

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CATHOLIC CHARISMATICS IN THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>

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A description and evaluation of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCRM) in the Philippines is a research matter that could lead to the publication of several studies. Based on my own pastoral experience, some interviews and from a limited number of published materials, I attempt to give an initial sketch. After a short introduction about the origin of the CCRM, I look into three manifestations of the Charismatic Renewal in the Philippines: the CCRM that is guided by the episcopate, the El Shaddai of Brother Mike Velarde and finally the meeting of the Charismatic Movement with Philippine Folk Catholicism. I conclude by presenting some elements to evaluate the significance of the CCRM for the renewal of Christian life in the Philippines.

I have never been a member of a charismatic community. Hence, this evaluation is written from the point of view of an outsider who only has a limited experience with charismatic groups as pastor and theologian, having taught for a short period at a charismatic renewal center.

## **The Origin of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCRM) in the Philippines**

### *The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)*

Yves Congar, one of the *periti* during the Second Vatican Council, believes that the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation caused an “eclipse of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Many theologians and

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<sup>1</sup> The population of the Philippines: 81,159,644 (July 2000 estimate). Religions: Roman Catholic - 83%; Protestant - 9%; Muslim - 5%; Buddhist; and others - 3%.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Joy Luz, *Encountering the Spirit of Life: An Exposition and Conceptual Analysis of the Pneumatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1999, unpublished), 44-53. Luz refers to the work of Y. Congar and others.

Church leaders have downplayed the role of the Spirit by a one-sided Christomonism, by the conviction that the Spirit acts only through the intermediary of the Church's institution and by the fear of a Spirit associated with freedom, risk and breaking away from structures. "When I was young," writes the cardinal protector of the first generation of Catholic charismatics, León Joseph Suenens, "the Church was presented to us as a hierarchical society: it was described as 'juridically perfect,' having within itself all the powers necessary to promote its own existence."<sup>3</sup> The Spirit was subordinated to the hierarchical Church, "making the Spirit appear as the Spirit of the Church, rather than the Church as the Church of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

The Second Vatican Council corrected this situation partly by adopting a Trinitarian view of the economy of salvation in which the Holy Spirit is seen as the life-principle of the Church. Moreover, the Council also rediscovered the Pauline charismatic view of the Church and reassessed the importance of the local Churches. The Church should be seen as a communion of Churches, with the Holy Spirit as principle of communion. This reaffirmation of the role of the Spirit was not free from ambiguity. In Chapter Three of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, a legal-institutional view is set side by side with a salvation-historical approach. The Holy Spirit apparently remains the captive of the Church's hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

The Council is not the only event that made the appearance of the charismatic movement possible in the Catholic Church. The liturgical movement, the scriptural renewal, Catholic action and other movements before the Council prepared the way for the renewal of ecclesiology. One of these movements, the *Cursillo de Cristianidad*, has greatly helped in the launching of the charismatic renewal in the Philippines. The Cursillo (Spanish, meaning short course) originated in Spain in the 1940's. It entered the Philippines via the United States and was a success in the 60's and 70's. The pre-Vatican II Philippine Catholic Church was basically a sacramental service station for women that was run by a male clergy. The Cursillo had a great impact on the renewal of the Church because it attracted the men. It

<sup>3</sup> León Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *A New Pentecost?*, trans. F. Martin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Luz, *Encountering the Spirit of Life*, 50. Luz quotes Brian Gaybba, *The Spirit of Love* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 111.

<sup>5</sup> Lode Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990), 43-60.

was in fact a male movement during its first years. At a Cursillo weekend, participants went through a conversion experience and were encouraged to help other Cursillistas in fulfilling their baptismal vows. The group reunions or *ultreya* (Spanish, meaning onward) renewed their conversion experience. Many of the Cursillistas became leaders of the parish renewal.

### ***The Duquesne Experience***<sup>6</sup>

The professors of Duquesne University who initiated the charismatic movement in the Roman Catholic Church, were Cursillistas involved in prayer and social action groups. In their search to deepen their prayer experience, they joined a neo-pentecostal group. This brought them in contact with the Azusa Street Renewal which is at the origin of the 20th century's Pentecostal "Fire from Heaven."<sup>7</sup> Pentecost became a newly discovered reality for them. They received the baptism of the Spirit that led to a transformation of their lives. The professors were advisers of a youth group and they shared their experience with them. The Spirit's response to the yearning of these young people was a similar renewal of life and commitment.

The initial experience of this youth group took place in 1967. These young people shared their experience with the faculty and students of other universities. Prayer groups and communities sprang up first in the United States and then in other countries. The CCRM was born.

