

Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements Opening Summary . . . Doris Gottemoeller, RSM

It's tempting to use this time to describe the paper I should have written, in light of all I've learned since completing the first draft! However, I'll confine myself to three items: the impetus for choosing this topic; the main ideas covered; and suggestions for further development of the topic.

I have been aware of the new ecclesial movements in a general way for some years. While in Rome attending the International Union of Superiors General sessions and council meetings, we were regularly invited to the evening prayer of the Community of Sant' Egidio. One visit included a special dinner with members and an art exhibit put on by some of the handicapped persons they assist. More recently I attended the worldwide Congress on Religious Life sponsored by the UISG and the USG in Rome. Some 850 religious from around the world were present, with a generous cohort of young religious. A papal audience for the group had been scheduled more than a year in advance, but we learned on our arrival that it had been cancelled. I remember thinking what a shame it was, since for many of those present it was their first trip to Rome, and perhaps the only one they would have in a lifetime. A few days after the Congress I fell into conversation with a well-dressed American woman in a bookstore. She identified herself as a member of Regnum Christi and said that she was in Rome for the ordination of new Legionaries of Christ—and they had had a papal audience on Wednesday, the day we had been scheduled to have our audience. Of course I have no idea who did the papal scheduling, or whether Pope John Paul II was even aware of the change. But I remember my feelings of anger at the fact that apparently the Regnum Christi group had been given preference over such a large group of women and men religious drawn from all over the world.

Still more recently, the Catholic Common Ground Initiative chose the topic of “New Movements, Parishes, and the Future of the U.S. Church” as the theme of our March 2008 conference. As a member of the planning committee for the conference, I have had several lengthy conversations with persons who have more personal experience of the phenomenon—especially in the United States—than I do. Finally, over the years I have accumulated anecdotal information (or semi-information) about the movements in parishes and dioceses in the United States. All of this cumulative

data was enough to convince me that the movements are not confined to Europe, that they exert a powerful enough attraction for many to constitute their ecclesial ‘home,’ that they are a sign of our times, and that there may be lessons for the religious in general and for the Sisters of Mercy in particular.

Main themes

The first task was to focus the review by defining what we mean by an ecclesial movement. I chose Tony Hanna’s description of movements as “groupings, mostly comprising lay persons, but also clerics and religious, who are striving for an intense religious life in the community and a renewal of the in the Church.” In a letter to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in 1998, Pope John Paul II defined a movement as “a concrete ecclesial entity, in which primarily lay people participate, with an itinerary of faith and Christian testimony that founds its own pedagogical method on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes.” These definitions are general enough to embrace every position on a hypothetical religious spectrum, from right to left. I could add to it that the movements we are concerned with were all founded in the 20th century.

That said, I chose to profile three of the largest movements, using their own sources, so as not to interpret their reality through an outsider’s lens. Then I offered some observations and reflections, namely,

- Each movement owes its origin to a charismatic founder.
- Most of the movements have grown rapidly, spreading from country to country around the world
- The movements call for an uncommon generosity and require explicit and demanding formation programs and rigorous ongoing spiritual and apostolic practices.
- At their best, the movements represent a flowering of the gifts of the laity, congruent with the insights of Vatican II.
- The movements presently occupy a kind of legislative vacuum in the church.
- Some movements have come under fire for cultivating division within parishes and dioceses.

- Doctrinal positions of some of the movements have been described as fundamentalist in their focus.
- Some of the movements have been criticized as lacking social awareness or an appropriate commitment to enculturation of the Gospel.

Some learnings and challenges which I identified for the Sisters of Mercy were the following:

- The necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality which unifies a group. I suggested that within the Sisters of Mercy there are tendencies to an individualism in spirituality and a lack of shared practice that threaten to undermine our collective identity and witness.
- The importance of our ecclesial identity and relationships. If religious life is to be a decisive element for the church's mission, it is important for us to own our ecclesial identity. The Sisters of Mercy have traditionally been sought out by bishops and pastors, with the expectation that our presence and ministry would bring blessings in their wake.
- The centrality of a corporate mission which shapes our ministerial choices. The spiritual and corporal works of mercy are multi-faceted, but one of the convictions I am gaining from this conference is a deeper appreciation of their integrative nature.

Further development of the topic

- Mercy association as an instance of an ecclesial movement.
- Campus ministries and university parishes as loci of the movements, and their appeal to young people.
- A closer reading of the 1989 synod document, *Christifidelis Laici*, on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and World, as well as of the Proceedings of the World Congresses of the Ecclesial Movements held in Rome in 1998 and 2006. To what extent are these documents a charter and yardstick for the new realities, and a maturing of Vatican II insights?
- An examination of the contributions of the ecclesial movements and of religious congregations to the New Evangelization.
- How does the phenomenon of lay ecclesial ministry challenge both the traditional congregations and the new movements?

I hope my paper will be a beginning of a discussion—far from the last word.