

# ENTHUSIASM IN 1976

By EDMUND COLLEDGE

**I**N AUGUST of last year, on a hot, humid Toronto night, the Ontario Regional Conference of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church opened, and drew not far short of three thousand people into the varsity arena. By no means all of the participants were Canadians; many of the cars parked tight all round the arena bore New York State licence-plates. This event was designed as a sequel to the spectacular Notre Dame conference of a few years ago, attended by almost three times as many worshippers; and some of them had come over the border to help. Middle-aged married couples seemed to predominate (though, of course, there were no means of knowing how many priests and nuns were there in lay attire); but there was no age-group unrepresented, down to wailing babies. The young people were conspicuously conservative in appearance; the only long-haired man within view must have been seventy. 'Prosperous middle class' would cover almost everyone there, though the term has little applicability to modern north-american living; the women were marked by a stereotyped smartness. Decorum prevailed, though one suspected that everyone was on his honour to be decorous. Apart from a lot of hugging and high-pitched salutation when we were all bidden to greet our neighbours, there was little evidence of emotional tension; the atmosphere was that of quiet devotion. The tone was set by the evening's principal speaker, a youngish, personable layman (ex-seminarian, one-time agnostic, husband and father, now professional, full-time co-ordinator of the 'Alleluia Community' in Augusta, Georgia), who addressed us, at inordinate length, in a subdued, conversational, unemphatic style, at first wonderfully effective, which only a public address system can make possible for so great a gathering. (One wonders if those who still employ the traditional revivalists' styles realise how superannuated they now are?) Before this, a young woman had briefly harangued us, addressing us, in the person of Jesus, as 'her children', and this seemed to fall very flat. *Autres temps, autres mœurs*: but revival, conversion, baptism of the Spirit are still the objects of charismatic renewal; that we were never allowed to forget.

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It was edifying to be there, surrounded by so many hundreds, either convinced that a personal knowledge of Christ had changed their lives or asking that this might be so; and the catholic charismatics are themselves persuaded that their young movement will permanently affect the Church and cure her ills. But this is what such movements have always believed; and one sat there and let certain historical themes run through one's mind. We must see this renewal in its north american context. The Toronto conference came hard on the heels of the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, where one of the chief preoccupations had been recent statements, not challenged by any responsible authority, that out of the United States's twenty-five million Catholics, not more than half regularly attend sunday Mass (and one doubts if the figures for Canada would be any more encouraging). Economic distress is traditionally a circumstance which will contribute to the growth of pentecostalism; and poor for the most part north american catholics are not. But they undoubtedly know themselves to be unprivileged; and charismatic renewal can be seen as a search for empirical proof of the creature's standing in the loving sight of its Lord, for restoration of an identity and a dignity which it is losing in the continuously more degrading pressures of western civilization. And it would seem that such proofs have not been found by many in the Church's sacraments or in its ordinary forms of prayer.

Recent conversations with a young married couple who have for several years been active in the organization of a local catholic charismatic group have been helpful and illuminating. Highly intelligent and articulate, by no means uncritical of the directions which the movement is taking, both husband and wife professionally committed to sociological study and practice, they saw the weekly meetings of their own group as, for many, a badly-needed form of therapy. Some of their members had come to them as victims of one or other of the ills now so cruelly injuring our society: alcoholism, addiction to narcotics, broken or breaking marriages, and, accompanying and exacerbating these, rootlessness, inability to communicate, isolation. Everywhere around us in the cities the concrete anthills climb to the skies, and the psychiatrists and the distillers and the pushers thrive; and the nameless, faceless denizens sit and wait for Godot.

Recently a most instructive programme about lemmings and their habits was shown on canadian television, when a biologist dismissed as an old wives' tale the thesis that when these beasts swim in hordes out to sea, they are seeking their death. That they

do so die is true, but they are not suicidally motivated. 'Of the entire animal kingdom, only one species ever commits so unnatural an act, and that is the human race'. What happens, it seems, is that the lemmings multiply so fast that they exhaust the capacity of their terrain to support them. Then their behaviour changes violently. Normally peaceful and sociable, they become hysterically aggressive: mate attacking and killing its mate. Then, when a certain pitch of frenzy has been reached, groups go off, distractedly searching for new land to live on, and it is during these migrations that some of them perish. La Fontaine, thou should'st be living at this hour.

