

Year of Faith:

Empowered to Move in the Midst of Adversity

■ Dn Christof Hemberger



Whenever I listen to others testify what God has done in their lives, how the power of the Holy Spirit has changed their lives, I am filled with joy and gratitude. Such testimonies build up. They encourage and strengthen our faith. It is exciting to hear and experience how God blesses people in their walk with Him, how they found new orientation for their lives, and how they learnt to live and serve as Jesus' disciples.

I have noticed that I am especially drawn to testimonies that report how others—with God's help—have passed through difficult times. What has always interested me is not that they had to pass through difficulties. What holds my attention is how they endured these times, how they dealt with their questions and feelings, how their faith had developed, and how they had experienced and sensed God during that time.

These experiences speak into my my life not only because they contain an emotional content, (Brother X has experienced God in his life—hallelujah!) but mainly because of their pedagogical content: they teach me something. From the example of others, I can learn how they have handled their questions and problems during those difficult times. These are issues that I also may have to face at some point.

A wise man has once said, "Christians are not people who have no problems. But Christians are people who know where they can turn with their problems!" This statement contains much truth.

To be honest, it is my impression (especially in the Western world, which is where I make my home) that we Christians often live and act as if we had no problems. It is easier for us to pretend that everything is fine than to admit that something in our lives is not quite as it should be. Does being

a Christian mean not having problems? The reality is different. We are not perfect. We do not manage everything as we want and ought to. We are sinners. Day by day, we face challenges an



ordinary person cannot handle by himself.

The challenges we have to face differ from person to person. Adversities in life, spiritual attacks, material temptations, personal weaknesses, and areas in our lives where we are especially prone to sin... such challenges attack our faith and wear it down.

Some of these challenges to our faith come from within us or come from original sin. However, not everything originates there. The fact that we live in a fallen world (already redeemed—but not yet transformed!) plays an important part.

Many things come to us through the people who surround us and through the society in which we live. This influence cannot be underestimated—it happens so easily that we conform to it without even realizing. For instance, a danger is that things that everybody does become "normality," and we start to conform to "the rest of the world" in this or that area.

Have you ever drunk a glass of lukewarm water? I would say it does not taste too good. I much prefer a nice, hot cup of tea in winter or a glass of cooling water in summer! Lukewarm drinks have a flat taste.

Can you guess why I have given this example? Correct: The Bible gives us a drastic exhortation for our lives. In Revelation 3:15, St. John tells us: "you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other!"

When we conform, when we have left behind our first love, when we give in to discouragement, we become flat, slack, and tasteless. We lose the power and enthusiasm we felt in the beginning.

The authors of the New Testament encourage us to consistently and boldly follow Jesus. Their

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message and their promise are unique, “Do not act like ‘the people in the world’! Do not conform! Commit fully! Trust the Lord wholeheartedly! Seek His will and live it consistently—then you will have an abundance of life!”

Jesus invites us, from His disciples in New Testament times to us today, to take Him as our example and to proclaim and live His message as courageously as He did. He has demonstrated this in tangible ways. What He proclaimed is what He put into practice in His own life.

I would like to use this article for the “Year of Faith” to speak into our situation as followers of Christ. No matter how cold is the wind that blows in our face, let us not retreat to the comforts of our cosy living rooms. Let us instead courageously confront this wind! Living day by day as a Christian does not always look like a stroll on a sunny Sunday. These days, a cold wind blows in the face of the Church (and thus also of the Charismatic Renewal within the Catholic Church) in many parts of the world. In some regions, laws prevent Christians from freely practicing their religion. In the Western world, Christian virtues and convictions are no longer considered important and large parts of society reject them. People who are supposedly close to us may show us rejection and lack of understanding. All this is unpleasant and not always easy to endure. What matters is that through these adversities, we hold fast to the one who is our first great love (see Rev 2:4).

