

A new era of group endeavours

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About 20 years ago, His Holiness John Paul II indicated in the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, the emergence of a “new era of group endeavours” in the universal Church, where “alongside the traditional forming of associations, and at times coming from their very roots, movements and new sodalities have sprouted”¹, as a sign of the “richness and the versatility of resources that the Holy Spirit nourishes in the ecclesial community”² and the laity’s capacity for generosity and initiative. In fact, Divine Providence enriched the life of the Church with the blossoming of many charisms, which were the source of these new movements and ecclesial communities, according to their diverse educational methods, forms of community and missionary momentum.

His Holiness John Paul II saw in them “one of the most significant fruits of that springtime in the Church which was foretold by the Second Vatican Council, but unfortunately has often been hampered by the spread of secularization”³, a cause for hope for the Church and mankind. In fact, both His Holiness John Paul II and His Holiness Benedict XVI consider these new ecclesial realities to be “providential”, that is, signs of the fruits of God’s designs for this historic time. Therefore, both Popes, welcomed, praised, recognised and encouraged these new movements and communities, convinced that they – and both Popes have reiterated this – “represent a secure newness, which is still waiting to be properly understood in light of its positive efficacy for the Kingdom of God at work in the present moment of history”.⁴

The bishops of the great continent of Asia have known how to gather and welcome this newness, in communion with the teaching of the recent Popes. In fact, on the

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¹ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 29.

² *Ibid.*

³ IDEM, Message for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, 27 May 1998.

⁴ IDEM, Speech to Communion and Liberation Movement on the 30th anniversary of its foundation, September 29, 1984.

recommendations of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, which took place in the Vatican from April 18th to May 14th, 1988, Pope John Paul II stated the following in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*: “One solid cause of hope is the increasing number of better trained, enthusiastic and Spirit-filled lay people, who are more and more aware of their specific vocation within the ecclesial community”⁵, with a “special recognition and praise” of lay catechists. He went on to add “The apostolic and charismatic movements too are a gift of the Spirit, bringing new life and vigour to the formation of lay men and women, families and the youth. Associations and ecclesial movements devoted to the promotion of human dignity and justice make accessible and tangible the universality of the evangelical message of our adoption as children of God”.⁶ The seminar, organised by the Federation of Asian Catholic Bishops (FABC), held January 24th to 26th 2010 in Pattaya, Thailand, on the “Role of Ecclesial Movements” and their “Mission in Asia”, is a sign of the Asian bishops growing awareness of this. In fact, in the Seminar’s final statement, participants quote the message of Pope Benedict XVI and propose the movements as an “inrush of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in contemporary society”, in such a way that “it is no longer possible to think of the life of the Church without including these gifts of God within it”. “We acknowledge the many blessings they have brought in the lives of individuals and communities, - the final statement affirms – through a revitalising of Christian life, renewed experience of Church, discovery of one’s vocation and awakening to mission”.

We know that the associating of faithful among themselves has always been present, in various forms, throughout the history of the Church.⁷ Should we not remember the still vibrant “secular third orders” and the many confraternities? We cannot forget that for more than six decades, your Churches have been the recipients of the good works of the Legion of Mary, the St Vincent de Paul Society and also those of the movements of Catholic Action. The II Vatican Council decree on the *Apostolate of the Laity* highlighted “the importance of the organisational forms of the lay apostolate” as an effective response “to human and Christian need and at the same time signifies the communion and unity of the Church in

⁵ IDEM, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. IDEM, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 29.

Christ”, recommending the development of associations at an international level.⁸ The “new era in group associations” has witnessed the development of many ecclesial movements and new communities within the universal Church, for example, the Cursillos de Cristiandad, the Work of Mary (Focolarini), the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (in its diverse communities, services and prayer groups), Communion and Liberation, the St. Egidio Community, the Emmanuel Community, ecclesial realities such as the Neocatechumenal Way, different associations of lay faithful in communion and collaboration with Religious Congregations and Missionary Institutes, and many more present here today. Many of these realities were born in different European nations, others in the United States, more recently others have been born in Latin American and Asian nations, such as the “Couples for Christ” and “Jesus Youth Movement”. All of them, however, are realities that are Catholic, universal and missionary in nature and in goal, and precisely for this reason they are increasingly present in diverse forms of incarnation of the Church on the various continents, cultures and situations. The charisms that gave birth to the ecclesial movements and new communities do not remain defined by the local Church nor circumscribed by the surrounding culture. The Christian experiences they generate expand to include various territorial, social and cultural areas, taking root in many particular churches. Their authenticity and fruitfulness are verified by their capacity to help people, of very diverse backgrounds, ages, temperaments, social and cultural contexts, ethnicities and nationalities, to encounter Christ and live the Christian experience. In this their original impetuosity of universality and totality manifests itself. This is also why on various occasions Card. Ratzinger explained that they are always a new gift for cooperation in the universal apostolic mission and, in a particular way, the Petrine ministry, in its apostolic duty to propagate the Gospel and baptise all nations until the ends of the earth (Cf *Mt.* 28:18). This leads to a better understanding of Pope Benedict XVI’s exhortation to the ecclesial movements and new communities at the world meeting of June 3rd 2006, when he stated: “I ask you to collaborate even more, very much more, in the Pope’s universal apostolic ministry, opening doors to Christ”.⁹

⁸ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 18 & 19.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, Homily in the prayer vigil and meeting (solemnity of Pentecost), St. Peter’s Square, Saturday, 3 June 2006.

