

PENTECOSTALISM: EVALUATING A PHENOMENON

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INTRODUCTION

Before entering on the formal presentation, I think it will be useful to first clarify some possible sources of misunderstanding.

The immediate focus of this study is Pentecostalism. It is not directly concerned with the persons who call themselves Pentecostals or, as some prefer, Charismatics.

Moreover, the purpose here is to make an evaluation. It is not to impart information about Pentecostalism, since such information is fairly presumed, with all the literature by and about the movement and, for many people, either personal experience or direct observation of the movement in action.

Finally, though I seldom do this when speaking, in this case it may be useful to give a brief run-down of "references" about the speaker's own qualifications in talking on the subject.

My professional work is teaching Comparative Religion. A phenomenon like Pentecostalism, I know, has for years been one of the characteristic features in other religious cultures, and not only in Protestantism or Roman Catholicism; in fact, not only in Christianity.

Since the first stirrings of Pentecostalism in Catholic circles, I have been asked to give some appraisal of it to leaders in the Church who sought counsel on the question, e.g., Bishop Zaleski as chairman of the American Bishops Doctrinal Commission and recently the Jesuit Provincial of the Southern Province, in a three-day private conference in New Orleans.

For several years I have been counseling persons dedicated to Pentecostalism, mainly priests, religious, and seminarians. And on Palm Sunday of this year I preached at the First Solemn Mass of a priest who is deeply involved in the movement.

My plan for today's talk is to cover three areas of the subject, at uneven length, namely:

1. The Historical Background of the Pentecostal Movement, up to the present.
2. What are the principal elements of Pentecostalism, as viewed by Roman Catholics dedicated to the movement?
3. An Evaluation in the form of a Critical Analysis of Pentecostalism as a Phenomenon which has developed an Ideology.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The essentials of the Pentecostalism we know today began with the Reformation in the sixteenth century as a complement to Biblicism. The two together have formed an inseparable duality in historic Protestantism.

Where the Bible was canonized in the phrase, *Sola Scriptura*, as the sole repository of divine revelation; the indwelling Holy Spirit in the heart of every believer was invoked as the only criterion for interpreting the Scriptures or even for recognizing their authenticity. Thus *Solo Spiritu* became the basic principle of direction in the life of a Christian, in place of the professedly divine guidance by the Spirit residing in the papacy and the Catholic hierarchy.

Pentecostalism turned sectarian in the nineteenth century when groups like the Irvingites, Shakers, and Mormons broke away from their parent bodies over what they said was indifference in the established Protestant churches to external manifestations of the presence in converted believers of the Holy Spirit.

What gave these sectarian groups theological rootage was the parallel rise of the Holiness movement among Methodists. Experience of conversion and an awareness of the Spirit had always been prominent in Wesleyan thought. With the advent of biblical criticism and the solvent of rationalism, many followers of Wesley fall back almost exclusively on personal experience as a sign of God's saving presence.

When some of these Holiness groups affiliated with the Irvingites and their counterparts, modern Pentecostalism was born.

Some would date the beginning with 1900, but more accurately, from 1900 on the Pentecostal movement began its denominational period. One after another, new congregations were formed or old ones changed to become Pentecostal in principle and policy. By 1971 some 200 distinct denominations in America qualified as Pentecostals. While total membership is uncertain, ten million in the United States is not too high a figure. Outside North America, the largest contingent is in South America, where Pentecostal missionaries from the States have successfully evangelized in every country below the Rio Grande. Brazil alone has four million, of whom 1,800,000 are communicants, mainly converts who were originally baptized Catholics.

The most recent development in Pentecostalism was the ecumenical collaboration with Catholic groups in the United States, at first cautious, then bolder and now becoming a pattern that gave rise to what some call "Catholic Pentecostalism", but others prefer to say is "The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church."

From this point on, my concern will be uniquely with this latest development, seen through the eyes of its dedicated followers and described by men and women who believe they are, and wish to remain,

loyal Catholics but honestly believe that a new dimension should be added to the concept of Catholicism before it was touched by the present outpouring of the Pentecostal grace of the Spirit.