To their credit, the bishops of the United States and Canada have shown themselves awake to such malaises, and concerned to help the suffering; and the official attitude towards charismatic renewal is one of reserved benevolence. So far, this has prevented much history from repeating itself. One only of the new-style 'charismatic parishes' has gone into schism; and there are encouraging reports of non-catholics seeking reconciliation with the Church through the ministry of the groups, of adults going off to test religious vocations. One is encouraged, because this can only mean that there are men and women finding in Christ strength to make what are essentially private, solitary acts of commitment, dedication, prayer; the groups have achieved with them what any physician of the body or the mind must hope and work for, the moment of healing after which he is not needed.

To write so implies, of course, that one believes that renewal has no permanent organizational future in the Church; and history teaches one to believe that this will be so. There have been times of intense and widespread evangelical fervour which have been commemorated by the founding of new religious orders; one thinks particularly of Innocent III and his dealings, prudent, generous and innovative, with St Francis; but one must also remember that Francis before his death knew that his cause had been defeated, and that his order was not going to carry to the world the message of impoverished simplicity which he had wanted it to preach. There have been at times whole communities converted, in many cases forcibly, to an anarchy of pious frenzy; but usually they have come to an end as violent as were their religious transports. Such was the fate of the Münster Anabaptists. Most often, the emergence of organized religious enthusiasm has been the work of some man or woman of dominating personality (Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* contains a whole gallery of them), at whose death or eclipse the

enthusiasm died down. Some permanent ecclesial structure may survive, especially if the first leaders went, freely or perforce, into schism, as did the Wesleys; but of the first fervours little but legend (and, very often, some of the gems of christian hymnody) will remain.

To say this is to look as a Catholic at pentecostalism, this takes no account of the enduring protestant pentecostal communities of the United States, of countries such as Wales which used to be visited regularly by outbreaks of 'revivalism'. In the old days, we in the Church also had our own tried and approved methods of generating and regulating deep emotions centring on religious topics; and it may be that charismatic renewal is receiving much of its support from those who are now deprived of redemptorist missions, the *Quarant'ore* and so many other now relegated traditions. Such activities always had their critics amongst the intelligentsia, who looked askance at them as pandering to men's mere emotions; but we seem to be the poorer for their loss. The contemplation of hell-fire and damnation, the cultivation of eucharistic devotion, accommodated themselves to sacramental belief more easily than does the doctrine of 'Baptism of the Spirit', which is what charismatic renewal preaches, so creating problems for the theologians around which at present everyone circles uneasily. But it is clear that the old and the new revivalism correspond with a deep human need for corporate affirmation of our love for God, a need which the common recitation of the sunday creed and a few friendly words with one's fellow parishioners after Mass do not fulfil.

The purists tell us that the parish church is not a social club, the parish priest not a welfare worker; but that is not to say that the Church may remain indifferent to man's need for society, for expressed concern for his welfare. If I today find that organized catholic worship gives me all that I require, that may argue only that I am fortunate in finding elsewhere other modes of fulfilment. Ernst Troeltsch has justly remarked:

Men think that with the 'social', that is with the 'sociological' nature of the Church, they have already solved 'social' problems, that is, the problems which belong to the life of society and of the state. They think that if they form an organization which expresses the love which flows forth from God and returns to him once more, they are also meeting the need of the social groups which make up humanity as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans Olive Wyon (London, 1946), p 1, 33.

Humanity does need expression of the love which flows forth from God; and if humanity sees church people today coldly indifferent to that need, if the scholars and the antiquarians are so wedded to the forms of the past that they gag over the most trivial innovations (the abolition of the tridentine Mass, the vernacular liturgy, 'folk Masses', holy communion in the hand, to name only four), they will have little to say or to offer to the world which we are supposed to be evangelizing. In the Hulsean Lectures which F. J. Foakes-Jackson delivered more than seventy years ago, he had this to say of where the Church should stand with regard to tradition:

It is of the utmost importance for all of us to bear in mind that which Tertullian so earnestly insists upon, that christianity is not a philosophy with a teaching to be changed with the varying conditions of life, but that it is a religion based upon the common needs of humanity, with its roots implanted in the heart of man from his first appearance as a responsible being.<sup>2</sup>

Man's needs do not change, but they can grow more acute; and we who know that his needs can all be met by Christ and his saving word must become anxious and sad as we witness the ease with which, in today's needy world, any pseudo-prophet can 'arise, and show great signs and marvels'. Recently Kenneth Minogue published a most perceptive article, analysing the appeal of one of the most fashionable of present pseudo-prophets, Carlos Castaneda. There he wrote:

The guru is typically concerned not just with imparting knowledge, but with transforming lives. What he requires of his followers is total submission not to knowledge but to a Way or Path . . . The attractions of the guru can no doubt be traced back to the beginnings of western self-distaste in the eighteenth century, but the more celebrated gurus only began to make a splash towards the end of the nineteenth. India was, so far as this particular diffusion is concerned, the guru's original homeland, and the most romantic account of what a guru could do for you was given in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*.

