In the French sector, as early as 1974-75, the ACFRCC (*Assemblée canadienne francophone du Renouveau charismatique catholique*) came into being, becoming ten years later the ADDRCC (*Association des délégués diocésains du Renouveau charismatique*). Soon thereafter, in order to unite and assist the Charismatic Renewal leadership at the national level, the CCRSC (*Canadian Charismatic Renewal Services of Canada*) was established for the English sector, and for the French sector, the CCRC (*Conseil canadien du Renouveau charismatique*). Each sector has its official magazine: *The Bread of Life* and *Selon Sa Parole*. Today over 1 million Catholic Canadians have been touched or in some way influenced by the Charismatic Renewal in Canada. There are some 862 prayer groups in roughly 16% of all Catholic parishes in the country.

What is particularly remarkable about the history and rapid growth of the Charismatic Renewal is the way it sprang up quite spontaneously and organically from the grassroots level of the faithful to become very quickly a nation-wide spiritual phenomenon in the Catholic Church of Canada. This is all the more remarkable since the Charismatic Renewal does not owe its origin to some inspired founder or charismatic figure. It has no membership lists and is not unduly bound by internal structures or rules. The Charismatic Renewal is a highly diverse collection of individuals, prayer groups, communities, and activities. Yet all share and espouse the same goals, namely, to foster a personal and continuous conversion to Jesus Christ, receptivity to the presence, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit, a deep love for the

Church and its work of evangelization, a strong fellowship, and a joyful zeal for the Gospel. One can say that the Charismatic Renewal has been and continues to be the sovereign work of God, realized through the Holy Spirit. It touches the lives of men and women in every walk of life, renews their faith, and enkindles in them a joyful love and zeal to serve God and his People. These lay faithful, priests and religious have allowed themselves to be surprised by God, surprised at the experience of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It is most fitting, therefore, that as we review the 35-year history of the Charismatic Renewal, we lift up our hearts and give thanks for the many spiritual gifts and blessings it has brought to the life of the Catholic Church in Canada. We invite all the faithful to join us as we make these words of Pope John Paul II our very own:

How can we not give thanks for the precious spiritual fruits that the Renewal has produced in the life of the Church and in the lives of so many people? How many lay faithful – men and women, young people, adults and the elderly – have been able to experience in their own lives the amazing power of the Spirit and his gifts! How many people have rediscovered faith, the joy of prayer, the power and beauty of the Word of God, translating all this into generous service in the Church's mission! How many lives have been profoundly changed![\[1\]](#)

Spiritual fruits of the Charismatic Renewal

In order to better celebrate the blessings which the Charismatic Renewal has bestowed – and indeed continues to bestow – upon the Church of Canada, we wish to highlight and name here some of its more notable spiritual benefits.

1) Experience

What perhaps best explains the enthusiasm of participants in the Charismatic Renewal is that it stems from a deep personal religious experience. The Charismatic Renewal is not a teaching or a program as such, but first and foremost a personal experience or 'close encounter' with God's Spirit. For example, there is a big difference between "experiencing" a region or country by traveling there oneself instead of simply reading about it in a travelogue. The former has a much deeper and more lasting impact on the individual. So too when a Christian has the personal experience of having been 'touched' or 'overtaken' by God's Spirit. With varying degrees of intensity, it often marks a change in the person's whole outlook and being. There is henceforth in that person an overriding sense that God's Spirit is really *alive, powerful* and *trustworthy* – even in today's secular world. In this respect, the Charismatic Renewal serves the Church well by eliciting from every member a personal discernment of the workings of the Holy Spirit and a "real assent" to the Spirit's presence in their lives and in the Church. It is of course true, however, that such a personal experience of the Spirit is not reserved to just a select few members of God's family. It can and does occur constantly in the life of every Christian who is alive to his or her baptismal vocation. This experience is always bound up with the witness of the Apostles and the living faith of the Church down through the centuries.

