



Charismatic Renewal In The Orthodox Church

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The Pentecostal movement which emerged in this country at the beginning of the 20th Century, as we know, met immediately with misunderstanding and rejection

on the part of the mainline churches. This gave rise to separate and independent Pentecostal churches, consisting of Spirit-filled believers who were compelled to withdraw from the churches to which they belonged.

Those who came under the influence of this fresh moving of the Holy Spirit were primarily from among Protestant Christians. What makes Pentecostalism a spiritual experience and not just another denomination is the fact that in the last decade or so the Pentecostal stirring has made its way into established Protestant churches, like the Presbyterian, Episcopal and Lutheran. Clergy and laity who receive the Holy Spirit baptism remain in their churches, rather than withdraw.

In 1969 an event occurred that seemed until then inconceivable to the hard-core Pentecostals: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit finally reached the Roman Catholics, and to their utter disbelief members of the Catholic Church began receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit, manifesting the evidence of speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts.

This amazement stems principally from the fact that the Roman Catholic has been a regimented church with rigidly structured forms of worship and an authoritarian tradition. But what is proving still more astonishing to classical Pentecostals is the spread of the charismatic renewal into the Orthodox Church, known to be far the most ceremonial and fixed in its

liturgy and forms of worship.

My aim here is to acquaint the reader with the origins and development of the charismatic movement in the Orthodox Church. It is truly impressive to see how readily charismatic Orthodox can relate to traditional patterns of worship and especially to the sacramental life of the church. What used to be a dead letter in the liturgy comes alive. What was once religious routine and quite irrelevant to them now serves as a channel of anointing. Their spirit recognizes the spirit of those Spirit-filled Church Fathers who bequeathed to posterity their monumental writings of faith and worship. They discover a spiritual kinship with the generations of believers of earlier times who handed down collectively the charismata of the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Body of Christ. In their deeper experience of the Lord Jesus Christ by reason of the Holy Spirit baptism they are empowered to overcome the barriers of time and space and to discern with joy the Pentecostal life of the historic church.

The charismatic renewal in a very real sense is not something entirely new for Eastern Christianity. It is really finding its way home in the Orthodox Church. It is not fanciful or an exaggeration to state that Eastern Orthodoxy has been the most charismatic and Pentecostal church in Christendom, although not necessarily in modern expressions

with which most of us are familiar. Just because the Orthodox never sung Blessed Assurance, Amazing Grace or any other such charismatic choruses is no indication that they were not charismatic. They were singing, as they continue to sing today, songs and hymns written in Greek, the language of the New Testament, by Spirit-filled men still unknown to the western churches.

The Apostolic Fathers, Nicene Fathers and Post-Nicene Fathers never taught that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were withdrawn by God from the church at the close of the apostolic age (about 100 A.D.). What is significant is the fact that the scriptural teaching of God's indwelling or Divine Immanence was preserved in the Eastern Church, that is, the reality that the Holy Spirit and the Divine Logos indwells personally every born-again believer. The worship and spirituality of the Orthodox Church has continued down the centuries to be Spirit-centered and Logos-centered.

I wish I had more time to expand on this important point; suffice it, however, to indicate here that the Pentecostal renewal among the western churches can be interpreted as a compensation for the loss in the west during the middle ages of the belief in the in-dwelling presence of the personal Spirit and its substitution with the doctrine of grace, divine transcendence and subsequent man-centered authority.

In Orthodox theology the teachings on creation, original sin and salvation are expounded chiefly in terms of the indwelling and personal presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). The eventual Latinization of theology in western Christianity and the rise of authoritarianism in the church banished the conviction that

man is constitutionally related to God, as an abode of the immanent Logos and Holy Spirit. The believer had to content himself with “grace” which a remote God communicated to him by means of sacramental channels, administered by a divinely instituted priesthood and hierarchy.

There were many abortive attempts to recover the immediacy of the Spirit during the middle ages. Those that were called “mystics” in this period represent a nostalgic yearning for a forgotten and lost spirituality.

The Protestant Reformers accentuated divine transcendence and pulled the Christian west further away from the idea of the cosmic Logos (Reason) and indwelling Spirit (Colossians 1:15-20, 2:3; John 1:1). A natural upshot of this development was an increased separation between faith and reason and a wider gulf between the divine and the human. The fideism of neo-orthodoxy and existentialism in recent Christian thought is the end-result of a long process of alienation between God and man in the cause of “faith” and “grace.” The God-is-dead theology with its undercurrent agnosticism is in a real sense a tragic culmination of this thought movement.

