

CHARISMATIC AND HEALING PRAYER

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Talk given by Alastair Emblem at Prayer retreat day 11th March 2017

Opening prayer

Introduction

I've lived in Farnham and been a Parishioner in St Joans since 1984. I have held various different roles in the Parish – the most relevant to today's retreat is that I have coordinated the St Joan's Life in the Spirit charismatic prayer group for the last 25 years. The group was started in about 1980 by former PP the late Fr Michael Albon.

1st disclaimer: I can't claim to be an expert on prayer. I checked on my bookshelf the other day and was amazed to find I have at least 18 books on prayer, and over 200 other books on various different aspects of Christian faith and spirituality – not counting several more out on loan to people. But I would honestly say that the more I read and find out about prayer, the more I realize I don't know! Because prayer is at heart a relationship with God – and God is infinite, so we can never in this life exhaust all the ways of exploring that relationship.

2nd disclaimer: I'm not here to tell you that any one way of praying is better than any other. One of the popular sayings about prayer is "pray as you can" and that's absolutely fine – as far as it goes. But the problem is, that seems to imply that you should find a way of praying that you are comfortable with, and stick to it. But the reality is, we can get stale. And the even bigger reality is that God is a God of variety and of surprises, so if we stick too rigidly to our comfort zone, we miss out on all sorts of wonderful things that God wants to give us. Here are some other popular sayings: prayer is a journey into the heart of God; there are seasons in prayer; and the Holy Spirit not only comforts the disturbed – he disturbs the comfortable.

Which brings us neatly on to my topic – Charismatic prayer and healing prayer: both of which tend to make people feel uncomfortable (me included when I first came across them). The first thing we need to address is this word charismatic because in the secular (non church) world it has different connotations. People like Nelson Mandela or Richard Branson are often described as charismatic, meaning they have attractive leadership qualities or larger than life personality.

And then there are the somewhat caricature American charismatic Pentecostal preachers, some of whom have been involved in scandals for using their preaching skills to persuade followers to make donations which seem to end up in the preachers' pockets. To be fair, I should also make it clear that there are many other very devout Pentecostal preachers who do have genuine spiritual gifts, but – the world being what it is - unfortunately it's the others who attract the publicity and give the word charismatic a bad name.

Definition

So what is the correct definition of charismatic in the Catholic world? Charismatic means relating to the charisms, which are the graces or freely given gifts which God gives through the Holy Spirit. The gifts which God continually gives to enable individuals to live out their Christian lives, and to enable the Church to grow and flourish and carry out its mission of taking the good news of God's Kingdom out to the world.

Catechism description

"Charisms are special gifts of the Holy Spirit which are bestowed on individuals for the good of others, the needs of the world, and in particular for the building up of the Church."

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The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is a movement of the Holy Spirit which started exactly 50 years ago this year in the Catholic Church and which has encouraged a revival of the powerful gifts which were evident in Jesus' ministry and in the Apostles after the day of Pentecost, and for the first few centuries of the Church. Gifts of healings and miracles for example. But also many other less spectacular but necessary gifts such as teaching, music, administration, ministry to the poor and so forth.

I remember being taught at school that these gifts – especially the extraordinary ones like miracles, healing and prophecy – were a sort of kick start for the early church, but they later died out because they were no longer needed. (This is actually incorrect Catholic teaching, corrected at Vatican 2 Council). Of course the charisms didn't die out altogether because they were evident in the lives of many of the saints, but they were not widespread. Well the Holy Spirit evidently decided that his charisms are needed by the Church today, and they do need to be more widely distributed. And it's easy to see why when you consider the worldwide rise in rationalism, secularism, atheism, Islamic fundamentalism, satanism etc. etc.

The last 6 Popes have welcomed the revival of charisms of the Holy Spirit, including healing and miracles. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (the Joy of the Gospel) Pope Francis wrote: "The Holy Spirit enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safekeeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the centre which is Christ and then channelled into an evangelizing impulse."