In the classical theology of the Church, the Holy Spirit is the love shared between the Father and the Son, or in St. Bernard's beautiful image, the kiss or embrace of the Father and the Son. St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the third person of the Trinity as the

breathing back and forth of the Father and the Son, the pulse and living heartbeat of God. The Father and the Son go out of themselves in a sort of mutual ecstasy and that ecstasy is the Spirit. This is not just an abstraction. It is at the very heart of the Christian life. This is what the Charismatic Renewal has experienced, and lest we forget, this is what it seeks to make us all aware of, namely, that the risen Lord wants us to share in God's inner life and love, that he wants us to experience his own Spirit, his own divine Ecstasy.

(2) Prayer

If there is one thing that characterizes the Charismatic Renewal, it is the high premium that it places on prayer, especially that of praise and thanksgiving. It has resolutely taken unto itself St. Paul's exhortation: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thes 5:16-19). The main purpose of prayer and prayer groups is to give glory to God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. A typical prayer meeting generally consists in songs of praise and spontaneous prayers addressed to the Father, the Son, or to the Spirit. It is punctuated with scripture readings, periods of silence, sharing, and prayers for healing, often ending with personal testimonies and thanksgiving. These prayer meetings take their inspiration from St. Paul's advice: "When you assemble, one has a psalm, another an instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor 14:26). Or again, as when St. Paul invites Christians to "be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and praying to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Eph 5: 18-20). This insistence on prayer, both personal and communal, is very much in keeping with Pope John Paul's own exhortation. In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, he speaks of prayer as "the very substance and soul of the Christian life," which, he says, is "wrought in us by the Holy Spirit" (n.32). It is almost as though the Pope was thinking of the Charismatic Renewal when he urged all Christian communities to become "*genuine 'schools' of prayer*"(n. 33) – for indeed that is basically what the Charismatic Renewal is all about.

(3) New Evangelization

Pope John Paul II first called for a "new evangelization" in 1983, an evangelization that would be "new in ardor, methods, and expression." The heart and wellspring of this new evangelization are to be found in the "inscrutable riches" (Eph 3:8) of Christ and the need to proclaim God's saving love as shown forth in Jesus Christ. Evangelization begins with a deep conversion to the person of Christ. It is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus, through the Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Charismatic Renewal has made a great contribution in this area as well. It has always understood personal conversion as the goal of evangelization, that is, a complete surrender to the person of Jesus Christ, a surrender that in turn releases the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what gives the Charismatic Renewal its ardent desire to be baptized in the Spirit. It seeks to experience the fullest possible release of the Holy Spirit and be confirmed in the "new life" that results from this release. The expression "baptized in the Spirit" denotes an experience with God that produces several things in the subject: a new or greater desire for prayer, a substantial increase in the hunger to better understand Scripture, a keener awareness of God's Spirit, and a personal desire to foster the Church's mission of evangelization.

This is not something 'new' in the Church: the Holy Spirit has always been active in the Church, and the New Testament presents this as being quite normal for every Christian. What is new and what the Charismatic Renewal brings to the Church today is a renewed and

lively awareness of the active presence and workings of the Spirit. This remains the heart and central focus of the Renewal's spirituality. The Charismatic Renewal therefore does not regard itself as a movement 'set apart' from the Church. To the contrary, it sees itself as a spontaneous ecclesial consequence of what happens when the fullness of Christian initiation is embraced and taken seriously. This is why Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have both insisted that the Charismatic Renewal is a grace *within* and *for* the whole Church.

(4) Gratuitous Service to Others

The Charismatic Renewal would constantly remind us that charisms are first and foremost gifts from God and "are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church."^[2] These gifts are given to individuals primarily *for the benefit of others*. Members of the Charismatic Renewal have always been very mindful of this servant quality that flows from the bestowal of God's gifts. In this, they heed the words of St. Peter: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received" (I Pet 4: 10). This of course is not to say that only those in the Charismatic Renewal receive such gifts; on the contrary, every Christian is so gifted through the sacrament of baptism and confirmation: "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another having another" (I Cor 7:7). Yet the Charismatic Renewal has certainly been a good and faithful steward in preventing us from neglecting the importance of God's gracious gifts to his pilgrim Church. Members of the Renewal are not only quick to recognize the gifts of others, but they are ever ready to share and serve others with whatever gifts from God they themselves have received.

