

Benedict XVI and the movements Address to Portuguese bishops

**“News” nr. 21-2010
Pontifical Council for the Laity**

In recent months the Pope has repeatedly spoken about the ecclesial movements and new communities, enriching his extensive teaching on the “a new era of group endeavours” (*Christifideles laici*, 29). In particular, he has dedicated a large excerpt of his speech to the bishops of Portugal on May 13, 2010, during a visit to Fatima, to this theme. Here, we repropose that part of the address that concerns the movements and comparing it with similar interventions by the Holy Father to understand it better.

Speaking to mankind today

The Pope introduces his discourse on movements after tracing the situation of the deChristianized society of today and the difficulties encountered in such circumstances to proclaim the Gospel: “when, in the view of many people, the Catholic faith is no longer the common patrimony of society and, often, seen as seed threatened and obscured by the ‘gods’ and masters of this world, only with great difficulty can the faith touch the hearts of people by means simple speeches or moral appeals, and even less by a general appeal to Christian values. The courageous and integral appeal to principles is essential and indispensable; yet simply proclaiming the message does not penetrate to the depths of people’s hearts, it does not touch their freedom, it does not change their lives. What attracts is, above all, the encounter with believing persons who, through their faith, draw others to the grace of Christ by bearing witness to him”.

Thus in order to speak effectively to mankind of today, credible witnesses are needed. The issue of the choice of a language that makes the Gospel understandable was deepened by the Holy Father in his meeting with the Pontifical Council for Culture, “the Pastors and the faithful notice several difficulties in the communication of the Gospel message and in the transmission of the faith in an ecclesial community [...] problems sometimes seem to increase when the Church turns to the men and women who are far away or indifferent to an experience of faith.

The Gospel message reaches them in a feeble and noninclusive way.[...] To find an appropriate language, the Pope calls for enhanced “inculturation of the Gospel,” “the rich and concentrated symbolism of the Liturgy,” “the language of art, whose beauty has a special communicative power”. Yet “the beauty of Christian life is even more effective than art and imagery in the communication of the Gospel Message” (*Address to the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for Culture*, November 13, 2010).

In short, the “believing persons who, through their faith, draw others to the grace of Christ by bearing witness to him”, mentioned in Portugal, are those that show first with their lives the beauty of being a Christian: this is the most eloquent language to reach today’s globalised and secularised humanity.

The joy of being Christian

Continuing his speech to the Portuguese bishops, the Holy Father indicates where to look for fertile grounds of Christian life: “The words of Pope John Paul II come to mind: ‘The Church needs above all great currents, movements and witnesses of holiness among the Christifideles because it is from holiness that is born every authentic renewal of the Church, all intelligent enrichment of the faith and of the Christian life, the vital and fecund reactualization of Christianity with the needs of man, a renewed form of presence in the heart of human existence and of the culture of nations’ (*Address for the 20th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18 November 1985). One could say, ‘the Church has need of these great currents, movements and witnesses of holiness..., but there are none!’”. In fact, faced with difficulties and crises that have distinguished the Church’s relationship with the contemporary world, a certain pessimism has spread. But Benedict XVI has personally found that the Holy Spirit has acted in the Church in time, bringing about what was needed, as he indicated in his speech at Fatima: “In this regard, I confess to you the pleasant surprise that I had in making contact with the movements and the new ecclesial communities. Watching them, I had the joy and the grace to see how, at a moment of weariness in the Church, at a time when we were hearing about ‘the winter of the Church’, the Holy Spirit was creating a new springtime, awakening in young people and adults alike the joy of being Christian, of living in the Church, which is the living Body of Christ”. On more than one occasion the Pope has mentioned his surprise before this “invasion” of movements and new communities in the life of the Church, as was the case in 1998, when as cardinal, during the World Congress of movements organized by our Dicastery: “For me personally it was a wonderful experience when, in the early 1970, I first came into closer contact with movements such as the Neocatechumenal Way, Communion and Liberation and the Focolare Movement, and so experienced the energy and enthusiasm with which they lived their faith and the joy of their faith which impelled them to share with others the gift they had received. That was the period in which Karl Rahner and others were speaking of a winter in the Church [...]. But then something suddenly happened which no one had planned. The Holy Spirit had, so to say, once again made his voice heard. The faith was reawakened, especially in young people, who eagerly embraced it without any ifs and buts, without subterfuges and reservations, and experienced it in its totality as a precious, life-giving gift” (in: *Movements in the Church*, Vatican City 1999, 2324).

