

# Prayer in the Spirit

by Father Ralph Tichenor, S.J.

## Introduction

This short paper is being written to assist those who are newcomers and may not have much of an idea of what is taking place when they come for the first (or even second) time to a charismatic prayer meeting. This is especially true for Catholics who have been accustomed to a more formal type of worship.

A charismatic prayer meeting has been called a “miracle” and, in one of the broad senses of that word as used by St. Paul, “a work of power!” This is a very apt description of what is happening. We believe that the Holy Spirit is the leader of the prayer group and that no two meetings will be the same. This does not mean that there are not usual ways of beginning the meeting. Ordinarily in a

large meeting there is a need to call the group to order, for brothers and sisters when they come together have much to share with each other. The call to order can often be a song begun by the one in charge of the meeting for the evening. In a smaller group the leader may begin by praying and by calling others to join with him or her.

Almost always right after the introduction there is a period of prayer, either silent or shared aloud. Sometimes this period can last for a fairly long period and, especially if it is silent, newcomers might wonder what is taking place and become uneasy at the lack of visible action. If you look around, you will find that there is a deep concentration. Very definitely prayers are being said by all those around you. The movement from silent prayer to shared prayer, (or the starting of a meeting with shared prayer) can be startling to a newcomer who is unprepared to experience shared prayer, especially if the group responds openly and freely to the Spirit.

There are two things which will attract the wonder of the uninitiated. The first will probably be the raising up of the hands above the head, probably with eyes closed. It will not be a simultaneous action; but different ones will be led by the Spirit to open their hands and offer their entire will to the Lord in a gesture which implies that he or she is unprotected, that the Lord is being invited to act as He will with them, that they are waiting and willing for Him to come – as He wills, not as they will.

## The Spirit is the Guide

A part of this explanation which must not be lost is the statement “led by the Spirit,” because this is the important reason for our actions and our prayers. To raise one’s hands just because everyone else seems to be doing it is to be guided by the group and not by the Spirit. I want to emphasize this point: *the Spirit is the guide of the meeting* and it is to Him we look, not to our neighbor. This is not only true of the gestures, but also of the prayer itself. We must pray

aloud, even at times perhaps shout, but only when we are led to do this by the Spirit. The Spirit guides the group, as a group, but He also guides each of us personally in asking us to share in the praise of the Lord. To be loud in our praise can be an act of faith, or it can be an act of human respect. It all depends on *why* we are doing it.

One warning which I think should be given at this time, because it is so important, is that we are not the judges of our brothers and sisters. We have no right to allow ourselves to judge the validity of their attitudes. When we truly do accept that they are allowing the Lord to guide them, it will give us a peace which is often remarkable. Otherwise there is a danger of a tension being created in us by our judgmental attitude. If there is something which is out of order (and it can happen even without the slightest bad will, through ignorance and at times, by uncontrolled emotion), the one who is leading the meeting will take charge of the situation as the Spirit guides him or her, and the rest of the group will continue to listen to the Lord as He speaks to us. We are to praise the Lord, not to judge our brothers or sisters.

The second phenomenon which will probably attract your attention, and might even dismay you, is singing or praying aloud with sounds which do not seem to be words. This is called praying, or singing *in tongues*. If you listen, you will find that there is a subtle harmony which is almost ethereal in quality, as a group without effort or direction sings the praises of the Lord in the way which He guides them. It can happen at times that some join this harmony without being called by the Spirit, and then a disharmony can become evident. Do not be disturbed. Once again the leader will quietly and lovingly call the group to listen to the Lord's promptings and not their own feelings or desires.

### Listen in the Spirit

This "listening" to the Lord is the foundation of a charismatic prayer meeting. The only purpose of a prayer meeting is to pray; to give praise and worship and all other forms of prayer to the Lord, as He guides us. Everything else is subordinated to this: unless it is a prayer, no matter how beautiful it may be, it is out of place. We are not giving a performance. Everything is for prayer, and should always be ordered to the greater glory of God. You will be part of the group from the very first meeting if you will join in the prayer as the Lord leads you. If you are there merely as a spectator, no matter how often you attend, you aren't allowing yourself to become one of the community. But certainly, some do come to "find out what it is all about;" and this curiosity is not out of order. The best way to find out, however, is to join in the prayer with the prayer group.

