

How to Strengthen Ecclesial Maturity in the
Catholic Charismatic Renewal

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When I wrote the first draft of this article, I assumed that everyone reading it would understand what “ecclesial maturity” means in the context of the Catholic Charismatic renewal. However, when a visiting in-law asked me what I was writing about, she thought “ecclesial maturity” referred to the Church’s hierarchy being mature enough to recognize the charisms of the laity and allow them to be exercised. Not a bad interpretation. Then I explained that I was writing about how the Catholic Charismatic renewal, as a movement, was to become mature in its attitude and contribution to the Church. This seemed to help, but the discussion then shifted to what it meant for a movement to be “ecclesial mature” and why this is important. I referred to Pope John Paul II’s address to the gathering of the movements in Rome on Pentecost, 1998, where he spoke of a “new stage [that] is unfolding before you: that of ecclesial maturity,” which is “a challenge. A road to take.” Since this papal address, many have written about “ecclesial maturity” and how this might be pursued and achieved in the Catholic Charismatic renewal. In this article, I simply wish to contribute a perspective on the issue, and to make a few suggestions on how we might grow in “ecclesial maturity.”

There is, I believe, a particular challenge that the charismatic renewal faces in pursuing “ecclesial maturity.” I believe that there is still widespread misunderstanding (or differing understandings) of what the charismatic renewal movement is all about – even among “charismatics.” What is the goal of the movement? What are its essential characteristics? And further, in spite of all that Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II taught about what the “charisms” are and how they are part of the Church’s nature and essential to her life, there still remains a widespread view among Catholics that “charisms” are just for participants in a particular movement – the “charismatics” – but certainly aren’t for everyone. In fact, some Catholics view focus on the charisms or the use of charisms as something intrinsically immature – identifying these gifts of the Holy Spirit with a particular type of religious experience or religious emotionalism that they see in prayer meetings where people are “carried away” with raising their hands, swaying to emotionally charged music, and even praying or singing aloud in gibberish that they call the “gift of tongues.” To speak of ecclesial maturity for “charismatics,” for many Catholics, is to insist that they put aside this “emotionalism” and grow up spiritually into sober, mature Catholics whose faith is not emotional or experiential, and who do not need “charisms” to live a good Catholic life and build up the Church. In short, to be “spiritually mature,” in this view, means to stop being “charismatic”!

Even after forty years, the Catholic Charismatic renewal still faces two challenges with regard to her acceptance by the Catholic Church (and here I mean by the “average Catholic” even more than the hierarchy): 1) enabling Catholics to understand that being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” (or whatever name you prefer) is a grace of renewal of life in Christ that God offers to all, and that is beneficial to all, and 2) that “charisms” are not the marks of a particular movement, but that every Christian receives charisms (gifts of the Spirit for the building up of the Church and for the spread of the faith) and needs to learn how to recognize one’s own charisms and to use them in order for the Church to function properly and fulfill her mission. To say that a Catholic is “charismatic” should be accepted in the same way as it may be said that a Catholic is Eucharistic, sacramental, Marian, pro-life, socially concerned and so on.

In summary, “ecclesial maturity” means, for those involved in charismatic renewal, not to identify this renewal with a particular charism or charisms (such as the gift of tongues or prophecy), nor to equate being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” with a particular type of experience of God that all must have. “Ecclesial maturity” means, for those Catholics not involved in the charismatic movement to recognize that the Church is “charismatic” (as it is sacramental and hierarchical), which means that each Catholic possesses charisms to be discovered and used for the service of the Church and the world. It also means that every Catholic ought to desire and to seek a fuller grace of the Holy Spirit to deepen and enliven the relationship we have with Jesus and with the Father, a relationship which began at our baptism but must continue to grow. Hopefully Catholics will also come to understand that this is basically what “charismatic renewal” is really all about – a renewal of something that is essentially Catholic and Christian.

Having said this, I would like to reflect on how those in the charismatic renewal could grow in ‘ecclesial maturity.’ As a heuristic device, the word “horse” is an acronym for the goals I see. First, the letter “h” stands for two principles that are the foundations of ecclesial maturity: holiness and humility. “Strive for peace with all... and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Growth in ecclesial maturity is only possible and attainable as individuals and groups are seeking that ongoing deepening of our relationship with God, and transformation into the image of God in his Son Jesus Christ, that we call the pursuit of holiness. “...as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct” (1 Pt 1:15). Ecclesial maturity cannot be strengthened or attained in any movement, community, prayer group or parish unless the members understand that their goal is to be holy: to be progressively transformed by grace into the image of Jesus Christ; to live godly and God-like lives. The call of all God’s faithful people to be holy was one of the central themes of the Second Vatican Council, and it must be constantly reaffirmed and reinforced in the Church. We all are tempted in our lives to act immaturely – to squabble and fight over things and issues that we shouldn’t be, to hold grudges, to engage in “turf wars” and seek recognition or position for ourselves or our friends, and so on. We all are sinners. But if we stop to ask ourselves, “Is this the way that holy people (or people seeking holiness) should act or think?” then the Holy Spirit would have an opportunity to speak to us and lead us to greater maturity and holiness.