Cardinal Suenens was instrumental for the acceptance of this new movement by the leadership of the Catholic Church. In 1974, the cardinal invited an international team of charismatics and theologians to Belgium. They produced the Malines document<sup>8</sup> that became a sort of reference point in the growth of the CCRM. In 1975, a convention of charismatics was held in Rome. Pope Paul VI concelebrated with the cardinal and gave his official blessing to the movement.

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<sup>6</sup> René Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977), 11-17; Mansfield, Patti, G. *As By a New Pentecost* (Steubenville: Franciscan University Press, 1992), 3-28; Edward D. O'Connor, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1971), 39-107.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (London: Cassell, 1996): 45-78.

<sup>8</sup> *Theological and Pastoral Orientations on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal* (Malines, 1974).

### *Catholic Charismatics in the Philippines<sup>9</sup>*

Several factors collaborated in the origin of the CCRM in the Philippines in the early 70's. First, some Protestant groups, influenced by the neo-pentecostal movement, organized prayer meetings that were also attended by Catholics. Second, some Filipino religious experienced the CCRM in the United States and they started charismatic prayer groups in the Philippines. Prayer meetings even reached Mindanao through the Maryknoll missionaries. Third, Assumption sisters who came in contact with the charismatic movement in Paris founded a charismatic prayer meeting. Some newcomers started to pray and sing in tongues. They spoke of the gifts of the spirit. They asked for the baptism of the spirit and the release of charismatic gifts. From a small group in mid-73, the Assumption prayer meeting grew to a number of more than one thousand in one year. Charismatic groups then spread all over Manila and the surrounding provinces.

The "officially approved" CCRM that is sponsored by the Philippine episcopate has mainly been a middle-class movement. This is quite normal because the majority of practicing Catholics in the Philippines are middle-class people. The bishops set the boundaries of the movement at an early stage. Priests were assigned as spiritual directors and diocesan offices were organized. The institutionalization was partly motivated by the fear of "losing" people to "Protestant Pentecostalism," which was lumped together with the strongly proselytizing American fundamentalist groups. A dam had to be put up to stop the invasion of the "sects."<sup>10</sup>

In the promulgation of the "Guidelines for the CCRM in the Archdiocese of Manila,"<sup>11</sup> Cardinal Sin warns about the dangers of ecumenical or interdenominational charismatic groups or activities. "Indiscriminate or less prudent participation of Catholics in so-called ecumenical or charismatic prayer groups has created considerable confusion in not a few of both faithful and pastors," writes the cardinal. His fear is somehow counter-

<sup>9</sup> Nazario E. Caparanga, *The Spirit of Love Community: A Typological Description* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1998, unpublished), 11-15. Rev. Herbert Schneider, SJ, one of the pioneers of the CCRM in the Philippines, retold the story during an interview.

<sup>10</sup> *Catholic Guidelines on Fundamentalism* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> *Guidelines of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in the Archdiocese of Manila* (Archdiocesan Office for Research and Development, 1981), henceforth, *Guidelines*.

acted at the end of the Guidelines where it stated “that Catholics can worship together with other Christians without fear of intellectual and theological hostilities and debate is a welcome phenomenon ... and a work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

## The CCRM

### *The Parish Groups*<sup>13</sup>

Beautiful statements have been written in the Philippine Catholic Church about renewal and restructuring of the parishes, making them into a communion of Basic Christian Communities. This Church has to become, not only a Church for but a Church of the poor.<sup>14</sup> In the Archdiocese of Manila and many other dioceses, the picture we get, however, is a very different one. The priest-centered parish with its “mandated” organizations still follows very much the traditional pattern. Charismatic prayer groups have to fit in and become one of the mandated organizations where one or several groups of people have a prayer experience every week.

To become an official member of such a charismatic prayer group, one has to attend a “Life in the Spirit Seminar.” The seminar, mostly led by lay people of a covenant community and organized in the parish or in a charismatic prayer center, follows a fixed pattern. Seven topics are discussed: God’s Love, Salvation, New Life, Receiving God’s Gift, Manifestation of the Spirit, Growth and Transformation. The speakers try to capture their audience by bringing in personal experiences and testimonies. Yet, the basic truths have also to be presented. As a theologian, having attended some of the sessions of such a seminar, I admired the oratorical skills of the speakers, but not the theological content of their talks.<sup>15</sup> Most of the CCRM groups have to catch up with the renewal in scripture study and in theology that has taken place in the recent decades.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>13</sup> Caparanga, *The Spirit of Love Community*, 16-30; Guidelines, 21-24, 33-34. I also relied on interviews with leaders of some parish groups.

<sup>14</sup> *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, 1991), 47-53.

<sup>15</sup> *The Life in the Spirit Seminars* (Notre Dame: Charismatic Renewal Services Inc., 1973). The book of Herbert Mühlen, *A Charismatic Theology: Initiation in the Spirit*, trans. Edward Quin & Thomas Linton (London: Burns & Oates, 1978) would have been a better guideline.