Charismatic prayer

So having given you that background about charismatic renewal in general, how shall we describe charismatic prayer? I will start by quoting from Fr Stephen Wright, a Benedictine monk at Ampleforth who has been involved in charismatic renewal and healing since 1972. "People are often drawn to charismatic prayer because they do not feel anything happening in their ordinary prayer life – they feel nothing – that they are apart from God. In charismatic prayer they find a new presence of God, a new delight in the spiritual journey and often a healing of their attitudes.

"In Charismatic prayer there is a lively openness to the Holy Spirit which lifts the heart and provides a sense of God's presence. All prayer is the work of the Holy Spirit – but in charismatic prayer there is more freedom to give expression to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. In movement and music, and voice. So in a charismatic prayer meeting the members are open and waiting for the movement of the Spirit in their minds and hearts and imaginations – and then share gifts of words or songs or pictures."

Fr Stephen mentions there a prayer meeting, and I can anticipate an important question arising: Is charismatic prayer something you can do on your own or does it have to be in a meeting? The simple answer is: it really has to be both, ideally. I know the experience or even the thought of a prayer meeting can be quite a barrier for most people. Certainly that was my own experience at the start. My older brother started dragging me along to charismatic meetings about 35 years ago because his Catholic faith had come alive and he wanted me to share the experience. On the one hand, I was intrigued, because (as Fr Stephen describes) I was feeling nothing in my prayer life, and I envied these people who seemed to have a real experience of God and answered prayer. I was brought up Catholic and was a regular Mass goer, yet I felt no real connection with God; no connection between faith and everyday life; no sense that praying was achieving anything.

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So I was hungry for the living, vibrant faith of these renewed Catholics. But on the other hand, I was somewhat put off by the openness, the freedom, the lack of structure, the improvised prayer and communal sharing of experience, the enthusiastic singing, clapping, raising of hands etc.. It was taking me way out of my comfort zone. But I think Fr Stephen Wright sums it up perfectly when he says this: "I have found that in the spiritual life there is only Love of God which unites us to Him and to approach him I must constantly be leaving my comfort zones – charismatic prayer is one of the best ways I have discovered for doing this." There we have it again – the Holy Spirit disturbing the comfortable.

I can certainly echo what Fr Stephen says. I found that as I gradually set aside my fears and prejudices and focused on Jesus, as I chose to put him at the centre of my life; as I gave the Holy Spirit permission to work in me, so my prayer life and spiritual life have become deeper and more fruitful. It's a bit like a picture going from black and white to colour; or from 2 dimensions to 3; or a gas boiler which has the pilot light on, but then the gas supply is turned up and the main burners ignite. That's quite a good metaphor. It's as if the pilot light is lit when we are baptized, and we can be quite comfortable to coast along at that low level of engagement with our faith. Perhaps we're unaware that there is any more. But then we discover that there is always more Holy Spirit, and when we take the decision to allow him to act in our lives, it's like the gas supply is turned up and woosh!

As St Paul says in 2 Tim 1:6 "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." And in case you feel this renewal in the Holy Spirit is some modern invention, St Thomas Aquinas also talks about it. He explains that although we receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit's grace at Baptism, this can often lie dormant and needs re-awakening so that its full potential can be untied and released.

This release of the power of the Holy Spirit is sometimes called Baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is a bit confusing because of course there is only one sacrament of Baptism. I prefer the expression renewal in the Holy Spirit. But Pope Francis is happy to talk about Baptism in the Holy Spirit. At the 2015 world retreat of Priests in Rome he said: "I ask all of you that, as part of the current of grace of the Charismatic Renewal, you organize Life in the Spirit seminars in your parishes, seminaries, schools, neighbourhoods, to share Baptism in the Spirit: it is catechesis that produces, by the work of the Holy Spirit, the personal encounter with Jesus, who changes our life."

