FEEDBACK:
THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

A Catholic Response to
Peter Hocken's Catholic Response

Kilian McDonnell

One must be impressed with the careful, courteous response of Peter Hocken¹ to the report of the Theological Commission of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church of Germany, entitled "Concerning Extraordinary Bodily Phenomena in the Context of Spiritual Occurrences."² Hocken has large praise for the freedom of the German report from "narrow denominational or confessional bias,"³ for the "clear recognition of the bodily component in all human and spiritual experience,"⁴ and for the willingness, following the traditions of Catholic spirituality, to recognize the possibility of an authentic, basic spiritual impulse which is distinguished from psychological or cultural factors. Hocken brings to his reflections a broad knowledge of both Classical Pentecostalism, non-denominational movements, and the Charismatic Renewal in the historic churches. What he writes needs to be received with the attention due to a creative scholar. I would like to remark on only a few of the points which Hocken raises in his response to the German report.

1. Hocken regrets the report's focus on phenomena. As a consequence, he claims that the report does "not address the question of the 'content' of the experience."⁵ There is in the report, he continues, "no discernment concerning the total current [of the 'Toronto blessing'] and its significance."⁶ Let me take exception. I admire the German report

for its holistic approach. While it must take into account the phenomena, it does so only in the context of the total event, in all of its complexity. Attention has to be paid to the phenomena in the framework of the whole, because it is the physical phenomena which can call into question what may be an authentic religious experience. Further, there is no direct access—I stress the word “direct”—to the spiritual content of the experience. There is only indirect access, through what people say they experience, through the effects they believe flow from the experience, and through what some assert are the short-term and long-term impact on individuals and communities. One can never address the Spirit as an object. Only by indirection can one theologize about the Spirit. I do not think that the report focused in an inappropriate way on the physical phenomena.

2. How would one meet Hocken’s request for a discernment of the “total current [of the ‘Toronto blessing’] and its significance”? One is dealing with phenomena with a wide range of possibilities including some whose original impulse might be an authentic move of the Spirit; some which may be authentic, but whose authenticity is put in doubt by questionable behavioral patterns; some experiences which may be sought for their own sakes and are of doubtful character; some which may be dominantly a psychological event; some which may be the result of various levels of manipulation; and some which may be rightly judged to be dominantly hysterical in nature. What is the discernment of the “total” current and its significance?

3. Hocken would have liked a more penetrating analysis of the “unity of the spiritual and the physical in God’s plan for creation.” The report fails, he claims, “to address the social and public character of the overall phenomenon.” Here Hocken contends that the “renewing-reviving currents of the Holy Spirit of God should manifest themselves in the physical realm that is also created by God and that is to be fully redeemed by the saving work of Jesus Christ.” He points to the goodness of the created order. Quite rightly Hocken invokes this principle.

---

7Every human act has a psychological structure. The purest impulse of the Spirit is always received according to the mode of the receiver, and therefore a psychological structure is never wanting.
11In the Catholic tradition this affirmation is also stated in Christological terms: “... the assumed [human] nature inseparably united to the divine Word [second person of the Trinity] serves Him [the incarnate Son of God] as a living instrument of salvation.” The divine and the human in Jesus form “one interlocked reality” (Constitution on the Church 8, one of the principal documents to issue from Vatican Council II). This principle, sometimes called the sacramental principle, operates on the basis of the model of the Incarnation where the divine and the human become one