

## History of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Houston

The history of Texas Catholicism has been a rich, but far from a smooth journey. As the Church passed from across the waters of the Spanish kingship into the Republic and finally grounding into an Independent state, Catholicism continued to flourish within the Texas borders. At the onset of the birth of Texas' Independence, as the United States established its strong foundation, Catholicism was far from being accepted beyond the Texas territory. Before 1836, immigrants who settled within the United States were offering a less than warm welcome for Catholics while the Republic was requiring landowners to be Catholic. Progress within the Church has continued to advance from the Middle-Age traditions and thrived from an internal reformation of Vatican II reaching an awakening in its youth through a Charismatic Movement establishing itself within major cities. One of these major cities to become the cornerstone in Texas of this Catholic Charismatic movement is Houston.

Initially, the movement traveled through Houston from Topeka, Kansas "after it was refused by the Bishops in the early 1900s" said Elizabeth Pringle, a member of the Catholic Charismatic Center in Houston. She added, "The movement continued on to Los Angeles where it was received by a small black community church"<sup>1</sup>. However, the Charismatic movement was not acknowledged within the Catholic Church until the mid 1960s when a group of college students from Duquesne University in Pittsburg had an upper-room experience paralleled to that of the upper-room experience of the Apostles written about in the New Testament. Pope Paul VI, vicar of the Catholic Church, emphasized the church's call to Evangelization at the 1975 Council of Vatican II, the beginning of the Church's renewal. However, many of the traditionally conservative church community members were not ready to receive such drastic changes found within the Charismatic movement. At the time, it was reported, "the movement was regarded as overly emotional and oriented toward biblical and doctrinal fundamentalism."<sup>2</sup> Some people even felt that it fell in the classification of a cult.

However, it was not until May, 1998 that then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, defined in a letter written in reference to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements; a movement is "a concrete ecclesial entity, in which primarily lay people participate, with an itinerary of faith and Christian testimony that founds its own pedagogical method on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes."<sup>3</sup> The Church recognizes a Charism from its Greek term charisma as used in 1 Corinthians 7:7, "Every one hath his proper gift [charisma] from God; one after this manner, and another after that." The term is used to meet the itinerary of faith within the call to the proclamation of Evangelization. Jay Dunlap explains in his article Are There Cults in the Catholic Church?, "movements subject to the Church's authority and faithful to the Church's teachings present themselves as a good way to approach God in love and service—but never as the only way,"<sup>4</sup> respecting all ways

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<sup>1</sup> Pringle, 1

<sup>2</sup> Vera, 4

<sup>3</sup> Ratzinger, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Dunlap, 2

accepted by the Church. Yet, the church community, including many priests, was hesitant to the charisms that are the foundation of the charismatic movement. Mrs. Pringle said, “My welcome into the Catholic parish was a message delivered from the pastor of my parish, Our Lady of Mount Carmel located on Whitefriars in Houston; ‘if that woman lifts her hands in my church she is out on her ear’”<sup>5</sup>. She added, “In ten years he never spoke to me despite the fact that I ran the Charismatic Prayer Group in his parish”<sup>6</sup>. As reported by Robert Vera, religious writer for the Houston Chronicle, “although the charismatic movement claims roughly eight percent of the nation’s fifty-eight million Catholics, many priests and laity remain skeptical”<sup>7</sup>.

In 1970, after an unexpected spiritual encounter prompted by a young group of Pentecostal-Catholics, Father Richard E. Paulissen of the Maryknoll House in Houston was moved to attend a retreat at a Catholic Benedictine Monastery in New Mexico, which changed his life and brought the movement back to Houston. By 1972, Bishop John Louis Morkovsky appointed Father Paulissen as the Director of the Charismatic Renewal in Houston. In the beginning, “a different parish hall was used each month for prayer meetings”<sup>8</sup>. Then, Father Paulissen was hired for \$100 a month to run the Charismatic Renewal from the Sacred Heart Dominican College, later simply Dominican College, which was located in Houston. “The Center’s activity began to stimulate activity in all parishes in the diocese. A life in the Spirit team from the Center began traveling to the parishes to conduct seminars and start prayer groups”<sup>9</sup>. At the close of the college in 1975, the renewal then moved to an old school at Saint Nicholas parish, the oldest African-American parish in the South. “The school had been closed in 1967 because the city had condemned it”<sup>10</sup>, nevertheless, Father Paulissen said, “For seven years the Center’s main service was the Sunday evening prayer meeting along with Tuesday morning prayer meeting”<sup>11</sup>. The movement continued to grow and by 1979, there were 120 prayer groups throughout the diocese. In 1982, Bishop Morkovsky officially declared the Center an Oratory allowing Sunday Mass to be celebrated. This defined the Center within the Charismatic movement; it also made the Center officially Catholic, with all the privileges of a parish such as offering the sacraments. However, it is not recognized as a parish due to its members residing in multiple parishes.