In a charismatic prayer group, the openness, the shared testimonies, the challenges and the mutual support encourage our individual spiritual growth, as well as helping us grow as a group, as members of Christ's body here on earth. It's a continual struggle between wanting to stay in our comfort zone, but knowing that the Lord wants us to grow and become gradually transformed into his likeness by the Holy Spirit, so that we can be more fruitful disciples.

A typical prayer meeting

No two meetings are the same, but there will always be a time of praise – heartfelt singing of worship songs; improvised prayers of praise; singing and praying in the Spirit using the charismatic gift of tongues; sharing prophetic words or pictures which the Holy Spirit gives us; sharing passages of Scripture and our reaction to them; times of silent worship or meditation; there might be a short teaching or testimony about the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In our meetings at St Joans there are usually 12 to 18 people there so we will often split into groups of 4 or 5 and pray for each other in the groups – prayers of healing or encouragement; prayers for a greater openness to the charisms; then there will be intercessory prayers for the Parish, and people or situations known to us. After about

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an hour we end with the Lords prayer and another praise song. Then we have a time of socializing over coffee and biscuits.

Gift of tongues

I mentioned just now the gift of praying in tongues – this is another challenge to our comfort zone, but it's something Jesus spoke about:

Mark 16 ¹⁵ *He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸ they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.'*

And of course the Apostles on the day of Pentecost experienced the miracle of speaking in languages unknown to them, which those listening could understand. Though this is different from praying in tongues where, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are speaking directly to God in a language only He understands.

Paul tells us in Romans when we don't know what to say, the Holy Spirit speaks for us with sounds that we don't understand, groanings that are unutterable. So praying in words that you don't understand is a way of saying: "God I trust that you're better at prayer than I am, so I'd rather use your words than mine, so please pray through me."

This gift can be used for private prayer or together with others who are also praying in this way. During times of praise, for example, a group may sing together in tongues, which is a beautiful way to glorify God and often results in a communal sense of joy and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

One description of the gift of tongues is 'it's your soul speaking directly to God'. As St Paul say in 1 Cor 14:2 "one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God". The Spirit speaks through us – sharing our heart with God's heart. The gift of tongues is not experienced as something that 'takes you over' – we are always in control of its use.

The Church accepts the reality of this gift. In the Catechism it says: **CCC 2003** *...There are furthermore special graces, also called charisms ...meaning "favour," "gratuitous gift," "benefit."⁵³ Whatever their character - sometimes it is extraordinary, such as the gift of miracles or of tongues - charisms are oriented toward sanctifying grace and are intended for the common good of the Church.*

Pope Francis is very welcoming of this gift. At a renewal conference in Rome last September he knelt while 50,000 charismatics prayed in tongues for him.

The effect of Charismatic prayer

What effect does charismatic prayer have on us, and how does it relate to other types of prayer? All prayer is an action of the heart – reaching out to God in love. In charismatic prayer we are seeking to love the Lord God with all our mind and heart and body and spirit, with our whole selves. We are open and surrendered to God's will, we try to have expectant faith and so can be more receptive of all the graces that the Holy Spirit wants to use in us and through us. There is often renewal or deepening of faith, healing, deliverance from evil; there are words from God which arise in people's minds and are shared to give encouragement to others. There are moments of great peace, and harmony – there is the expression of a lively and deep faith.

There is the expectation that people's lives will be touched, prayers answered and lives changed. In the times of silence there is a move towards contemplation, which can then be carried forwards in our own individual prayer, or

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in Adoration, or at Mass. In charismatic prayer there is joy and witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do. This can then permeate through other ministries of the Church and ignite people's faith. It can reach out to those who are searching for meaning in their lives which only God can give. No wonder the Pope is encouraging more and more people to be involved.