MAIN ELEMENTS OF PENTECOSTALISM

Although American Catholic involvement in the Pentecostal movement is hardly five years old, a growing body of literature is accumulating. Most of it is still descriptive or historical, but more than a score of monographs and half a dozen books are frankly theological. Their authors seriously try to come to grips with what they call the Charismatic Renewal, and their studies are couched in formal, even technical language.

There is no doubt that those who are professed Catholics, and at the same time, committed to Pentecostalism, want to span both shores. As they view the situation, it should be seen from two perspectives:

- 1) from the standpoint of Pentecostalism, defining what are its essential features; and
- 2) from the side of Catholicism, distinguishing what is different about Pentecostalism today, compared with other historical types of the same movement in former times.

Essentials of Pentecostalism

Writers of a Catholic persuasion isolate certain elements of Pentecostalism and identify them as trans-confessional. They are simply characteristic of this aspect of Christianity wherever it is occurs, whether among Catholics or Protestants or, in fact, whether before the Reformation or since.

1. The primary postulate also gives Pentecostalism its name. Just as on the first Pentecost in Jerusalem there was an extraordinary descent of the Holy Spirit and a marvelous effusion of spiritual gifts, so at different ages in the Church's history a similar phenomenon occurs.

It is generally occasioned by a grave crisis or need in the Church. God raises certain charismatic persons to visit them with special graces and make them the heralds of His mission to the world. Such

were Benedict and Bruno, Francis and Dominic, Ignatius and Teresa of Avila.

The present age is such a period, certainly of grave crisis in Christianity, during which the Holy Spirit has decided to enter history in a miraculous way, to raise up once again the leaders of renewal for the Church and, through the Church, for all mankind.

2. No less than on Pentecost Sunday, so now the descent of the Spirit becomes palpably perceptible. This perceptibility shows itself especially in three ways:

a) In a personally felt experience of the Spirit's presence in the one who receives Him. The qualities of this coming are variously described; but they cover one or more of the following internal experiences: deep-felt peace of soul, joyousness of heart, shedding of worry and anxiety, strong conviction of belief, devotion to prayer, tranquility of emotions, sense of spiritual well-being, an ardent piety, and, in general, a feeling of intimacy with the divine which, it is said, had never or only for sporadic moments been experienced before.

b) Along with the internal phenomena, which themselves partake of the preternatural, are external manifestations that can be witnessed by others. Such are speaking in strange tongues, the gift of prophecy, the power of healing, and, it would seem, all the gamut of charismata enumerated in the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St. Paul.

c) Capping the two sets of phenomena, of internal experience and external manifestations, is the inspiration given by the Spirit to communicate these gifts to others. Normally a Spirit-filled person is the channel of this communication; he becomes a messenger of the Spirit to others and his zeal to act in this missionary role is part of the change that the divine visitation effects in him.

3. The basic condition required to receive the charismatic outpouring is openness of faith. The only fundamental obstacle is diffidence or distrust of the Spirit to product today what He had done in ages past.

Distinctive Features

If the foregoing are typical of Pentecostalism in every critical period of Christianity and the common heritage in Protestant as well as Catholic experience, certain features are typical of Pentecostalism today.

1. Present-day charismatic experience is far wider than ever before. Where in former days only certain few people received the Pentecostal outpouring, it is now conferred on thousands. And the conferral has only started. It is nothing less than a deluge of preternatural visitation.

2. Consistent with the large numbers is the fact that Pentecostalism, otherwise than ever before, affects the lettered and unlettered, those obviously pursuing holiness and the most ordinary people. Indeed, one of the truly remarkable facts is that even quite unholy persons may now suddenly receive the Spirit, provided they open their hearts to Him in docile confidence and faith.

3. Also, unlike in previous times, this is a movement. It is not just a sporadic experience but a veritable dawn of a new era of the Spirit; such as Christianity had never known in ages past. It is destined, so it seems, to sweep whole countries and cultures, and promises to effect changes in so-called institutional Christianity - - not less dramatic than occurred in Jerusalem when Peter preached his first sermon in response to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

4. As might be expected, the Spirit is now to affect not only individuals or scattered groups here and there. His charismatic effusion will remake Christian society. His gifts are to recreate and, where needed, create new communities of believers, bound together by the powerful ties of a common religious experience and sustained by such solidarity as only a mutually shared contact with the divine can produce.