The Charismatic Renewal thus renders an invaluable service to the Church in what may be called its "memorial function": it obliges us all to remember and keep constantly in mind something we know through divine revelation, but in practice often tend to forget, namely, the grace-given character of our Christian existence. In this 'memorial' capacity, the Charismatic Renewal serves as a living sign to all the faithful that the Holy Spirit both surrounds and inhabits the family of God. It serves as a powerful reminder that we must all assume an attitude of openness and grateful availability for every gift that the Spirit wishes to pour into our hearts. Such gifts are ultimately bestowed for the *building up* and *edification* of the ecclesial community.

(5) Healing

Another salient feature of the Charismatic Renewal is its healing ministry. Very early on, the Renewal recognized that healing was an integral part of Jesus' ministry and that he empowered his followers to heal as well. Faith seems to have been a crucial element in at least some of Jesus' healings, as when he uses the phrase: "Your faith has made you whole" (Mk 10:52). On other occasions, by contrast, disbelief and a lack of faith on the part of his listeners sometimes prevented healing from occurring (Mk 6:5-6).

The Charismatic Renewal sees healing as one of the powers of the Holy Spirit and so embraced this ministry as an integral part of its mission. It also recognized that with human beings, there are different types of sickness: sickness of the body caused by physical disease or accidents; psychic illnesses caused by psychological traumas of the past; sickness of the soul caused by personal sin and the forces of evil. Jesus also recognized these various needs for healing: (a) at the basic physical level as when he cured the blind, the lame, the paralyzed; (b) the recovery of a lost human dignity, as when Jesus forgave the adulteress or honored Zacchaeus; and (c) at the level of morality and the liberation of

life's potential, as when he cast out demons, or taught us how to live the beatitudes and love our neighbour.

In other words, the Charismatic Renewal does not consider healing merely from physical illness, but from every obstacle or hindrance that prevents one from surrendering completely to God. Like Jesus himself, the Charismatic Renewal understands its healing ministry primarily as a way of removing obstacles to one's awareness of God's presence, a means of eliciting a more genuine response to God's love. In this sense, healing is not seen as an end in itself, but a means of giving glory to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ, through the healing power of the Spirit.

In their earlier pastoral message on sickness and healing, *New Hope in Christ* – which bears re-reading – the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops recognized the powerful concern in the Bible for healing the whole person and all persons, a ministry that the Church has always been faithful to throughout its history. The pastoral letter also recognized that with Jesus, "healing of mind and body becomes the clear sign that the Kingdom of God is already present."^[3]

For these and many other precious gifts that the Charismatic Renewal has bestowed on the Church of Canada during the past thirty-five years, we give thanks and praise the Lord, from whom all good things are given to us through the Holy Spirit.

New Millennium and New Challenges

With his apostolic letter *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II has charted a veritable 'navigational' course for the Church as it sets out on a new millennium. With that letter, he effectively turned the eyes of the People of God toward the future in anticipation of the challenges that await us. In a similar forward-looking spirit, we now turn our attention to some of the challenges facing the Charismatic Renewal that we foresee in the years ahead.

(1) The question of healing services

While recognizing that healing has become an integral part of the life and ministry of the Charismatic Renewal, and that over the years many individuals have benefited from the healing power of the Spirit, we should bear in mind that the healing gifts of the Church are not restricted to charismatic healings. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its 1983 pastoral message, *New Hope in Christ*, spoke of a diversity of available healing ministries in the Church:

Some people bring wholeness through carrying their own suffering. Others, building on nature, have brought their medical skills under the aegis of Christ. Still others have received the rare gift of charismatic healing. All of these gifts are celebrated and summed up, as it were, in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick where the Church's ministry of healing is joined with its ministry of reconciliation.^[4]

The rich potential of these various forms of healing ministry in the Church should be promoted and celebrated, to the exclusion of none.

