This article is an electronic version of an article originally published in *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1986, Volume 3, Number 1, pages 36-56. Please keep in mind that the pagination of this electronic reprint differs from that of the bound volume. This fact could affect how you enter bibliographic information in papers that you may write.

Charismatic Covenant Community: A Failed Promise

Adrian J. Reimers

The evolution of The People of Praise Charismatic Community is described as an emanation of the Catholic charismatic renewal, itself stimulated by Vatican II in the 1960's and 1970's, which saw much religious experimentation and the formation of new lay religious communities. According to the author, an ex-member of The People of Praise, the group came to represent a spiritually poor "generic" Christianity far removed from the Catholic Church. This, plus tight psychological and social controls based on theories of "headship," "discipleship," and "commandability" led the author and his wife to leave the community after more than a decade of membership.

Seated in our folding chairs in the back of the basilica, under Bemini's golden Chair of Peter and facing the bronze balustrade of the high altar, we chatted softly among ourselves, craning our necks from time to time to see if he were coming yet. Moments before, Cardinal Suenens had finished celebrating the Liturgy from that high altar -- a singular privilege at the time -- and very soon the Pope was to address this throng. It was an historic even4 and as a member of the People of Praise Charismatic Community, I was a part of it all. During that Liturgy, charismatic clergymen had pronounced inspired prophecies from that altar, and the sounds of charismatic hymns and the complex melodic patterns of singing in tongues had filled St. Peter's. The 1975 International Conference on the Charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church had come to Rome to the heart of the Church, and the Church - in the person of Pope Paul VI himself - would soon welcome us warmly, indeed, enthusiastically.

The Rome conference was a wonderful moment and a unique opportunity. After only eight years, the charismatic renewal movement was accepted and approved by the highest authority in the Church. Rarely does a movement win such approval so quickly. Yet the same event was also a turning point. Instead of following through on what they had begun, the People of Praise decided to set out on their own path - one that would now lead away from Rome. Like a child wise in its own eyes, we backed away from our Mother’s embrace and decided we could do better without her. In doing so, we lost a unique opportunity to serve Christ and his Church.

Origins of the People of Praise

Shortly after my wife Marie and I moved to South Bend, we began attending charismatic prayer meetings there. As a grad student in philosophy, I had a rather "heady" faith, a combination of traditional belief and a fascina6on with the latest intellectual fads. I maintained a consistent life of prayer about as well as I was able to stay off cigarettes; that is, I could do it for a week at ft most. In January of 1971, we went on a charismatic retreat. I remember sitting there on the floor, feeling very much like a Pharisee, an intellectual

nit-picker whose love of God went little farther than his fascination with his own latest theological insight. It was there that Christ touched me with his love. I was moved in part at least because the others on the retreat were not condemning me (which is what I had expected once they got to know me.) In any case, I resolved right there to be open to all that the Lord had for me and to seek every gift that the Holy Spirit wanted to give me. A few weeks later, people prayed over me and I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. From that point my life has been different The life of faith that I had until then achieved sporadically had become a reality.

When the People of Praise formed the following fall, Marie and I eagerly joined expecting to find in it a chance to live out more fully the life that we had begun to experience. God was moving in power, and it seemed that the direction that he was taking was toward the formation of communities. Amazing things were happening. On the east side of South Bend, John Ferrone, a charismatic and recent graduate of Notre Dame, had set up a desk, some shelves, and a mimeograph machine in a garage. With no advertising budget he set himself and some volunteers to making teaching materials available to members of this new movement. Within seven years his Communication Center Oater changed to Charismatic Renewal Services) was doing an annual business in excess of one million dollars. In Ann Arbor, a group of charismatics under Ralph Martin's direction began putting out a magazine called *Pastoral Newsletter,* intended to be a help for prayer group leaders and members. In 1972 the name changed to *New Covenant,* and its circulation quickly climbed into the 70,000's. These achievements did not come easily; those involved worked hard and sacrificed. On the other hand, their success far exceeded reasonable expectations. It was, we said to ourselves, surely a great work of God, an unprecedented move of the Holy Spirit.

This was also a time of confusion in the Church, a period of religious craziness when anything could be justified in the name of Vatican H. The council had called for an updating of the Liturgy; suddenly the 'Fifty-ninth Street Bridge Song" ("Feelin' Groovy") was a hit, and home masses featured discussion homilies with beer and pizza for the eucharist Avant-garde theologians were publishing in paperback, showing us that we no longer had to believe all that superstitious stuff and that Adolf Hitler and a few racists were the only real sinners. (Those who slept around or who used artificial birth control were not -- if they were sincere.) The new Catholicism (if you must insist on the term) was to be a "contentless" ethic. The greatest danger, of course, was that reactionary forces in the curia would undercut the spirit of the Council and put an end to this *aggiornamento.*

A New Pentecost

For most of us the charismatic experience was a welcome proof that all those things that we once believed in - the power and majesty of God, the reality of the Risen Lord, miracles, healing, effective prayer - were still real. The Holy Spirit had answered Pope John XXIII's prayer for a new Pentecost. The Church was alive and the power for renewal was being poured out.