### Speaking and Hearing

At some time in the meeting there will most likely be "sharing," "scripture reading" and "prophecy," as the Spirit leads His people and they begin to respond. One of the most important points to notice here is that all of these are always two-fold in nature. The Spirit can speak through the one as He wills, but those who hear must also *listen in the Spirit!* Just to listen is not to hear the Lord. It is to hear a fellow human being. Unless we hear in the Spirit, it

will often have little or no meaning for us. By “hearing in the Spirit” I mean listening with our hearts (i.e., feelings as well as intellects). You must become aware also that while in a large meeting, the different sharings, readings and scripture will most likely be for the entire community, this is not always true. The Lord can be guiding one or a few, and not everyone at once. If you cannot hear in the Spirit, that is, experience what is being said, at the time it may be that the message isn’t for you. In this case, please don’t act as though it were! For one to exclaim in joy at what the Lord has said to him or her, is an act of gratitude, and can be very spontaneous. To use these words or phrases of thankfulness when we do not feel this is to very easily fall into a hypocrisy which can deceive us and those being truly led. This lack of honesty in our reply can cause confusion in the word of the Lord and in the community which is praying.

The expressions of joy and gratitude which we can make are given to us by the Spirit. They are very numerous. Among them we often find the reverent utterance of the Holy Name of Jesus, a very beautiful and powerful prayer. The spontaneous “Alleluia” or the simple “Praise You Lord Jesus” is also often heard. As long as it is sensitive to the rest of the group, however you are led to express your feelings of joy and peace and gratitude will bring peace to you in the course of a prayer meeting. One thing which does call for a little extra caution is hand-clapping. Hand-clapping has its place and occurs during meetings at times, but there is danger that it may just be a conventional sign of approval, and not Spirit-led. Newcomers are often so accustomed to this way of expressing approval that it can be used almost automatically, instead of as a sensitive and personal response to God speaking His word to one’s own heart.

### “Tongues”

Charismatics themselves can be so accustomed to some things in a prayer meeting that they may not realize that newcomers may not know exactly what is meant by them. Although I have already spoken of singing and praying in tongues, tongues can become a witness to the presence of the Spirit in another way – *speaking* in tongues. Here, someone often begins to speak in an unknown tongue, in a rather loud voice which attracts the attention of others. It may not be any known language, but once in a while it may be recognizable. The group listens to what the Lord is saying, and, when silence comes, it prays quietly for an interpretation of what has been said. Ordinarily, after a short time, someone in the room speaks out in English and gives the force of the idea. This is not a translation, for the “speaking in tongues” itself is usually not a recognizable human language, and appears to be a preconceptual language. When the interpretation has been given, there is generally a short pause. The community discerns whether it is truly of the Lord. When an awareness of the rightness of the interpretation is perceived there will be an affirmation by the members of the prayer group. We can again see how much care must be taken not to express an approval unless you are certainly aware of a special peace which is the Spirit in both the utterance and the interpretation. Any falsity in this matter, however indeliberate, can do harm. It can confuse those involved. Falsity can affirm as from the Spirit what was not His, or can reject what the Spirit wanted to convey to the group.

## Proclaiming God's Word

“Sharing” is a narration of what has happened to an individual or others very close to him or her which seems to indicate a special (though often simple) action of the Lord. It isn't just saying something. It is being led to share by the Spirit because we can feel or see the relevancy for the upbuilding of the group. Infrequently, sharing can be for the admonition of a few or all of those present at the meeting. “Sharing” is not just a “little story” which could be an interruption of prayer, but it is or should be a Spirit-led sharing of what the Holy Spirit wants to bring to the attention of those present. In a large group, one or two people are sometimes set aside to pray with those who want to share or prophesy, and to try and help them to discern whether the message is from the Spirit, and whether it is at this time that it should be given. This is done as unobtrusively as possible. The nonappearance at the microphone of the one who has been prayed over is no indication of a judgment: sometimes time interferes; at others the message is not clear enough for those discerning; or it is thought that it is not for the group, but for individuals, etc. Those called upon to try and discern for the prayer group are very aware of the responsibility and the seriousness of their decision; if wrong it could hinder the Holy Spirit. One should be happy to submit his or her gift to those set aside for this arduous task.