This quest for holiness requires humility. The greatest sin of members of the charismatic renewal (including me) for many years probably was hubris -- pride. Charismatics thought we were spiritually superior because God was working so evidently and powerfully among us in this renewal movement. We did glorify and praise God for this, but we were blind to the extent that is affected our attitudes. Then many communities and prayer groups experienced very dark and difficult times that brought to light areas of sin and weakness, including pride that “goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). However, it is maturity that recognizes that the revelation of sin and sinful attitudes is actually the mercy of God at work, inviting us to repent, to change, and to attain holiness. Humility, which includes conviction of our sin and the need to repent, is the only path to holiness.

There are a number of results or “fruits” of the pursuit of holiness through humility that are signs of personal and ecclesial maturity. One of these is openness to the presence and work of the Lord in other movements and in the broader Church. A form of immaturity in the Catholic charismatic renewal is the failure to see God’s ‘hand’ in other movements and in the broader Church. Ironically, sometimes Catholics could see the work of the Holy Spirit more clearly in evangelical Protestant or Pentecostal churches than in other Catholic movements. The recognition of authentic workings of God in other Christian churches and communions is

important for ecumenism, but Catholics in charismatic renewal must also recognize (and thank God for) how the Holy Spirit is at work in other Catholic movements and groups, ‘even’ in the ‘normal’ Catholic life of fellow Catholics in their parishes. Yes, we can surely “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” and work at “encouraging one another” (Heb 10: 24,25), but this doesn’t always mean enlisting other Catholics to join us or to be “baptized in the Holy Spirit”. (I am not saying that we should not witness to the ways that God has worked in our own lives. This must be done, but with prudence and sensitivity). Sometimes we might be called to receive spiritual nourishment from other Catholic movements and groups (or individuals), which are not identifiably “charismatic”. I admire my wife who meets weekly with an informal “rosary group” to pray for our Catholic schools, attends meetings of a “Communion and Liberation” group and works with young children using the “Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.” She is enriched by those contacts, as she is by attendance at our charismatic community meetings. Openness to the work of the Holy Spirit outside of charismatic renewal breaks down barriers and helps overcome “labels” that tend to divide instead of unify. Openness to the grace of God in the broader Church is a sign of ecclesial maturity and overcomes the “party spirit” that St. Paul once condemned in that very “charismatic” church in Corinth (see 1 Cor 1: 10-13; 3: 1-9).

Related to this openness is the respect we must foster for other Catholics and especially for our ordained leaders; our bishops, priests and deacons. St. Francis of Assisi is an exemplary model of this respect. Despite the worldliness and dissolute lives of some of the clergy of his time, St. Francis always was obedient to and respectful of these ‘elders’ by virtue of their office and position. He chose to let the witness of holiness and poverty that he and his followers pursued speak for itself. He followed the admonition of St. Paul: “We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves” (I Thess 5:12,13).

Respect of others is a sign of maturity, even when others act or speak in ways that are difficult to respect. We are called to respect others because of the image of God in each person. We respect leaders in the Church (even lay leaders properly appointed) by virtue of the position or office they hold. We may disagree with certain of their statements, actions or views, and may express this in an appropriate way at the proper time, but we respect their person and their office. At the University where I serve, I believe that I have done more to promote the charismatic renewal by showing that I value and respect other employees, and especially the members of the department which I chair, than by any talks or conversations on the Holy Spirit or charismatic renewal. In connection with this I believe that we are called to be “peacemakers” who are signs and instruments of the peace of Christ wherever we go. “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding... (Romans 14:19); “...agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Cor 13:11).

The next sign of ecclesial maturity should not be surprising: service. One of my favorite Biblical texts is the end of Galatians 5:13:

For you are called to freedom, brethren, only to not use
your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love be
servants of one another.

Our attitude should be that which Jesus recommended in his parable in Luke 17: 7-10, which concludes: “We are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.” Whatever

we do, we do in imitation of Jesus, “the Son of man [who] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Charismatic groups, as well, should be ready to serve the needs of others and of the wider Church, as directed or guided by their pastors and by the local bishop.

Finally the last element that reflects ecclesial maturity is the ongoing pursuit of education. Education does not guarantee holiness or virtue (“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”, as St. Paul warned in 1 Cor 8:1). However, if we desire to grow to maturity in Christ, those involved in the charismatic renewal would benefit from education in the true Catholic understanding of God’s revelation as presented in Sacred Scripture, and Sacred Tradition. The Church communicates God’s revelation to us in many ways, such as in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, papal teachings and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Sacred Tradition also is expressed in the lives of the saints and in the study of the Church’s history. I have been enriched, over the years, not only by my own study of Church history and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, but also by the work of Charismatic renewal leaders such as Ralph Martin, who in recent years has presented in a very understandable and powerful form the teachings of the great Catholic mystics. He has presented those both in his tape series, distributed by Renewal Ministries, and in his recent book, The Fulfillment of All Desire (Emmaus Road). I have also been struck by the increasing number of lay Catholics pursuing advanced degrees in Theology, such as through our distance learning degree program at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Through education in Scripture and the tradition of the Church, we can truly grow into fuller maturity in Christ! So here is our challenge, to grow in ‘ecclesial maturity’ through the pursuit of holiness and humility, with openness to all the Holy Spirit’s working in the Church with sincere respect for others and how the Holy Spirit is working in them especially in our ordained leaders, in service to the Church and to our neighbor, and always seeking to grow in wisdom and maturity through ongoing education. May the Lord enable us through his Holy Spirit to strive for this full maturity in Christ!