Sapiently, sadly, Minogue's conclusion is: 'The kind of knowledge gurus possess is fundamentally the diagnosis and cure of the disease of being human'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Difficulties in the Second and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, England, 1903), p 33.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Guru: Thoughts after Reading Carlos Castaneda', in *Encounter* (August, 1976, 47 no 2), p 20.

The gurus are following Mary Baker Eddy, promising us that they will take the pain away. Christ tells us to take up our cross and follow in his footsteps. They tell us that our human condition is a disease. Christ became man to share it and to triumph over it. They promise us instant and effortless beatitude through arcane wisdom. Christ thanked the Father for revealing to the simple what was not shown to the wise; and he revealed to us the resurrection to tell us when and where we may hope for blessedness.

It is among the simple, in areas marked by long-standing economic and educational privation, that Pentecostalism has become a permanent form of worship; and one may wish and hope that it will retain its early simplicity. One of the most disquieting features of the new catholic pentecostalism spreading in North America is the need which it experiences to rationalize and justify itself by disparaging all intellectual approaches to faith and prayer, and seeking to substitute for them an undemanding, specious pseudo-science of the life of the Spirit. I have before me the second number of a journal directed to catholic Charismatics, which shows too plainly that they are being encouraged to regard theology as an enemy. The author of an article on scripture as a guide to christian living writes: 'I will not attempt to solve all the problems of scholars and theologians. I figure they created canonicity, inspiration and inerrancy, and so they can find the answers which will satisfy their questions. All we need do is discover the weight and power for good that God has given us in his word. Hopefully our answer will be acceptable to the theologians, but for now let us be satisfied to please ourselves'. If canonicity is a theologians' irrelevant invention, does this leave us free to preach 'The Gospel of Nicodemus', to edify our congregations with the correspondence exchanged between Paul and Seneca? Those of us committed to the study of medieval spirituality may often deplore the great mass of uninformed sentiment, lacking content, bordering upon hysteria, which it threw up; but what would be the judgment of the future upon our age, if the life of the Church today were to be assessed only from the millions of words, *inania et vacua*, annually churned out by the popular catholic presses?

If charismatic renewal hopes to become a force to change our lives, it will not achieve this by becoming an in-group, with any kind of private gospel such as this anti-intellectualism. And it will have achieved nothing by escaping from close episcopal supervision and control, if its leaders substitute for this a narrow authoritarian

attitude towards internal dissensions. This seems in places to be happening; leadership among the charismatics is already a problem. There is no system of democratic election, nor do the groups ask the bishops for guidance or appointments, so that leaders acquire their authority in much the same way as did such figures of the past as Benedict, Francis and Ignatius, by sheer force of personality. One of their followers has recently written of 'a strange form of authoritarianism where there is great stress on obedience, submission and authority . . . One can find charismatic communities where the rule is stricter than any pre-Vatican II religious community'.<sup>4</sup> Simon Tugwell has drawn our attention to John Kildahl's conclusion, that 'leaning on the group, and in particular, leaning on the leader, is a dominant psychological motive'.<sup>5</sup>

Then one is made uneasy by the calculated efforts which one can observe to trade on certain prevalent anxieties and obsessions (just as the Buchmanites in the 1930's traded on our fear of the coming war with Germany) by asserting that the Holy Spirit will use the ministry of the groups to heal what medical science and the sacraments of the Church have not cured. 'Faith healing' is traditionally a pentecostal belief and practice; and there are now many members of catholic charismatic groups who are claiming that they have been given this power. The official Church is, rightly, uneasy over this, and even more by the practice by lay people of rites of exorcism. One is not here writing of the prayers offered by a group for the special needs of one of its members; that is wholly laudable. But when they go further, to diagnose his ills as deriving from demonic possession, and to invoke the holy Spirit, with the laying-on of hands, to drive out the demon, they are playing with fire, and they are encouraging a morbid and superstitious attraction to the black arts which is already rampant. (Recently a colleague, who needed for his own serious scientific purposes to consult some historical study of witchcraft, complained that out of the vast new arts and sociology library of the University of Toronto, every single work dealing with the topic had been pilfered; and a publisher remarked not long ago that any book with the word 'Witch' in its title will sell like hot cakes from coast to coast.) The bishops, alarmed, have forbidden such rites; so now 'exorcism' is called 'deliverance'.

