

Cardinal Suenens and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal

It is my privilege to evoke for you one of the Church leaders who was more than others open for the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church: Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens. He was born in 1904 and lost his father when he was only four. His mother, with the aid of an uncle raised him in rather difficult financial circumstances. He was very bright and after brilliant studies in high school, he entered the seminary. Cardinal Mercier, who was the archbishop at that time, saw immediately that this seminarian had a great potential to serve the Church in important tasks. He sent him to the Belgian College in Rome where he studied philosophy and theology. The cardinal invited him each year during the summer vacation to visit him. The cardinal, who was enormously respected in Belgium as a hero who resisted the German invader during the first world war, followed closely the curriculum of his pupil and guided him. After his ordination on September 4 in 1927, the young priest was for one year teacher in a high school in Brussels. Then cardinal Van Roey who succeeded to cardinal Mercier appointed him as a professor of philosophy in the diocesan seminary. He had great influence on many priests who were his students in the seminary. In the autumn of 1940, after the beginning of world war 2, the Belgian bishops appointed him as a vice-rector of the Catholic University of Leuven. One day the vice-rector was summoned to see the German commander of the district. Over an hour passed and Suenens had not returned. It was feared that he too had been arrested as the rector was. The truth was otherwise. The commander, a protestant, spoke for a few minutes about the grievances of the German authorities towards the University. Then for an hour he talked about the over-riding need for Christian unity. He said "*What matters most is that we should experience together the communion of the Holy Spirit*".

Suenens had never forgotten this conversation and said that the motto he chose as a bishop: "*In Spiritu Sancto*" was an outcome of this conversation. For him the most difficult period covered the last fifteen months of the war. The rector had been imprisoned by the Gestapo, the vice-rector assumed full responsibility in a very inflammatory period in which the slightest incident could assume enormous proportions. In these circumstances he always remained calm and optimistic. While this period he was also struck by the absence in the University of any serious religious teaching. He started then with some professors an Institute for religious sciences.

In 1945 he was named auxiliary bishop to cardinal Van Roey and he remained it till the death of the cardinal in 1961. He was consecrated as a bishop on December 16, 1945 and then chose for his coat-of-arms the motto "*In Spiritu Sancto*". During this period he developed also an important ministry in giving religious teachings for the radio. He was influenced by the ministry of Msgr Fulton Sheen in New York and became aware of the ever growing importance of the media in the world after the war. He stressed the importance that the Church could not be absent in the press, the radio and later on the television.

During these years also Miss Veronica O'Brien, an envoy of the Legion of Mary came to him and convinced him that the Legion could be a means of evangelisation. He started with her help the first groups of the Legion in Belgium. From then on Veronica remained with him till the end of his life and she was really an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Unremittingly she gathered information about the Church in the world, opening even more broadly the vision of bishop Suenens on the Church. In 1961, after the death of cardinal Van Roey, he was appointed as archbishop on November 24th and quite rapidly, three months later he was created a cardinal on March 19th 1962.

It was not by any chance that Leo Suenens had chosen his motto as bishop. From then on he was looking around where the Holy Spirit was at work in the Church. He saw that the **liturgical renewal** was the first such move he discovered and during the Second Vatican

Council he was one of the promoters of the liturgical renewal. But I cannot say that this was very influential in his ministry. The second move was, as I said, **the Legion of Mary**. He saw the importance of this method of evangelisation as under the inspiration of Frank Duff, the founder, ordinary lay people went to visit homes, to pray with the families and to spread the Good News of the Gospel. He wrote a book about Edel Quinn, an Irish envoy of the Legion, hoping that one day she would be sanctified. He also wrote "*Theology of the Apostolate of the Legion of Mary*".

The third discovery was for him the **ecumenical movement**. As a seminarian, he followed closely what happened during the **Malines Conversations**. Right after the first world war, cardinal Mercier met Lord Halifax, an Anglican from York. Both started what I would call the first ecumenical conversations, in order to try to unite both Christian Churches. A Benedictine monk, Dom Lambert Beauduin helped them and wrote an essay: "*United not absorbed*" that was meant to open a door to unity between Anglicans and Catholics. The English Catholic hierarchy was very suspicious and at the death of cardinal Mercier succeeded in stopping the conversations. But since then important members of the Anglican Communion came regularly to visit the site of the conversations in the Archbishop's house in Malines. Cardinal Suenens followed the footsteps of Mercier and started regular contacts with the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as with the Archbishop of York. During the Second Vatican Council his views were broadened by the contacts with the ecumenical observers of different Christian denominations. It were these observers who invited him to the United States, telling him that they followed with great interest the developments within the Catholic Church but that at home very few heard about it. This was the reason of his frequent visits to the United States after the Council.

