



Ecclesial Movements as Agents of a New Evangelization

by *H. Richard McCord*

A new evangelization is synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond boundaries and broaden horizons. The new evangelization is the opposite of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal into oneself, a *status quo* mentality and an idea that pastoral programs are simply to proceed as they did in the past. (Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, *Lineamenta*, no. 10)

In recent years the Holy Father and the bishops have called the Catholic faithful to undertake a “New Evangelization.” This call has been given special prominence by the Holy Father’s decision to convene the next international Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*.

The preparatory document (*Lineamenta*) for this synod reminds us that the newness of the New Evangelization is more than rhetorical flourish. It has significance and consequences. It must be, in the words of Blessed John Paul II, “new in ardor, methods and expression” (apostolic exhortation *On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: The Way to*

Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity in America [Ecclesia in America], no. 6, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html).

This essay examines one such example of a new approach to evangelization, namely, the phenomenon of ecclesial movements. “Ecclesial movements” is a collective term for many volunteer groups and associations that have arisen within the Church, mostly in the twentieth century. They offer the possibility of going beyond boundaries to broaden the horizons of mission and ministry. This essay will describe the movements in general terms, provide some historical perspective on their emergence, and then reflect on their potential role in the New Evangelization and transmission of faith in a changing social milieu and a culturally diverse ecclesial environment.

“Movement” is a contemporary term applied to ecclesial groups and associations of the Christian faithful and used to accentuate their newness, dynamism, spontaneity, and a certain charismatic quality in how they were founded and in how they carry out their

work. To say that something is a movement calls attention to the initiative of the Holy Spirit who distributes gifts and graces by which all the faithful can contribute to the building up of the Church (see Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium]*, no. 12, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]).

Some examples of contemporary ecclesial movements that exist to a greater or lesser extent in the United States are Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo, Christian Life Communities, Christian Family Movement, Movimiento Familiar Cristiano, Focolare, Neocatechumenal Way, Marriage Encounter, Communion and Liberation, and L'Arche.

These diverse groups have certain common characteristics that could constitute a summary description of an ecclesial movement. With some exceptions, all movements have

- A founder whose particular charism gave birth to the movement
 - Predominantly, but not exclusively, lay membership
 - Some ecclesial structure and communal expression
 - A set of teachings and methods that flesh out the movement's charism
 - An explicit commitment to an evangelizing mission
 - A relationship with ecclesiastical authorities

Ecclesial movements are examples of the necessarily diverse forms of participation in the life of the Church—something that the Second Vatican Council commended as the group form of the apostolate (Paul VI, *On the Apostolate of Lay People [Apostolicam*

Actuositatem], nos. 18-20, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1*).

Ecclesial movements follow in a long tradition of groups, associations, and communities that have arisen throughout the history of the Church. To meet specific needs of the time and to pursue mission-oriented purposes, the Holy Spirit has raised up from the lay faithful various monastic and mendicant orders, confraternities, sodalities, charitable and educational societies, social welfare organizations, and Catholic Action groups. In the modern period, and due largely to the encouragement of the Second Vatican Council, the ecclesial movements represent “a new era of group endeavors of the lay faithful” (John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World [Christifideles Laici]*, no. 29, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html).

Many of the movements that operate in the United States today were established first in Europe or Latin America. Over the course of time, particularly through the influence of immigration, they have made their way to this country. Sometimes the social conditions in another country that facilitated the emergence of a given movement are not replicated in our own nation. Consequently, some movements have had difficulty being understood and accepted here. The existence of a strong system of parishes in the United States—a situation that is not the case in other countries—has also modified, or perhaps impeded, the growth of ecclesial movements.

Within the unity of the Church's communion and mission, all the faithful have, by reason of their Baptism, both the freedom and the right to form associations (see *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 19; Paul VI, *On the Ministry and Life of Priests* [*Presbyterorum Ordinis*], no. 8, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1*; and *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation* [*Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC)] [Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998], c. 215). This is exercised within a broader understanding of the Church as an organic communion of vocations, ministries, services, charisms, and responsibilities. No specific authorization by the hierarchy is needed to form or join an association, although the hierarchy can give it recognition and even grant it juridical status (see CIC, cc. 298-301). An association or movement cannot use the name "Catholic" without consent from competent ecclesiastical authority (see CIC, c. 300).

Ecclesial movements enjoy a measure of flexibility, fluidity, and the ability to appeal to people who want to engage in a particular apostolic activity, use a certain style of prayer, or follow a set of spiritual practices. Movements can function in a much more homogeneous and focused manner than parishes.

Recent trends show that U.S. parishes are growing larger as mergers and consolidations take place and as the Catholic population increases. As a result, parishioners can feel lost and nameless. By contrast, movements can be more relational and communal. They can give members more opportunities to connect with others, share their gifts, and receive support for living a

Christian life. John Paul II even raised the possibility that some large parishes might become "a community of communities and movements" in order to renew themselves (*Ecclesia in America*, no. 41).

Because movements tend to be keenly aware of their mission, more intentional about their methods and audiences, and possibly more willing and able to innovate, they seem well positioned to be leaders in the New Evangelization. Ecclesial movements, insofar as their membership is mainly or exclusively lay, provide valuable formation for laity and give them the chance to exercise leadership, often on a large scale.

Movements can appeal to people who are searching for a deeper experience of discipleship and who often want "more" than the average parish can provide. They can also offer a way of belonging for cultural minorities who had the prior experience of membership in a movement in their countries of origin. Certain movements are culturally based and often promote devotional practices and customs that help immigrants make a bridge from their homeland to a new country.

The flip side of the strength of ecclesial movements reveals their weaknesses. They can be elitist and absolutist about their particular mission or spirituality. They can demand excessive allegiance. They can exalt the teachings of their founder above the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Church. Particularly in the United States, they can position themselves in a competing relationship with the parish. This has been a source of tension and misunderstanding, especially between the bishops of the United States and some of the movements.

However, conflict is neither inevitable nor unresolvable. If a diocesan bishop and his collaborators are able to develop a comprehensive pastoral plan, then a legitimate space can be made in it for ecclesial movements. Parishes are indeed the mainstay of a diocesan church, but they are not the only ways of gathering people into community and equipping them for mission. Movements can exist within parishes and alongside of parishes. Dialogue and discernment are keys to a collaborative relationship. For example, over the past five decades, Marriage Encounter has drawn thousands of couples from parishes, given them an experience of renewal, and then sent them back into their parishes with increased fervor for ministry.

When considering how to tap the potential of the ecclesial movements for the New Evangelization, it is helpful to recall the “criteria of ecclesiality” proposed by Pope John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici* (no. 30) for evaluating their contribution to the Church.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) has developed an instrument based on these criteria (CCCB Theology Commission, *Criteria for Evaluating New Ecclesial Movements*, June 2002). It lists six qualities that

must exist in any ecclesial movement that wishes to take part in the New Evangelization.

1. *Accountability*: Does the movement hold itself accountable to ecclesiastical authority?
2. *Implantation*: Is the movement involved in the parish and some aspect of its mission?
3. *Authentic doctrine*: Is the movement faithful to the teachings of the Church?
4. *Complementarity*: Does the movement have some contact with other ecclesial movements in the local church?
5. *Social involvement*: Does the movement have a presence in society and a commitment to the works of charity and justice?
6. *Holiness*: Is the movement intentional about being an instrument of holiness in its members and an inspiration to all the faithful?

To the extent that new ecclesial movements model themselves on these criteria, they will have a promising role in the life of the Church and in its New Evangelization.

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