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Taking the Catholic Pulse

Pentecost pope affirms charismatic renewal as ‘current of grace’

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June 5, 2017

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Pope Francis prays with Catholic charismatics during the vigil of the feast of Pentecost in Rome.
(Credit: Siciliani-Gennari/SIR.)

ROME - Addressing one of his favorite topics, Pope Francis spoke energetically over Pentecost weekend to huge crowds at the Circus Maximus and at St. Peter's Square of the creative power of the Holy Spirit to unify through diversity, while bringing peace, joy and courage.

Following three hours of high-octane praise and testimonies in many languages under a hot sky, Francis arrived at the Circus Maximus before 6 pm on Saturday to the strains of the Latin-American charismatic classic *Vive Jesús El Señor*.

He was there to mark the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), which held four days of meetings in Rome last week.

The start of the "renewal," as it is known, is usually considered to be a weekend at Duquesnes University in Pittsburgh in 1967 when staff and students were "baptised in the Spirit" following prayers with Pentecostals.

Francis, who has long been close to the renewal, stood on stage to celebrate the vigil of Pentecost with many of its leaders and pioneers and a smattering of cardinals and evangelical pastors, before an ebullient crowd of over 50,000 from more than 120 countries.

Under a huge banner declaring 'Jesus Is Lord,' Francis was flanked on stage throughout by two laywomen: Michelle Moran, president of the renewal's Rome-based office, the ICCRS, and Patti Gallagher Mansfield, a speaker and theologian who was one of the original group in 1967 to receive the baptism of the spirit.

During one of the praise sessions, while the band sang 'How Great is Our God,' the pope stood with his hands outstretched and eyes closed, mouthing words if not exactly singing, while next to him the two women fell on their knees and prayed in tongues.

Francis had told the CCR that he had wanted the celebrations to be ecumenical and to focus on the Spirit's call to the Churches to come together as one. But rather than delegates from the other Churches, the non-Catholics on stage with him were mostly evangelicals and Pentecostals who have long been involved with CCR movements.

Among those speaking were Norberto Saracco from Buenos Aires and Giovanni Traettino, the pastor whom he visited in Caserta in 2014, who returned time and again to the theme of a new unity in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“The movement of the Holy Spirit, also known as the Pentecostal movement, has in its DNA - its life in the Holy Spirit - the vocation to build Christian unity,” Traettino said, adding that “the election of Pope Francis clearly opened a new season, especially in relations with us.”

Saracco, too, alluded to the “new times” Francis had brought.

“Even a few years ago, we could never have imagined that this was possible,” he said.

The CCR’s best-known figure, the preacher to the papal household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, likened the divisions in the Christian Church to the construction of the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis - using God’s name to justify different churches claiming superiority over the others.

At Pentecost, he said, the Holy Spirit overturned the sin of Babel by re-focusing the apostles on Jesus Christ, renewing their hearts and minds through a baptism in the Spirit, and causing them to move on from their “small unity” to “the great unity which is the whole body of Christ, namely, humanity.” After Pentecost the disciples came to realize that if God had poured out the same Spirit on both pagans and Jews, they could not oppose His action.

The same realization, said Cantalamessa, had come to Christians today through the charismatic renewal, when it was clear that “God has poured out His Spirit on millions of faithful belonging to almost all Christian denominations, and, in case there remained any doubt about His intentions, poured them out with identical expressions, including the strangest of all - speaking in tongues.”

In his 23-minute address, Francis hit many of his favorite themes when speaking of Christian unity: the call to a “reconciled diversity” by proclaiming together the Lordship of Christ despite inter-confessional differences; the way that the charismatic renewal was “born ecumenical”; and the witness to an “ecumenism of blood” being given across the world, as Christians of all

denominations were murdered by killers who made no distinction between Catholics and Lutherans, Orthodox and Protestant. Impelled by this witness, Francis said Christian unity was more urgent than ever as the Spirit called Christians to walk together, in prayer and acting in favor of the weakest.

“Walking together, working together, loving each other, and together seeking to explain our differences and seeking agreement, but on the way! If we stay put, without walking together, we will never, ever, reach agreement, because the Spirit wants us walking,” the pope said, adding that the CCR was “a privileged place for moving along the road towards unity.”

The pope’s address gently located the renewal at the heart of the Church while highlighting its temptations. Describing it as a “current of grace” meant for the whole Church, he warned that no one could claim to own it, while all in the Church were called to serve it.

Referring to the renewal’s distinctive evangelical-style worship, the pope described ‘praise’ as “the prayer of recognition and action of grace for the gratuitous love of God.” It may not be to everyone’s liking, he added, but “it is true that it fully belongs in the Biblical tradition,” and warned against Michal’s disapproval of King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant in the second Book of Samuel.

While affirming the renewal, Francis was also nudging it to recover more of its social dimension. In defining the renewal in three-fold terms as baptism in the Spirit, praise and service of humanity, he said all three aspects were indissolubly linked. The coming of the Spirit meant that no one among the apostles went without, he noted, and urged people to read the the third of the theological reflections on the CCR known as the Malines documents, which was in part written by Brazilian Bishop Helder Câmara.

On Sunday morning Francis brought to a close the five-day CCR Jubilee by celebrating Pentecost Mass in St. Peter’s Square, focusing in his homily on the way the Holy Spirit creates a new people and puts in them a new heart.

He warned against the twin temptations of seeking diversity without unity or unity without diversity. The first temptation was of those who “become Christians of the ‘left’ or of the ‘right,’ before being on the side of Jesus, unbending guardians of the past or the avant-garde of the future before being humble and grateful children of the Church.” The opposite temptation was confusing unity with uniformity, in which “unity ends up being homogeneity and no longer freedom.”

The second ‘new thing’ brought by the Holy Spirit was a forgiving heart, Francis said. “The Spirit is the first gift of the risen Lord, and is given above all for the forgiveness of sins,” he said, adding that forgiveness was the cement or glue binding the bricks of the Church. Forgiveness, he said, “sets our hearts free and enables us to start afresh,” he said. “Without forgiveness, the Church is not built up.”

During the Angelus blessing following the Pentecost Mass, Francis prayed for the victims of Saturday night’s terror attack in London that killed seven and left three times that number in a critical condition in hospital.

Francis prayed that the Holy Spirit “grant peace to the whole world and heal the wounds of war and of terrorism, which also last night, in London, struck innocent victims.”

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