From the moment on Pope John the 23rd announced the **Second Vatican Council** the cardinal was aware that this was also the work of the Holy Spirit. In retrospect, in the light of the role filled by the cardinal in the Council and afterwards, the long preceding period, especially as auxiliary bishop, presents itself as a time of preparation. Still as an auxiliary he wrote an important note giving his vision about the future of the Catholic Church and the role the Council could play in this badly needed renewal. This note is one of the most striking papers that bishops, before the start of the Council, gave at the request of the Pope. It was a strength of the cardinal that he chose always the right persons to assist him. During the Council as well Belgian bishops as bishop Charue of Namur and bishop De Smedt of Bruges as an outstanding group of theologians from the University of Leuven assisted him. Rapidly he became one of the four moderators of the Council. Many of his interventions were historical. In the light of his later role in the Charismatic Renewal I only mention his answer to another cardinal who had said that charisma's were only needed at the beginning of the Church; he defended in a striking way the view that charisma's were always essential for the Church as signs that the Holy Spirit remains always with the people of God. Out of love for the Church, even when it was not understood by many, he wrote a book: "*Co-responsibility in the Church*" since he felt that the fruits of the Council were in danger. It took him much courage to come out for his opinion. He even argued with the Pope as once Paul did with Peter. I believe that this is true love for the Church he always served faithfully, even when his interventions were criticised by many colleagues.

Then came his last discovery of the work of the Holy Spirit **the Charismatic Renewal**. Veronica heard in 1972 that in the United States there was a new movement, called the Catholic Pentecostals. Through her contacts, she received information and brought it to the attention of the cardinal. At the end of 1972 he invited Father Francis Martin and was convinced this was the work of the Holy Spirit He asked him to pray over him for the baptism

in the Spirit. In March 1973 he was once more invited to give some ecumenical lectures in America. At the beginning and at the end of his journey, contacts with Charismatic groups were planned; with the Community of Hope in Convent Station, New Jersey before his lecture journey and in Ann Arbor with the Word of God Community in order to know more about what the Spirit was doing. Together with Veronica and another priest I accompanied the cardinal. I will say more about what happened to me in my personal testimony at the end. The cardinal became fully aware of the strong new move of the Holy Spirit. He resolutely supported these new communities and prayer groups. Guided by the Spirit he was not blind for dangers were people, with the best of intentions, were so influenced by Pentecostal Churches and their inspiring way of praying and exercising the charisma's, that they moved away from the teachings of the Catholic Church. He went to Rome to speak about the authentic work of the Spirit but also of the need for guidance. Very few in Rome were impressed and the Curia asked him not to go to the first International Leaders meeting of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Grotta Ferrata in 1975. But the Pope Paul VI was more open; on Pentecost of that year he authorised the cardinal to preside the Eucharist for the participants of the first world-wide congress at the papal altar in Saint Peter. After the consecration a wonderful song in tongues filled the air of Saint Peter for some long moments. Even while it was not sure till the last moment the Pope entered Saint Peter at the end of the Eucharist and gave an address to the participants, calling the Charismatic Renewal a 'chance' for the Church. Because of his concern that the Catholic Charismatic Renewal remained in the heart of the Church, he invited some of the leaders to come to Brussels and to stay there for some time. Ralph Martin and Steve Clark resided for some years in Brussels in close contact with the cardinal. The ICCRO, that became later ICCRS resided for quite a while in the residence of the cardinal in Brussels. Father Fio Mascarenhas S.J. from India who presided at that time the ICCRO remained in Brussels till the offices moved to Rome. At a meeting of the Charismatic Renewal in South Bend, in a big stadium the cardinal addressed the participants. When a large airplane flew over the stadium, he had to stop for a moment and then continued with the remark: you saw this plane; it has two wings, the same for us: we have two wings, the Holy Spirit and Mary.. He was always concerned that the Renewal should remain in the heart of the Church. The Pope understood his concern and asked him to be the ecclesiastical link between the Renewal and the Vatican. He attached great importance to the theological foundations of the Renewal and he took the initiative in May 1974 from 21st till the 26th to organise in Malines a meeting with an outstanding group of theologians and leaders of the Renewal. Even professor Joseph Ratzinger, the actual Pope Benedict XVI was one of the theological consultants. He didn't attend the meeting but the draft was submitted to a group of consultants of which he was a part. It was Father Kilian Mc Donnell O.S.B. from the United States who wrote the final text that was approved and signed by all participants. It resulted in what was called the First Malines Document: "*Theological and pastoral orientations on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal*". Some more documents were written by the cardinal himself and are known as the Malines Documents. Between others I mention: "*Ecumenism and Charismatic Renewal: theological and pastoral orientations*" in 1978 and "*Charismatic Renewal and social action: a dialogue*" written with Don Helder Camara in 1979. In 1974 the cardinal wrote: "*A new Pentecost?*" Taking now this book in my hands, I do not have the impression that it is dated. I rather see a prophetic vision about the future of the Charismatic Renewal. I want to share two passages, stressing the role of the Renewal for the whole Church: "*The work of the Holy Spirit is fundamental; that is, it has to be the basis of everything else in Christian life. The rediscovery of the power of the Spirit, then, is a fundamental part of Church renewal. It has to be at the basis of everything else and it will, of necessity affect everything else... worship and liturgy, community, daily life together, service, evangelism*" (page 113) and also: "*The ideal espoused by the spontaneously recognised*

'leaders' of the 'movement' - I must enclose in quotation marks these inadequate expressions - is that it should disappear... That is exact: the ambition of the Charismatic Renewal is to eliminate itself as soon as possible, much as, on another level, the biblical or liturgical movements have ceased to be identifiable groups and disappeared into the life of the Church... The purpose is to disappear when the goal is reached, even as a river loses itself when it merges into the sea" (page 105). I know that this goal is not yet reached. Our goal is to become apostles of the baptism in the Spirit in order that all Christians are affected by it. I would like to develop this idea tomorrow.

Let me also give now my testimony about the baptism in my life as a priest.

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