

# A Work In Progress

*The leader of a prominent renewal community reflects on the mistakes of the past—and on renewed vision for the future.*

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by Ralph Martin

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Over the past year, the charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church has been celebrating its 25th anniversary. From small beginnings in Pittsburgh in 1967, it is now estimated that some sixty million Catholics throughout the world have been touched by the renewal.

At the same time, in the past couple years a number of the covenant communities that developed from the Catholic charismatic renewal, and that have been instrumental in its development through their conferences and publications, have been going through a time of purification and change. Some of this has come at the initiative of the communities themselves; some has come at the initiative of church authorities.

For example, about a year ago the Catholic Archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, Theodore McCarrick, indicated through various statements that he could not approve of the Catholic covenant community that was

headquartered there as it was then constituted. He established a new community in his archdiocese featuring elected leadership, financial accountability, a more moderate approach to the exercise of pastoral authority, greater openness to the wider church, and freedom for community members to seek advice and counsel from whomever they wish.

Earlier, Bishop Albert Ottenweller of Steubenville, Ohio, had announced the results of an evaluation he had conducted of the covenant community located in his diocese. While he found much that was good, he said, he also felt there needed to be more communication with the bishop, correction of elitist attitudes, a more open method of choosing leaders, better balance in the practice of obedience and submission, greater openness to the wider church, and less control exercised over members' lives.

The community in which I have been a leader for many years, The Word of God in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has recently come to the end of a period of evaluation and change that has attempted to deal with many of these same issues. In sharing the lessons we are learning, I would like to make clear that I am speaking only for our own community, and am not implying that these same problems have appeared in all covenant communities in the same way.



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## Safeguarding God's Work

The Word of God community began in a genuine encounter with God in the power of the Holy Spirit. We wanted to give our whole lives to him and be fruitful in his service. And, to a large extent, this is what happened. But over the years our fundamental trust in God and the power of the Holy Spirit began to be "supplemented" by human efforts to "safeguard" the work of the Lord, to "ensure that it didn't get off the track." A subtle shift occurred: from exalting Christ to exalting "our way of life," "our teaching," "our approach," "our community." A well-intended desire to "protect the Lord's work" led to a dynamic of excessive control, and to a proliferation of required practices and policies.

Paul's descriptions of the Galatians began to sound all too familiar:

You senseless Galatians! Who has cast a spell over you—you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was displayed to view upon his cross? I want to learn only one thing from you: how did you receive the Spirit? Was it through observance of the law or through faith in what you heard? How could you be so stupid? After beginning in the Spirit, are you now to end in the flesh? Have you had such remarkable experiences all to no purpose—if indeed they were to no purpose? Is it because you observe the law or because you have faith in what you heard that God lavishes the Spirit on you and works wonders in your midst? (Gal.3:1-5).

This subtle shift—from trusting in Christ to trusting in our own efforts—expressed itself in many different ways. It led to an excessive focus on externals. In an attempt to build a comprehensive Christian environment, we spelled out "The Christian Approach" to numerous areas of life. Rather than simply teach scriptural principles and then point people to Christ and the Holy Spirit for specific ways of applying them in their own lives, we prescribed in detail how everyone should do everything.

For example, rather than simply present what the Bible teaches about modesty, we listed what types of clothing were and were not acceptable (at one teaching session, we even showed slides!). Rather than simply teach about male and female roles and identity, we specified what household chores men could and could not do: barbecuing hamburgers was okay; washing dishes and changing diapers were not. Rather than simply teach about the need to govern media input into our home, we made "recommendations" about exactly how many hours people should watch television and read magazines each week. And so on.

The problems we were addressing were real problems. And the recommendations and requirements we established often had real merit. But the cumulative effect was to create a burden too heavy for many people to carry, and to an atmosphere of judgmentalism. Measuring others according to their conformity to external standards overshadowed the fundamental love and mercy we are to show toward one another.

Members of the community felt that they dared not be open in their sharing groups lest they be condemned for not successfully following all the prescribed practices. The result was a heavy burden of stress, fear, and guilt.