## Reading Scripture

“Scripture reading” too should be done under guidance of the Spirit. Sometimes during the course of the week preceding the meeting, one can find a passage which seems to be of particular import not just for him personally, but also for brothers and sisters. If you should receive such a text during the week, do not forget it. If necessary, write it down. At the meeting, if after prayer, it still seems to be what the Spirit wishes to share at this time, it can be given with or without an explanation of why it seemed relevant at that time, as the Spirit leads. At other times, the scripture passage may appear without a previous warning, but again when one has prayed and finds that it does express what the Spirit seems to want to give at this meeting, the one having this intuition may give it. The fruitfulness of the passage for the group (i.e., in bringing peace, joy, guidance, etc.) is often a sign of the genuineness of the Spirit's action.

## Prophecy

“Prophecy” is not necessarily or even ordinarily a “foretelling,” although in the Old Testament before Jesus came, prophecies were generally of this sort. It is a statement very often given in the first person (e.g., “I am your Lord . . .”) for the building up of the community. As St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, prophecy, too, is to be discerned by the community, and only then can it be accepted as authentic. Most prophecies are encouraging, and can be judged by the results they bring in the people assembled: unity, peace, joy, love. Christ came to save, not to condemn, and this is what He is generally telling us in prophecy, by bringing us His love and peace. But it is also true that a prophecy can be stern in its tone, as a loving Father disciplines

His children. While not condemnatory, a prophecy can be threatening or stern in its tone and in its demands.

### **The Charismatic Gifts**

Other charismatic gifts may also be seen at times in a prayer meeting, especially a “word of knowledge” or a “word of wisdom,” but they will not be so evident most of the time to the newcomer. Sometimes the gift of healing is given. Often this healing is interior, and only the one healed is aware of what the Lord has done for him or her. Healing of whatever sort can happen to anyone, even one who is skeptical of the idea of healing. An exterior or physical healing is always connected in some way with faith – for its upbuilding, its renewal or for its implanting – and is not, contrary to what you might think, something extremely extraordinary. In all cases it must be tested, medically, if possible. A medical testing is almost necessary in a major healing to give glory to the Lord. A newcomer especially may, because of the attitude of the modern world, be led to skepticism in these occurrences. Again, we have no right to judge. The discernment must come from the community and from the scientific analysis of the experts for it to be accepted as a witness for others. Submission to the discernment of the community and science helps to protect against Satan and his snares. Although we Catholics take healings for granted (at least interior healings accomplished by the sacraments, e.g., the Anointing of the Sick, the sacrament of Penance, etc.), people have misunderstood the charismatic gift of healing. Although there have been fakers and perhaps still are some, this is no reason for us to refuse to use the gift of the Spirit. Fakers are a reason for exercising care and prudence. But refusal to expect and accept miracles, and to use the healing gift of the Spirit is unworthy of the people of God; for someone could have been healed if we had only had the courage to exercise our gift.

### **Purpose of the Gifts**

The charismatic gifts exercised by individuals and by the community are given for the upbuilding of the community and are not signs of any particular sanctity on the part of those given the task. The Lord can use anyone whom He wants to do His work. It is important not to take it for granted that these gifts are to be exercised only by others. The Lord has given each member of His mystical body special gifts for the upbuilding of his body, and we have a serious responsibility to exercise those gifts. Every member of the body depends upon every other for support and growth. Failure to exercise the gifts the Lord has given us under the guise of humility (and a false one at that) is a failure to love those brothers and sisters God has grouped with us. Our prayer must not be, “Lord, let someone act.” It must be, “Give me faith if you wish me to act.” To act in the use of the charismatic gifts can often be a burden accompanied by fear. Don’t pass the burden on to someone else as Jeremiah tried to do. Our response to the Lord should always be a sincere and open, “Yes, Lord” to anything and everything He asks of us. We will sometimes make mistakes, but mistakes which happen to men of good will can be amended by others of good will. If it humbles us that we erred, perhaps the gift of humility was being offered us all along.

## A Miracle

We began by saying that a prayer meeting is a miracle or a work of power, and I'd like to end by reasserting this. It is truly the work of the Lord. When you come, avoid skepticism, cynicism and suspicion. But be discerning as well. See and feel the faith, and joy and love present, and you will know without any doubt whether this is truly "of the Lord."

Please pray for me. I also pray that the Lord will guide you and that you will be able to respond to His call. I ask His blessing on all who read this guide to what he is doing in this period of renewal. Praise the Lord, my brothers and sisters, for in Him and through His Holy Spirit we are made one as brothers and sisters with God as our Father.

- *Father Ralph Tichenor, S.J.*

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[Sjpirit@fea.net](mailto:Sjpirit@fea.net) <http://www.scrc.org>