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New Ecclesial Movements, Synodality and Co-Responsibility

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When the New Ecclesial Movements (NEMs) burst on to the church landscape in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council they were a totally unexpected, unforeseen phenomenon. In the last fifty plus years of their existence, not only have they had a huge impact on the church's missionary outreach but their *modus operandi* has impacted, albeit unintentionally, on the very structure and organisation of the church itself. Their arrival coincided more or less with the dismantling of the then dominant notion of church as a perfect society and the rediscovery of the pilgrim people of God motif in the Second Vatican Council. This led to what Richard Rohr calls the 'destabilising of the imperial ego'¹ and what Paul Lakeland, the American ecclesialologist, calls 'the grace of self doubt'²

The church that many of us grew up in had a very pompous view of itself, not given to any semblance of self doubt. Not only had we little or nothing to learn from other traditions but inside our own bubble we had those who taught and those who learned (Docens &

1 Richard Rohr, *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations* (CAC Publishing: 2016), 121-122.

2 Paul Lakeland, "Reflections on the 'Grace of Self-Doubt,'" in *Ecclesiology and Exclusion. Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, ed. Dennis M. Doyle, Timothy J. Furry, and Pascal D. Bazzell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2012), 13-17.

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Discens) – the pecking order of the pyramid was crystal clear and set in stone. Each one knew his/her place and the responsibility for the church was hugely dependent on where you sat in the pyramidal hierarchy. My mother spoke of the ‘higher calling’ that priests/nuns/brothers had received. It exemplified perfectly not only her view of the church and her place within it but also the way most laity would have looked at it. Although meant as an accolade, it did a huge disservice because if some have received a higher calling it follows logically that others have received a lower calling. Inevitably, this created a certain obsequiousness and subsequent powerlessness among laity. Church was the business of the experts, the clergy and religious; laity knew their place. Ordination and Profession conferred holiness, leadership and responsibility. Church had a clear structure of pope/bishops/religious/lay; it had the diocese and the parish, solid unchanging edifices that had stood the test of time.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

And then these new ecclesial movements (NEMs) arrive in tandem with the newly rediscovered pilgrim people of God motif and start to upset the applecart. The new kids on the block did not deliberately set out to disturb or upset the church’s structure or organisation – they were simply following the impulse of the Spirit and preaching the gospel with enthusiasm and fervour. However, although it was not their primary intention, these movements certainly played a part in de-stabilising the rigidity of church structure especially the pyramidal model. They exercised a pivotal role in reorienting the focus of ministry away from ordination and back to the centrality of baptism. They began to embody co-responsibility for the life of the church and became evangelisers in a host of diverse ministries and cultures. They modelled a new way of being church, one that was much more horizontal and equal than the pyramidal model espoused by the perfect society image. Having reclaimed the essential dignity of baptism that empowered the recipient to be priest, prophet and king, they implicitly recognised that God had called them to exercise these charisms and responsibilities in the church and in the world. Although the terminology of Synodality had not yet been birthed, the new ecclesial movements intuited that being church meant we must be synodal and, synodality, if it meant anything, meant taking baptism seriously – very seriously!

SNAPSHOT

According to the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, 123 diverse international NEMs and associations have currently been

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recognized. They have millions of adherents. To give some brief examples as an indication of scale, Focolare, founded in 1943 at Trent has more than 5,000,000 adherents spread over 182 nations; the Neocatechumenal Way which had its beginnings in Madrid in 1967 has now more than a million followers around the world while the Catholic Charismatic Renewal has a global reach that exceeds 200 million, with some millions in covenant Communities.

PAPAL SUPPORT

Regarded with suspicion by many bishops, initially, they very much depended on the support of the papacy to secure validation and to help them navigate a route towards acceptance within the fabric of the institutional church. Pope Paul VI was the first to welcome them, albeit cautiously. It was his successor Saint Pope John Paul II who embraced them, saw their potential and recognised them as ‘a providential gift of the Spirit’.³ Pope Benedict XVI largely held a benign and positive view similar to his predecessor so they continued to enjoy papal approval and popularity during his tenure. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger he had written, ‘what are these new movements if not the fruit of the action of the Holy Spirit, concentrated at the right time, at certain crossroads in history.’⁴

