

Communion - A Way of Living in God

Why do I want to share some thoughts with you today about Communion? And in particular, to talk about this before speaking of Renewal as a Compass for the Church? The reason is because the Catholic Church, on Pentecost Sunday 2019, inaugurated a new single international service called Charis. This replaces the two previous international bodies which governed Catholic Charismatic Renewal, ICCRS and Catholic Fraternity, a network for charismatic communities. Charis was established at the particular request of Pope Francis. He recognises that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is a specific current of grace in the Church today. And he wanted all involved in this Renewal to belong to a single communion of this grace.

There are approximately 120 million Catholics living the experience of baptism in the Spirit. They do this in a variety of different forms. Some belong to prayer groups, others to communities of various kinds. Some are living a particular charism. Many are doing their own thing in isolation from each other. What makes the Church Catholic, is the communion we experience with each other. Pope Francis is most keen that those in Renewal experience this communion in a very real way. And so he has presented us with the four dimensions of Charis's statutes: promoting the grace of the baptism in the Spirit as a grace which all are invited to share, working together to fulfil Jesus' prayer, that they may all be one, by consciously acting towards the unity of all Christians. Then there is a service towards those who are in need and find themselves on the margins of society. And finally, no surprise to anyone who knows Pope Francis' agenda, the need to involve Renewal in the mission of evangelisation.

Things have moved on since Charis was inaugurated in 2019. And at the same time, there is still much work to be done. Various elements of Catholic charismatic renewal still stand aloof from each other. Many are content for the charismatic renewal to be the preserve of a few, and struggle to understand how this life in the Spirit must become normative for all Christians. So where do we start to understand communion?

Many of us will speak of the baptism in the Spirit and the life in the Spirit which we have come to experience as the fruit of this prayer for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But do we really understand what sacramental Baptism is all about?

Fundamentally baptism immerses us into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And when we are immersed into the living reality of Christ, then we are invited to step into the life and love which defines the relationships of the Persons in the Blessed Trinity. The early Church Fathers called this perichoresis.

The Church is often seen as a community of communities. When we think about the Church, born from the wounded Heart of Christ, living in the circle of God's life and love, it would be more true to say that the Church is a communion. The Blessed Trinity is not a community but a communion of divine Persons. Maybe we struggle to understand the Church as communion. This is because the word communion is often understood within a eucharistic setting, Holy Communion. It is the same with the term Body of Christ. But originally, in the thinking of the early

Fathers, both these terms, communion and Body of Christ, were used to speak of the Church.

The Church is born in the Heart of the Trinity God from all eternity. It is not a plan B in the wake of the Fall. We are the Pilgrim People of God destined for a future communion with God for all eternity.

Lumen Gentium, article 4, is particularly important for our understanding of renewal in the Church:

‘When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and thus, all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father. He is the Spirit of Life, a fountain of water springing up to life eternal. To men, dead in sin, the Father gives life through Him, until, in Christ, He brings to life their mortal bodies. The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. In them He prays on their behalf and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons. The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth and which He unifies in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse. The Spirit and the Bride both say to Jesus, the Lord, “Come!”’

We understand the Church to be a sign and sacrament of God’s Kingdom:

OT signs and types - the ministry of Jesus in signs and wonders - the life of the Church, especially in her liturgical celebration

Communion is not an abstract theological idea. It is the essence of what the Church is and what the Body of Christ is called to become. We speak of eschatology - the day when the whole Church will become the 'communion of saints'.

Communion, within an ecclesiology (the Church's self-understanding) of the Council, is the dominant theology of the second Vatican Council. Born out of the loving heart of the Trinity, the Church is called to live communion in a number of ways. We see this above all in the liturgy. In the Eucharistic prayer, we express our communion with the Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter, and with our local Bishop. Bishops are the successors of the apostles. As the first apostles were formed into a college known as "the Twelve", so the bishops are called to exercise their ministry within a collegiality of discernment, teaching and action. Priests belong to a presbyterate and are called to live in communion with their bishop.

We might understand the magisterium or teaching of Pope Francis as a retrieval and renewal of the insights and teaching of the most recent Council. It always takes time for the Church to discover the depths of a Council and Vatican II is no different.

Pope Francis is seeking to live communion as a reality. I think this is the best way to express the core of all he is trying to teach us. Just think about how often his teaching encyclicals and other texts have joy in the title - gaudium

or gaudete. When we are living in full communion within the Mystical Body of Christ, we experience joy. When we are not in communion we do not experience joy.

And so, let's return again to the theme of CHARIS. First of all, Charis is a juridical body of the Church. It brings charismatic renewal in from the margins, recognising what the Lord has achieved since the 1970s. Renewal is not a personal or private affair. Secondly Charis is a way of saying that all dimensions of the expression of charismatic renewal in the life of the Church are to experience communion amongst themselves; communities, diocesan leadership support structures, all who are living the reality of Baptism in the Spirit.

Finally, anyone could have told you all this. There are many who know the ecclesiological developments since the NT until our own time. Others know the story of Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Others can share with you the evolution of Charis and how Charis is structured.

But I have come here to the north-east to tell you all this, because I have been asked to be the liaison bishop of the CBCEW with Catholic Charismatic Renewal. As a bishop, I represent the communion of the Church to which we are all called to belong. May the Holy Spirit be with us today and in the days ahead, as we seek to receive the gift of communion which is the Lord's will for us.