The Holy Spirit is Central

Against this background we can see how the charismatic renewal represents, so to speak, a rediscovery of the Holy Spirit in the Christian west. In the Orthodox Church it can be interpreted as a re-awareness and fresh experience of what always was present, but had remained dormant and suppressed. While the Holy Spirit was replaced with “grace” in western theology and worship, in Orthodoxy the Holy Spirit to this day remains the dynamic of the church’s sacramental and devotional life. A Holy Spirit consciousness has always been an abiding quality of Orthodox theology and worship. As the Protestant

writer Alexander Allen states in his book *The Continuity of Christian Thought*, “*The doctrine of grace, as a specific influence passing from God to the individual spirit through external channels or in some arbitrary way, which has played so large a part in the sacramental and Calvinistic theologies, it must be admitted the early Greek theology knew nothing*” (p.16).

In order to view the charismatic renewal in Orthodoxy in proper perspective for an accurate assessment of its influence, it is helpful first to understand that Orthodoxy with its heritage of Christian Hellenism has been a Pneuma-centric church which has kept the human element in subjection to the lordship of Jesus Christ, at least in its doctrinal teaching. The Orthodox Church has through the centuries affirmed the primacy of the Spirit and the Logos. In one sense it is the most Pentecostal and charismatic church. It has all the theological presuppositions for a charismatic renewal.

Today we very often hear about the need for a theology of the charismatic renewal. I believe that the Orthodox Church with its rich and long tradition of the church Fathers that goes back in a straight line to apostolic times can make a significant contribution to the development of such a required theology for the disciplining and articulation of the charismatic experience.

The clericalism and gulf between clergy and laity that was a factor in the outbreak of the Reformation never really existed in the Eastern Church. The magisterium of the church was never restricted to the ordained clergy. There were always laymen who functioned in the Body as teachers, apostles and evangelists. The charismatic ministry survived side by side with the ordained ministry.

In the words of Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware, “*The Orthodox Church is not only hierarchical; it is charismatic and Pentecostal. ‘Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings (1 Thessalonians V, 19-20). The Holy Spirit is poured out upon all God’s people. There is a special ordained ministry of bishops, priests and deacons; yet at the same time the whole people of God are prophets and priests. In the Apostolic church, besides the institutional ministry conferred by the laying on of hands, there were other charismata or gifts conferred directly by the Spirit; Paul mentions ‘gifts of healing,’ the working of miracles, ‘speaking with tongues,’ and the life (1 Corinthians 12:28). In the church of later days, these charismatic ministries have been less in evidence, but they have never been wholly extinguished*” (The Orthodox Church, p. 254).

Some examples of Spirit-filled men who exercised a charismatic ministry of teacher and prophet in the Russian Orthodox Church in the last two-hundred years are: Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), Leonid (1768-1841), Macarius (1788-1860), Ambrose (1812-1891), John Sergiev (1829-1908), Alex Khomiakov (1804-1860), Berdyayev, Fedotov, Arseniev, Evdokimov, Vladimir Lossky, etc.

The charismatic experience from the fourth century was being associated increasingly with monasticism. Those who looked for a deeper walk with God invariably withdrew into the cloistered life of the monastic community. But this began to change in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century.

Monasticism began to decline rapidly with the emancipation of Greece and the Balkans from Ottoman Turkish subjugation by the middle of the nineteenth century. It marked the return to an intramundane piety and Christian outreach. It signaled the ago

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of renewed charismatic activity in the mainstream of the church's life apart from monasticism. The monastery no longer was the only possible place for a deeper experience of Jesus Christ. The man who probably inaugurated the age of renewal, lay Christian endeavor was Apostolos Makrakis (1831-1906), a Spirit-filled Greek evangelist, preacher, prophet and teacher. Every spiritual movement subsequent to Makrakis that took place in the Greek church can very likely be attributed to the seeds of awakening that this spiritual giant had planted. His most outstanding disciple, Soter Philaretos (died 1913), continued the work of renewal, like his teacher, both through the written word and in the ministry of evangelism.

It has always been a teaching in the Orthodox Church that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second blessing following water baptism, indeed necessary for salvation. It is believed on scriptural (John 3:5) and patristic grounds that rebirth takes place primarily through Holy Spirit baptism.