The culminating point of the Life in the Spirit Seminar is the baptism in the Spirit. This means for many of the participants a real conversion experience. They become new members of a prayer group which has to sustain “the life in the Spirit” that they received during the seminar. What happens during these prayer meetings depends very much on the leadership. In the beginning, many of these meetings were full of life and activity. People spoke in tongues. They were slain in the Spirit and healers were called in. Later on, however, prayer meetings seem to have been tamed. They are very much limited simply to bible study and the sharing of experiences.

The Guidelines rightly laments that the charisms of the Spirit do not seem to go beyond the prayer group. “Some groups appear to be reluctant to take active interest in the needs of those around them (...) and tend to become closed circles instead of springboards for service in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

In Metro Manila, the “Alliance of Parochial Charismatic Communities” is supplemented by the “Community of Office-Based Prayer Groups”. Employees of banks or business corporations meet during their break or after work to have a prayer meeting or bible study. Some office towers in the financial district of Makati have a chapel, sponsored by a business company, where the charismatic group meets. Some groups of office workers meet every month in the Greenbelt Church of Makati and celebrate a healing mass. Office groups attempt to reach out. Some succeed, for example, in creating new groups in government offices. They also take some initiative in helping poor people, the elderly and the street children.

### ***The Covenant Communities***

The Life in the Spirit seminar, followed by prayer meetings and some outreach programs, has not been enough for some Catholics who experienced a radical conversion experience. They looked for something more. Brother Vic Gutierrez, Senior Head Coordinator of *Ligaya ng Panginoon* (Joy of the Lord), the first covenant community in the Philippines, expressed this new call in the following words: “we felt the challenge to explore how we can become practicing Christians from Monday to Sunday.”

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<sup>16</sup> *Guidelines*, 1981, 25.

I briefly describe the history and organization of this first covenant community.<sup>17</sup> The original group of 41 used to be members of the Assumption prayer groups. In 1975, under the leadership of Rev. Herbert Schneider, a Jesuit, they organized a weekend retreat at the East Asian Pastoral Institute. At the end of the retreat, the decision was taken to start a community. But how this could be done among married people was not very clear. Schneider brought them in contact with the Ann Arbor community of the United States. Some joined a workshop in Ann Arbor while leaders of the American community visited the Philippines and shared their expertise with the group. Among them were Stephen Clark and Ralph Martin. The group went into a long period of training. Finally, the group members made their covenant promise in the beginning of the 80's. In their promise which is renewed every year, each member pledges to live as a follower of Christ, to faithfully attend all the activities of the community, to relate with one another in love and to give financial support to the community.

At present, Ligaya ng Panginoon is a cluster of covenant communities in the Philippines with more or less 2000 members. It created a network of movements for the evangelization of the different sectors of Philippine society: Brotherhood of Christian Businessmen and Professionals (BCBP), Christ's Youth in Action, Women for Christ. It also organized a partnership with covenant communities which it helped develop in India, Singapore, Pakistan, USA and Canada. Its main office reprints and distributes catholic literature (Word of Joy Publications), runs a training center (Institute for Pastoral Development) and is a member of two international organizations, the Christ the King Association (Catholic) and The Sword and The Spirit (Ecumenical).

In Manila, Ligaya ng Panginoon belongs to the Federation of Transparochial Communities. The federation has some thirty members. Among them are *Bukas Loob sa Diyos*, *Buklod ng Pagibig*, *Elim* and the *Spirit of Love Catholic Community*. Some of these communities reach out beyond the boundaries of the Philippines. They have foundations mainly among the Filipino migrants in Hong Kong, the USA and Canada. One organization that had a great impact in the Philippines and spread to other

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<sup>17</sup> See the Word of Joy publications. I rely mainly on an interview with Brother Vic Gutierrez.

countries is the Couples for Christ (CFC). The CFC started from marriage encounters within the Ligaya ng Panginoon. It became a separate entity and took as its mission the evangelization of families. At the same time, it refocused its thrust to include social responsibility to change the lives of the poor and the marginalized sectors of the country. The CFC participated in an active way in the campaign to oust President Joseph Estrada and the election of a group of new senators.

### *Fringe Groups*

Early Pentecostalism showed a pattern of division and proliferation. A similar pattern is present in the Philippine CCRM, notwithstanding the interventions of the Catholic hierarchy which tries to keep the movement within the diocesan and parochial boundaries. The leadership in many a group splits and each leader starts his or her own group. Some of the priest leaders take part in movements towards division. The most famous among them is Archie Guiriba, a Franciscan priest, who founded *Shalom* and organizes his own TV masses and miracle crusades. In some dioceses, bishops try to stop the spread of this group. Yet people are very much attracted by the healing sessions. They keep flocking to the masses and prayer rallies of Guiriba.

One of the causes of the split of the early charismatic movement is its elitist character. Charismatics are middle class people who somehow realize that they have “to put good order into their private life.”<sup>18</sup> This promise of generous, practicing Catholics hardly addresses the chaotic world of the poor who have to survive in the slums of the cities. William Joseph Seymour, one of the initiators of Pentecostalism, believed “that the breaking of the color line was a much surer sign than tongue speaking of God’s blessing and the Spirit’s healing presence.”<sup>19</sup> In the Philippines, the line to be broken is not color but social classes. The boundary set by the official Church to belong to a charismatic group is formulated by the middle class clergy and laity. It is a boundary of power and possession. Ordinary people are not able to cross this boundary to find a home within the charismatic move-

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<sup>18</sup> See the “The Promise of the Sacred Heart Community,” a covenant community in Baguio City.

<sup>19</sup> Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 64.



ment. They search for other charismatic manifestations. This explains the El Shaddai phenomenon and the many popular expressions of charismata.

## Brother Mike Velarde and El Shaddai

Described by *Asiaweek* in 1996 as a Filipino superstar and classified among the 50 most powerful people of Asia is the Catholic preacher Mariano “Mike” Z. Velarde in 1996. He is lovingly called “Brother Mike” by the members of his El Shaddai congregation.<sup>20</sup>

Mike’s story started in 1978.<sup>21</sup> At the age of 37, he was waiting in a hospital for a heart surgery. He believes that he was miraculously healed after receiving a revelation. In the following years, as a movie producer and a real estate developer, Mike gave his financial support to the CCRM in Manila. He founded the El Shaddai DWXI-PPFI (Prayer Partner Foundation, Inc) and devoted himself to the radio apostolate. A new revelation in 1982 told him, “Come, and build Me a center.” This led to a master plan for a huge basilica. He brought the plan all the way to Rome to be blessed by the Pope. God, however, had other plans. Mike experienced three major setbacks that he attributed to the devil. In 1984, his business collapsed. This was followed by a crises in his family and his DWXI radio station. Through these crises, he understood the real meaning of God’s call. God did not want him to build a basilica but a holy temple of people instead.

In 1988, Mike Velarde’s “financial trouble was miraculously over.” Since then, “the work of the Lord at DWXI-PPFI has spread unto the ends of the earth. Chapters in Hong Kong, Canada, USA, Singapore, the Middle East, Italy, United Kingdom and Japan have mushroomed.”<sup>22</sup> The El Shaddai has indeed experienced a phenomenal growth. The organization now has more than half a million card-bearing members in the Philippines and a hundred thousand abroad. Its real following by “attendants” is much higher. It is estimated to reach as high as seven million.

<sup>20</sup> *Asiaweek*, 20 September 1996, 36-43. El Shaddai, the mountain (almighty) God, is an ancient name for Yahweh, found frequently in the P (Priestly) tradition (e.g., Gen. 28:3; Ex. 6:3).

<sup>21</sup> Brother Mariano “Mike” Z. Velarde, *How to Win Your Battles All the Time* (Makati: El Shaddai Miracle Publications, 1992). *El Shaddai: General Pastoral Guidelines for Service Volunteer Workers* (1994). See Esmeralda Fortunado-Sanchez, *Karanasan ng Ilang Kasapi ng El Shaddai - DWXI-PPFI* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Velarde, *How to Win*, 29.

During election campaigns, politicians attend El Shaddai rallies. Mike became President Joseph Estrada's spiritual adviser in 1998. He skillfully adjusted his position, however, after the fall of Estrada in 2001.

Financially, the El Shaddai also became a success story. Its headquarters in the financial district of Makati is occupied by a group of enthusiastic people who run a huge organization. Many have questioned the non-transparency of the donations from Mike's followers. No doubt, money and Mike's political role have triggered a lot of controversy. Mike himself defends his position and is not afraid to mention his past as a gambler. Gambling becomes a metaphor for his leap of faith. "So far," he says of the salvation business, "this is my greatest risk."<sup>23</sup>

The El Shaddai has its weekly celebration in a huge field near the Philippine International Convention Center in Manila. The anniversary and Easter celebrations at the Rizal Park draw crowds of a million and more. These celebrations are broadcast on television and radio. They are often attended by the chaplain of the El Shaddai in the Archdiocese of Manila, Bishop Teodoro Bacani. On the local level, the El Shaddai has parish chapters. They are supervised by the parish priest who is the spiritual director. The chapters organize a monthly mass and study of the Catholic Catechism, weekly prayer meetings, seminars and healing rallies. They not only fund their own activities and support the parish but also contribute 20% to the national fund of the foundation. The El Shaddai tries to help its followers financially.