What were the reasons that caused the Popes to recognise the “providential” nature of the new era of group endeavours of the lay faithful? His Holiness John Paul II expressed them in a synthetic and very illustrated way when he said: “There is so much need today for mature Christian personalities, conscious of their baptismal identity, of their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world! There is great need for living Christian communities! And here are the movements and the new ecclesial communities [...] You are this providential response”.¹⁰ They are the womb that nurture new generations of men and women who discover, thanks to their charisms and educational methods, the gratitude, the joy, the truth and the beauty of being Christian.

For this very reason, Divine Providence has blessed the Church in our time with an out pouring of charisms. What is a charism, synthetically, if not a gift (*gratia gratis data*) of the Holy Spirit (cf *1 Cor* 12:14-11), given to a single person in a specific time in order to start a unique experience of faith that will be useful for the building of the Church. This is what the Apostle Paul refers to when he points that charisms come from the one Spirit if they proclaim Jesus as Lord (cf *Cor* 12:3), they contribute to the growth of the Body of Christ (cf *1 Cor*12:7, 12, 22-27) and hold above all else the gift of charity (cf *1 Cor*13, *12 Cor* 6:6, *Gal* 5:22). Charisms open minds and move wills towards a new path of encounter and discipleship with the Lord. Through charisms, through a human encounter, the presence of Christ reaches people, it touches people’s eyes, ears, mouths, hearts, intelligence, freedom, and for this reason, is proof of a very real presence, capable of affection and persuasion, just as Christ did with the apostles and first disciples two thousand years ago. In this sense, movements are means through which the event of Christ and his mystery in history, the Church, encounters people in a moving, educating and convincing way. Thus within the movements we witness a serene confession, full of joy and hope, without hesitation or problematic inhibition, that Jesus is Lord. Here we find the essence, simplicity, and freshness of the Christian proposal. Thanks to the charisms, in associations and movements conform to ecclesial communion, the radicalism of the Gospel, the objective content of faith and the living stream of tradition, are persuasively communicated through personal experience, as an adhesion of one’s freedom to the event of Christ.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Address on the occasion of the Meeting with the Ecclesial Movements and the New Communities, Rome, 30 May 1998.

This is “providential” because everything in Christian life always begins from a surprising, renewed and fascinating encounter with Jesus Christ. His Holiness Benedict XVI writes in the encyclical *Deus caritas est*: “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”.¹¹ Today more than ever, we must allow ourselves to be grasped by Christ, in the midst of the tribulations of a world that does not know the real face of God or which rejects Him and holds Christian witness hostage.

The movements and new communities are also providential because they educate the sense of belonging to the Church understood and lived as a mystery of communion. Benedict XVI defined them as “schools of communion, groups journeying on in which one learns to live in the truth and love that Christ revealed and communicated to us through the witness of the Apostles, in the heart of the great family of his disciples”.¹² Or, as then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote in the book-interview “Salt of the earth” “vital cells” of support on the common journey, schools of real life, that “within a smaller reality, allow the great vital reality of the Church to be concretely experienced and practised”.¹³ From this we can affirm that these new realities have fostered a better recognition of the fact that the Church was founded on and is always renewed by the hierarchical, sacramental, and charismatic gifts that are co-essential to her.

Moreover, the ecclesial movements and new communities are “providential” because they are motivated by an *ad gentes* missionary responsibility and impetus. Mission is certainly not an extra to Christian life, a marketing strategy or fanatical proselytism, but a communicating to others of the gift of the encounter with the Lord, who has given a sense, a direction, a new taste and the promise of the fulfilment to our existence. And it is so true, so beautiful, so good in all that it expresses that we are compelled to share it with everyone, propose it to the freedom of all, for love of their life and their destiny. Therefore we can state with certainty that the rooted implantation of the Catholic Christian identity, is not found in a closing in on oneself protectionism, rather it is a condition and renewed

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1.

¹² IDEM, Message to the participants of the Second World Congress on Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, 22 May 2006.

¹³ JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth: the Church at the end of the Millennium: an interview with Peter Seewald*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997.

impetuous to be explicitly present, visible, without fear or calculation, in all areas and situations of life as communicators of the extraordinary gift of the encounter with Christ. For this very reason, a positive charge multiplies and deepens all encounters. Thus the movements are subjects of evangelisation, promoters of ecumenism in their wide range of experience of friendships, prayers and collaboration with Christians of other confessions and communities, capable of appreciating the religious sense present in the encounters with believers of the great monotheistic traditions or other religious traditions, as well as being capable of rejecting all idolatry or fundamentalist degeneration, while remaining committed to a dialogue open to all cultures. A Christian view appreciates every trace of good and truth, every sense of the Mystery, nostalgia and desire for God, within the Divine plan that takes place in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's Revelation, the true face of the only God, the only Mediator, our only Lord, our only Saviour. The most important question, which is the measure of the true Christian value of each individual, community or Church institution, is their *ad gentes* impetus, to "open the doors of Asia to Christ", which is the greatest gift and supreme service that one could give the Asian peoples.