Historically the baptism of the Holy Spirit is administered to a believer who has just been baptized in water. The two baptisms have constituted one initiatory rite, engrafting the believer on to the Body of Christ. The Spirit baptism is administered in the sacrament of Chrismation when the priest anoints the believer on the organs of sense, saying at each anointing: *"The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit."* This usage can be traced back to very early times. St. Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) in this regard states the following:

"See that you do not mistake the Chrism for mere unguent. For, just as the bread of the Eucharist after the invocation of the Holy Spirit is not ordinary bread, so also this holy ointment is no more simple ointment after the invocation, but the gracious charisma of Christ and the Holy Spirit, being made operative by the presence of His divinity" (Catechetical Discourse 21:3).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is called a "seal" (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30, 2 Corinthians 1:2). The sealing of the Holy Spirit represents the

Spirit's imprinting on the believer the Father's likeness, that is, the Lord Jesus Himself. While in the western church the laying on of hands prevailed as the form of administering the Holy Spirit, in the eastern church episcopally consecrated Chrism or Unction became established as the external expression of the mystery of the believer's participation in the Holy Spirit.

Although normally the Spirit baptism is administered by means of the sacrament of Chrismation, according also to Father Lev Gillet: *"the gift of the Holy Ghost cannot be exclusively identified with Chrisma. Scripture points to cases when the Spirit was given without any human ministrations...In many modern cases we should not dare to deny the reality of a 'Baptism of the Spirit' conferred upon men who had not received it sacramentally. 'The wind bloweth where it listeth' and 'God giveth not the Spirit by measure.' Pentecostal grace cannot be fixed and, as it were crystallized around the outward ministrations of the Holy Sacraments. The Chrisma, ritual anointing, is but the efficacious sign or sacramentum of the invisible and spiritual unction which God pours out in the hearts of men whenever and wherever He pleases"* (Orthodox Spirituality, p.66).

This same Orthodox writer also affirms that *"the gifts of the Pneuma which marked the beginning of the church are not things of the past. They have been given, they are given, to the church for all times."*

Against this background we can see that in the Orthodox Church the charismatic renewal is really nothing new or extraneous, but it is actually finding its way home. A further consideration, however, that will help us understand how the charismatic renewal is right at home in Orthodoxy is the fact that the Jesus Prayer or Prayer of the heart is so much part of Orthodox spirituality. ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me"). In repeating this small, but potent supplication, over and over again, the name of Jesus releases the power of the Holy Spirit in the heart. The experience is described in the well-known book *The Way of a Pilgrim*:

"Sometimes my heart would feel as though it were bubbling with joy, such lightness, freedom and consolation were in it. Sometimes I felt a burning love for Jesus Christ and for all God's creatures. Sometimes that sense of a warm gladness in my heart spread throughout my whole being and I was deeply moved as the fact of the presence of God everywhere was brought home to me. Sometimes by calling upon the Name of Jesus I was overwhelmed with bliss, and now I knew the meaning of the words: 'The Kingdom of God is within you'." (p.41).

Seeing God's Light

Spirit-filled Orthodox teachers have also spoken of the quest for the vision of the transfiguration light of Tabor. St. Symeon the New Theologian taught that this experience is accessible to the ordinary Christian. He relates the account of a young man who was *"standing at prayer, saying more in his mind than with his lips: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner,' whereupon a brilliant Divine radiance descended on him from above and filled the room. The young man forgot that he was in a room, or beneath a roof, for on all sides he saw nothing but light' he was not even aware of standing on the ground. He became wholly dissolved in this trans-substantial light and it seemed to him that he himself became light. So he forgot the whole world and was filled with tears and unspeakable joy. Thereupon his mind rose upwards to heaven and there he saw another light, brighter than the light which surrounded him"* (Philokalia, p. 146).

St. Symeon speaks of his own experience of the divine light: *"I often say the light; sometimes it appeared to me within me, when my soul possessed peace and silence; sometimes it only appeared afar off, and even hid itself altogether. Then I suffered an immense sorrow, thinking that I should never see it again. But when I began to weep, and witnessed to my complete detachment from everything, and to an absolute humility and obedience, the light reappeared like the sun which chases away the thick clouds."*

I have tried to demonstrate as briefly as possible that the Orthodox Church is intrinsically Pentecostal and charismatic in its theological and liturgical tradition. This is not to say that everything presently goes well with the Orthodox Church, that it is spiritually flourishing and is fully "without spot or wrinkle." On the contrary, it is in grave need of renewal. Its greatest temptation is to rest on the spiritual laurels of earlier generations or Spirit-filled saints, teachers, confessors, martyrs and fathers, and to boast: "We are the spiritual descendents and heirs of the church Fathers. We are the church of the Fathers!"