Speaking about my experience personally, I found that by being open to the Holy Spirit, I very quickly found myself wanting to pray more, wanting to read the Bible and finding that I understood what it meant and could relate it to my own life. The Mass and sacraments began to become more meaningful. Over time, I have been more interested in active church involvement, including music and the Parish Council; in different forms of prayer – Rosary, meditation, Lectio Divina, Adoration, healing prayer. And I've been motivated to help other people deepen their own spiritual lives through leading the prayer group and running adult formation courses and organizing Parish Missions.

Healing prayer

I just want to say a very brief word about healing prayer, but I make no apology for the fact that this is brief in the extreme - we could easily have a whole week's conference on the subject. As I mentioned earlier, one of the charisms of the Holy Spirit is healing. Healing – both physical and spiritual – was absolutely central to Jesus' ministry. Jesus is saviour of the world – he came among us to save mankind from its fallen state. In Greek the words salvation and healing are the same. As St Peter says in Acts 10:38 "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

Jesus passed on to his followers the power and authority to heal. **The Catholic Catechism** teaches that Jesus Christ continues to heal today, through the Eucharist, sacrament of the sick, Confession and other sacraments, and through prayers for healing. The Church also teaches that prayer for healing can be carried out by lay people: praying for ourselves and for each other.

Many of us were brought up to believe that it is wrong to pray for healing, because we are meant to suffer and "offer it all up to God". However, in 2000 the Pope clarified the teaching on this subject. *"Presuming the acceptance of God's will, the sick person's desire for healing is both good and deeply human, especially when it takes the form of a trusting prayer addressed to God..."* (Congregation for the doctrine of the faith - instruction on prayers for healing September 2000).

A number of people in our Prayer Group have felt called to offer to pray for healing and now in St Joan's we have healing prayer ministry after Sunday Mass once a month; and most months we also now have a service of healing on the first Wednesday of the month. Many people have reported an easing of various physical conditions, and several have spoken of healing of depression and insomnia. We are still building our faith to pray for miraculous healings, and we're trusting God to do more and more through our ministry.

In Conclusion

It seems appropriate to finish with a quote from Pope Francis. Last December he said this during a homily: *"Prayer works miracles; it works miracles for Christians, whether they be faithful laypeople, priests, or bishops. The prayers of the faithful change the Church: it's not us popes, bishops, priests or nuns who carry the Church forward, but Saints. Saints are those who dare to believe that God is the Lord and that He can do everything"* - Pope Francis (1/12/16)

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Renewal in the Holy Spirit is for everyone; the whole church. You don't have to be involved in a charismatic prayer group. I encourage you (as does the Pope) to pray to the Holy Spirit with expectant faith that he will awaken those graces that lie dormant within you.

I would also like to invite you to come along any Wednesday evening to the Life In the Spirit prayer meeting at 8pm in the Parish centre. And on the first Wednesday of most months there is a healing service in the Church at 8pm. Even if you don't feel in need of any particular healing, do come along as there is a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere, and a real sense of God's presence.

And if you would like to know more about the charisms of the Holy Spirit, please do come along to a monthly retreat day called the Alton Day of Renewal where this year we are focusing specifically on this topic. Details are on the handout (see next page).

Questions

Closing Prayer: Ephesians 3:14-21

I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Prayer suggestions

- Praise and thank God your loving Father for all the blessings in your life.
- Recognise your deep thirst and need for more of God, and pray to Him from the bottom of your heart.
- Think about Jesus asking you: "Who do YOU say I am?"
- Ask forgiveness for all your past sins: recognize that Jesus took them all on the Cross and they died with him. Proclaim to yourself that, through his death and resurrection, you have been set free from slavery to sin. Through your Baptism into Christ, you are a new creation and have been freely given His Holy Spirit.
- Who is on the throne of your life? Resolve to put Jesus there, as your Lord and Saviour.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to deepen your faith; to show you that Jesus died for you personally; to show you how much God loves you unconditionally as your Heavenly Father; thank Him that He has given you spiritual gifts (charisms) to help you to pray and to become more Christ-like.
- Repeat simple prayers from the heart, such as: "Praise you and thank you Father;" "Come Holy Spirit;" "Jesus I love you;" "Thank you for forgiving me and saving me;" "Lord, I receive your forgiveness and love."

