

*The movements and new communities
in the words of the Holy Father Benedict XVI*

A brief review

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The faithful and pastors who wish to delve into the teachings of Benedict XVI on ecclesial movements and new communities, are concentrating their attention particularly on the words he spoke at the memorable encounter on the vigil of Pentecost 2006 and the message he sent on the occasion of the Congress held in preparation of that event. During the vigil, one of the points emphasised by the Pope was that the Holy Spirit gives life and freedom, and that “the movements were born precisely because of a thirst for true life” and “they are intended to be and should be schools of freedom, of this true freedom”. In his words to the Congress several days earlier, he affirms that these new ecclesial groups are “a luminous sign of the beauty of Christ and of the Church, his Bride”. These are clear fundamental indications that deserve to be increasingly better known and studied. Moreover, the Pontiff has on many occasions dealt with the subject, tracing the fundamental lines for a clear understanding of the “new era of group endeavours of the lay faithful” (*Christifideles laici*, 29). We would like to mention some of these “sparse” teachings, because perhaps not everyone knows about them or has realised their importance. Further teachings of the Holy Father will be included with the next issue of our newsletter.

Benedict XVI has reasserted several times that movements and new communities do not have their origin in human initiative but that they are gifts of the Holy Spirit as is the Church itself: “Among the realities raised up in the Church by the Holy Spirit are the movements and ecclesial communities ... The entire Church, as Pope John Paul II loved to say, is one great movement animated by the Holy Spirit, a river that travels through history to irrigate it with God’s grace and make it full of life, goodness, beauty, justice and peace” (4 June 2006, *Regina Coeli*). These new groups are considered by the Pope to be a gift for the Church, particularly in order to help put the Second Vatican Council into effect. Over the past few decades we have witnessed a “vast flowering of associations, movements and new ecclesial realities providentially raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Every gift of the Spirit is found originally and necessarily at the service of the edification of the Body of Christ, offering a witness of the immense charity of God for the life of each person. The reality of ecclesial movements, therefore, is a sign of the fecundity of the Lord’s Spirit, because it manifests in the world the victory of the Risen Christ and it accomplishes the missionary mandate entrusted to the whole Church” (24 March 2007, *To the members of Communion and Liberation*).

In maintaining this premise, Benedict XVI is well aware that he is completely in conformity with the teachings of John Paul II: “My venerable Predecessor, John Paul II, has presented the Movements and New Communities which have come into being in these years as a providential gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, in order to respond in an effective way to the challenges of our time. And you know that this is also my conviction (*Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishop-friends of the Focolare Movement and the Sant’Egidio Community*, 8 February 2007). The Pope predicts that they will continue to spread: “Dear representatives of the new movements in the Church, the vitality of your communities is a sign of the Holy Spirit’s active presence! It is from the faith of the Church and from the richness of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that your mission has been born. My prayer is that you will grow ever more numerous so as to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God in today’s world” (26 May 2006, *To the representatives of movements in Poland*).

The movements express the variety of gifts of the Spirit, all necessary to build up the Church, gathered in unity thanks to the ministry of the bishops in communion with the Pope: “The Holy Spirit wants the multiformity of the movements at the service of the one Body, which is the Church. And this comes about through the ministry of those he has placed to sustain the Church of God: the Bishops in communion with the Successor of Peter” (*Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishop-friends of the Focolare Movement and the Sant’Egidio Community*, 8 February 2007). The charismatic origin of the movements requires that they be welcomed by the bishops with attention and respect, “with much love”, notwithstanding the difficulties that such a wave of innovations can imply in some circumstances: “After the Council, the Holy Spirit endowed us with the ‘movements’. They sometimes appear to be rather strange to the parish priest or Bishop but are places of faith where young people and adults try out a model of life in faith as an opportunity for life today. I therefore ask you to approach movements very lovingly. Here and there, they must be corrected or integrated into the overall context of the parish or Diocese. Yet, we must respect the specific character of their charism and rejoice in the birth of communitarian forms of faith in which the Word of God becomes life” (18 November 2006, *To German bishops*). There is no contradiction in the Church between charism and institution, but complementarity and reciprocal interpenetration: “In the Message to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, 27 May 1998, the Servant of God John Paul II had this to say: that there is no conflict or opposition in the Church between the institutional and the charismatic dimensions, of which the Movements are a significant expression. Both are co-essential to the divine constitution of the People of God. In the Church the essential institutions are also charismatic and indeed the charisms must, in one way or another, be institutionalized to have coherency and continuity. Hence, both dimensions originate from the same Holy Spirit for the same Body of Christ, and together they concur to make present the mystery and the salvific work of Christ in the world. This explains the attention with which the Pope and the Pastors look upon the richness of the charismatic gifts in the contemporary age” (24 March 2007, *To the members of Communion and Liberation*).