Over and again, I have experienced that Jesus Christ used precisely those situations I found difficult. He challenged me to trust in Him more fully, to rely on Him completely, and to surrender absolutely. It is easy to say, “I’ll go with you anywhere”—if the road is straight, level and broad. If the path becomes rocky, bumpy and exhausting, it is quite a different story.

The journey of the people of Israel in the desert, many life stories of Biblical figures and of saints in Church history, as well as some important experiences in my own life, have been excellent lessons. They made me realize that in any circumstance or situation, it is much better not to pursue my own desires but to seek God’s will and to put His precepts into practice to the best of my abilities!

Being a Christian means following Christ. Following means that someone else goes ahead and knows the way.

Following Jesus in my everyday life also means for me to submit fully to God’s authority. This surrender encompasses all areas of my life, including my wishes and desires. “Lord, what do you want me to do?” has become a more important question than, “What do I want? How do I get what I deserve? Where does this

leave me and my needs?”

Secondly, following Him means that over and again, I need to expose my own ego in my decisions and desires to overcome it (Jn 3:30, “He must grow greater, I must grow less”).

And thirdly, following Him means holding on to what I have recognized as true and important. Christ won some victories through me only because I did not give up in difficult times but have persevered. For this, the prayers of my brothers and sisters in Christ were as necessary as good spiritual direction. However, my determination to overcome the mountain in front of me in the power of the Holy Spirit, keeping before my eyes the promises I can claim through the victory of Christ, was just as crucial.

Are we willing to follow Him, even when it gets tough? Are we willing to face the challenges that our own personal life circumstances bring day by day? Are we willing to take the side of Jesus and of Christian virtues in the face of cold adverse winds in society?

Taking a stand for Jesus may mean at times that you get problems you would not have if you had not opened your mouth... However, to repeat once again: Jesus did not promise us a life without problems. Nevertheless, he has assured us that we can go to Him with our problems!

We are not alone on this path! God gave the Holy Spirit to the Church to comfort, encourage and inspire! How stupid would we be if we attempted to solve life’s problems and difficulties in our own strength—and how great is the assurance of walking in the power of the Holy Spirit!

His power far surpasses the point where mine ends. His peace can encourage me and make me joyful in deep personal suffering. His comfort is a balm for my soul; his joy and love drive me on, well beyond my human limitations.

I invite you, especially during this Year of Faith, to offer your lives anew to the working of the Holy Spirit! Open the windows of your lives to the wind of the Spirit who shows us the right path and guides us—especially when a cold wind from “the world” blows in our face.

Pray the *Veni Creator Spiritus* every day for the renewal of the world, the Church, the Charismatic Renewal, as well as your own personal life!

The Holy Spirit takes hold of our heart and renews our life. He calls us to follow Jesus radically—and at the same time, he equips and enables us for it. 🕯️

Loneliness of a Leader

■ Ann Brereton



A poem I recently read summarises the partnership of Leadership and loneliness. (In part) “Leaders are called to stand in that lonely place between the no longer and the not yet. They will intentionally make decisions that will bind, forge, move and create history. Leaders are not called to be popular, nor to be safe. We are the ones called to take risks, change attitudes; risk displeasures; to gamble our lives for a better world.” (Mary Lou Anderson)

Leadership involves others, so it appears paradoxical to state that leadership and loneliness can often go hand in hand. As the poet expresses, leaders stand in the ‘lonely’ place between the now and the vision of what is to become. As Christian leaders, we are given God’s vision and the conviction of ‘what might be’. The leader’s role is to inspire and encourage others to fulfil His plan. As leaders, God’s Grace gives courage to be out in front, leading and stepping into this unknown.

For new leaders in particular the experience of loneliness can be surprising and unsettling, especially if they misunderstand the definition of Christian leadership, i.e. obedient service performed in love. A temptation for leaders is to imagine themselves as better than the people they are leading; to be the wise one who has to have the answers. Many people often love, admire and respect them. Such accolades may give them a false sense of their own importance.

When the pressures of service, responsibility and suffering are prolonged, loneliness can ensue.

