

Criticism Mounts

Charismatics: Too 'Spiritual'?

The startling growth of the Pentecostal movement in the U.S. has been accompanied in recent months by rather predictable assessments of continued growth and the "building of Christian community."

But some negative criticisms have emerged as well.

In the interim between the 1973 International Conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal which drew some 22,000 persons to the University of Notre Dame in early June and the International Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit slated for mid-August, three areas of uncertainty may get further exposure in public.

These are the relationship of Pentecostal or charismatic Christians to the social dimensions of the Gospels, the problem of inter-communion, and the "anti" established-Church image that some churchmen, including Pope Paul, ascribe to some neo-Pentecostal groups.

During a discussion on Pentecostalism at the May, 1973, joint meeting of the Roman Catholic and Protestant press associations in Bloomington, Minn., Father Kilian McDonnell, OSB, who heads the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Colledgeville, Minn., spoke to the question of social action.

He said charismatics in the U.S. for the most part still have to "integrate the social implications of the Gospel into the spiritual dimension." While stating that charismatics place great stress on building up the "spiritual body," the priest claimed there are many "individual social action efforts" among charismatics.

The editors of New Covenant magazine, the monthly journal of the Charismatic Renewal published in Ann Arbor, Mich., produced two consecutive issues in 1972 which dealt specifically with charismatic involvement — or lack of it — in social action movements.

The articles conceded that charismatics have projected involvement in social action to the future.

A survey by the Jesuit sociologist, Father Joseph Fichter, SJ, of Loyola University, New Orleans, found charismatics heavily involved in spiritual practices but not active in social programs or movements.

Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens of Belgium believes the Charismatic renewal has a major role to play in the overall task of Church renewal.

Specifically, Father Fichter said that of those surveyed only 19 per cent "have been or now are in the interracial movement," although 77 per cent approve the civil rights effort. He added that only 16 per cent actively supported the farm worker movement, 9 per cent have been involved in peace demonstrations, and 11 per cent worked at voter registration.

Dr. Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School, taking part in a study conference in Chicago that dealt with small Pentecostal communities, said he felt a lack of concern for important social issues was a "major drawback" of the Pentecostal groups.

A Swiss-born theologian and expert on Pentecostalism, Dr. Walter J. Hollenweger, who was secretary for evangelism of the World Council of Churches, said that while Pentecostalism has made "great gains," especially in the Catholic Church, there have been drawbacks.



Photo by Laurence E. Keefe

One of the drawbacks is that the movement can lead Christians to "concentrate on purely religious experiences and forget that God has given us the Holy Spirit also to do some very hard thinking on the political and economic problems of our time," he said.

With respect to intercommunion, the problem continues at Roman Catholic charismatic gatherings such as the conference at Notre Dame. Hundreds of Protestants came for the three-day conference, but were obliged to schedule separate services.

While permission can be granted by the local bishop, the request by officials of the Notre Dame conference was denied.

For those in the Charismatic Renewal who see the movement as a sign of the journey towards full visible unity of Christian Churches, the intercommunion situation has become a significant stumbling block. Many prayer communities include both Protestants and Catholics.

During the 1972 Notre Dame conference two Catholic priests, speaking during the closing prayer meeting and liturgy, "agonized" because "separated brethren" attending could not receive the Eucharist. They called for a "healing force" that would make intercommunion possible.

On the question of a separation of charismatic groups from the mainline Churches, Pope Paul is the latest to enunciate this fear.

He warned in a pre-Pentecost public audience that Catholics involved in charismatic groups should make sure they do not loosen ties with the hierarchy and official Church structures.

"We should reflect on whether certain groups in search of the Holy Spirit, that prefer to isolate themselves to avoid both the directing ministry of the Church and the anonymous crowd of unknown brothers, are on the right road."

The Pope's cautionary statement came just after Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens of Belgium told some 22,000 Catholics at this year's Notre Dame conference that he believes the Charismatic Renewal has a major role to play in the overall task of Church renewal.

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In New York last March, Cardinal Suenens told an Episcopal Church conference that the fruits of the modern Pentecostal expression far outweigh any dangers to the Churches. He discounted the likelihood that charismatics will move toward "anti-intellectualism" and "sectarianism."

But reservations about the alienation of charismatic groups have been heard in other quarters.

During a conference of Presbyterian charismatics in Ann Arbor, Mich., in March, concern was expressed by ministers that the charismatic body might become stronger than the Church itself.

On the other hand, Father Emmanuel Sullivan, SA, secretary to the Committee on Unity in Prayer for the British Council of Churches, said that Pentecostalism as he sees it leads to "a sense of community which is truly a manifestation of the Church, the Body of Christ."

The American Catholic priest said that the Pentecostal movement has established a firm foothold in the Catholic Church.

He concluded that whatever the reactions of the established Churches towards Pentecostalism, they will be forced to ask how the movement relates to the overall renewal of the Christian churches.

A Lutheran charismatic pastor, the Rev. Don Pfothenauer who spoke during the joint Catholic-Protestant press convention in Minnesota last May, acknowledged that the charismatic renewal has caused "disturbance" and "division" in the Churches to some extent.

But he said he believed that ultimately the Pentecostal movement will equip the church with "the spiritual strength it needs to handle today's crises and problems."

Father Harold Cohen, SJ, a chaplain at Loyola University, New Orleans, and one of the major speakers at the Notre Dame charismatic conference this year, seemed to contradict the implication that charismatics could separate from the established churches.

In fact, he appealed for greater support of the charismatic renewal from Church leaders and coupled his own pledge of loyalty to Pope Paul with a vow to remove himself from the charismatic renewal if the Church ruled against it.

"We should reflect on whether certain groups in search of the Holy Spirit, that prefer to isolate themselves . . . are on the right road." — Pope Paul VI

Whatever the problems that beset the Pentecostal or charismatic renewal these days, long-time observers like Father McDonnell and Dr. Hollenweger believe it's too early to judge the true impact of the movement.

For the most part, according to Dr. Hollenweger, a critical analysis of the charismatic experience is still lacking. He said most theological books written on the subject are either unqualifiedly optimistic or reject what the author does not understand.

Father McDonnell said the Churches must adapt their theological scope to include the charismatic experience, and that those in the charismatic renewal must seek to explain their experiences meaningfully within the context of the established Churches.