The Pope gave two fundamental rules on how to welcome the movements: “It seems to me that we have two fundamental rules of which you spoke. The first was given to us by St. Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians: do not extinguish charisms. If the Lord gives us new gifts we must be grateful, even if at times they may be inconvenient. And it is beautiful that without an initiative of the hierarchy but with an initiative from below, as people say, but which also truly comes from on High, that is, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, new forms of life are being born in the Church just as, moreover, they were born down the ages. At first, they were always inconvenient. Even St. Francis was very inconvenient, and it was very hard for the Pope to give a final canonical form to a reality that by far exceeded legal norms. For St. Francis, it was a very great sacrifice to let himself be lodged in this juridical framework, but in the end this gave rise to a reality that is still alive today and will live on in the future: it gives strength, as well as new elements, to the Church’s life. I wish to say only this: movements have been born in all the centuries. Even St. Benedict at the outset was a movement. They do not become part of the Church’s life without suffering and difficulty. St. Benedict himself had to correct the initial direction that monasticism was taking. Thus, in our century too, the Lord, the Holy Spirit, has given us new initiatives with new aspects of Christian life. Since they are lived by human people with their limitations, they also create difficulties. So the first rule is: do not extinguish Christian charisms; be grateful even if they are inconvenient. The second rule is: the Church is one; if movements are truly gifts of the Holy Spirit, they belong to and serve the Church and in patient dialogue between Pastors and movements, a fruitful form is born where these elements become edifying for the Church today and in the future. This dialogue is at all levels. Starting with the parish priest, the Bishops and the Successor of Peter, the search for appropriate structures is underway: in many cases it has already borne fruit (22 February 2007, *To the clergy of Rome*).

In the previous issue of our *News* we presented a short collection of the teachings of Benedict XVI on the ecclesial movements and new communities. With this article we shall complete the presentation of what the Pope has said on this theme during the early years of his pontificate. As we said in the previous article, the Holy Father recognises in the movements one of the most evident fruits of the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council. In fact, their birth and development help us to correctly understand the Council itself: “ I think we have to rediscover the Council’s great legacy. It is not a spirit reconstructed from texts but consists of the great Council texts themselves, reinterpreted today with the experiences we have had which have borne fruit in so many movements and so many new religious communities ” (24 July 2007, *To the clergy of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso*). In our secularised and individualistic world the movements reawaken in the faithful an awareness of belonging to the Church: “ The Eucharistic form of Christian life is clearly an ecclesial and communitarian form. Through the diocese and the parish, the fundamental structures of the Church in a particular territory, each individual believer can experience concretely what it means to

be a member of Christ's Body. Associations, ecclesial movements and new communities – with their lively charisms bestowed by the Holy Spirit for the needs of our time – together with Institutes of Consecrated Life, have a particular responsibility for helping to make the faithful conscious that they belong to the Lord (cf. Rom 14:8). Secularization, with its inherent emphasis on individualism, has its most negative effects on individuals who are isolated and lack a sense of belonging. Christianity, from its very beginning, has meant fellowship, a network of relationships constantly strengthened by hearing God's word and sharing in the Eucharist, and enlivened by the Holy Spirit ” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 76).

Movements and new communities have therefore shown that they can effectively stand up against the relativistic mentality and at the same time reignite and sustain Christian hope in the serious situations of poverty that afflict so many nations: “In the rich Western world, where even though a relativistic culture is present, at the same time a widespread desire for spirituality is not missing, and your movements witness the joy of the faith and the beauty of being Christian in great ecumenical openness. In the vast depressed areas of the earth, they communicate the message of solidarity and draw near to the poor and the weak with that human and divine love that I wished to repropose to the attention of all in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*” (8 February 2007, *To the bishop-friends of the Focolare movement and the Sant'Egidio Community*). The vitality of the movements impels them towards a strong missionary commitment: “The ecclesial movements and new Communities are a providential instrument for a renewed missionary outreach; welcome and promote them in your dioceses, since the Holy Spirit uses them to awaken and deepen faith in hearts and to proclaim the joy of believing in Jesus Christ ” (26 May 2007, *To the bishops of Mozambique*).

Collaboration with these new movements has proved to be useful for evangelisation: “My thoughts turn to the priests, the men and women religious and the laity who work so generously, often in the face of immense difficulties, in order to spread the truth of the Gospel. Many of them cooperate with or actively participate in the associations, movements and other new ecclesial realities that, in communion with the Pastors and in harmony with diocesan guidelines, bring their spiritual, educational and missionary richness to the heart of the Church, as a precious experience and a model of Christian life ” (11 May 2007, *To the bishops of Brazil*).