The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church had described the Church as the People of God, and for many Catholics at the time this meant *community.* Cursillistas, social action groups, religious orders, and charismatic prayer groups were all seeking the key to true community. In South Bend during the late sixties, a group of former cursillistas, including Steve Clark, Paul DeCelles, Ralph Martin, Jim Byme, and Kevin Ranaghan, had begun working together to think through the bases on which Christian community could be built. Clark's book, *Building Christian Communities,* focused these ideas and provided principles on which several important conununities came to be built (including the People of Praise). Late in 1969 Martin and Clark had founded the Word of God, a covenant community in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Then in 1971 Byrne formed the True House at Notre Dame, and in the same year Ranaghan and DeCelles shied the People of Praise in South Bend.

Some critics have suggested that those who joined these communities were too weak and unstable to cope with the uncertainties of the times, that they were seeking father-figures, strong authorities to give direction and security to their lives. That this was manifestly untrue of the People of Praise is clear from the simple fact that strong authority was not an issue. Indeed, in the early days we spent precious little time on questions of authority and government.

Marie and I and most of the other 27 original members joined the People of Praise because we saw in it a hope, not only for ourselves, but for the Church and the world as well. We had experienced God's love powerfully in the initial charismatic experience. We had seen miracles and hearings -- drug addicts and alcoholics freed from bondage, cripples made well, broken marriages healed, wicked men and women turning to God. We were hearing the truths of the Gospel proclaimed clearly and unashamedly. We could hear the call to holiness, and we were zealous to do the will of the Lord. And -- seeing the relationships we had begun to form with Protestant charismatics -- we began to hope for a coming to the end of four hundred years of Christian disunity. Many of us saw these communities as a vehicle especially well-suited for God's work of renewal in the Catholic Church. We were forming a group of Christians committed to sharing their lives in an explicitly Christian way, a community in which our common and individual lives would be led under the guidance of and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a good idea,

A Fateful Decision

Very early in their history the People of Praise made the fateful decision to become an ecumenical covenant community. This decision, which seemed to make sense at the time, would later prove to be spiritually crippling. The issue of what we would be vis-a-vis the Church arose very quickly. The leaders (called "coordinators") had thought, for example, of seeking status as an experimental "floating parish" or something similar. Although one member was a Presbyterian, we saw ourselves as a Catholic community. The original covenant read (in part), "We agree to obey the direction of the Holy Spirit ... in full harmony with the bishops and faithful of the Catholic Church.” Because the open prayer meeting that we ran was ecumenical, and because some of the Protestants who attended that meeting were interested in joining us, the coordinators decided that God's will was that we be ecumenical. Within a few months the 'bishops and faithful" line of the covenant was changed to read, “in full harmony with the Church,” and members were free to interpret the word 'Church" according to their own denominational convictions.

Generic Christianity

In itself, the decision to establish an ecumenical group is not problematic. The “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" encourages Catholics to work with others, including those outside the Catholic community, to accomplish good works. However, the People of Praise was not intended to be a group with a limited purpose, such as evangelism, serving the needs of the poor, or fostering charismatic renewal. This community was intended from the beginning to entail the full commitment of each member's life. It is because of the depth and extent of this commitment that the People of Praise has increasingly moved toward a kind of generic Christianity. In order to maintain the totality of the covenant commitment as well as the sensitivity to the doctrinal and ecclesiastical commitments of all members, the People of Praise has had to distance itself from the Catholic Church and has - in a practical sense - had to become very much like a church itself.

A Covenant Community

The term "covenant community" is significant. The People of Praise sees itself not just as "a bunch of people," but as a people in the social and cultural sense, rather like the people of Israel. This was not to be simply a community gathered around a set of common beliefs and values, but a people, a clan or set of clans whose members recognize a kind of familial relationship among themselves and who share common customs, govemmen4 and patterns of belief. Indeed, the coordinators have consciously set out to create a new culture within the People of Praise.

Kevin Ranaghan once remarked facetiously, "And God said, 'Give my people meetings!'" His comment reflects a central reality of the People of Praise subculture. Meetings play a very large part in the member's personal life. Besides weekly meetings of the community (or a geographic section of it), each member has a man's or women's group meeting, a meeting with his or her "head," meetings of service teams, and periodic teaching series. A weekly schedule is an important component of the well-ordered life in the group, and much of the shape of one's schedule is determined by the meetings he attends.