5. While there had been Pentecostal experiences in every stage of Christian history, generally they were characterized by public phenomena or at least their external manifestations were highlighted. Modern Pentecostalism includes these phenomena, indeed, but the stress is on the internal gifts received by the people. Their deep inside conviction of mind and

joy of heart are paramount. These are, of course, no less phenomenal than the physical gifts of tongues or prophecy or healing of disease. They, too, partake of the miraculous. But they are the interior gifts from the Spirit in the spirit, and as such, are the main focus of Pentecostalism in today's world of doubt and desperation.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

So far I have given what might be called an overview of Pentecostalism, with emphasis on that form which professed Catholics have not only adopted but which their leaders, priests, religious and the laity, are defining and defending in a spate of books and periodicals.

I have witnessed the phenomena they describe, read the literature they have written, spent hours in conference and consultation with those deeply committed to the movement, conferred at length with specialists in the psychological sciences who dealt professionally with "Catholic Pentecostals", and I have carefully watched the consequences of the movement for several years. My growing conclusion is that Pentecostalism in the Catholic Church is symptomatic of some grave needs among the faithful that should be met soon and by all affective means at our disposal. But I also think that Pentecostalism as an ideology is not the answer to these needs. In fact, it may be a serious obstacle, even a threat, to the authentic renewal in the Spirit inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council.

My reasons for this twofold judgment naturally suggest two sets of appraisal: one for considering Pentecostalism symptomatic and the other for believing it does not meet the felt needs of the Church today.

Pentecostalism As Symptomatic

It is not surprising that a phenomenon like Pentecostalism should have risen to the surface in Catholic circles just at this time. The Church's history has seen similar, if less widely publicized, phenomena before.

1. The widespread confusion in theology has simmered down to the faithful and created in the minds of many uncertainty about even such

fundamentals as God's existence, the divinity of Christ, and the Real Presence.

Confusion seeks certitude, and certitude is sought in contact with God. When this contact is fostered and sustained by group prayer and joint witness to the ancient faith - - it answers to a deep-felt human need. Pentecostalism in its group prayer situations tries to respond to this often desperate need.

2. Among the critical causes of confusion, the Church's authority is challenged and in some quarters openly derided. This creates the corresponding need for some base of religious security - - which Pentecostalism offers to give in the interior peace born of union with the Spirit.

3. Due to many factors, many not defensible, practices of piety and devotion - - from regular Novenas, to statues, to rosaries and religious articles - - have been dropped or phased out of use in the lives of thousands of the faithful. Pentecostalism serves to fill the devotional vacuum in a way that startles those who have, mistakenly, come to identify Christianity with theological cerebration or the bare minimum of external piety.

4. Ours is in a growing measure a prayerless culture. This has made inroads in Catholicism. It is a commentary on our age that millions have substituted work for prayer; and now the balance needs to be redressed - - with Pentecostalism offering one means of restoring the spirit of prayer.

5. In the same way, religion for too many had become listless routine, and prayer a lip-service or almost vacuous attendance at the Liturgy. Religion as experience, knowing God and not only about Him; feeling His presence in one's innermost being - - was thought either exotic, or psychotic, or presumptuous. Pentecostalism promises to give what Christians in our dehumanized Western society so strongly crave - - intimacy with the Divine.

All of this, and more, is part of the background which helps explain why such a movement as the Charismatic came into being. Its existence is both symptomatic and imperative that something be done - - and done well - - to satisfy the desire of millions of Christians for peace of mind, security of faith,

devotion in prayer, and a felt realization of union with God.