Key to understanding the Holy Father’s teaching on the movements and new communities is his own personal experience of wonder and joy when faced with these changes fostered by the Holy Spirit in the wake of the Council. So, the Pope reminded the Portuguese bishops that the most effective language to announce the news of the gospel to mankind today is the joy that comes from Christian life, and one of the most important contexts in which that life flourishes today is found in the movements ecclesial and new communities.

The Pope also underlined the importance of the movements for the new evangelization in his address to the bishops of England and Wales, during his recent trip to Britain, 19 September 2010, “many of the new ecclesial movements have a particular charism for evangelization, and I know that you will continue to explore appropriate and effective ways of involving them in the mission of the Church”. Along the same lines we find a similar thought in no. 94 of postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*: “the Synod also recognized with gratitude that the ecclesial movements and the new communities are a great force for evangelization in our times and an incentive to the development of new ways of proclaiming the Gospel”.

Continuing his speech, Benedict XVI wanted to clarify to the Portuguese bishops how ecclesial movements and new communities are able to revive and relive the Catholic Churches’ two thousand year heritage of faith by means appropriate to today’s world, without degradation or compromise, “Thanks to their charisms, the radicality of the Gospel, the objective contents of the faith, the living flow of her tradition, are all being communicated in a persuasive way and welcomed as a personal experience, as adherence in freedom to the present event of Christ”. In other words, movements and

new communities are shown capable of achieving a “renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God” (*Address to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2005).

Ecclesial movements and new communities in the particular Churches

The Holy Father continues his Fatima address without failing to offer his authoritative guidance to help resolve tensions that may arise over the inclusion of new realities into the fabric of the particular Churches. The Pope calls on the faithful obedience of all to the one Spirit, while respecting individual roles, and firstly addressed the bearers of the particular charisms, who have generated the movements: “The necessary condition, naturally, is that these new realities desire to live in the one Church, albeit with spaces in some way set aside for their own life, in such a way that this life becomes fruitful for all the others. The bearers of a particular charism must feel themselves fundamentally responsible for communion, for the common faith of the Church, and submit themselves to the leadership of their Bishops. It is they who must ensure the ecclesial nature of the movements”. Communion with the bishops is therefore essential to the inclusion and full use of these new ecclesial groups in the Church. The bishops, – the Pope underlines – hold their institutional position through the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed by the sacrament of Holy Orders, therefore the pastors can fulfill their function as carriers of the same Spirit that gave rise to the movements: “Bishops are not only those who hold an office, but those who themselves are bearers of charisms, and responsible for the openness of the Church to the working of the Holy Spirit. We, Bishops, in the sacrament of Holy Orders, are anointed by the Holy Spirit and thus the sacrament ensures that we too are open to his gifts. Thus, on the one hand, we must feel responsibility for welcoming these impulses which are gifts for the Church and which give her new vitality, but, on the other hand, we must also help the movements to find the right way, making some corrections with understanding – with the spiritual and human understanding that is able to combine guidance, gratitude and a certain openness and a willingness to learn”. Openness to and support for the new season of associations of lay faithful and the willingness of bishops to learn guarantee their interventions of governance and correction, which will be effective and acceptable because inspired by the one Spirit. Indeed, in this sense the Holy Father urged the bishops gathered at a seminar organized by our Dicastery May 17, 2008, “We pastors are asked to closely accompany the movements and new communities, with friendly and knowledgeable fatherly concern, so that they can generously put at the service for common use, in an orderly and productive manner, the many gifts they bring and that we have come to know and appreciate [...]. Those called to the service of discernment and leadership must not claim to rule over the charisms, but rather against the danger of quenching them (see *1 Thessalonians 5:19-21*), resisting the temptation to render uniform that which the Holy Spirit wants multiform to contribute to the building and expansion of the one Body of Christ that the Spirit himself renders firm in unity”.

The unity in ecclesial communion that we are called to realize necessarily involves a close bond between the universal Church and particular Churches, especially when it comes to movements and communities of international importance, as the Holy Father clearly stated to participants at meetings held by the *Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships*, October 31, 2008: “Precisely because we are assisting at a promising flowering of Movements and Ecclesial Communities, it is important that Pastors exercise prudent and wise discernment in their regard. I sincerely hope that dialogue between Pastors and Ecclesial Movements intensifies at all levels: parish, diocesan and with the Apostolic See. I know that opportune ways are being studied to give Pontifical recognition to the New Movements and Ecclesial Communities and many have already received it. This fact the recognition or establishment of international associations on the part of the Holy See for the universal Church Pastors, especially Bishops, cannot fail to take it into

account in their dutiful discernment that lies within their competence”. The Pastors of particular Churches are therefore called upon to exercise their duty to judge and govern in tune with all the bishops and the Apostolic See, whose pronouncements are an essential element for decisions at the local level.