The fact that the Oratory was growing led to the need for a larger building. However, by this time, Father Paulissen was aging and building a new building was not of interest at his stage in life. However, “in the fall of 1993 a gentleman approached [Father Paulissen] me and said that he would like to pay for a new Center... and formed a foundation for the Center placing three million two hundred thousand dollars into it”<sup>12</sup>, which led to the building of a three thousand seat church. After much time had passed,

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<sup>5</sup> Pringle, 1

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>7</sup> Vera, 2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 20

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 22

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 25

John Small agreed to be recognized as the contributor. By the conclusion of construction, the two-story worship center at 1949 Cullen cost 5.4 million dollars and opened May 25, 1996 on Pentecost Sunday. The Houston Chronicle quoted Walter C.J. Matthews, the director of the National Charismatic Movement, “the Houston Center is unique in offering both Sunday Mass and charismatic education and outreach, and is regarded by officials as a national model for a diocesan charismatic center”<sup>13</sup>. Vera included in his article that Reverend Frank Rossi, Vice Chancellor of the diocese stated, “The facility is considered a spirituality center open to any Catholic, it is not meant to replace the parish community but rather offer a prayer and liturgical style that helps deepen the spiritual life of many Catholics”<sup>14</sup>

After the completion of the building, it was time to find someone to take over. By now, Father Paulissen was in his late sixties and needed someone to lead the Center. On July 25, 1999, the Houston Chronicle reported: “In their first-ever ventures outside Ottawa, the Companions of the Cross have accepted bishops’ invitations to pastor in Texas...Four priests and a seminarian will move to Houston to manage the 3,000 seat Catholic Charismatic Center and parish church”<sup>15</sup>. Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza had requested the Companions of the Cross-to oversee the Catholic Charismatic Center.

The Companions of the Cross-is a brotherhood of Roman Catholic Priests who live in community, and “stand in solidarity with the official Magisterium of the Church”<sup>16</sup>. Their roots are in the Archdiocese of Ottawa Ontario, Canada, and in their founder: Father Bob Bedard. The brotherhood stands under four pillars in their ministry; Eucharistic, Magisterium, Marion, and Charismatic. These priests are involved in active ministry “with their key ministries of pastoring parishes to authentic revival in the Holy Spirit”<sup>17</sup>. Father Bedard explained in his book *We are Called to Be Companions of the Cross*, the Companions are “open to using all the gifts of the Holy Spirit for ministry within the Church”<sup>18</sup>. He writes that the “gifts that we speak of are the nine peculiar Charisms...wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues... as defined for ministry, to be used in the service of others to build up the body of the Church”<sup>19</sup>. Father Ed Wade, currently an Assistant Director of the Catholic Charismatic Center explained, “I had heard about this place and I, along with Father Sean Wenger, called Father Paulissen who asked us to come down and do some speaking”<sup>20</sup>. During the visit, four visiting priests were able to investigate the Center, “obviously, we saw the beauty of the place and the possibilities of it” continued Father Wade, “but, we could never figure out what this place was. There is nothing like this place in the country, probably the world”<sup>21</sup>. Father Wade has remained

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<sup>13</sup> Vera, 2

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, 1

<sup>16</sup> Bedard, 17

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>20</sup> Wade, 1

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 1

active in the ministry at the Center. In 2004, the New Orleans Times-Picayune reported Father Wade as a scheduled speaker presenting at the Charismatic Renewal Conference on Prayer and Evangelization with an expectation of 3000 in attendance.

It was John XXIII who opened the doors to the Pentecost, “that was his prophesy”, said Father Wade, “then Paul VI, who was discrete but respected it, he too was able to see the renewal”<sup>22</sup>. At a time that priests were leaving the church, and a fear that Catholic brothers and sisters would also leave, the Magisterium was able to see that the church was in need of renewal. Father Wade shared, “if it was not for the renewal, I would have left the seminary. I just kind of thought it was business as usual, I did the Mass like I was suppose to, but, I never thought it was possible to have a relationship with the Lord”<sup>23</sup>. Father Wade compared what the renewal has done in him to that done to Saint Paul on his way to Damascus: a new awareness of God’s presence and mercy. The Catholic Charismatic Center estimates its number of daily members at five-hundred, with its expectations of growth. The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life recently conducted surveys and reported in October 2006 that approximately one-in-five people, non-Pentecostals and Catholics, are charismatic<sup>24</sup>. Although this definition includes those Pentecostal Christians who do not belong to exclusively Pentecostal denominations, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal believes that the mission work of Evangelizing to other parishes will continue to bring more into the Renewal.

A movement that has impacted the Catholic community in Houston is the Charismatic renewal. Pope Benedict XVI stated in *The Pentecost Vigil with the Holy Father*, “The Movements were born precisely of the thirst for true life; they are Movements for life in every way”<sup>25</sup>. Planted within prayer groups throughout the diocese, this church renewal continues to grow from a building the city condemned into a modern worship center that emphasizes evangelization. The Catholic charismatic community can be seen by some as a major culture of the Catholic renewal joined with the traditionalist leading the community faithfully in the Church’s calling. Even today, the Galveston-Houston diocese remains supportive to the Roman Catholic priests of the Catholic Charismatic Center, Director Father Michael Scherrey, Assistant Directors Father Francis Frankovich, Father Sean Wenger, and Father Ed Wade, as they continue in their active ministries throughout the Catholic Church community.

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<sup>22</sup> Wade, 6

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>24</sup> Executive summary, 3

<sup>25</sup> Benedict XVI, 4

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