All leaders will encounter situations that need prayer and discernment before they can make any decision. Once this process is completed, they choose a decisive course of action. Considering our diverse natures, there will be times when these decisions cause conflict within the body.

The Harvard Business Review featured a story on how lonely it is to be a CEO in the corporate world. We have the added difficulty in the Christian world of dealing with close friends, ‘our fellow brothers and sisters.’ Friends can assume you will be ‘on their side’ when it comes to decision-making. When this is not the case, the leader’s support system can begin to tumble. Those once considered friends are critical. The leader is hurt and begins to feel alone and isolated. Jesus experienced this in the Garden of Gethsemane. His friends did not understand the path He chose and could not support Him by staying awake. Then the majority of them abandoned Him. This pattern of misunderstanding and abandonment is sometimes reproduced in leaders’ lives, causing stress and loneliness.

We will look at some areas in which loneliness can manifest itself in the life of a leader.

Leaders can inadvertently isolate themselves from God. ‘Working for God’ may become confused with ‘doing God’s work.’ The two can be very different. It is easy to make assumptions about what the Lord desires. Prayer is squeezed out by the business of ministry and the many other demands of life. Fidelity to daily prayer, scripture reading, and Christian fellowship are essential.

Isolation from God can very quickly have leaders believe that the work done for God is the same as being with Him. This danger will

have leaders lead people along their path rather than the Lord’s.

Leaders can isolate themselves from others. This tendency protects against disappointments, criticism, and rejection. It’s easy to think “Why bother with consultation? It’s easier and quicker to do everything myself.” Leaders’ actions reverberate throughout the group. This individual isolation can become a larger problem, particularly when it leads to poor decision making, negativity, fatigue and frustration.

Leaders are regularly given confidential information that they are unable to share. People can ‘unburden’ themselves and feel relief. The danger is that leaders may shoulder the burden. This load can be particularly difficult when the information shared is scandalous in nature or based on unfounded accusations (Prov 18:8,17; 1 Tm 5:19). Where possible, foster a healthy companionship with a person who has current or past leadership experiences relevant to yours or engage a Spiritual Director. Seek someone who understands confidentiality and the need for ‘wise counsel’. Equally, have someone in your life who is outside your normal circles, someone with wisdom whom you can trust. Sharing with friends such as these can help you enormously. Leaders who carry this load alone can fall into depression or anxiety and can turn to exterior activities or people for comfort.

Earnestly pray for the virtue of humility. Scripture makes it clear that “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). Loneliness, isolation, and fear hidden behind the facade of pride can deceive our hearts and cause us to fall into sin. Loneliness can lead us into the arms of ‘another’. Satan knows that instigating a sexual scandal with a Christian leader has devastating results. Illicit affairs, sexual misconduct, and pornography are a reality in the Christian world in which we live today. Such scandal has the capacity to weaken the faith of believers as well as give non-believers a reason to reject Christianity. We must guard our hearts against these temptations. Seek out a good Spiritual Confessor.

The community of the faithful can help enormously in assisting leaders to avoid loneliness. A faith-filled community is called to pray for leaders. The problems they deal with, temptations they suffer, and stress they endure should compel us to intercede for them by asking God to protect them. Take every opportunity to encourage and support them.

Leaders, remember we are a member of the body. We do not have all the answers. Actively seek out the giftedness in others. Sharing the load is essential to our well being and effectiveness. Develop a time schedule for prayer, family, administration, the training of others, and personal time. Prioritise that schedule and protect it.

God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory. (St. Augustine) 🏠



QUESTIONS TO THE ICCRS DOCTRINAL COMMISSION

The ICCRS Doctrinal Commission, currently headed by Dr. Mary Healy, is in consultation with theologians and experts from around the world.

If you have a question about the CCR, please send it to newsletter@iccrs.org

Can a non-baptised person receive baptism in the Holy Spirit?