The theological basis of this claim was shown by the then Cardinal Ratzinger during the World Congress of the movements of 1998. After excluding some false conflicts in vogue in modern theology (institution/charism, Christology/Pneumatology, hierarchy/prophecy), the then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith offered a historical overview on the different “waves” of charisms that have characterized the story of God’s people, comparing them to the new era of group endeavors of the lay faithful, to highlight the remarkable similarities and emphasize the benefits that the Church has drawn from them throughout its history. The Pope returned to the theme during the general audience of 13 January 2010: “this personal and community style of the Mendicant Orders, together with total adherence to the teaching and authority of the Church, was deeply appreciated by the Pontiffs of the time, such as Innocent III and Honorius III, who gave their full support to the new ecclesial experiences, recognizing in them the voice of the Spirit. And results were not lacking [...]. Today too, similar projects are not lacking: the movements, which truly stem from the newness of the Gospel and live it with radicalism in this day and age, placing themselves in God’s hands to serve their neighbour”.

The historical *excursus* of ‘98 aimed to reveal the ecclesiological nature of the inevitable tensions that arise when new charisms are born, for the very fact that they are found at the very heart of the delicate relationship between universal and particular Church, efforts to rebuild communion should concern all at stake, fully respecting the roles and charisms, particularly with regard to the Apostolic See: “everyone must let himself be measured by the unity of the one Church, which remains one in all the local Churches and as such appears again and again in the apostolic movements. Local Churches and apostolic movements must constantly recognize and accept the simultaneous truth of two propositions: *ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia – ubi episcopus, ibi ecclesia*. Primacy and episcopacy, the local ecclesial system and apostolic movements, need each other. Primacy can only live with and through a living episcopacy, episcopacy can only preserve its dynamic and apostolic unity in subservience to primacy. Where one of the two is weakened, the Church as a whole suffers” (in: *Movements in the Church*, cit., 51).

Priests and the movements

The last brief recommendation with regard to the movements and new communities offered the Portuguese bishops regards the involvement of priests: “Foster or confirm in your priests”. This is a theme dear to the Holy Father, fully aware that the introduction and growth of new ecclesial commitment hinges on the openness of priests. In the Letter proclaiming the Year for Priests (June 18, 2009) Benedict XVI had dwelt at length on the theme: “In this context of a spirituality nourished by the practice of the evangelical counsels, I would like to invite all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church, not least through the ecclesial movements and the new communities. “ In his gifts the Spirit is multifaceted... He breathes where he wills. He does so unexpectedly, in unexpected places, and in ways previously unheard of [...] but he also shows us that he works with a view to the one body and in the unity of the one body” (Benedict XVI, Homily for the Vigil of Pentecost, 3 June 2006.). In this regard, the statement of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* continues to be timely: “While testing the spirits to discover if they be of God, priests must discover with faith, recognize with joy and foster diligently the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, whether these be of a humble or more exalted kind” (n. 9). These gifts, which awaken in many people the desire for a deeper spiritual life, can benefit not only the lay faithful but the clergy as well. The communion between ordained and charismatic ministries can provide “a helpful impulse to a renewed commitment by the Church in proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel of hope and charity in every corner of the world” (Benedict XVI, *Address to Bishop Friends of the Focolare Movement*

and the Sant'Egidio Community, 8 February 2007). The Pope therefore not only recommended that priests offer pastoral care to their movements and communities, but sees in them a valuable aid to nourish their own spiritual life.

Besides the new associative groups are a great source of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, so much so that almost all the seminaries and places of formation have to learn to deal with this change, accepting it and governing it without distorting it, so it may become an occasion for shared spiritual enrichment, as the Holy Father wished to indicate in his *Letter to Seminarians* of October 18, 2010 (No. 7): “The Movements are a magnificent thing. You know how much I esteem them and love them as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Yet they must be evaluated by their openness to what is truly Catholic, to the life of the whole Church of Christ, which for all her variety still remains one. The seminary is a time when you learn with one another and from one another. In community life, which can at times be difficult, you should learn generosity and tolerance, not only bearing with, but also enriching one another, so that each of you will be able to contribute his own gifts to the whole, even as all serve the same Church, the same Lord”.