Concerning Extraordinary Bodily Phenomena in the Context of Spiritual Occurrences

The Theological Commission of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church of Germany

Translated by Veronika Ruf, et. al.

For a long time there has been a greater awareness of the body in spiritual experiences in the Charismatic movement. In response to questions that have arisen regarding the so-called "Toronto Blessing," the Theological Committee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Germany presents, together with the Coordinating Group, some thoughts that can assist in spiritual discernment. In the foreground there is not the Toronto Blessing, but the question as to how to deal with physical phenomena that accompany spiritual occurrences.

Encountering God is always a holistic event that includes the body and the soul; it is never something "purely spiritual." This principle holds true for the Christian Liturgy as well as for the spiritual life of the individual. Certain positions of the body and ways of behavior help a person to be open before God. Every new attention and affection given by God that touches the heart of the human person has a soul-body effect. Knowledge, relationship, strengthening and empowering, feeling or spiritual "contact," also always have a bodily component. At times it can be "felt to the fingertips." This soul-body connection holds true in general for human experiences; sometimes we can read in a person's face what is going on inside.

Occurrences that remain in a conventional framework (what is "conventional" is sometimes very different in different cultures) provide no special difficulties. However, today some are inclined to explain all spiritual proceedings as merely inner-psychological occurrences, thereby failing to take seriously enough the extent to which God's self-communication occurs therein. The spiritual tradition, however, is well aware that the "Creator communicates to the creature" and that human beings, for instance in the Spiritual Exercises, are able to distinguish this from their own thinking and wishes. The manner of such communications can certainly be very different. Ignatius of Loyola distinguishes between being overwhelmed, being moved, and finally a quiet and more common way (for example in the midst of our own thoughts and decisions). The first and the second way naturally have a stronger effect on the soul as well as the body (which is not to say that

2 Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, 175-189. "Three times to make a good choice."
they are of greater worth). The Charismatic movement in our century
was allowed to experience the holistic effect of God’s grace in a new
way. The often surprising filling with the Holy Spirit (Baptism in the
Holy Spirit) as well as many extraordinary charisms, to which we were
not accustomed, underline the fact that the Spirit of God also
encompasses the body.3

In the background stands the question as to how to judge the
phenomena which have occurred since January 1994 under the name of
the “Toronto Blessing.” When the Holy Spirit is prayed for, many
people fall to the floor. Some start laughing or crying, sometimes even
screaming, others shake or jerk, or feel as though they are drunk. It
goes without saying that this abbreviated description does not fully
capture or portray these occurrences.4 However, before we can make a
statement regarding these phenomena (Part C) it is important to speak
in principle of bodily phenomena accompanying manifestations of
spiritual occurrences (Part A) as well as spiritual discernment (Part B).
We learn from history and our own spiritual experience, and gain
insight for the whole spiritual life as well as old-proven criteria to
discern the new. Only after that will we ask the questions as to whether
in the “Toronto-phenomena” we are dealing with spiritual occurrences
and how they can be judged from the criteria we have provided. This
investigative approach means that in Parts A and B we do not speak of
the “Toronto-event,” despite the fact that our questions have been
raised through it.

A. Principles

A. 1. Comparison with Occurrences in the Realm of Psychology
and Medicine

It is often pointed out that phenomena like falling down, laughing,
crying and shaking, screaming and contortions also occur through the
use of certain psychological methods. Does it follow that through
prayer the same behaviors happen? Indeed, it must be admitted that
with certain psychological therapies we encounter similar phenomena,
and so a comparison is quite possible.

However, there is a difference in that such reactions experienced in
therapy are caused by the methodical reconstruction of psychological
problems, whereas those experienced in prayer are explicitly caused by
an encounter with God. Since in the encounter with God the person as
a whole is addressed holistically in a still greater depth, it is not
surprising that the person is thereby deeply moved or stirred. This

3Here we are presupposing knowledge of the theological-pastoral orientation
document Der Geist macht lebendig (see literature below). Note that the aspect of
bodily presence [Leibhaftigkeit] in an experience of the Spirit is a central theme
throughout the document.

4For more on this, see Part C and the recommended literature at the end.