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Life in the Spirit

PRAYER GROUP

Website: stjoanlits.webstarts.com

We meet on Wednesday evenings 8.00-9.15pm in the St Joan's Parish Centre Wright Room (the main hall) with the exception of the first Wednesday of most months, when we hold an Evening of Renewal – a Healing Service or other prayer or praise service - in St Joan's Church.

Who can come? Everyone is welcome, at any meeting, with no formal commitment. The Group has no "membership" but is open to anyone who needs prayer support or who wishes to develop their prayer life and spirituality. Although firmly rooted in Catholic tradition, we warmly welcome other denominations.

What happens? There is no set format, but the meeting will usually start with a time of praise and worship - including contemporary praise songs. There may be readings of short extracts of Scripture, followed by a time of silent meditation. Sometimes we watch a teaching DVD on living in the power of the Holy Spirit. We usually pray for Spiritual Renewal (see below) and a fresh infilling of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and we always set aside time to pray for the needs of those present, their families and friends, the Parish, the local community, other issues of concern, and for healing.

History. The Prayer Group at St Joan's was started in about 1980 by a former Parish Priest, Fr Michael Albon. Parish Priests Fr Jim Martin, Canon Tony Whale and Fr Niven Richardson have encouraged the Group, so that prayer can be seen at the centre of Parish Life. We now meet in the Parish Centre or the Church.

Courses. Over the years, the group has arranged many courses for the Parish: "Life in the Spirit" Seminars with teaching on spiritual renewal; Alpha courses for an introduction to the Christian faith; "CaFE" courses exploring different aspects of the Catholic Faith in a relaxed cafe-style setting; Parish Missions, Prayer Services, and Evenings of Renewal. These courses are announced in the weekly Parish bulletins.

Evening of Renewal is on the first Wednesday of each month 8.00-9.00pm in St Joan's Church. The format varies but has recently been a Healing Service with Praise and Worship, Scripture reading and reflection, Adoration of the Lord, and an opportunity to receive individual prayer ministry for physical, emotional and spiritual healing.

Next Healing Service: April 5th at 8.00pm in St Joan's Church. EVERYONE IS WELCOME

RENEWAL IN THE HOLY SPIRIT ("Charismatic Renewal")

2017 marks the 50th anniversary of this important movement in the Catholic Church, which has refreshed the spiritual life of an estimated 120 million Catholics worldwide. Charismatic Renewal is officially recognised under Canon law, and accepted by the Pope and Church Authorities as a valid work of the Holy Spirit and a source of great blessing for individuals and the whole Church.

The word 'charismatic' comes from the Greek word charisma meaning 'gift'. It denotes any good gift that flows from the love of God to us. This includes spiritual gifts that allow every Christian to perform his or her duty for the growth of the Church and for the good of others.

The characteristics of a charismatic prayer group

- A belief that the infilling of the Holy Spirit received by the disciples in the upper room on Pentecost is available to all believers.
- A belief that the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 never ceased to exist, but can still be exercised by all believers who have received these gifts from the Holy Spirit.
- An emphasis on living out every day lives according to God's Word
- An emphasis on Jesus as Lord over the believers' lives and on developing a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus
- An emphasis on the Holy Spirit's involvement and being the leader of the prayer group

Teaching on the Charisms of the Holy Spirit:

On the fourth Saturday of each month at **Alton Day of Renewal** – see www.altonrenewal.com for full programme details.

"Yes! The Renewal in the Spirit can be considered a special gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in our time." - Pope Saint John Paul II, 14 March 2002

"I hope the Holy Spirit will be evermore welcome in the hearts of believers and that the 'culture of Pentecost,' which is so necessary in our day, might continue to spread" – Pope Benedict XVI

"The Holy Spirit enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church." - Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium