



Jeff Lowenthal

Charismatics crowd Notre Dame stadium at a 1973 conference: In tune with the Holy Spirit—or a hotbed of schism?

Holy War

Roman Catholic charismatics still speak in tongues, but some of them are no longer speaking to each other. The 500,000-member Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCRM) has steadily been gaining ecclesiastical respectability; last month, 10,000 charismatics meeting in Rome were blessed and encouraged by Pope Paul. But the leaders of the movement returned home to face the first serious wave of criticism the movement has drawn since it was founded at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh eight years ago.

Charismatics—Protestant and Catholic alike—believe that through a “baptism of the spirit” they can receive various “charisms,” or gifts, including prophecy, faith healing and a spontaneous form of ecstatic prayer known as glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. But now critics of the movement are accusing CCRM’s leaders—especially those at communes in Ann Arbor, Mich., and South Bend, Ind.—of brainwashing members, overdramatizing religious experiences and blurring the lines between Catholic and Protestant. The most prominent of the critics, Notre Dame University church historian and liturgist William Storey, who dropped out of CCRM in 1970, claims that the movement, if unchecked, may go “hell-bent for schism.”

Demons: Storey detailed his charges in a letter to four bishops and the Pope last March and in an interview last month in the Catholic newsletter *A. D. Correspondence*. Among other things, Storey accuses some leaders of manipulating the minds of their followers. He particularly objects to the evangelical technique of convincing a recruit of his utter worth-

lessness in order to exorcise his demons and rebuild his faith.

One former member of the now defunct True House community at South Bend says he sustained “devastating psychological damage” after an all-night “breakthrough ministry” to cure his individualistic tendencies. “I was encouraged to spill the beans of my past, my feelings about my parents and my sinful desires,” he remembers. “I was left psychologically drained and willing to do anything for the community because they had healed me.” Another of Storey’s students has been hospitalized repeatedly for psychological problems that Storey believes were aggravated by the movement. “There’s a tendency to think you can take charge of people and handle all their problems by prayer,” he says. “If you promise that to people with serious disorders and the goods aren’t delivered, they feel that God has abandoned them.” Storey reports that five years ago another of his students, whose initially euphoric involvement in the movement ended in disappointment, went home to Boston and shot himself.

Popes: The assertion that leaders of the movement are divinely guided through the gift of prophecy also is under attack by Storey and others. “Even popes can’t get away with that kind of claim,” says Storey. “Papal infallibility is very limited and qualified. The quasi-infallibility given [CCRM’s] prophecies isn’t hedged at all. What you have here is a lot of little popes and popesses.”

Theologically, the most serious criticism of CCRM leaders is that they are more charismatic than Catholic. At gatherings with Protestant charismatics, prayer can become a more important event than the traditional Roman Catholic sacraments. “The Catholic charismat-

ic layman is not a mini-theologian,” adds religious journalist Richard Rasky, who is writing a book on the charismatics. “He’s coming into constant contact with Protestants and he can no longer distinguish what’s Catholic and what’s not. He picks up Protestant ideas.”

One of the ideas that some charismatics have picked up is a Protestant fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Josephine Ford, a Notre Dame theology professor who was expelled from the movement in 1971, says she was condemned for her refusal to accept the fundamentalist subordination of women and total submission to leaders. Despite her academic credentials, Ford says, she was never allowed to lead a prayer meeting or a class. Ford and Storey also found their liberal political beliefs anathema to movement leaders. “They want to stay cozy with Jesus in their communities,” Ford says. “They don’t want to get involved with the world.”

Kevin Ranaghan, a member of the twelve-man CCRM governing body, or National Service Committee, calls Storey’s accusations “grossly exaggerated” and “based on misinformation.” “In a movement as large and fluid as Catholic Charismatic Renewal, theological and pastoral problems do arise,” he conceded in a statement two weeks ago. “Occurrences of faulty teaching and practice, when they have been dealt with by the National Service Committee, have been handled intelligently, responsibly, and in conformity with Catholic tradition.”

Mother of God: In fact, autonomous charismatic communities do thrive outside the conservative Ann Arbor-South Bend power base. Edith DiFato, one of two women who lead the Mother of God community in Potomac, Md., agrees that criticism of the movement is based on

misunderstanding. "The parish was originally meant to be a community where all could come with their problems and needs," she says. "Now there are so many people in a parish it is impossible to give individual help. The priest has pretty much become the financial co-ordinator who gives sermons. Our idea is simply that of a new Christian community where everyone supports one another."

Neutral observers of the controversy seem willing to let the movement heal itself. "There's nothing inherently un-Catholic about the movement," maintains South Bend Bishop Leo Pursely, who received one of Storey's letters but plans no investigation. "They've simply laid great stress on one phase of the Trinity—the power and presence of the Holy Spirit." And Oklahoma Archbishop John R. Quinn, head of a U.S. bishops committee that issued a report on the charismatics last November, says the attitude of the bishops has shifted from "wait and see" to "basic approval." The report points out the dangers of elitism, fundamentalism and too much ecumenism. The solution it suggests is to encourage more priests to join CCRM and to create new ties between the movement and their parishes. Such initiatives may not always be welcome, however, since conventional priests and parish structures are exactly what many charismatics are trying to avoid.

—SUSAN CHEEVER COWLEY with DEWEY GRAM in Chicago, LAURIE LISLE in New York and JANE WHITMORE in Washington

Slap on the Wrist

After a month's deliberation, an Episcopal Church court in Washington, D.C., voted 3-to-2 last week to convict the Rev. William Wendt of violating canon law when he allowed a woman, the Rev. Alison Cheek, to celebrate communion in his church last November. The court settled, however, for the lightest punishment possible: Wendt, who could have been suspended or defrocked, will merely be admonished by his bishop—who is free to forgo even that slap on the wrist.

The majority, all clergymen, supported the ordination of women. But they suggested that women should not be allowed to celebrate communion until their ordination is authorized by the church's General Convention. The main issue in the trial, said the majority, was whether Wendt was guilty of disobeying his bishop's "godly admonition" not to allow Mrs. Cheek to officiate.

The two lay members of the panel, both of whom also supported the ordination of women, complained in their dissent that "a great moment in church history is before us, and the majority of the court is allowing it to pass by." Wendt himself, who is entitled to appeal the verdict, said there was no point in waiting for the General Convention to act. He predicted that his parish would vote again to have women priests conduct some of their services.

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