Moreover, the missionary momentum of the movements and new communities encourages parishes to become missionary, not only with extraordinary and episodic activities but with a permanent attitude of "ordinary pastoral activity". It must not be subjugated by the rhythm of routine, rather continually reawakened by the presence of Christ and his passion for life and the destiny of mankind. It is a call to come out from the comfortable shadows of the bell tower and become a public, visible and active sign of mission in the midst of that portion of territory and people entrusted to you, to live on the streets of the neighbourhood among the people, which is to meet their needs, to welcome with a preferential love the poor and those who suffer, to take on the pastoral care of schools, hospitals and places of work and entertainment. "The parish must search for itself, outside of itself" John Paul II would say and Benedict XVI speaks of "auto-transcendence" of parishes as an antidote to closure within the walls of the temples and sacristies. The missionary zeal widens our gaze beyond the circle of the practising Catholics to promote new forms of presence in favour of those who are far, of those who are still missing, of those who do not believe, of those who are seeking...an authentic *ad gentes* mission! It is precisely in this area where we can find an opportunity for an excellent collaboration between parishes, small communities, movements and new communities.

Referring to this new era of group endeavour – in which all of your associations, movements and communities recognized themselves – in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II asked for a two-fold attitude: humility in presence, cordiality in welcome.¹⁴ This humility is demanded of every association, every movement and every new community as they are present in the different local Churches of Asia. First of all this implies knowledge of the vastly different social, cultural, and political situations of their incarnation. It requires also to know how to respond to God’s call manifest in their very ancient religious and cultural traditions in anticipation of encountering the real face of God in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it requires the appreciation of the mission and tradition of these Churches and the holiness they have sowed, cultivated and reaped, built on their witness, at times even heroic. It implies, *in primis*, an attitude of communion with their bishops, attentive to their indications; openness to sharing your charismatic, educational and missionary wealth with the local Church; the will for active and lively collaboration; a presence in the parish, that is a community of communities.

At the same time, Pastors are asked to be cordial in their welcome, which implies respect for their freedom of association and their charisms recognised by the Holy See as the Spirit’s gift for the universal Church. Cordiality appeals to the heart of the Good Shepherd, who learns how to get to know well the different members of his flock, to welcome them with magnanimity and care for their well being with paternal love. “I therefore ask you to approach movements with a great of love”¹⁵: with these words Benedict XVI exhorted a group of German bishops on. If the movements and new communities are bearers of the gift of the Spirit, formational methods and missionary subjects, then there should be a sense of gratitude and joy for the precious contribution that they bring to the local Churches, enriched by the Christian experiences circulating in the living blood of Catholicity.

In any case, we must be careful to avoid any contraposition between the local church and universal Church, between the parish, small communities and movements. John Paul II stated “Moreover, if we are to build the common house together, then any spirit of

¹⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, no.71.

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Address to the Bishop of German Bishops’ Conference on their *ad limina* visit in the Consistory Hall, 18 November 2006; cf. IDEM, Address to the Bishops of the German Bishops’ Conference, 21 August 2005.

antagonism and strife must be put aside, and people instead must come to love one another with mutual affection; (cf. *Rm* 12, 10), anticipate one another in showing respect and the will to collaborate, with patience and foresight, willing to make those sacrifices that are sometimes required”¹⁶, always allowing that which is demanded in the hymn of love prevail (*I Cor.* 13:1-13). Parishes, movements and new communities, but also other groups of faithful, religious communities, shrines, rectories, chaplaincies, centres for apostolate....express the freedom of forms in which the one Church is realised. In this way, the mystery of communion is realised as a living synthesis of unity and pluriformity: pluriformity is born of unity and finds its’ roots, its expressive space and its goal in unity. This allowed John Paul II to write in the Apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* that “Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up”.¹⁷ On June 3rd 2006, Benedict XVI explained to the movements and new communities that the Holy Spirit “wants your diversity and he wants you for the one body, in union with the permanent orders - the joints - of the Church, with the successors of the Apostles and with the Successor of St Peter. He does not lessen our efforts to learn the way of relating to one another; but he also shows us that he works with a view to the one body and in the unity of the one body. It is precisely in this way that unity obtains its strength and beauty”.¹⁸ And he went on to make this exhortation “take part in the edification of the one body! Pastors must be careful not to extinguish the Spirit (cf. *I Thes* 5: 19) and you will not cease to bring your gifts to the entire community. Once again, the Spirit blows where he wills. But his will is unity. He leads us towards Christ through his Body”.¹⁹

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Address to participants in the Convention of the Italian Catholic Church in Loreto, April 11, 1985.

¹⁷ IDEM, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 43.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Homily in the prayer vigil and meeting (solemnity of Pentecost), St. Peter's Square, Saturday, 3 June 2006.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*