Like any other culture, the People of Praise has its celebrations and rites. Every family or household celebrated the Lord's Day in a way that approximates the Jewish Sabbath celebration. On Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas the Sunday afternoon community meeting becomes a time of great celebration, to which all wear their Sunday best. Often these feasts are celebrated with special performances from the community's music group. If possible, an annual "retreat" (actually a weekend of fairly concentrated teaching and some common recreation) is presented for each member according to his sex and state in life.

Courtship and Marriage Traditions

The People of Praise has well-developed courtship and marriage traditions which have been followed more or less closely for ten years or so. One does not ordinarily date in the community until he and his head (more on the institution of headship later) have prayed through his state in life. After the decision to marry has been made, the individual starts dating a rather large number of other individuals. When a young man finds himself attracted to a particular woman, he approaches his head to discuss moving into a "serious dating relationship." Both the man's and the woman's head become involved at this point counseling the couple and helping them to discern whether they should marry. When the question has been "popped" the couple announces the news at the next large community meeting, where it is greeted with applause, and the engagement is official. Weddings in the People of Praise are primarily community, rather than family, events.

In the early 1980's the coordinators took an important step toward developing the community's cultural ideal with a series of teachings on provident and resourceful living. Recognizing that economic conditions generally have been unstable, and that those who are prepared weather hard times better, the coordinators developed a series of teachings to encourage such virtues as thrift, resourcefulness in caring for material things, and preparedness. Initially this resulted in many members storing up grains, dried foods, and drinking water in their basements, and women dusting off sewing machines and canning jars. Although these specific efforts seem to have fallen off in recent years, the covenant idea of the provident and resourceful Christian remains strong in the People of Praise.

On the whole the efforts of the coordinators to foster a distinctive subculture have been fairly successful. This culture has made possible the group's expansion into such distant places as Falls Church, Virginia, and Corvallis, Oregon, where branches of the People of Praise now exist.

The People of Praise is governed by a group of about six or seven *head coordinators* who serve as the overall governing board of the organization in all its branches. The head of the group, who is in fact very much the spiritual head of the People of Praise (though not so much by virtue of his office as by the force of his personality), is Paul DeCelles, the *overall coordinator.* Each geographical branch (e.g., South Bend, Falls Church) is headed by a *principal branch coordinator* and several *area coordinators,* followed by heads of smaller groupings and service team heads. Especially interesting is the institution of *handmaids,* women (generally wives of coordinators) whose role is to counsel other women, to support or supplement the husbands' ordinary headship. Besides working with women who want to help or whose husbands feel they need it, the handmaids try to foster a particular model of womanlines within the community.

Much more could be said about the culture of the People of Praise; there are social hierarchies, career trajectories, marks of honor, and even a few taboos. There is a strong emphasis on the manly, occasionally to the point of ridiculing the "wimp." At this point however, it would be best for us to take an in-depth look at the covenant itself.

Covenant - The Glue That Holds It All Together

Shortly before our dismissal from the People of Praise, I mentioned to one of the head coordinators that I believed that I might have to leave the community simply to be true to myself, that to continue to belong would deny something vital about my personality. His answer was interesting: "How can you speak of being true to yourself when you have just mentioned that you want to go back on one of the core commitments of your life?' This little exchange illustrates well the seriousness and thoroughness with which the People of Praise views its covenant. It is not just a commitment, It is one of one's primary commitments, a pledge that one cannot back out of without seriously compromising his integrity.

By "covenant" the community understands 'a solemn agreement that establishes a relationship." The model and inspiration for this is the ancient Hebrew idea of a covenant, as found so frequently in the Old Testament. Unlike modern contracts, ancient Near Eastern covenants established a permanent and personal relationship between the two parties involved. When Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech at Beer-sheba (Gen. 21:22-32), he did more than simply agree to the rights to a well. The two became -- as it were -- brothers in their covenant. They were in this together. To violate this would not be a simple legal infraction; it would be an act of personal disloyalty and a breach of faith. The sanctions against breaking a covenant were not those of the courts, but the internal witness of one's own character on the line. The People of Praise is a covenant community. That is, it is founded on a covenant among its members. After a trial period of about two years, the prospective member makes the following covenant with the rest of the community.

The Covenant

> We covenant ourselves to live our lives together in Christ the Lord, by the power of his spirit ... We agree to become a basic Christian community, to find within our fellowship the essential core of our life in the Spirit; in worship and the sacraments, spiritual and moral guidance, service and apostolic activity ... We accept the order of this community which the Lord is establishing with all the ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially with the foundational ministry gifts of apostles, pastors, prophets, teachers, and evangelists. We agree to obey the direction of the Holy Spirit manifested in and through these ministries in full harmony with the Church ... We recognize in the covenant a unique relationship one to another and between the

> individual and the community. We accept the responsibility for mutual care, concern, and ministry among ourselves. We will serve each other and the community as a whole in all needs: spiritual, material, financial ... We agree that the weekly meeting of the community is primary among our commitments and not to be absent except for a serious reason.