A healing prayer service must not be introduced or take place *within* the existing Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharist has its own ritual structure that must be respected. A

healing prayer service, however, could conceivably be held before or after Mass for those who desired or needed such a healing prayer service. Healing always entails a social dimension, as do all forms of reconciliation. Indeed it would be wonderful if prayers for healing and reconciliation were to become a normal everyday occurrence, especially in our Christian families. Prayer for healing is the birthright of every baptized Christian and is not restricted to ordained ministers. When an anointing takes place in a charismatic healing service, it is important to make perfectly clear to the faithful that this is not a sacramental anointing. Hence when oil is used in the non-sacramental anointing of a healing prayer service, care must be taken to clearly differentiate it from the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

(2) Support and involvement of priests

The members and leaders of the Charismatic Renewal have frequently expressed the desire and need for greater support and involvement of priests in the Renewal. This desire is expressed in terms of the Renewal's increasing need for spiritual direction and guidance. So much has changed since the beginning of the Charismatic Renewal in Canada that at this stage of its maturation, members often feel bereft of the help and support they would need in our rapidly changing world. There can be no doubt that spiritual direction is in great demand today in every sector of life. It is no longer viewed, like it perhaps was in the past, as a spiritual luxury available to only a few religious men and women. Spiritual direction is regarded today as an essential component of the life of faith by an ever-increasing number of lay faithful. It is something they need and are demanding with greater frequency – and rightly so! In addition, many express the need for guidance when faced with issues such as the New Age movement, the esoteric, the occult, and other spiritualistic trends that are present in today's society.

On the other hand, with the growing shortage of priests in many dioceses, the number of pastoral demands now being placed on priests has increased considerably. Nor can one expect a priest today to be an expert in dealing with every problematic issue that arises in today's society – much less have all the answers to these. While there is generally much 'good will' and 'mutual sympathy' on the part of both the Charismatic Renewal and priests generally, the need for closer collaboration remains. Ways must be found to meet this challenge, something that most certainly requires on everyone's part an even "greater *creativity* of charity," as called for by Pope John Paul II.[\[5\]](#)

We therefore urge all priests and seminarians to study and make every effort to become ever more proficient in the art of spiritual direction. Faith is an arduous journey in the best of times, but today more than ever the lay faithful require competent guides and mentors in the ways of the Spirit. Today's spiritual director must pay close attention to God's presence in the life of the directee and assist that person in integrating prayer and life, contemplation and action, faith and justice. Is this growing hunger for spiritual direction not one of the new "signs of the times"? Could it be a providential sign that we are being invited to re-think our ministerial priorities? We feel that herein lies a fresh opportunity to accompany and journey with those faithful who are searching, to help them discover the deepest treasure of their hearts, namely, the beauty and depths of the grace already given to them at baptism.

(3) The question of leadership

As the Charismatic Renewal prepares to “launch out into the deep” of a new millennium, it does well to re-examine the manner in which its leaders come to assume and discharge their duties. Many have observed that after thirty-five years, the Charismatic Renewal in Canada has lost some of its original vitality, that commitment to the Renewal has diminished, and that some leaders at the local prayer group level are getting tired after years of leading these groups. Might the prolonged burden of leadership at the local level not be one reason why the Renewal has lost some of its initial vitality, dynamism and capacity to attract the younger members of the ecclesial community?

To be sure, good leadership and governance are also among the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Romans (12:6-8), St. Paul reminds us that the office of leader is a vocation, a gift from the Holy Spirit. However, such a gift requires on-going formation in the skills of effective leadership. God works *with* nature and not *counter* to nature, as the age-old scholastic saying goes, which means that we are to cooperate with God’s gifts with all the human know-how and skills available to us. Thus a periodic review and evaluation of just how – and how well! – leadership in the Charismatic Renewal is actually assumed, maintained, exercised, and eventually passed on to a younger generation is of critical importance. Without such a continued re-assessment of its leadership, a movement can lose its initial vitality, élan, and contagious appeal. Such an honest review would re-examine the criteria by which leaders are chosen, the manner in which they exercise this responsibility, the extent to which they are afforded opportunity for on-going formation, the time-frame of their tenure in office, and the procedure or mechanism by which a smooth and timely transfer of leadership can take place within the movement.