One who reads the Pastoral Guidelines<sup>24</sup> of El Shaddai may feel rather uneasy when reading its conclusion: "So we will always joyfully shout: Don't worry! Be happy!!! If you obey, your miracle is on the way!" The message of Mike Velarde is not a complex theological treatise. It is straightforward language addressing the experience of people, especially the poor. He tells them: "God loves you. Do the will of God and the Lord will take care of you, even materially. Be generous and the Lord will be generous. God is present with his blessings, but we should also be willing to accept suffering in life."

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<sup>23</sup> *Asiaweek*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Velarde, *El Shaddai: General Pastoral Guidelines*.

Mike's universe is the popular universe of primal religion that is still very much present in the Philippines. Evil spirits control every disease. But by prayer, one will be able to expel these spirits. Brother Mike is a great speaker who puts all Catholic clerics to shame. He has a style of his own. He is relaxed and conversational. He gives sermons with humor and jokes yet remains authoritative. He feels one with the people, uses their symbols and give them homely reminders that touch their hearts. Theologians may suspect him of proclaiming the "prosperity gospel" of the televangelists. But he is probably much more down to earth and his message is rooted in the very struggle for survival of every Filipino in search of a job, food, health and a home.

What explains the success of the El Shaddai? In an excellent study, Leonardo Mercado sums up eight factors.<sup>25</sup> I have mentioned some of them: the charisma of Mike, an attractive liturgy, effective communication, an inculturated message and the empowerment of the laity. I would like to also quote the concluding passage of the Asiaweek article. "For all the priests and politicians that pay him homage, though, Velarde does not seem to fit the role of power broker. And for all the money El Shaddai draws, Brother Mike does not appear to be a cunning televangelist of the notorious American variety. If anything, he is most similar to a self-help guru, a preacher of positive thinking and mental healing. And like those spiritual cheerleaders, he offers a philosophy (I call it "a theology") that seems sincere, if naive. That his teachings have rekindled confidence and hope among many of the poor is perhaps, in itself, enough of a miracle."<sup>26</sup>

## Folk Catholicism and the CCRM

Harvey Cox sees the widespread appeal of Pentecostalism in the light of what he calls the recovery of "primal spirituality."<sup>27</sup> People re-discovered within the Pentecostal experience the three dimensions of this elemental spirituality: primal speech, primalpiety, and primal hope. In the popular El Shaddai movement, we see this spirituality at work. People experience a

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<sup>25</sup> Leonardo Mercado, "El Shaddai and Inculturation," *Philippiniana Sacra*, 35 (September-December 2000): 485-511.

<sup>26</sup> *Asiaweek*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 81.

religiosity which is still very much alive in Filipino folk catholicism.<sup>28</sup> Filipinos are still at home in a universe where a Great Creator, *Apo* (elder) *Dios* overlooks the world and brings life to it by being present through a wide variety of spirits and ancestors. Many communities still have their native priest/ess (*babaylan*, shaman) who functions as a kind of powerbroker. S/he helps people to be in harmony or to restore peace with the world of spirits. The priest/ess goes into a trance (*langkap*, *sinasapian*, means “possessed by”) and becomes the medium in prayer, prophecy and healing. Popular catholicism adopted this primal worldview but added its saints and the greatest mediators of all, Jesus and Mary. Mike Velarde’s El Shaddai is a charismatic movement that is inculturated within that universe of popular catholicism. Mike is the great mediator, prophet and healer who brings people in contact with God and the spirits and mediates for them.

Brother Mike has many companions. In the 19th century, religious millenarian movements in Mount Banahaw, south of Manila, attracted many followers. These communities are still alive today.<sup>29</sup> In 1914, Felix Manalo established the *Iglesia ni Kristo* (INK) among the uneducated laboring class. He was “the angel from the east” (Is. 43:5) and God’s last messenger on earth. Manalo got his inspiration from messianic sectarian movements in the USA. Today, the *Iglesia* counts around three million followers.

Cities and towns in the Philippines still have an *Apo* (or *Inkong*, elder) around who functions as a mediator with the spirits. The *Apo* gets possessed by the Santo Niño, Jesus Nazareno, Mary or one of the saints and leads the community in communicating with the world of the sacred. This manifestation of the Philippine age-old primal religion has been a fertile ground for some charismatic leaders who founded their own communities. Only a few studies on recent religious movements are available. I briefly summarize one particular experience where a group of Cursillistas and Catholic charismatics founded “Sacrifice Valley,” a community led by *Inkong Viring* (Virginia).

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<sup>28</sup> See the books of Leonardo Mercado, *Doing Filipino Theology* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1997) and *Filipino Popular Devotions* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Robert C. Salazar, ed., *New Religious Movements in Asia and the Pacific Islands* (Manila: De La Salle University, 1994), 176-189.