<sup>4</sup> Chachere Richard: 'Gift of Discernment', in the *Catholic Charismatic*, 1 no 2 (June, 1976), pp 30-35.

<sup>5</sup> 'Ecstasy - or What?', in *The Way* (July, 1974), 14 no 3, p 189.

Concerning 'the gift of tongues', I have little wish to add to what Michael Ivens and I have already written on this matter.<sup>6</sup> It is one of which I have not even an observer's experience; and in 'Pentecostal Prayer' we were guided chiefly by Simon Tugwell's excellent, painstaking *Did You Receive the Spirit?* In his more recent publication, *Prayer in Practice*, Tugwell still maintains his reserve towards the possibility that pentecostalism can be integrated into the life of the catholic Church. That reserve is shared by most traditionalists, who regard 'the gift', in particular, with misgiving and scepticism; and there are many with first-hand knowledge of protestant pentecostalism who tell us that our suspicions are well founded. A friend from the deep south told me that when he used to frequent such conventicles, one glance round the meeting house was enough to tell him who would be given what tongues and when. Yet I should add that someone else has spoken to me of a canadian priest who has never been heard to utter in public, but who has received the gift, and regularly uses it in private as a form of spiritual preparation for counselling and hearing confessions. If we are bible christians, we must believe that this is a gift which the Holy Spirit can bestow; but we are not required to accept everything which looks like its manifestation. Two thousand years have taught the Church that the world is full of crackpots, with more motives for fraudulence than can well be enumerated; and the Church warns us to be on our guard.

But an aloof, reserved caution is not going to win souls for Christ; and charismatic renewal seeks to draw them by offering a Christ-like openness. Our Saviour wept over Jerusalem, he spoke of his longing to enfold its children in a mother's protective embrace, he asked for that welcoming love which the city refused him. The gospels tell us of a man suffering, most cruelly, the pains of his despised and rejected love. Pentecostalism is trying to show that love as acceptable, as promising hope and joy. If it can revive in us an evangelical love for one another, it will have greatly blessed us; but our own experience and observation must tell us that the states of religious exaltation which the revivalists can produce in their gatherings cannot be of long duration, that some process of transmutation must be found, if the union with Christ which our emotions have experienced is to survive the emotions' subsidence, and to effect enduring change in our lives.

<sup>6</sup> 'Pentecostal Prayer', in *The Way* (October, 1973), 13 no 3, pp 325-36.



Many of the scenes which the gossellers remember and describe so vividly must remind us of what charismatic renewal seeks to promote: the enthusiastic, exuberant crowds, the near-hysterical demonstrations, the spectacular healings, the explosive release of pent-up feeling as hearts were touched by the words of life. But after such preaching campaigns, Christ asked for himself and for his staff a time of withdrawal, solitude, silence. There is no more recognizably human situation in all the gospels than the description of the exhausted Jesus, sitting alone by Jacob's well, glad, we may guess, that even his disciples had left him for a while, yet sacrificing his badly-needed rest to tell the unhappy woman who came to draw water the cause and the cure of her sorrow. It is in silence and in solitude that we too come close to the Father and receive the healing of the Spirit. Renewal will not truly have renewed, unless it teaches its followers, having prayed together, to go apart, to some lonely place where they can rest quietly, and to accept loneliness as a portion of God's will for us all, as one of the blessings which the Spirit has to give. All our elaborately-organized 'encounters' will have accomplished little, unless they lead us, after Christ, into the desert, 'that we may hear his word, not through any tongue of flesh nor angel's voice nor sound of thunder, but hear his very self'.<sup>7</sup> Beyond doubt, we need to learn to live in communities; we also need to learn to live alone.

Such an alternation of speech and silence, action and repose, exaltation and calm, is a pattern of living which the Church has taught and practised since its early days. To that pattern charismatic renewal can make a valid contribution, if it will not seek to be the whole of the life of communion with God to which his every child is called.

In her learned, witty study of the very word 'enthusiasm' and its history, Susie Tucker sagely observes that it could be used abusively, as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only by those convinced that the possibility of divine possession did not exist;<sup>8</sup> and she quotes a remark by George III (of all people) which we might well all take to ourselves. When his courtiers complained to him of the unbridled rantings of the 'Methodist' Lord Dartmouth, the king replied: 'He says only what any christian ought to say'.

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine: *Confessions*, x, 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Enthusiasm: a Study in Semantic Change* (Cambridge, 1972), p 21.