For members of the People of Praise, this covenant is the central determinant and interpretant of their lives. It is the axis around which spiritual, social, and family life are structured. Yet in and of itself it is problematic. In the context of the community's ecumenism, it puts Catholics into a very awkward position, as we shall show later on.

From the very early days of the community, the founding coordinators have taught that this covenant can be read simply as a specification Of the New Covenant that all Christians share in Christ. It is, according to this, a commitment by these particular people that they will live explicitly and fully according to the New Covenant. The community would be a group, with no nominal Christians, in which one would not have to mask his commitment to Christ behind a veneer of worldly sophistication or frivolous distraction. As the life of the People of Praise developed, however, the nature of the commitment went far beyond this. When members now pledge, "We covenant ourselves to live our lives together," this is construed as a commitment of the whole life of its members, both in its temporal extension and in its depth. The member not only commits his life to the point of willingness to lay it down for the group, he also commits his soul in the sense that his person is radically open and available to the community. When members agree to find within the People of Praise the "essential core" of their life in the Spirit, they mean it. Thus they recognize a "unique relationship" among themselves, one which they share with no one outside the group. In an authoritative teaching to explain the covenant, overall coordinator Paul DeCelles taught that the covenant relationship one shares with another member of the People of Praise is more important than any relationship with any other person. This is a startlingly strong statement.

The Issue of Obedience

One of the most important lines of the covenan4 in a strictly practical sense, is "We agree to obey the direction of the Holy Spirit manifested in and through these ministries." In it, members commit themselves in some sense to obey another. Who should be obeyed, and to what extent has been a thorny issue for the community, and the development of ft is worth tracing out.

Initially - at the beginning of the community - most of us understood this obedience in a pretty charismatic sense. That is to say, when we promised to obey the direction of the Holy Spirit we meant that we expected leadings in the form of prophecies and inspired counsel from the membership and leaders. The role of the coordinators would be to take the lead in sorting things out and discerning what should be done. We saw this kind of obedience as pertaining primarily to the community as a whole. For example, fairly early in the life of the community we received several prophecies concerning witness and evangelism. Some members felt a strong impulse in their hearts to share the Gospel with others. In response, the coordinators called a weekend retreat for anyone who felt led to be involved actively in evangelism. As a result of this retreat, a team was created that devoted a good deal of prayer and work to street evangelism in South Bend. The "we" in the covenant was here understood as referring to the group as a whole and not directly to the individuals.

A New Emphasis

Late in 1974 a new emphasis began to develop. Throughout the charismatic renewal leaders

began to realize that the times we live in call for serious, disciplined Christians. Conference speakers began to speak of persecution and martyrdom as being the lot of the faithful follower of CMSL To move on in the Lord's plan we would need more than just tambourines and happy prayer meetings. It was time to become serious about rooting out sin and growing in holiness. The community was growing quickly at this point, and the coordinators found themselves spending great amounts of time counseling those with problems. They began casting around for an effective way to train others to meet these needs. Also at that time nondenominational charismatic churches associated with the Christian Church Ministries in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, were developing a doctrine and practice of discipleship, modeled closely on their understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Twelve. influenced by these factors, the People of Praise began to develop its own practice of headship and a new approach to obedience. On the one hand, the leaders wanted a way to help members root out sin and grow in righteousness. On the other hand, they began to feel a need to have men under them who could carry out orders to undertake hard things in the service of the Lord. To accomplish both these ends the People of Praise adopted, in a modified form, the discipleship practices of the non-denominational churches.

it was an honor when they asked me to serve as one of the first heads within the community. Not long before I had read an early history of the Jesuits. It was an inspiring story of courage and selfless devotion to the Gospel. Ignatius, Francis Xavier, and the others were strong and loyal and disciplined, ready to pick up and go wherever the Church needed them. I wanted to do that to be radically available to serve the Lord, completely at his disposal. So when Paul DeCelles came to my office at Charisma6c Renewal Services, and asked me if I would fully submit my life to one of the coordinators, myself accepting responsibility for heading others, I was honored and even excited. Full-life submission to these men of God had become a mark of mature commitment To enter into such a relationship became the goal of any man who wanted to move on with the Lord. During the course of the next year we began to hear more and more military imagery in the teachings and prophecies, both within the community and in the charismatic renewal as a whole.