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## Exaggerated Self-Importance

We became overly focused on our own place in God's plan, exaggerating our own importance and devaluing the contributions of others. Building covenant communities, we thought, was clearly the most important work to be done in the kingdom of God. We developed a condescending attitude towards "merely" preaching the gospel when it did not lead to the establishment of communities. This tended to make us only want to be involved in what could directly contribute to "our work."

Along with this went an emphasis on the "weakness" of other groups and organizations, and a mag-

nification of the dangers "out there" in the wider church and world—dangers from which only covenant communities could provide protection. We felt it was obvious that if someone had the opportunity to join a covenant community, they should do so. If they were in a covenant community and were thinking of leaving, they were obviously making a serious mistake.

This attitude was heightened by an overly exalted view of the community covenant itself. In practice, many people, at least unconsciously, placed it on the same level as the marriage covenant that joins husband and wife together—or even on the same level as the fundamental Christian covenant that brings us into relationship with God. Fear and guilt about leaving the community was further compounded by the requirement that members had to have the approval of community leaders in order to leave "in good order." Needless to say, it was very difficult for people to come up with a reason for leaving the community that the leadership would approve.

## Submission and Unity

Our approach to leadership made it more likely that these imbalances and abuses would occur. In the name of ensuring continuity and fostering "spiritual fatherhood," we made it almost impossible to change top leadership. Accountability to higher authority—while provided for "on paper"—never functioned properly, especially in an ecumenical community over which there was no single church authority. Accountability to the members of the community was similarly lacking.

In an effort to correct for the stress on independence and individualism so prevalent in contemporary society, we placed strong emphasis on authority and submission. Pastoral leaders took on too much responsibility for giving personal direction to individuals. By the same token, individuals gave

over too much responsibility to their pastoral leaders. This led to stress and burnout among leaders, and to unhealthy passivity and dependency among members.

We put great stress on submitting to community norms for the sake of unity, without acknowledging that loyalty to Christ must supersede loyalty to community leaders. Along with this came extensive teaching on secrecy and confidentiality, which tended to stifle the kind of legitimate disagreement and open discussion that might have prevented some of the imbalances.

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## Off the Record

Many of these harmful dynamics could never be discovered simply by reading our official documents. They operated in an unofficial, "off-the-record" manner, rooted in sinful human nature and overly controlling leadership dynamics.

Bishop Sam Jacobs, Catholic Bishop of Alexandria, Louisiana, and chairman of the National Service Committee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, summed up the situation well. "Structures and organizations were developed in an attempt to build the 'perfect community,' to create the 'perfect unity' between brothers and sisters, something that the broader church has not been able to accomplish in 2000 years," he said. "Policies and constitutions were imposed on people from the top by an elect group of leaders. Everything was tightly controlled for fear that it would not hold together of itself. Uniformity was demanded; right external practices were mandated; rules of speech and confidentiality were taught and imposed; individual initiatives were discouraged unless approved by the leadership; excesses and imbalances in teachings on the roles of men and women, on the community, on the covenant were given. There was a lack of accountability with the community and to the church ... Father, forgive us."



## Profound Changes

The past year has seen some profound changes in the way our community operates. We have formally retracted the teaching in the areas of authority, men's and women's roles, and daily Christian living, that was problematic. We have disavowed pastoral leaders' directive authority in the personal lives of individuals. We have restructured our leadership, and recently concluded our first election of a community council and a leadership team—which, for the first time, includes women as well as men. We have opened our life to the input and authority of appropriate church officials.

For example, although we are a thoroughly ecumenical community, many of our members are Catholic. The local Catholic Bishop, Kenneth Povish, of Lansing, Michigan, has been very encouraging regarding the changes that our community is making. Here is how he described the condition we had gotten ourselves into: "It was unbelievably legalistic. The number of documents they had, and the number of orders they issued, was just phenomenal. Life was becoming unbearable." Bishop Povish has since stated that he is "impressed" with the changes that The Word of God is making in response to these problems, and that he considers the new directions "healthy," leading the community into "the mainstream of the church."