The community is situated in the countryside, north of Manila. Virginia was a cursillista who came in contact with charismatic prayer groups in the beginning of the 70's and had a new conversion experience. She believed that the Spirit took possession of her body and made her re-live the experience of Jesus. She moved with her followers to a lonely place. They set up a cluster of houses. Saturday is a day of worship. When her disciples pray together, Virginia gets into a trance and delivers Jesus' messages mostly about conversion because the end is coming. People approach her and ask for healing. In the healing sessions, Virginia uses holy water and herbal concoctions. This is often accompanied by a purification rite where people confess their wrongdoings. Some are "slain by the spirit."

During Lent and the Holy Week, devotees flock to the place of *Apo* Viring to witness her way of the cross, crucifixion, death and resurrection, while being possessed by Jesus' Spirit. This re-enactment is followed by a healing session in the evening. On Saturday morning, at least during the first years of the community, one of the *apos* (elders) presided in the celebration of the Eucharist. How such a celebration led by a lay person could be a valid Eucharist was explained by pointing to the presence of *Inkong* Virginia. Since Virginia was possessed by Jesus, the Holy Spirit was also present and took care of the consecration. In later years, the community tried to get the approval of the bishop of the place and desisted from celebrating the Eucharist without the presence of a Catholic priest.

Are "Sacrifice Valley" and many other popular practices manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit? They certainly do not carry the official approval of the Roman Catholic Church. And yet, the question has to be asked: did the Catholic hierarchy not stifle the charisms of the spirit within a legalistic and ritual structure which offered very little to the common people who are searching for some respite and well-being (*ginhawa*) in the midst of poverty, sickness and suffering? I will not enter into a full-blown discernment process about the validity of the different charismatic experiences I described.<sup>30</sup> I end with some impressionist ideas about the significance of the CCRM for the Filipino Catholic Church and nation.

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<sup>30</sup> See David Middlemiss, *Interpreting Charismatic Experience* (London: SCM Press, 1996).

## The Significance of the CCRM

### *Church Renewal*

The renewal of the Catholic Church in the Philippines after the Second Vatican Council had a very slow start. Mike Velarde rightly claims that “Filipino Catholics went over to the Born-Again groups because the Catholic Church has been sacramentalized; it did not evangelize.”<sup>31</sup> We are a priest-centered Church and these priests are tied up with sacramental duties. The CCRM and the El Shaddai have contributed greatly to changing the face of the Church by reconnecting with the biblical vision of the Church, community of disciples, in service of one another and the world through a variety of charismatic gifts.<sup>32</sup>

Mary C. Grey<sup>33</sup> points out that Christianity has to confess to a disastrous neglect of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic christianity has corrected this situation by putting a “qualitative religious experience” at the center of its renewal. The Spirit who started to breathe again in Pentecostalism, which has been manifesting itself in feminist spirituality, new age groups<sup>34</sup> and liberation theology, has finally, also breathed life into what has been called “the frozen people of God,” the Catholic Church.

I would like to sum up a few manifestations of this renewal. Dead rituals received life by making them into prayer experiences with the whole community participating. The role of the laity was restored. Covenant communities became laboratories where community life was rediscovered. The Bible regained its central place in Christian life. Lay people developed their talents by serving the Church and society through a variety of charisms. Many groups got conscientized and developed programs to rebuild Filipino society, plagued by greedy capitalism and a corrupt elite democracy. The recent people revolution and the revolt of the poor (EDSA II and

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<sup>31</sup> Mercado, “El Shaddai and Inculturation,” 497, 500.

<sup>32</sup> *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 35-54.

<sup>33</sup> Mary C. Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope* (London: Darton. Longman and Todd, 2000), 62-78.

<sup>34</sup> See Lode L. Wostyn, *A New Church for a New Age* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 74-76.

EDSA III)<sup>35</sup> confronted the Church with its failure to reach the poor. The El Shaddai and some covenant communities succeeded in addressing the poor. These developments may finally give birth to the Church of the poor that was envisioned in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippine Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup>

The charismatic conversion of the Catholic Church has recently been threatened by a conservative backlash. Pope John Paul II, surrounded by a gerontocracy led by Cardinal Ratzinger, seems to rebuild the strongly centralized fortress Church of the Counter-Reformation. Reading the “Reflections on the CCR” by Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, episcopal adviser of the International CCR Office in Rome, I was rather astonished to find out that “the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals” and “the gift of discernment of charisms,” is endowed to the Church’s shepherds.<sup>37</sup> I thought that the Second Vatican Council affirmed that this charism belonged to the whole Church. Brother Vic Gutierrez of Ligaya ng Panginoon fears that the CCRM will soon be a cleric-led movement instead of a lay movement. Charismatic meetings are star-studded with priests and bishops. Priests get again into the driver’s seat, something which will be gladly given by the laity who feel safer when a sacred man is around. How do we handle this conservative backlash? I believe that the rediscovery of the charismatic vision of the Church within the Catholic Church with its long clerical past has placed us in a tension field. An awareness of these tensions may help us to keep the right trajectory towards renewal.