But I can hear the Lord replying to us Orthodox: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, *'We have Abraham as our father;'* for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Much of the Pneumatic theology in the Orthodox Church remains in cold storage. It needs to be put on the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Lord dealt with me in this regard. I praise Him for showing me that the Holy Spirit is not known with the head, but rather with the heart; that theology of the Holy Spirit without the baptism of the quickening Spirit is dead and capable of killing the soul; that theology is not viable and redeeming without experience.

It had always been frustrating for me to join in with other theologians in discoursing about the Holy Spirit and His place in the Trinity without actually experiencing the full release of the Spirit within my heart and within my life. Now I can understand what St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 AD) meant when he admonished: "*No one has the right to teach concerning the Holy Spirit without first having the experience of the Holy Spirit.*"

I can foresee that the charismatic renewal will move in the Orthodox Church like wildfire in the years ahead, as soon as more of her pastors and theologians are prepared to realize that it is a full-gospel movement of the Holy Spirit. Since the Orthodox believe that they continue organically in an unbroken continuity the church of

the apostle Paul, they have no reason to distrust the charismatic renewal, since it is of God and not of man.

To paraphrase the scriptural dictum, "Can anything good come out of the west?" This attitude (arising from Orthodoxy's experience with the papacy from the ninth century and thereafter) is a barrier that has to be overcome. The traditionally Protestant expressions in the charismatic renewal immediately raise suspicions in the mind of Orthodox. The Reformation has been long regarded as a heresy out of a heresy.

But the Holy Spirit baptism is beginning to change this mentality among many Orthodox. In this deeper experience of God they are being given a new vision. They are now able to see that the Lord is not only capable of but desires to pour out His love and mercy and power upon the Christian west and upon all flesh. God is enabling the Orthodox to relate to believers of other churches in a relationship of love. The Lord is showing me that it is not enough to be the "true church." The house of Israel was His true church but it was capable of crucifying the Lord of glory.

The Orthodox Church with all of its true and authentic doctrines is in desperate need of renewal. There are signs coming out of Greece today that reveals that Greek Christians are beginning to humble themselves and to confess before God that they have reached an impasse in the crisis that plagues the church. Some voices are beginning to be heard, admitting helplessness and total dependence on God's mercy.

In closing, let me point out that I have been convinced from my studies in church history that the Orthodox church is the historic church with a history and unbroken continuity that goes back to Apostolic beginnings. It always fascinated me that the Orthodox Church developed through the centuries totally unassociated from both the papacy and the Reformation, that is, from the religious upheavals of western Europe, and that she preserved a unity in diversity, the authority of scripture and the Lord Jesus Christ as the only head of the church.

But nevertheless I believe she has been a disobedient church, especially in the last few centuries, and as a result of her disobedience she has abdicated her responsibility of witnessing to the western churches and to all the world. I know now that God is doing what the Orthodox Church or any church for that matter could not do: the restoration of the church and the regathering of all of God's people. The outpouring of His Holy Spirit is His answer to the rise of liberalism in many of the denominations, the futility of the ecumenical movement to reunite all Christian churches and the spreading apostasy in the churches.

God has thus far kept the Orthodox Church free from a creedal crisis, that is, a crisis of belief and theology. No liberalism fortunately plagues it. Her crisis is one of personal faith and obedience in the midst of theological certainty.

You may very likely disagree with me, dear reader, but my approach to the charismatic renewal when I face my fellow-Orthodox goes like this: God is compensating for Orthodox failure to witness to the world for the full-gospel that our church claims to possess in a unique way. If He were to wait for the Orthodox Church to manifest His love and power to perishing man, He would have to wait for ever. But He is bringing the non-Orthodox by means of the end-time outpouring of His Spirit upon all flesh into the full-gospel, Christian orthodoxy. But it will be an Orthodoxy not necessarily in its modern day, external structures. It will be an Orthodoxy of faith and worship, but not necessarily in the forms and shapes with which we are familiar. We should know better than to dwell under the illusion that Orthodoxy at its core has to be identified with the externals that we know of today. It is naive to suppose that the full-gospel of Christ's authentic Church has to be identified with immutable, verbal forms. God is telling me to bow to the mystery of His love and mercy He is already pouring upon all men and women in a final stage of preparing His people for the return of Jesus Christ.