It has been humbling and embarrassing to see the ways we have gotten off the track and the ways in which we have grieved the Lord and our brothers and sisters in Christ. The past few years have been a time for soul-searching, and even for grief. But they have also been a time for gratitude that the Lord loved us enough not to leave us mired in our problems. We know that God's judgment and purification always proceed from his love. We are profoundly grateful that the Lord is correcting what needs to be corrected so we can participate with him in the wonderful things he has in store for us in the days ahead.

## Back to the Future

Just what *does* the Lord have in store for us?

It would be premature for us to announce our "Grand Vision" for what God is calling us to. We are still in a time of adjustment and transition. No doubt there are many things from our past that the Lord wants us to leave behind. No doubt he wishes to bring us some new things. But I believe the Lord will also want to continue much of what he has done with us in the past. Thus, in looking ahead, I often find myself looking back to our roots.

More than anything, I find myself coming back to the simple, basic fact that we have encountered God. I think the Lord's main priority for us in the future is to deepen and unfold and renew that encounter with him.

In the midst of trouble and difficulty, we can forget how great God is and what a small

part we play in his work. God is a lot bigger than we are. He knows a lot better than we do what is going on. He is a lot more capable than we are of carrying out his plan successfully. Because we are so limited in our perceptions, our senses, and our thinking, we try to narrow God down to fit what we can see and think. We do it with the works of God. We do it with the word of God. Now I sense the Lord saying, "You've done it again. You've narrowed down my work and my plan so you can understand it better and control it better. But you've gotten too narrow. You need to open up again to allow for my sovereignty."

## Open to the Spirit

In one sense, the purpose of our being together is very simple. The purpose is to know, love, and serve God in this life and to be happy with him in the next. The purpose is to know and love Jesus, and to make him known and loved. Life on this earth is very short, and the whole purpose of it is that Jesus may be revealed to every human being, so that every human being can have an opportunity for repentance and faith.

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This might not sound different than what any church or group would say—it's just basic Christianity. But that is precisely the point! We need to be careful, when we define ourselves, not to feel a need to multiply "distinctives" in order to set ourselves apart from others. Where Christianity is flourishing in the world today is where Christians are getting back to the basics—to preaching redemption in Christ. Where the gospel is being preached, the people of God are thriving.

It is the Holy Spirit who makes it happen, who comes to us so we can know Jesus, who empowers us so we can go out to others. Historically, one of the reasons why our community is together is because at the beginning of this century Jesus started pouring out his Holy Spirit in a way that has not been experienced for generations. Not since the early days of the church have we experienced what we are experiencing in this century, in terms of the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit of God.

In country after country there is phenomenal growth in churches and groups that are open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, that do not place limits on what the Spirit can do and how he can do it. Churches and groups that are not open to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit often experience decline. We need to remember Paul's words: "After beginning in the Spirit, are you now to end in the flesh?" Openness to the full working of the Spirit will be crucial to our future, just as it was to our past.

## Love of the Brethren

Another thing that comes to mind as I think about what God has done with us is that he had us encounter not just him, but also each other. He has had us encounter each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have found each other. We have encountered God together, and we have encountered each other.

I am not talking about this in an exclusive way. This applies to many people and groups. The Lord loves "the love of the brethren." We experience it

imperfectly and incompletely. Our own sin and weakness get in the way. But it is still part of our call, part of what we experience, part of what the Lord is doing with us.

Moreover, he has done it irrespective of our church boundaries. We found each other as members of different churches, as bearers of different traditions in Christian history. But we have recognized that what we have in common is far greater than what separates us. We have God in common. We have the blood of Jesus in common. We have the

Holy Spirit in common. There is a profound ecumenical dimension to our identity. We didn't dream it up. We didn't try to make it happen. When we found each other, we found ourselves heirs to the divisions in Christianity. But God showed us that what we had in common gave us the basis of a relationship that can flourish despite our differences. The differences are real, and they are significant.