A leader is a person whose main concern is effectiveness, i.e., whether the right things and directions have been established to encourage people to live up to their full potential. The leader understands that sustained long-term results cannot be achieved by ordering people to do things. Leadership involves acting in a manner in which people willingly follow. This requires the ability to plan, organize, co-ordinate, and guide. This is especially true today since a leader must deal with accelerated change, a diversity of cultures, high expectations on the part of the members, and an ever-continuing challenge regarding resources, both human and financial. Attention given to these basic human leadership skills does not jeopardize the gifts and spontaneous promptings of the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, the development of these leadership skills can only enhance and complement the workings of the Spirit.

A good Christian leader is not only a good manager, but also one who “bears witness” to the Gospel in and through his or her life. This is especially what gives a leader a compellingly attractive force. As Pope John Paul II insisted: “United to Christ, the ‘great prophet’ (Lk 7:16), and in the Spirit made *witnesses* of the Risen Christ, the lay faithful...are called to allow the newness and the power of the gospel to shine out everyday in their family and social life.”^[6] Immersed as they are in the world, which is their normal working milieu, the lay faithful are expected to manifest Christ through the witness of their life of faith, hope and charity. Indeed their ability to bear witness in the world is all the greater if their lives radiate personal holiness, since “holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.”^[7]

(4) The question of on-going formation

Not only is the formation of group leaders of particular importance, but it is becoming increasingly obvious, in our rapidly changing times, that on-going formation must also be provided for the rank-and-file membership of every ecclesial movement – indeed for all the lay faithful. In his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II went to great length to insist that the formation of the lay faithful be placed among the priorities of every diocese. “The more we are formed,” he said, “and the more we feel the need to pursue and deepen our formation, still more will we be formed and be rendered capable of forming others.”^[8] Chapter V of this apostolic exhortation is entirely devoted to the many interrelated aspects of what Pope John Paul calls a “*totally integrated formation*” of the faithful. The various components of such a formation, he explains, include the following: *spiritual* formation, *doctrinal* formation, the indispensable need to have a more exact knowledge of the Church’s *social teaching*, as well as the cultivation of *human values*.

We urge the members of the Charismatic Renewal and all the faithful to make greater use of the many scriptural and theological resources that are presently available. In today’s pluralistic world, where so many conflicting views and opinions hold sway, the need for on-going formation in theology is obvious. This is especially true in view of the way people interpret the Bible today. There are those who interpret Scripture in a fundamentalist, overly literalist manner, while others interpret Scripture in an overly subjective manner. To avoid this twin pitfall, a sound theological formation is necessary. Theology is “faith seeking understanding,” and therefore it seeks to probe and better understand our faith, to better express it and thus account for the hope that is in us (Cf. 1 Pet 3:15).

The Theology Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has recently created a Web site that offers a rich resource to assist in this on-going formation: <http://theology.cccb.ca/> Here you will find helpful group discussion models, meditations, and questions on all the major themes of Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Novo Millennium Ineunte*. In addition, there are many theological resources available that can help one achieve a more “integrated formation.” Special attention should also be given, the Pope reminds us, to the local culture in which we live and work: “The formation of Christians will take the greatest account of local human culture, which contributes to formation itself.”^[9] In this context, culture is seen as “the common good of every people, the expression of its dignity, liberty and creativity, and the testimony of its course through history.”^[10]

Conclusion

We repeat here, for the benefit of all Canadian Catholics, the concluding words of the first message we addressed to you in 1975 on the Charismatic Renewal:

Remain attentive to the Spirit. He alone can bring to completion, in ways no human hand can trace in advance, our common efforts to build tomorrow’s Church.

This pastoral exhortation is just as relevant today as when we first uttered these words some thirty-three years ago. It might be said that they take on an even greater urgency today as we launch out, together, on the uncertain waters of a new millennium.

Pentecost 2003

[1] Address of Pope John Paul II with the National Service Committee of the Italian "Renewal in the Spirit", Rome, April 4, 1998.

[2] Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

[3] CCCB, *New Hope in Christ*, 1983, no. 11.

[4] CCCB, *New Hope in Christ*, 1983, no. 26.

[5] John Paul II, *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, no. 50.

[6] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 14.

[7] *Ibid*, 16.

[8] *Ibid*, 63.

[9] *Idem*.

[10] *Christifideles Laici*, no. 44.