## *Tensions*

Harvey Cox sees a shift taking place in the struggle to be the ultimate source of meaning.<sup>38</sup> The two competitors of previous centuries, scientific

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<sup>35</sup> We witnessed in January 2001 a second people’s revolution which overthrew President Estrada. EDSA stands for the highway where the people’s revolt took place. Shortly after EDSA II, a crowd of poor people occupied the Marian Shrine on EDSA and marched to the presidential palace where they were stopped by the police and army. This was called the EDSA III revolt (end of April).

<sup>36</sup> In the theological vision of the FABC, we find a strong affirmation that the Spirit of God is at work beyond the boundaries of the Christian Churches. Hence, mission should be conceived in terms of a threefold dialogue: with the poor, Asian cultures and religions.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Joseph Cordes, *Call to Holiness. Reflections on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 44-47. Cordes refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, articles 890 and 801.

<sup>38</sup> Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 299-321.

modernity and traditional religion, are two tired boxers. Two new competitors are entering the ring in the 21st century: fundamentalism versus experientialism. He places Pentecostalism in the experientialist camp. We can do the same with the CCRM and yet, I share the doubt of Cox. The struggle between fundamentalism and experientialism cuts right through Pentecostalism, the CCRM and the Churches. Only a constant discernment that succeeds in keeping a creative tension between these two competitors will create the freedom to let the Church become a church of the Spirit, a church of love, of order and peace (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:39-40). While listening to testimonies of members of the Filipino CCRM, I met several tensions and stumbling blocks which I summarize under five headings.<sup>39</sup>

I already mentioned the first one: the tension between charisms and the institution. In a strongly clericalized and centralized church, the temptation of the laity is to let the priests occupy the driver's seat, endangering to imprison the freedom of the spirit manifested in a variety of charisms within the cage of an institution. As a teacher of theology, I have been pondering since many years ago about the book of Ralph Martin, *A Crisis of Truth*.<sup>40</sup> He was one of the founders of the CCRM who suddenly turned conservative, if not fundamentalist, and succeeded in condemning the best minds of present-day Catholic theology. I recently heard the same reaction from a group of charismatic leaders who found it necessary to promise absolute obedience to the Church's authorities and the teachings of the Church. Not too much space will be left to the Spirit and his/her charisms, if these are hemmed in by the "new" Roman Catechism, the papal moral code and the Roman laws and rituals. A sound competition, an openness to pluralism and a critical spirit of dialogue can be better alternatives.

A second tension creates an opposition between an often strongly emotional prayer experience and social involvement. In the course of my interviews, a leader of a covenant community expressed his frustration in trying to orient his group towards a stronger social commitment. "We are good", he said, "in handling prayer, in the study of and sharing about personal relationships, family life, sexuality issues and so on. We are a nice commu-

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<sup>39</sup> Some of these tensions are discussed in Nigel Scotland, *Charismatics and the Next Millennium* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 249-270.

<sup>40</sup> Ralph Martin, *A Crisis of Truth* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1982).



nity in a warm nest of friendship but we did not do enough to open our doors to the really poor people. We are trained to be Eucharistic ministers and counselors but we do not know how to bring Christ to the slums". The vision is present among the laity. They know and believe that evangelization and social action cannot be separated. But in reality, we all still have to learn to become more reflective of what the Church wants to be: not only a church for, but a church of the poor.<sup>41</sup>

The struggle of ordinary daily life and the quest for the miraculous is a third tension field that is difficult to handle in the Filipino setting. I keep remembering a healing session where a charismatic healer took away the crutches of a boy who was born cripple. The next thing that happened was a boy crawling over the floor until they lifted him and returned the crutches. Poor people flock to healing sessions and many are enthralled by the magic of Brother Mike who throws handkerchiefs containing three pieces of calamansi (small lemons) to the crowd, blesses eggs, bottles of water and oil. These are symbols that fit within Filipino culture.<sup>42</sup> They may bring some joy and consolation but the harshness of daily life still has to be faced. The health and wealth gospel stresses the joyful dimension in its meeting with the Spirit. Yet, poverty, suffering and pain are still there and will have to be overcome.<sup>43</sup>

A fourth tension field is created by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible which can hardly address present-day faith experience. The *Iglesia ni Kristo* and fundamentalist sects are keen to argue with Catholics by producing a chain of biblical quotations. Catholic apologists often get onto the fundamentalist platform and end up joining biblical shootouts. Catholics, especially charismatics, have rediscovered the Bible. They also made an attempt to bring the Word of God to their contemporary experience. Often, however, they do not fully succeed in unearthing the riches of biblical texts because they are not familiar with the critical, historical tools of present-day exegesis.