But they are not as significant as having the Trinity in common.

## Commitment Without Cages

As we have tried to come together in ways that are pleasing to the Lord, we've learned some important things about commitment, about unity, about faithfulness and loyalty in relationships. We have overdone some of it. We have so emphasized commitment that we have ended up blocking the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. We have tried to put in concrete something that is very precious, in order to safeguard it. But we need to safeguard it in a way that is still open to the Spirit, not in a way that creates barriers to God's action. I think the Lord wants us to find ways of preserving committed love without making it a cage to trap people in.

We are called to be a renewal movement. We are supposed to help renew the church, not replace it. We are supposed to contribute, not compete. We are

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supposed to be a leaven, not become something so much in and of ourselves that we cannot be a servant to other things that God is doing.

It is a scary way to live, but I believe it is the way the Lord is calling us to live: as his servant. We must be ready to do what he wants, when he wants. That means starting when he says to start; stopping when he says to stop; changing when he says to change; not being so invested in how we have done things in the past, or in what we would like to see happen, that we are not ready to hear the Lord give a change of direction.

We need to ask, not, "How can we promote our work? How can we build up our thing? How can we secure our immediate area of concern?" We need to ask, "What is the Lord doing? And what does he want us to do to contribute to his purpose and plan?"

## Leaders and Followers

I believe the Lord wants to teach us more about the kind of leadership he is looking for today. One of the most important teachings Jesus ever gave about leadership was in the gospel of Matthew. Talking about the leadership he saw all around him in Judaism, Jesus says, "They are fond of places of honor at banquets in the front seats of synagogues; of marks of respect in public; of being called 'Rabbi.' As for you, avoid the title 'Rabbi.' One among you is your teacher. The rest are learners" (see Matt. 23:6-10). That is a radical re-evaluation of human leadership.

Obviously, Jesus works through human leadership. He gives leadership gifts. He anoints leadership ministries. He delegates leadership authority. But he also says, "Don't exalt yourselves. You may be leaders, but you're also followers."

I believe the Lord wants to lift a burden off of human leadership. He doesn't want us to try to be Savior and Lord for people. He wants us to be servants, and to defer to him who is the One Teacher, the One Lord, and the One Father. He is saying, "Don't take the place of God's fatherhood in people's lives. There is a fatherhood role that belongs to God alone, and that all human fatherhood needs to defer to."

## Lift Jesus Higher

The question we always need to ask, in considering our call and the future of our life together, is "How can Jesus Christ be pre-eminent? How can we lift Jesus up in this or that area of our life? How can Christ and his purposes be served? How can we remain in the servant's place and not try to take over the Lord's place?"

As we keep in mind our beginnings, study what God is blessing throughout the world today, submit to the correction and humbling we receive, and learn from our mistakes, we will be in a better position to come up with sound approaches to the different areas of our community life and be more useful servants to the Lord in the future.

We must not be unappreciative of all the tremendous things the Lord has done in us and through us in the past. But he seems to be saying that it is time for an oil change. A lot of grime and dirt has gotten into the engine. A lot of things are not flowing smoothly. God wants to give us an oil change because he cares about us being even more fruitful in the future than we have been in the past. That is not just a personal sense, and it is not just for us; it is scriptural, and therefore it is for everyone. "Those whom he loves he purifies. Those who bear fruit will be pruned so they bear more fruit."

The changes the Lord is after are not just changes in the way we do things, but changes in *us*—because the way we do things derives from who we are. The system we are struggling to change, with all its problems, has come out of us. It has come out of our hearts. It has come out of our minds. It has come out of our fallen human tendencies. *We* have to change in order to do things differently.

My counsel to those who may be going through a similar time of purification is this: Let's thank God that he cares for us enough not to leave us in our sin, in our rusty, dirty condition. Let's thank God that he has fresh oil. Let's thank God he has a new breath of his Spirit. Let's take it one day at a time, and let God unfold our vision and call in the days ahead. ■