Pentecostalism As Mistaken Ideology

The question that still remains, however, is whether the Pentecostal movement is a valid answer to these recognized needs. Notice I do not say that individuals who have entered the movement cannot find many of their spiritual needs satisfied. Nor am I saying that group prayer is not helpful for many people; nor, least of all, that the Holy Spirit has been inactive during these trying times to confer precisely an abundance of His seven- fold gifts on those who humbly and in faith invoke His sanctifying name.

What I must affirm is that Pentecostalism is not a mere movement; it is, as the ending "ism" indicates, an ideology. And as such it is creating more problems objectively than it solves subjectively. In other words, even when it gives symptomatic relief to some people, it produces a rash of new, and graver, issues touching on the Catholic faith and its authentic expression by the faithful.

1 The fundamental problem it creates is the absolute conviction of devoted Pentecostals that they have actually received a charismatic visitation of the Holy Spirit.

I am not here referring to such external phenomena as the gift of tongues, but of the deeply inward certitude that a person has been the object of a preternatural infusion, with stress on the infusion of preternatural insight, i.e., in the cognitive order.

This is an astounding assertion, and the only thing un- remarkable about it is that so many Pentecostals are now firmly convinced they have been so enlightened.

Their books and monographs, lectures and testimonials simply assume to be incontestable - - and beyond refutation - - that they have been specially illumined by a charism which, they say, is available to others who are equally disposed to receive it.

But repeated affirmation is not enough, and even the strongest subjective conviction is not proof - -

where a person claims to have been the recipient of such extraordinary gifts - - notably of spiritual knowledge - - as God conferred in apostolic times or gave to His great mystics in different times.

The dilemma this raises can be easily stated:

- Either the Pentecostal experience really confers preternatural insight (at least among it's leaders)
- Or the experience is quite natural, while certainly allowing for the normal operations of divine grace.

Everything which the Pentecostal leadership says suggests that they consider the experience - - and I quote their terms - - "preternatural, special, mystical, charismatic, extraordinary".

2. It is irrelevant to discourse about the charismata in the New Testament, or theologies about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. No believing Christian denies either the charisms or the gifts. The question at stake is not of faith, but of fact.

Are the so-called charismata truly charismatic? If they are, then we stand in the presence of a cosmic miracle, more stupendous in proportion - -by reason of sheer numbers - - than anything the Church has seen, I would say, even in apostolic times.

But if the experiences are not authentically charismatic, then, again, we stand in the presence of a growing multitude of persons who believe themselves charismatically led by the Holy Spirit. They will make drastic decisions, institute revolutionary changes, or act in a host of other ways - - firmly convinced they are responding to a special divine impulse whereas in reality they are acting in response to quite ordinary, and certainly less infallible, motions of the human spirit.

3. At this point we could begin a completely separate analysis, namely, of the accumulating evidence that the impulses which the Pentecostal leaders consider charismatic are suspiciously very human. Their humanity, to use a mild word, is becoming increasingly clear from the attitudes being assumed toward established principles and practices in Catholicism.

Logically, it may be inferred, the Holy Spirit would not contradict Himself. We expect Him to support what Catholic Christianity believes is the fruit of His abiding presence in the Church of which He is the animating principle of ecclesiastical life.

What do we find? In the published statements, and therefore not the casual remarks of those who are guiding the destiny of the Pentecostal movement among Catholics, are too many disconcerting positions to be lightly dismissed by anyone who wants to make an objective appraisal of what is happening.

I limit myself to only a few crucial issues, each of which I am sure, will soon have a cluster of consequences in the practical order:

a) **The Papacy** If there is one doctrine of Catholic Christianity that is challenged today it is the Roman Primacy. Yet in hundreds of pages of professional writing about the charismatic gifts, we find a studied silence - - no doubt to avoid offense to other Pentecostals - - about the papacy; and a corresponding silence about a more loyal attachment to the Holy See.

It is painful to record but should be said that the pioneer of American Pentecostalism among Catholics and its prolific defender (Kevin Ranaghan) was among the first to publicly take issue with Pope Paul VI on *Humanae Vitae*.

b) **The Priesthood and Episcopate** Running as a thread through apologists for Catholic Pentecostalism is an almost instinctive contraposition of, and I quote, "charismatic" and "hierarchical", or "spiritual" and "institutional".