An increasing number of the faithful find in the movements an opportunity to receive adequate instruction in the faith, and in a special way to rediscover the sacraments of Christian initiation. “Each Christian community is called to be a place where people can be taught about the mysteries celebrated in faith. In this regard, the Synod Fathers called for greater involvement by communities of consecrated life, movements and groups which, by their specific charisms, can give new impetus to Christian formation. In our time, too, the Holy Spirit freely bestows his gifts to sustain the apostolic mission of the Church, which is charged with spreading the faith and bringing it to maturity” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 64).

For this reason the presence of the movements contributes significantly to the growth in maturity of the laity: “In the ecclesial communities of Latin America there is a notable degree of maturity in faith among the many active lay men and women devoted to the Lord, and there are also many generous catechists, many young people, new ecclesial movements and recently established Institutes of consecrated life ” (13 May 2007, *To the 5th CELAM General Conference*). The engagement of the lay faithful in culture and politics is essential if the living conditions in their countries are to improve. Therefore, “ it is time to overcome the notable absence—in the political sphere, in the world of the media and in the universities—of the voices and initiatives of Catholic leaders with strong personalities and generous dedication, who are coherent in their ethical and religious convictions. The ecclesial movements have plenty of room here to remind the laity of their responsibility and their mission to bring the light of the Gospel into public life, into culture, economics and politics ” (13 May 2007, *To the 5th CELAM General Conference*).

Naturally, not everything can be solved by politics: “ The living Church, the Church of the little communities, the parish Church, the movements, must form as many centres in the outskirts and thus help to overcome the difficulties that the leading politics obviously cannot manage to resolve, and at the same time, we must also think that despite the great focuses of power, contemporary society itself is in need of solidarity, of a sense of lawfulness, of the initiative and creativity of all ” (1 September 2007, *To the young people gathered in Loreto*). Families find support in these new ecclesial movements: “Today, however, it is possible for husbands and wives to overcome their difficulties and remain faithful to their vocation with recourse to God’s support, with prayer and participating devotedly in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The unity and strength of families helps society to breathe the genuine human values and to be open to the Gospel. The apostolate of many of the movements called to work in this context in harmonious understanding with the dioceses and parishes contributes to this ” (13 May 2006, *To the Pontifical Council for the Family*).

In our fragmented society, it is not sufficient to follow the very necessary preparation for the sacrament of matrimony because “ the great crises come later. Consequently, ongoing guidance, at least in the first 10 years, is of the utmost importance. In the parish, therefore, it is not only necessary to provide preparatory courses but also communion in the journey that follows, guidance and mutual help [...]. The presence of a network of families that help one another is important and different movements can make a considerable contribution” (24 July 2007, *To the clergy of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso*). It is precisely in this field, on the other hand, that “there is also a growing number of national and international lay movements which promote the renewal of married and family life as well as a greater community experience ” (8 September 2005, to the Mexican bishops).

On many occasions Benedict XVI pointed out the importance of movements and communities for young people: “ It is only in this way that young people – with the support of their respective parishes, movements and communities, in which it is possible to experience the greatness and vitality of the Church – will be able to experience work

as a vocation and true mission ” (28 March 2007, *To the participants at the 9th International Youth Forum*). The Pope urges young people to be “ prepared to make an impact with an authentically Christian witness in the contexts of study and work, to be committed to the parish community, to groups, movements, associations and every social milieu ” (29 March 2007, *To the youth of Rome*).

The words of Benedict XVI clearly show the role that the new ecclesial groups can take in helping in the renewal of parishes: “As we have seen, associations and movements, which are undoubtedly a source of enrichment, play an important role in the world of youth. The Church must make the most of these realities, and at the same time she must guide them with pastoral wisdom, so that with the variety of their different gifts they may contribute in the best possible way to building up the community without ever entering into competition – each one building, so to speak, its own little church –, but respecting one another and working together for the one Church – for the one parish as the local Church – to awaken in young people the joy of faith, love for the Church and passion for the Kingdom of God. I think that precisely this is another important aspect: this authentic communion on the one hand between the various movements whose forms of exclusivism should be eliminated, and on the other, between the local Churches and the movements, so that the local Churches recognize this particularity, which seems strange to many, and welcome it in itself as a treasure, understanding that in the Church there are many ways and that all together they converge in a symphony of faith. The local Churches and movements are not in opposition to one another, but constitute the living structure of the Church ” (21 August 2005, *To the German bishops*). Pastors are therefore called to make the most of the possibilities offered by the new associations: “it seems to me that precisely during the Pontificate of Pope John Paul II, a fruitful combination between the constant element of the parochial structure and, let us say, the ‘charismatic’ element, was created, which offers new initiatives, new inspirations, new life. Under the wise guidance of the Cardinal Vicar and the Auxiliary Bishops, all parish priests can together be truly responsible for the growth of the parish, taking in all of the factors that can come from the movements and the living reality of the Church in varied dimensions ” (13 May 2005, *To the clergy of Rome*).