And then we come to Pope Francis. If John Paul II could be seen as the pope for the movements, giving them almost total freedom as long as they were theologically orthodox and obedient to the papacy, then Francis instead is a pope coming from the movements – or at any rate from a movement-like idea of the church. This is clear not only from his speeches to popular movements in Latin America, but also from his ecclesiology. Just like the new ecclesial movements, Francis is more interested in spiritual renewal of the church than in the reform of ecclesiastical structures, although the latter is needed to enable the former.⁵

His endorsement and support has been somewhat more nuanced and challenging for the new movements. In many of his addresses to them he reminds them that they have a responsibility to the local church, that they must avoid elitism, that they need to have more robust and transparent governance structures, that individual freedom particularly in the internal forum needs to be respected, that they must not operate as a parallel church. No carte blanche or rose coloured spectacles here!

3 Speech of St. Pope John Paul II on May 30th 1998 at World Meeting of Ecclesial Movement

4 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, ‘The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements’, Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements, Rome, 27-29 May 1998

5 Massimo Faggioli, ‘Francis & the New Ecclesial Movements, A complicated story for a complex papacy’, *Commonweal*, December 20, 2021

Yet even these criticisms are couched against a tacit acceptance that the new movements have become key players in the evolution of the church's missionary strategy. Francis is keenly aware that the real challenge for the church's mission in Europe is to bring the Gospel back into everyday social life and particularly into new forms of the socio-cultural *Areopagus*. It implies re-launching the process of inculturation that brings the Gospel into the depth of people's lives as well as of society. The church needs the NEMs and Francis knows that that they will play a critical, indispensable role in the synodal process that he has just inaugurated. He has likened them to gymnasiums where the key elements in synodality have already been practiced – dialogue, listening, participation, walking alongside people, accompaniment. They are uniquely equipped to deal with the prevailing culture of 'a liquid modern world' a term coined by Zygmunt Bauman.⁶

Francis believes they have the requisite skill set to play an important role in his missionary ecclesiology. One concrete indication of Francis' appreciation of the NEMs is his appointment of the Brazilian, Fr. Alexandre Awi Mello as the new secretary of the recently created Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life. This is a hugely important Dicastery and the fact that Fr Mello is the Brazilian Director of the new ecclesial movement, Schönstatt, is a highly significant endorsement.

His introduction of synodality challenges the current model of church which is still hugely dependent on clerics and religious to animate its structures and *modus operandi*. That way of being church is simply unsustainable and will not be a viable option for the third millennium. This is where the new ecclesial movements will play a pivotal role.

Massimo Faggioli contends that as this new ecclesiology takes root, the relationship between the institutional church and the movements will no longer be understood in terms of "the pope handling the movements," but rather as movements shaping the culture of church leaders, including the pope.⁷

SYNODALITY AND PNEUMATOLOGY

All of the NEMs would see their existence emanating from a special charism given to their founders by the Holy Spirit. They are very comfortable in the language of pneumatology and celebrate readily the fruits of that Spirit. Francis too comes from this space. He is much more visibly attentive to the Holy Spirit and his ecclesiology

6 Cf. Z. Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, Lateranza, Roma-Bari, 2008; Z. Bauman, *Vita liquida*, Lateranza, Roma-Bari, 2009; Z. Bauman, *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone*, Lateranza, Roma-Bari, 2012.

7 Cf. Massimo Faggioli, *Commonweal*, December 2021.

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is clearly shaped by this disposition. He intuits that synodality cannot be just a feature of the church's life, it needs to become the way in which we are church. Synod for him is just another name for church.

It could be said that Francis' championing of synodality comes out of his pneumatology; it is from this perspective that he declares boldly (*parrhesia*) that synodality is what God expects of the church in the third millennium. The new thing that God is doing does not disturb him because he is more attuned to the prophetic gift. This approach resonates easily with that of the NEMs who interpret their existence as emerging from the dynamism of the Holy Spirit and see themselves in many ways as heirs to the prophetic tradition.

Francis speaks of the Holy Spirit forty-eight times in *Evangelii gaudium*, noteworthy when one considers that his immediate predecessor, Benedict, only mentioned the Holy Spirit on three occasions in his three encyclicals.

In the book authored by Dr Austen Ivereigh, Francis states: "What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us ... we cannot speak of synodality unless we accept and live the presence of the Holy Spirit."⁸ This kind of language, somewhat novel in official church discourse, is very familiar territory to members of NEMs who would often speak of praying and discerning not just for their own personal journey but for the journey of their movement and God's plan for that.