“Commandability" for Everyone

As it turned out, this ideal of “full-life submission” proved too intense and impractical for the kind of group we were. By 1979 we had virtually abandoned it. However, we did not abandon the idea of obedience. Instead of “full-life submission," the coordinators sought to foster an attitude of “commandability" among all the members. On the one hand, this approach softened the overtones of the earlier full-life submission, since particular individuals were not pledging complete submission of their wills to their respective heads. On the other hand, it was a more extensive approach in that this idea of commandability is for all members, and not just an elite few. The general idea is this: Every community member ought to want to do what the community, in the person of its leaders, should ask of him or her. It is expected, then, that if a member should be asked to do something (e.g., move to the branch in Corvallis), he will pray and think about it and decide whether to accede to the request. His prejudice in the situation ought to be in favor of the coordinators' request, with the expectation that if his will be otherwise, God will make that will clear. In one teaching to community heads, Kevin Ranaghan illustrated commandability this way: if the coordinators should ask the members to give half their savings to fund some work which they (i.e., the coordinators) believe that God wants done, then ideally every community member will recognize that request as a personal command.

This -- in a general way -- is how the People of Praise now understand their covenant pledge to obey the direction of the Holy Spirit. From a promise to be generally responsive to the Lord's leadings, the community has moved to an understanding that puts each member's will in a fairly explicit relationship of obedience (or commandability) to the leaders. We will

see how this works out when we look more closely at headship. But first we must see what is involved when one wants no longer to be bound by the covenant

"A Quitting Spirit"

Late in 1978 a popular and fairly influential member, one of the heads of the People of Praise, decided that he could no longer follow the direction of the coordinators. After a few meetings with them, he and his family left the community. In his wake a rather large contingent of other members also left. Most of these had made the covenant of the community. The effect on the People of Praise was stunning. We were all -- to some degree -- shocked that this could happen. Several months later, head coordinator Kevin Ranaghan addressed the whole community and interpreted what had happened. He likened the covenant of the People of Praise to the marriage vow. (Remember that a covenant establishes a personal relationship.) Without attributing personal sin to anyone, he commented that one should see fidelity to the covenant as a similar kind of obligation. He then went on to attribute the events of the previous fall to an evil spirit, specifically a "quitting spirit." He suggested that what had happened in the People of Praise was very similar to the massive exodus of Catholic priests from their ministry in the late 1960s. These two waves of departure, one of ordained ministers in the Church and the other of covenanted members of this noncanonical community, both typified a contemporary tendency to abandon one's commitments when keeping them becomes hard. In other words, the covenant of the People of Praise is -- according to Ranaghan -- an objectively binding obligation in conscience, one that cannot be abandoned without the agreement of the other parties involved. If so many people should decide at one time to leave, then the most logical explanation is that evil spirits have inspired them to do so.

The Problem Lies with the Individual

In general, it is very difficult for one who has made the covenant to leave the people of Praise. It is easiest when a clearly defined, objective need -- such as a doctor's strong recommendations to move to a warmer climate -- can be cited. When the issue at stake, however, is a serious disagreement with the leaders or a fundamental loss of confidence in the ability to lead, or when it is even simply the recognition that one no longer feels called to belong, then the coordinators strongly resist his departure. The member is expected to meet for a period (about six months) with his head to resolve the difficulty. Then he must meet with coordinators at successively higher levels, reviewing each time his objections or reasons for wanting to leave. The presumption throughout the process is that the problem lies with the individual, that there can normally be no good reason to be released from the covenant. This insistence on the role of the leaders as the sole judge of efforts to leave the community has led to a rather ludicrous result occasionally. Some members have announced that they were leaving, only to be reprimanded by the coordinators and advised that they cannot withdraw unilaterally. Shortly thereafter the coordinators dismissed them from the community. The message is strange but clear: you cannot quit; you have to be thrown out.

When my wife and I were considering leaving the group, we searched our souls over this matter of fidelity to the covenant. Even though we saw serious problems in the community, we wanted, as much as possible, to remain faithful to our promises. Our freedom of conscience concerning this came when we realized that any spiritual commitment we make must be subject to the spiritual oversight of our parish priest. The pretensions of the community notwithstanding, my covenant with them was not beyond the jurisdiction of the Church. When each of us had been told that the covenant was not binding on us by several priests, including those in confession, we knew that we were free to withdraw without the consent of the coordinators.

Headship: How to Effect Covenant Loyalty

It is impossible to understand the culture and the spirituality of the People of Praise if one does not clearly understand the doctrine and practice of headship. If the covenant is the glue holding the group together, headship is the means by which it is applied. If the People of Praise has a distinctive culture, one of its dominant features is the role of the head. Although the coordinators are trying to change the terminology from "head" to "the person pastorally responsible for another," in the minds of the membership, personal headship exists, and in fact, the one exercising it is called "head."