This question has arisen in many countries where the Life in the Spirit Seminar is not only a means of spiritual awakening for baptized Catholics but also an evangelistic outreach to people who have never been baptized. To answer this question, we should look at what Scripture and Tradition tell us about the Holy Spirit in relation to the sacraments of initiation.

Acts 2 tells us how Jesus' promise to his disciples, "you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5), was fulfilled at Pentecost. When a crowd gathered, Peter proclaimed the good news of Jesus, then explained how they too can receive the same gift: "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). This very important statement establishes a link between sacramental baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the supreme gift of God, is received not simply through individual prayer but by being incorporated into the Church through baptism.

The same link reappears in the story of the new converts in Samaria. Here there is the additional element of the laying on of the apostles' hands (Acts 8:12–17), which the Church recognises as the origin of the sacrament of confirmation (CCC 1288). In Ephesus too, the Holy Spirit, with his accompanying charismatic manifestations, was given through baptism and the laying on of hands (Acts 19:5–6). Other New Testament passages likewise confirm that baptism is the normal means by which the gift of the Spirit is imparted (see Jn 3:5; 1 Cor 6:11; 12:13; Tit 3:5).

There is one instance, the conversion of Cornelius and his household, when the Holy Spirit was poured out prior to baptism (Acts 10:44–48). However, Luke makes clear that this was a unique event, a turning point in salvation history. In this instance, God acted sovereignly to demonstrate beyond any doubt that he offered salvation in Christ to gentiles as well as to Jews. Peter did not pray for the new believers to be filled with the Holy Spirit—God just did it, even before Peter had finished speaking. It is significant that even though Cornelius and his friends had obviously been baptized in the Spirit, Peter considered it essential that they should also be sacramentally baptised (Acts 10:48).

The Cornelius event reminds us that God is free to pour out his Holy Spirit whenever and however he wills. This does not mean that God's people are free to dispense from the ordinary channels of grace that he has established, the sacraments. In baptism we are totally freed from sin, reconciled to God, and reborn as children of God (CCC 1262–70), and only in this way can God's own Spirit come to dwell in us.

The early Church took for granted the link between the sacraments of initiation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When

new believers were baptised and anointed, they experienced being filled with the Spirit, receiving life-transforming power, overflowing joy, and the manifestation of charisms. The gift of the Holy Spirit was not simply a doctrine to be believed but a fact of experience.

In later centuries, it became increasingly common for people to receive the sacraments of initiation without the subjective experience of being baptised in the Spirit. Nowadays, when people receive baptism in the Spirit later in life, the gift of God that they had already received in baptism and confirmation is awakened and rekindled in them.

Thus, it is essential for the Charismatic Renewal to uphold the connection between baptism in the Spirit and the sacraments of initiation. Jesus established his Church as the ordinary means by which he gives his own divine life to us. Life in the Spirit is impossible apart from life in the body of Christ, which we enter into through the sacraments.

What then should we do for non-baptised people who come to a Life in the Spirit Seminar? We should welcome and embrace them, and from the beginning we should explain to them that the hope is that they be born into new life through sacramental baptism and become disciples of the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ. We should not pray over them for baptism in the Spirit, which would give the misleading impression that the Holy Spirit is given independent of incorporation into Christ and his Church.

This does not mean they cannot be prayed over at all. They can receive prayer that the Holy Spirit would enlighten, bless, guide, heal, and speed them on their journey to the fullness of life in Christ. The Seminar team should also have a plan for bringing such people into a good RCIA program as soon as possible after the Seminar ends.

Here is an example of a beautiful prayer that prayer ministers can pray for non-baptised persons (based on Eph 1:18–19; 3:19–21):

Father, we pray for [name]. God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we beg you to give [name] a spirit of wisdom and revelation to truly come to know JESUS! Open his/her heart to understand the hope to which you have called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of your power in us who believe. Let [name] experience the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge and enter into all the fullness of the Lord. Father, whose power at work in [name] is able to do far more abundantly than all that [name] could ask or think, to you be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for all ages of ages! Amen. 🙏