The Bible reports the faith experiences of a people. These experiences were interpreted and became a message about God and God's action in

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<sup>41</sup> *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 47-52.

<sup>42</sup> Mercado, "El Shaddai and Inculturation," 504-505.

<sup>43</sup> See Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 315.

history. Some basic knowledge of the historical and cultural context in which Israel interpreted and expressed the presence of Yahweh can help us reconstruct the underlying experiences of a people. Once we have uncovered these experiences, we can easily arrive at a dialogue with our own faith experiences. In such a dialogue, the message of the Bible is again a living Word addressing our own life situation.

The meeting between Scripture and present-day experience often fails because the Bible is understood in a fundamentalist and literal way. Instead of a message rooted in the experience of a people, it becomes a chain of doctrinal and legal statements imposing rules and regulations apparently under the auspices of the Holy Spirit. Most Catholic charismatics can hardly accept such a fundamentalist imposition. They find a way out of a literal reading by spiritualizing the biblical text. The meaning of the text is adjusted to fit into some very personal, spiritual experiences. For example, the master symbol of Jesus' preaching, the Kingdom of God, is a political symbol which challenged the authorities of Jesus' time. The symbol gets spiritualized and now addresses nice people who are looking forward to the heavenly bliss in the kingdom of heaven. A spiritualized reading of the Bible is a poor alternative to fundamentalism

A fifth tension field is created by the CCRM being challenged to enter into the political realities of the country. It is a known fact that political manipulation and powerplay have never been far away from the Philippine Catholic Church and its hierarchy. Politicians who attend the El Shaddai rallies do not fail to also visit the residence of Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manila. Bishop Bacani, the chaplain of El Shaddai, has repeatedly stressed that the Gospel failed to touch political life. Politics in the Philippines has never been evangelized. This task of evangelization belongs to the laity. But until now, the hierarchy still remains in the lead. Some covenant communities and the leadership of El Shaddai have explored ways and means to be present in the political scene and to shake the foundations of a corrupt elite democracy. The task of the evangelization of politics is still ahead of us.

## *The Future*

Prophetic movements within a strongly institutionalized Church tend to be tamed and forced into the framework of the institution. This observation of a leader of a covenant community does not sound very hopeful. He feels that the CCRM is dying. The exercise of charisms has declined, prayer meetings have lost their freedom and creativity, and the leaders are poorly trained. “We are caught”, he said, “in patterns and prescriptions that sap the life from our prayer and community experiences”.

Others, however, are more hopeful. The El Shaddai elders, for example, are full of enthusiasm. They express their hope in the following statements: “we have to work hard and focus on evangelization. We can double our number. We have still a great harvest in front of us, especially among the poor and the migrant workers abroad. These migrant workers themselves are missionaries in their host countries”.

Pessimism or hope? I believe that by heeding the recommendations I received from some leaders, the CCRM can look forward in hope towards a promising future. What has to be done? First, leaders of the CCRM have to refocus on the baptism in the Spirit and the charisms. Second, they are to seek a better training program for themselves. The gift of teaching is in the third place in Paul’s list (1 Cor 12:28). In our Catholic tradition, priests tend to claim all the charisms yet most of them are not exactly brilliant teachers. The CCRM leaders can express their support to the Spirit by creating possibilities for the laity to receive professional training as teachers of the community. Third, they are to develop real communities. The creation of Basic Ecclesial Communities has been the focus of pastoral planning in the Philippine Church. But pastoral action hardly got started because we have been busy writing position papers instead. Some charismatic communities can show us the way. Finally, I got the permission to quote Bishop Bacani and I hope I will be faithful. “As Christians, we have to evangelize our society. It means we have to address the social and political issues of the country. The laity needs to be encouraged to enter into the socio-political scene”. The Roman Synod of 1971 on “Justice in the World” (No. 6) declared that social commitment is an integral part of

evangelization. The task is ahead of us. I also share the prophetic dreams for the twenty-first century of Mary C. Grey when she quotes Hyun Chung's sermon in Canberra (1991):

*“Dear Sisters and Brothers, with the energy of the Spirit,  
let us tear apart all walls of division  
and the culture of death which separates us.  
And let us participate in the Holy Spirit's economy of life,  
fighting for our life on this earth,  
in solidarity with all living beings ...  
Wild wind of the Holy Spirit blow to us.  
Let us welcome her, letting ourselves go  
in her wild rhythm of life.  
Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole of creation. Amen.”*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 78.

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