Everyone in the People of Praise has a personal head. Married women have their husbands as heads. Everyone else is assigned a head by the coordinators. The personal head is a pastor, responsible to oversee every aspect of one's life. The extent to which a member opens his life to his head is not defined. In this respect, headship is voluntary. (A member can withhold areas of his life from the head.) On the other hand, a good head has the responsibility to draw out those under him and encourage them to submit more of their lives to his counsel. Most heads take this seriously because they understand this responsibility to be objective, rather like that of a father to his older children.

Why should one submit to a head's direction? It is characteristic of the People of Praise that they believe their teaching, practices, and policies to be objectively valid institutions established by God and manifesting his will. One should submit to his head for the simple reason that God has given the gift of headship to the community, and it is right and good to accept wholeheartedly what God has given. (Lest this seem simplistic, let me assure the reader that this is exactly how this reason is frequently presented.)

A second reason for submitting one's life is Original Sin. We are all weak and sinful, easily deceived by Satan and our own wayward flesh. The wise Christian will not go it alone but will seek the advice of someone wiser. In the People of Praise that "someone" is one's assigned head. As one man, an engineer with a responsible job in a major corporation, told me, "I need a head because I'm rebellious. He has to keep me in line." According to Kevin Ranaghan, one of the head's principle jobs is to lead the member into holiness and righteousness.

Some observations am in order here. The first is simply that Catholics have Penance and the Eucharist to help them fight sin in their lives and grow in holiness. I am not personally aware of any community member who was ever counseled to use these to grow holy. However, I have heard a coordinator tell my wife not to discuss her life in the confessional; just tell your sins, get absolution, and get out, she was told. I myself was told by a head that it is not wise for community members to seek spiritual counsel from priests, and I know that others have been given similar advice.

Psychological Consequences

Headship, as a result, has fairly predictable consequences both to ft head and the one headed. Because headship is so all-encompassing (matters submitted to heads have included the discipline of children, how to deal with a wife, how to help one's wife see and deal with her own problems, whether to accept a promotion at work, whether to have another baby, what kind of car to buy -- in short -- almost everything), a relationship of inequality and dependence between the two generally develops. The one headed, unless he gets into a rebellious snit, does not feel comfortable making decisions without consulting his head. If he should do so, his head may well call him gently to task. I was talking to one of the coordinators about headship and mentioned to him that I had "fired" my head. (This

was shortly before we left the group.) He looked incredulous: "Who do you talk to about decisions?" Then he added, a bit abstractly, "I guess you could talk to your wife."

This effect on the one headed reflects itself in the head. He becomes the needed helper. Any deviation requires his concern. In the fall of 1984 one coordinator, who had been on mission elsewhere, raised some pointed questions about the direction that the community was taking and about its relationship with some other communities. To allay the misgivings that other members might have, Paul DeCelles called a meeting for anyone interested. He began the meeting by saying, "First let me give you a bit of the history of how we tried to help Tony." When I began to raise questions about what the community was doing, my head commented to someone else, "There are real problems over there (i.e., at the Reimers)." The underlying attitude is that for the most part objections and questions from members stem not from reasoned and fairly objective analysis but from spiritual or emotional problems. Theological reflection by members on their own lives is seen as a sophisticated smokescreen. Thus, when one large group left the community, a head coordinator could comment to me that, of them all, only one gave the real reason for wanting to leave.

Headship often creates serious problems in the marriages of community members. Most wives seem to resist the idea of an outsider (i.e., the husband's head) calling the shots inside the family. She may want to quit her job, since he has begun doing handsomely in his. He may even agree. But until the head agrees, the matter is not settled. (This actually happened, as have virtually all of the examples in the article.) More often than not wives tend to resent and resist the relationships between the heads and their husbands. For their part husbands are confused by this and seek the advice of their heads, wondering how to get their wives to fall into line. According to a teaching that has been circulating among the community heads, women are by nature manipulative. This is one of the effects of Original Sin on them. The wise husband will factor this into his relationship with his wife, recognizing that much of what she does is insincere. To deal with this, the husband should distrust her motives and instead draw closer to his head and the men in his men's group.

We should note in passing that heads are assigned without regard to denominational lines. A Catholic member may easily have his spiritual and moral life formed by a Protestant.

Unprecedented Control

To exaggerate the importance of headship in the People of Praise is almost impossible. Even though the practice is virtually without Scriptural warrant and although such control of the lives of lay folk is unprecedented in Catholic tradition, the People of Praise exults in its practice. When the community celebrates the anniversary of its founding, time is always set aside for members to share publicly with others what God has done for them. Close to half of these testimonies are usually about headship. These people really want to be faithful and to do God's will. Their leaders have given them headship as the key to attaining this. Although heads are generally unformed theologically (a situation that the leaders finally began to address in 1984) and often ignorant of important aspects of their faith and spirituality, the coordinators invest them with authority over the lives of community members. And members, who seldom have a say as to who will head them, most of whom have been hurt by their heads, entrust their lives to this institution.