SYNODAL LIFE

Many NEM members will speak of 'a life before and a life after' their engagement with a movement that they have joined. Invariably, it means they have been immersed in some kind of conversion where they have had a direct experience of God's love for them. Referring to this in the encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction ... it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us."⁹

They will speak about the experience of community, mutual support, ongoing formation, a sense of purpose and mission, a

8 Austen Ivereigh, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future. Pope Francis in Conversation with Austen Ivereigh* (London: Simon Schuster, 2020) p.85.

9 Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* – (25. 12. 2005).

calling from God himself to live a life resonant with the gospel and a desire to share their story with others by way of testimony. This kind of witness brings the Christian message into the fabric of society at all levels – schools, hospitals, economics, politics, the arts etc. It is no longer heard only from the pulpit or the catholic school but it permeates potentially every avenue of life. The protagonists are mostly but not exclusively lay and they have been imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfil their baptismal mission to be priest, prophet and king.

Moreover, they have received a formation that gives them confidence to speak out with *parrhesia*, that holy boldness which Francis speaks of so often. There is a huge army who can bring the gospel message to the masses. To date, they have largely worked outside the official structure of the institutional church and at local level would often have vied and collided with parish and diocese and their pastoral agendas. Their impact on church was only really noted in the preparations for John Paul II's papal trip to Spain in 1982 when it was discovered that 45% of all Spanish Catholic related to the church through a movement rather than a parish. This caused a considerable degree of angst in some church quarters.

“Reversing the relationship between the territorial or geographical dimension of church aggregations (parish, diocese) to the personal dimension (membership in a group not defined by geographical location) threatens the overturn of a system that dates from the early centuries of Christianity (dioceses were the successors of the provinces of the Roman Empire) and that was solidified in the second millennium, especially by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The NEMs with their flexibility and extended reach also pose a challenge to the ecclesial concept of the local church that is in dialogue and tension with the universal church.”¹⁰

However, such tensions are not new to the Church. She has been here before. One could cite the arrival of the mendicant orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans as a threat to the regular diocesan clergy in the 12th/13th century. After initial tension and struggle, the church found a way to integrate the new with the old. Synodality could bring radical change to venerable church structures but perhaps that too is the wind of the Spirit issuing forth new church paradigms for the new millennium

LEADERSHIP

One of the most interesting aspects of these new movements is the way they see leadership exercised. Critically, anyone from any state of life can be elected to leadership by the membership. If we

¹⁰ Ibid. Fagigoli

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assume that the idea of governance is connected to leadership, and not just to management, then this brings up the second question: the relationship between governance and ordination at the local church level. With the launch of *Praedicate evangelium* and the subsequent opening up of governance roles in Vatican dicasteries to all the baptised we could be witnessing a harbinger of significant changes at diocesan and parish level. But the more governance at the parochial level is held in lay hands, the more restricted becomes the role of the clergy. We may not yet be ready for the full implications of this line of thought, though seventy years or so ago Yves Congar offered the prescient observation that “now we have to ask not what is the role of the laity in relationship to the clergy, but rather what is the role of the clergy in relationship to the laity.”

¹¹ The Jesuit Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlando made this striking change even clearer at a March 21 press conference, saying that “the power of governance in the church does not come from orders, but from one’s mission.” Governance becomes linked to canonical mission, which one is eligible for through baptism – not from the power of orders, as John Paul II had said in the previous curial reform. Now, in principle, all levels of church governance are open to any Catholic, male or female.

A constant feature of the NEMs has been a deep awareness that all are equal within the charism that has called them to this way of life. Moreover, leadership rotates with terms of office being the norm rather than permanent posts. This changes the dynamic of relationships; all see themselves called to live their charism as equal members, albeit in different states of life. Democratic features are much more in evidence than one would see in the hierarchical structure of the local church. Although there have been notorious exceptions, (Legionaries of Christ, L’Arche, Schoenstatt) in general, genuine co-responsibility is central to the life of these new movements and this certainly can speak to the unfolding vision of synodality espoused by Pope Francis. Moreover, the integral place of clergy and consecrated men and women within the movements also presents a much more cohesive way of being church with all the various states of life working together to realise the fulfilment of their charism in the church and in the world.

