

(English translation)

Stuttgart, 6 May 2004

## **The Role of the Spiritual Movements**

*Talk addressed at a meeting of leaders of Christian Movements and Church Communities*

Dearest brothers and sisters, in this important Meeting, which I'm really happy to be part of, I have the task today to talk about the role and the fellowship of spiritual Movements, my commitment for this and the hope that I have in them. The Movements have authoritatively been considered as a great spiritual resource and "motive for hope" for the Church and humanity<sup>1</sup>, that is, as one of the "gifts of the Holy Spirit for these our times."<sup>2</sup>

But what do these new realities consist of? Here I'm speaking above all of the experience of the Catholic Church, but certainly this holds true for the other Churches, according to their tradition.

The Ecclesial Movements and the New Communities usually arise from a charismatic personality who guides them and they feel called to live the Gospel authentically and radically.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit, "who gives to each one as he so desires" (*1 Cor* 12:11), opens for them new ways to meet the needs of our times. The Movements are always directed towards the common good according to St. Paul's words: "The Spirit reveals his presence in each one with a gift which is also a service" (*1 Cor* 12:7). Yet they have different guidelines and new possibilities to offer various precious gifts to the Church and the world. They are certainly not present only in this era, they have always existed, from time to time, since Christianity came about and there is a reason for it.

The first Christians lived in an authentic way. But with the passing of years, because of the world's influence, not all the baptized were coherent to their faith. Hence Christianity became weak and was watered down. There was the need – so to say – for the Holy Spirit to give rise to new spiritual currents in the Church, as it happened in the first millennium, for example, those of Basil, Augustine, Benedict; and then many others during the second millennium.

Throughout the centuries, through ever-new charisms, many spiritual families flourished, each an expression of a Word of Jesus or of a fact of his life or his suffering or other things. How can we forget Francis of Assisi and his disciples who emulated with their lives the words of the Gospel: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt* 5:3)? There is Therese of Lisieux and her followers who exemplified the words: "I assure you that unless you change and become like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt* 18:3). Vincent de Paul, Mother Theresa of Calcutta and many others of different Churches like, for example, Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, with his charitable work of Bethel, they were and are manifestations of Jesus' concrete love for the most in need and the suffering.

We come after them and we wish to continue this marvellous "incarnation" of the Gospel. But there is more. At present the Holy Spirit is addressing another calling to the new Movements: the calling towards a deeper communion amongst them, and this in tune with what is happening in the world. In fact, despite that wars, violence, tensions and terrorism continue to persist on earth today, we have to affirm that we are heading towards unity. Unity is a sign of the times. This is affirmed in the spiritual and religious world, by the thrust that the Churches have towards full and visible unity after centuries of

<sup>1</sup> See *Homily on the vigil of Pentecost, Teachings of John Paul II*, XIX, 1 (1996), p.1373.

<sup>2</sup> *ID.*

<sup>3</sup> Cf J. RATZINGER, *I movimenti ecclesiali e la loro collocazione teologica*, in *I movimenti nella Chiesa*, p.47.

indifference and struggle. The Second Vatican Council confirmed it and often returned on this idea; the World Council of Churches affirms it too.

In the political world, the European States that have come together attest to it, so have others in Africa and Latin-America and international organizations like the UN.

In a similar way it happens among the Movements: they are also called to communion; I'm also a witness of it and with God's grace I contributed a little to it.

We started in 1998, first with the Community of Saint Egidio and the Italian Charismatic Renewal, during the time when this fellowship was very much awaited for in the Catholic Church. I told Pope John Paul II my willingness to collaborate, because I was urged and facilitated by the charism of unity, typical of the Focolare Movement. Now there are about 220 Catholic Movements and New Communities that are in contact with one another.

It was not difficult for me to later understand that the Holy Spirit wished that we spread this communion also to the religious families like, for example, the Franciscans and Benedictines who began many centuries ago; and we did it with joy and reciprocal enrichment. We then put ourselves in communion with Associations, sometimes important ones, like the Catholic Action.

And what is the fruit of this whole journey? Great and unexpected fruit. In order to highlight it, we need to think that in the Catholic Church there is an institutional aspect, represented by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but there is also, and there always has been, a charismatic aspect. Today this has been particularly emphasized by the Holy Father, who see it as co-essential to and in communion with the institutional aspect.

Well: the communion that came forth among all these Movements and New Communities in the Catholic Church had a way to manifest the potential of the charismatic aspect of the Church. This can be seen in about 250 Day Meetings with the presence and blessing of their respective bishops. Because of this we were able to understand that if this communion will continue to develop and spread, the people of God will become more one, more charismatic, more dynamic, but also more one big family and more Marian.

But it didn't all end there in regards to communion. Or rather, we had the impression that the Holy Spirit would open new possibilities yet. In fact, when we discovered that Evangelical Movements and groups, each one with their own identity, were meeting amongst themselves for some decades already and now they had asked that we worked together, we seemed to understand that we could widen our communion also with them. And for some years now we are in contact also with them. It's a communion that, a little later, included groups of Anglicans, Orthodox, etc.

The effects? We will already see one in these days here at this Meeting and then at the Day meeting: "Together for Europe."

I'm certain that if Christ is among us because we love one another, our common Christian witness to the world and in particular in Europe, will shine forth with a special beauty, with a great attraction and with a new strength and power. As a consequence we'll contribute also in making the civil world better: an "earthly city" more in harmony with the "heavenly city."

Besides, Jesus didn't think nor wanted less when he told us to pray to the Father: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (*Mt 6:10*).

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