

Fostering charisms in prayer meetings

by Fr. John Gordon

*“Renew Your wonders in this our day,
as by a new Pentecost.”*

With these words of prayer, inspired by Blessed John XXIII, the whole church anticipated the grace of Vatican II. The fruit of the Council was immediate, startling, exciting and frightening, and new. Without doubt, one of the richest graces in our day is the Charismatic Renewal. Bursting on the scene in the late 60s, it grew at such an exponential rate it has been called the fastest growing movement in the church.

A tool that the Lord has used to pour out this gift is the charismatic prayer meeting. It is often at prayer meetings that people are introduced to the grace of baptism in the Holy Spirit and the charisms. It is important, therefore, that we use well the tools the Lord gives us. How can the prayer meeting be better used as the tool the Lord intends?

In the first place, we need to know the purpose of the prayer meeting. There are all kinds of good reasons for having a prayer meeting: we like to be together; it is an opportunity to praise the Lord in a more spontaneous manner; we are freer to exercise the charisms. Yet, as part of a move of the Holy Spirit within the life of the church, the purpose of the prayer meeting is the same as the purpose of the church: to enable her members to grow in

holiness and to evangelize the world with the good news of Jesus Christ (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 773; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14).

The unique contribution that the charismatic prayer meeting brings to the church is the free and deliberate exercise of the

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charisms. The charisms, as seen evidenced in the Charismatic Renewal and charismatic prayer meetings, are biblically based. St. Paul discusses charisms in several passages of his letters. In 1 Corinthians 12, he places his discussion of charisms within that part of the letter dealing with the prayer of the church. It seems that these charisms, gifts of the Holy Spirit which empower us to live the good news, can be somewhat surprising. To say that the grace of these gifts came as a surprise to the Catholic Church is an understatement.

I remember when I went to my first charismatic prayer meeting. It was a summer night (Friday, August 15, 1975 to be exact!) and I had no idea what to expect. I had never heard of the Charismatic Renewal and I merely thought it would be interesting to see what a prayer meeting was about. I will never forget the feeling of electricity in the air as the prayer meeting went on; the exuberant singing and spontaneous praise, the praying and singing in

tongues, the Scripture readings and prophecies, the speaking and interpretation of tongues. They even prayed over someone that night for healing! One person had the gift of tears! I walked out that night stunned, amazed, curious and hungry for more. I realized these people had something—better yet, someone—that I had never realized could be experienced. Because it was clear that Jesus was the Lord of that meeting, and it was apparent that

Intercessory Prayer

For the renewal of the grace of Pentecost in the life and mission of the church we pray:

Lord, fill our minds and hearts with the fire of the Holy Spirit so that we may serve you in purity of body and please you in cleanness of heart.

Lord, may the Paraclete who proceeds from you enlighten our minds and lead us to all truth as your Son has promised.

Lord, may the Holy Spirit cleanse our consciences by his coming, so that when your Son Jesus comes, he may find in us a dwelling place prepared for him.

from the Breviarium Romanum, as quoted in the booklet Devotions to the Holy Spirit by Brian Moore, SJ

he was Lord of their lives, I was not put off by the flourishing of charismatic gifts at the prayer meeting. I was certainly intrigued, and I knew that I wanted what

Once I experienced the grace of baptism in the Holy Spirit, those charisms that I had seen and heard started to well up within me. Within a few days I started to

I am renewed in the Lord and the gifts of the Spirit. When I hear teaching about the charisms, I am renewed in the Lord and the gifts of the Spirit. When I am exhorted to be open and to expect the Lord to use me, I am renewed in the Lord and the gifts of the Spirit.

As I continued to go to the prayer meeting, I began to realize the importance of the charismatic gifts.

these people had, a knowledge of Jesus that was based on an experience of him, not just on texts about him. I couldn't wait for the next week's meeting. I read all that I could get my hands on, and I found the Lord moving more and more surely into my heart, into my life. As I continued to go to the prayer meeting, I began to realize the importance of the charismatic gifts; their presence and exercise emboldened and empowered me in the new life I was now living. I asked for baptism in the Holy Spirit and I received so very much from the Lord.

pray in tongues, right away the Scriptures came alive, and I started to hear the Lord speak to me. The prayer meeting made a considerable difference in my ability to respond to this new grace as it taught me to expect the gifts and how to exercise them. As I continued to attend prayer meetings, I began to broaden my understanding and expectations about the gifts. I learned that there was a wide variety of charisms—like teaching, mercy, hospitality and exhortation—and that God wanted us to be open to all of them. In addition to the fundamental task of the prayer meeting being a tool for evangelization, it is also a school for the reception and use of the charisms. Indeed, teaching and learning how to grow in and stir up the charismatic gifts needs to be one of the primary tasks of the prayer meeting and those leading it.

Prayer group leaders need to take on the very important task of teaching about the gifts and stirring them up in the prayer meeting. There are a variety of tools and resources: local and regional renewal centers (including Chariscenter USA); books like Steve Clark's *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, a series of books and pamphlets on the gifts written by Fr. Robert DeGrandis; and the growth seminar *There's Always More* by Sr. Nancy Kellar (Sr. Nancy's book has an entire session on the stirring up of the charismatic gifts). As we are schooled in the charismatic gifts at our prayer meetings, we will be equipped to exercise them outside the prayer meeting. We will be ready to witness, to pray for healing, to offer a word of wisdom or knowledge, to even speak a prophetic word.

Please pray for the following initiatives, activities and concerns of the National Service Committee:

- ◆ For upcoming Regional Leaders Gatherings in Chicago and Denver.
- ◆ For the Twelve Days of Blessings Conference and Retreat sponsored by the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services in September.
- ◆ For the preparations for the National Leaders Conference in Nashville in November.
- ◆ For the Holy Spirit seminars being planned and presented throughout the country.
- ◆ For charismatic conferences being planned or presented throughout the country.
- ◆ For the financial provision for the mission of the NSC.

The charismatic gifts of the Spirit are not natural, they are supernatural; hence, we cannot rely on our own understanding but must learn from the Spirit of the Lord how best to exercise them. The Scriptures themselves introduce us to the charisms and speak of them in such a way that suggests their frequent and regular use (see 1 Cor. 12-14; Rom. 12). The Word of God also addresses the need to be renewed in the Holy Spirit; we are reminded to “fan into flame the gift of God received through the laying on of hands” (2 Tim. 1:6). This renewal, or rekindling, also calls for a stirring up of the gifts. I have experienced the need for this over and over again. When I am involved and participating in a charismatic prayer meeting,

“Strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts. But I will show you a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). “Over all these virtues, put on love, the bond of perfection” (Col. 3:14). As we seek to respond to the grace of the Lord poured out so generously in these days of the new Pentecost, let us live the greatest gift, love. May we love the Lord and one another. In so doing, we will be renewed in the Holy Spirit and the charisms will flourish among us. ◆



Fr. John Gordon is a member of the National Service Committee. He has recently been named Associate Director of the pre-theologate program at the Franciscan University of Steubenville.