OBSERVATIONS

Many of the movements emerged from a fusion of the male and female genius in harmony. The governance of Focolare at all levels, precisely because it is based on the presence of Jesus in our midst,

¹¹ *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

is entrusted to a man and a woman who are co-responsible. One can think of Pierre Goursat, an elderly lay celibate and Martine Catta, a young married woman who became founders of Emmanuel, a large and vibrant charismatic community with branches spread across the world. It has become one of the main providers to priesthood in France and elsewhere. The Neo Catechumenate was born out of a deep prayer symbiosis between Kiko Arguello, a travelling musician and evangelist, and Carmen Hernandez who spent some time considering a religious vocation. The Lion of Judah Community (renamed Community of the Beatitudes) was founded by a married couple, Josette and Ephraim Croissant who were both converts to Catholicism. One should also remember some of the inspirational figures whose insight and advocacy helped shape these new movements. Think of Von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr whose mutual support enabled a vast wealth of fresh thinking about the Marian and Petrine dimensions of the church. Likewise Cardinal Suenens, one of the architects of the Second Vatican Council, was inspired by the lifelong witness of his confidant and spiritual director, Veronica O'Brien, an Irish legionary, who encouraged him in his ministry and helped shape his thinking and attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. These relationships teach us that we cannot have true synodality unless the male and female genius is working in harmony and in equality.

CONCLUSION

When the movements emerged in the mid 60s onwards they prompted a debate about the charismatic and hierarchical elements in the church. At first they were seen in opposition to each other but mature reflection led to a recognition that they are co-essential for the life of the church. The tension between them was healthy and necessary. They also brought into question something that Balthasar raised many decades ago when he spoke of the Marian and Petrine model of the church. The Petrine is meant to serve the Marian not the other way around. We grew up in a church where the Petrine had become so strong that it dominated the Marian, at times almost suffocating it, when it was meant to allow the Marian give birth to Christ and protect those charismatic flowerings that are the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Organisation must follow life – not the other way round. The NEMs are part of the Marian- charismatic dimension of church and they have become a very visible part of the church landscape and are rebalancing that relationship between the Petrine and the Marian. Just as the arrival of Monasticism in the 3rd/ 4th century and the mendicant orders

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in the 12th century challenged the then established way of being church, so too do the NEMs. They don't fit into existing structures – they embody a new way of being church.

They haven't asked for co-responsibility – they have assumed it and claimed it from their baptismal anointing and have sallied forth into the church and the world exercising their charisms with boldness. They are pathfinders for the synodality which Francis speaks of and their lived experience of conversion, dialogue, communication, community, mission, and accompaniment will inform this universal process as it unfolds – they have already changed the structure of the church and there may be more to come. The more democratic elements in their governance and their freedom to act and to respond outside a hierarchical framework is both exciting and potentially dangerous. If they move beyond parish or diocesan boundaries they have the capacity to be mobilised in a cohesive way; they have a 'can do' approach and are much more focused on the mission rather than the maintenance – they are not as dependent on the institutional structures and in many ways have already moved beyond them. In their rationale it is not so much that the church has a mission more that the mission has a church. They are more at home in 'liquid modernity.'

Finally, Donal Harrington in his book about the parish of tomorrow¹² speaks of those in our church who would like to *ignore* the mire we find ourselves in. Others *deplore* the state of the church and give vent to their anger and chagrin. Still others want to *restore* the church to a time of its former glory and ascendancy. All of these are *cul de sacs* with no future- a waste of energy and focus – there is no going backwards. The only worthwhile way is to *explore*, to search for new beginnings, new ways of being church. The NEMs are doing that and in their ownership of co-responsibility as their baptismal heritage they are a true pathway to synodality. No charism ever comes into existence in total purity – it is mediated through sinful people and the NEMs have their share of such sinners as exemplified by the many scandals that have rocked them. Pope Francis is all too aware of their flaws but he sees them as schools of synodality with real potential to en flesh synodality in the universal church. They have been called into existence through the agency of the Holy Spirit and they are providential for the church. They are the harbingers of synodality, providential gifts of the Spirit who is leading the church to find a new pathway in the third millennium.

12 Donal Harrington, *Tomorrow's Parish*, Columba Press, 2020.