While some commentators state the dual aspects in the Church and even stress the importance of harmony between the two, others have begun to opt for a theological position quite at variance with historic Catholicism. They suggest that in the New Testament there was essentially only one sacrament for conferring the gifts of the Spirit. Baptism gave a Christian all the essentials of what later on the "institutional church" developed into separate functions, namely the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate [1].

c) **Catholic Apostolate** The heaviest artillery of Pentecostals in the Catholic camp is leveled at the "ineffectual, irrelevant, and dispirited" form of Christianity prevalent in the Church.

Accordingly, under the impulse of the Spirit, radical changes are demanded in the Church's apostolate. Old forms of trying to reach the people, especially the young, should be abandoned. The applies particularly to Catholic education. "In spite of the immense expenditure of money and human effort being put into parochial schools", Pentecostals are saying, "how often do we not hear the complaint that a pitifully small proportion of the students emerge as deeply convinced and committed Christians? We can therefore well use some new life in the Church." [2] Concretely this means to enter other kinds of work for the faithful, and not retain Catholic parochial schools - - as more than one teaching order, influenced by Pentecostalism, has already decided to carry into effect.

d) **The New Spirituality** Given the posture of Pentecostalism as a phenomenal downpour of charismatic grace, it is only natural that the human contribution to the divine effusion is minimized. Actually defendants of the movement are careful to explain that a new kind of spirituality was born with Pentecostalism.

As heretofore taught, persons aspiring to sanctity were told that recollection had to be worked at and cultivated. It meant painstaking effort to keep oneself in the presence of God and consciously fostering, perhaps through years of practice, prayerful awareness of God. The charismatic movement is actually a discovery that all of this propaedeutics is unnecessary. In view of its importance, it is worth quoting the new spiritual doctrine in full:

There is a subtle but very significant difference between what the presence of God means in the spiritual doctrine that has long been usual in novitiates, seminaries, and the like, and what it means for those who have shared the Pentecostal experience.

The difference can be put bluntly in the following terms: the former put the accent on the *practice*, whereas the latter put it on the *presence*. That is to

say, the former regard the constant awareness of God's presence as a goal to be striven for, but difficult to attain; hence they exert themselves in recalling over and over that God is here, and in frequently renewing their intention to turn their thoughts to him.

The latter, on the contrary, seem to start with the experiential awareness of God's presence as the root which enlivens and gives its characteristic notes to all their prayer, love and spirituality. [3]

It is not too much to call this "instant mysticism". And if some charismatics do not succeed as well (or as soon) as others in this sudden experience of God which dispenses with the laborious process of cultivating recollection, it must be put down to a lack of sufficient docility to the Spirit or, more simply, to the fact that the Holy Spirit remains master of His gifts and breathes when (and where) He wills.

But the essential dictum stands: those who charismatically experience God, and they are now numbered in thousands, came by the phenomenon without having to go through the hard school of mental and ascetical discipline still taught by an outmoded spirituality.

(e) **Aggressive Defensiveness** Having postulated what they call the "Pentecostal Spirituality", its proponents defend it not only against present-day critics of such "cheap grace", but they anticipate unspoken objections from the masters of mystical theology. Among their silent critics, whom they criticize, is St. John of the Cross.

As elsewhere, so here is offered a contraposition, the classical doctrine on the charisms (or extraordinary gifts of the Spirit) and the new doctrine of Pentecostalism. Again direct quotation will bring out the full confrontation:

On the practical level, the classical doctrine on the charisms has been formed chiefly by St. John of the Cross.

The stand that he takes is predominantly negative; i.e., a warning against the harm that comes from rejoicing excessively in the possession of such gifts. The one who does so, he says, leaves himself open

to deception, either by the devil or by his own imagination; in relying on these charisms, he loses some of the merit of faith; and finally, he is tempted to vainglory.

Similarly when St. John discusses supernatural communications that come by way of visions or words, particularly those that are perceived by the imagination or the bodily senses, he is mainly concerned to warn against the dangers of deception and excessive attachment. He condemns the practice of seeking to obtain information from God through persons favored with such communications. Even when God answers the queries that are thus addressed to Him, He does so out of condescension for our weakness, and not because He is pleased to be thus questioned.