Catholicism Was The Loser

In 1983 my wife was the head of a women's group. Every Monday night she and four other community women would meet to talk about their lives and about what God was doing for them. All the women in the group were Catholics and frequently the discussion would be about such topics as natural family planning and devotion to the Blessed Virgin. in the

summer of 1984 the branch leader approached Marie to suggest that another woman join the group. This woman was a Protestant, a member of the community's Lutheran fellowship, who took her Protestantism seriously. The branch leader noted this and suggested that the Catholic tone of the group be dropped. This woman would almost certainly object to discussions of Marian devotion, and so, "in the spirit of openness," Catholic topics should be avoided. This incident typifies the ecumenical hole that the People of Praise has dug itself into. There is, of course, nothing wrong with a group of Catholics being sensitive to the perspectives and concerns of a Protestant who should join them. We all do this. However, this group was intended to be a context for fairly intimate and deep sharing of the central realities of life. And for some this meant growing closer to Catholic expressions of faith, expressions that Protestants still object to. Clearly the group could not do both. When it came to a choice between community solidarity and Catholic doctrine, Catholicism was the loser.

The People of Praise is ecumenical. It is intended to be a community in which each member can be fully a member of his own denomination while loving and sharing his life with others in the group. On the face of it, that seems like a good idea. The guiding ideas were formulated some years back by -- I believe -- Steve Clark. All Christians share something that makes them more "one" than any unity found in the world. We can share a life in Christ, one based on our common patrimony of faith as expressed in the Apostles' Creed and on a pattern of practical virtues and values easily gleaned from the New Testament. In theory this is not a bad idea. Were the community differently structured, perhaps as a grouping of communities, each with a denominational identity and the Catholic Community in a well-defined relationship with the local Ordinary, this might work. Unfortunately, as we have seen from the discussion of headship and the covenant, this is not what the People of Praise is. As a result, the People of Praise is adrift as a body and is becoming increasingly unable to inspire its members or meet their deepest spiritual needs.

Practical Denial of Catholic Solidarity

'rhe reader will recall that the covenant specifies, "we will find within our fellowship the *essential core* of our life in the spirit: in *worship and the Sacraments."* Plainly, an interdenominational group cannot do this. Paul DeCelles addressed this concern in a videotaped teaching to the community in the spring of 1985. How can an ecumenical group share the sacraments, when they cannot even agree on how many sacraments there are? DeCelles attempts to avoid this difficulty by claiming that "to the extent that any of our churches recognizes more sacraments [i.e., than baptism] as valid, to that extent we all wish we could share them." As even a superficial reading of *Lumen Gentium or Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican II Constitutions on the nature of the Church and on the liturgy), as well as Pope John Paul's writings, will reveal, the Eucharist is essential to the formation of true community in Christ. In the Eucharist the unity of the Church is both signified and brought about.

Rather than follow the clear teaching of the Church and modify the structure of the community, DeCelles invented his "blood of the covenant" theory. Any covenant in the Old Testament was ratified by the shedding of the blood of a sacrificial animal. The New Covenant is ratified in the blood of Christ himself. Like these ancient covenants, Paul was suggesting, the covenant of the People of Praise is ratified in blood too. The blood of this covenant, he explained, is the blood of each member, who, in virtue of his commitment agrees to lay down his own life for his brothers and sisters.

This is an important point for Catholics. By our common participation in the Eucharist we partake of the actual blood of the New Covenant; we are made to be really and ontologically one. The unity that Christ creates among Catholics who do not know each other is stronger

and more lasting than that established by the community's agreement. Here we were the serious error of DeCelles' claim that the covenant relationship between members of the People of Praise is more important than any other relationship. It is a practical denial of solidarity with Catholics outside the community, something tantamount to schism.

Because it lacks roots in the tradition of the Church, the teaching of the community has begun to dry up and lose its force and originality. Perhaps the greatest contribution that the group can make is its wisdom concerning personal relationships. The teachings on commitment agreements, forgiveness, gossip, and negative humor, as well as much of its teaching on authority and service, are sound, scripturally based, and valuable. In the first five to seven years, I was often moved and excited after hearing the latest community teaching. "Here is life-changing wisdom!" I thought. Generally it was, too. However, during the last six years in the group I found that my spiritual sustenance was coming more and more from without - that it was coming from the Church. After a retreat for all the women in the community, one of the women, a former nun, told me that although the community retreat was nice, she missed the old retreats of her convent days. The community retreat was -- as they usually are - focused on relationships and authority. What she wanted was a weekend to deepen her own relationship with Jesus.