If there is anywhere that Pentecostal spirituality seems to conflict with the classical it is here. [4]

Then follow pages of a strong defense of the new positive approach to charismatic experience, admitting that where conflict exists between this and the teaching of such mystics as John of the Cross, the main reason is obvious. Men like John and women like Teresa of Avila lived in a former age, when charisms were rare and then given only to individuals. In our age they are literally an inundation and their recipients are countless multitudes.

(f) **Religious Communities** Not surprisingly, the Pentecostal movement has made some of its deepest effects on religious communities, of men, but especially of women.

All problems facing the Church at large affected the lives of those who, by prior commitment, dedicated themselves to the pursuit of holiness.

When the charismatic experience offered them release from anxiety and the hope of a strong sense of God's presence - - in spite of the turmoil all around - - religious took to the movement on a scale that no one actually knows. But all estimates indicate that the number is large.

We are still on our final analysis and our approach has been to point up the ideology of Pentecostal

leadership, to see whether (and if) it is at variance with historic Catholicism.

A recently, privately-bound study of religious who took to Pentecostalism reveals many things about convents and cloisters that is common knowledge among the initiated but still unknown among the faithful at large.

Thematic to this study is the firm belief that the *betenore* of religious life is structure and institutionalism; that openness to the Spirit along Pentecostal lines gives best promise for religious in the future. A few sample statements indicate the general tenor:

We must remember that in order to choose religious life, you must be a misfit.

The danger is that a sacred institution tends to isolate man so he can stand back and deal with God. The institution tends to come between man and God.

Religious life is a human institution which God merely tolerates. God's good pleasure is the one thing necessary, and God's good pleasure is man's total openness. It is in this openness that we find out true identity, but this takes courage.

Total openness takes faith. Awareness of our true identity implies a life of faith. But faith implies doubt. You can't have faith without doubt. Doubt and faith are two sides of the same thing. We don't pray right because we evade doubt. And we evade it by regularity and by activism. It is in these two ways . . . by which we justify the self-perpetuation of our institutions. [5]

While other factors have also been operative, it was sentiments like these that contributed to the growing tide in some communities with impatience at the slowness of the institutional Church to up-date religious life, make it truly open to the Spirit, and experience the rich depth of internal peace and joy that seemed to be so lacking in "structured community routine".

It is not a coincidence that some spokesman for the charismatic approach to a life of the evangelical counsels have been most critical of such symbols of

institutionalism as the Sacred Congregation for Religious. Nor is it surprising that some who feel that Rome is archaic or out of touch with the times should also be most enthusiastic about Pentecostalism.

EPILOGUE

There are those who say we should just allow the Pentecostal movement to go on and then see what happens. But that is not in the best tradition of Christian prudence. If, as I personally believe, latter-day Pentecostalism is in the same essential stream with Gnosticism, Montanism, and Illuminism, we do not pass moral judgment on people but prudential judgment on an ideology if we say all that I have said in this lecture.

There are grave needs in the Church today - - of which the gravest is the urgent recovery of prayer across the spectrum of Catholic living - - among bishops, priests, religious and the laity.

But if prayer and the experience of God's presence are so urgently needed, we must use the means that centuries of Christian wisdom have shown are securely effective to satisfy this need. Pentecostalism is not one of these means.

REFERENCES

1. Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, *Catholic Pentecostals*, New York; Paulist Press, 1969, p. 128. In context, the authors apply all the classic passages in St. Paul as conferring no special sacramental grace of orders. Their line of arguments the same as that of writers like Hans Kung, who claim that the apostolic Church did not recognize a unique sacrament; deriving from Christ's ordination of the Apostles at the Last Supper, which confers the priestly powers, including the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.
2. Edward D. O'Connor, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1971, p. 180.
3. O'Connor, p. 197.
4. O'Connor, pp. 210-211
5. "Hope '69 In Immediate Retrospect", part III, p. 3.