Spiritual Poverty

It is not hard to explain this spiritual poverty. Cut off from 2,000 years of Catholic tradition, the People of Praise has to build "from scratch.' In some cases these later teachings may reflect the prejudices of the coordinators, as seems to be the case with the teaching on feminine manipulativeness and Original Sin. Other teachings are thinly veiled reflections of the community's increasingly authoritarian world view, one instance being some recent teachings on the seven deadly sins. At a men's retreat in 1984, we learned that unwillingness to submit one's budget to a head is one good sign of the capital sin of greed. At a women's retreat one handmaid taught (with the approval of the coordinators) that one manifestation of the sin of pride is the failure to submit one's thoughts and opinions to the heads of the community for correction. As the community attempts to deepen its life apart from the tradition of the Church, it is forced more and more to project its needs onto the community in the form of teachings.

When the People of Praise began in 1971, we saw in it a great hope for ecumenism. These hopes culminated in 1977 with the giant Conference on Charismatic Renewal in the Christian Churches in Kansas City. There 50,000 charismatics from about a dozen denominations and traditions, including Catholics, gathered for a conference. We all left Kansas City with high hopes for a new era in ecumenical cooperation. In the wake of the conference, encouraged by the strength of out communities, we fully expected a new surge toward Christian unity. It was not to be. Within eighteen months, the coalition that pulled together for Kansas City had dissolved. Efforts to continue the initiative fell flat as Protestant leaders began to withdraw their support. The Catholic hierarchy was also less than enthusiastic. The great hope was a bit premature.

The internal life of the People of Praise has suffered similar setbacks. Despite the best efforts of the coordinators, Catholics remain very much the dominant majority. In fact, frequently Protestants who join the community become attracted to the Church and become Catholics. In the years around the Kansas City conference, I heard coordinators express misgivings about this. They had hoped to increase the proportion of Protestants in the People of Praise. To enhance the ecumenical aspect of the community, leaders have established a Catholic and a Lutheran fellowship, so that Catholics and Lutherans, at leased can have some experience of their own denominations. For Catholics this means an occasional Mass and the promise of eventual instruction courses in Catholic doctrine.

Every Easter, Catholics from the People of Praise attend the Easter Liturgy in their parishes. There they hear the Word of God as it is proclaimed to their brothers and sisters around the world. They receive the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord in communion, often in a beautifully decorated church, often with the smell of incense lingering in the air. Then in the afternoon they proceed to a downtown auditorium where they pray in tongues, sing some songs, and hear a teaching, believing that this is the real celebration of their Easter. Alas, one fears that the ecumenical breakthrough has turned out to be generic Christianity. It is not without reason that the history of Protestantism is the story of continual divisions and the multiplication of sects. The great paradox is that we best serve the cause of ecumenism by being fully Catholic, for it is only in the Catholic Church that the necessary factors for enduring unity can be found.

The Unrecognized Crisis of Identity

What is the People of Praise really? In the early years we did not worry much about that. We were a group of charismatics committed to each other and available to serve the Lord in whatever he might lead us to. We knew that we were there to serve the Church by fostering its renewal and by winning others to Christ. It was all pretty simple.

Around 1974 we began to hear the Lord telling us to get serious. People began talking about sin and its effects in the world, about persecution and about righteousness in a corrupt society. Then we went to Rome. There in St. Peter's basilica we heard somber, prophetic warnings: "A time of darkness is coming on the world, but a time of glory is coming for my Church... I will prepare you for spiritual combat; I will prepare you for a time of evangelism that the world has never seen ... prepare yourselves for the action I begin now, because things that you see around you will change; the combat that you must enter now is different ... You need wisdom from me that you do not yet have." Although the exact meaning of these prophecies was not clear, we understood the general thrust. Over the course of the next year it seemed that the Lord wanted communities like the People of Praise to band together in some way to form a bulwark against evil. We saw the People of Praise as a citadel of righteousness. We would stand in the gap while the Church gets its act together, regrouped and prepared for the fight. We were an army of God. At one point the coordinators of the People of Praise announced that we were declaring war against Satan. It was a heady time.

The Decisive Wrong Turn

I believe that it was precisely here that we made the decisive wrong turn. Whether the Rome prophecies were true or not (and the leaders of the People of Praise now believe them to be false prophecy), one thing was very clear, Pope Paul VI had welcomed us warmly and encouraged us to be at the heart of the Catholic Church. He wanted the faith and the joy of the charismatics to help revitalize the Church. But we had our own idea, a better one. We knew how to do commitment how to do spiritual warfare, how to do ecumenism - the right way! Guided by our leaders and proud of what we had, we chose to regard with disdain the clumsy institutions of the Church. We would withstand Satan and turn the fruits of the victory over to a grateful Church.

Serious Divisions

By the end of the decade, serious divisions within the bulwark began to appear. In early 1981 the association of Communities (which is what this bulwark called itself) dissolved, resulting in a bitter feud between the People of Praise and the Word of God, its counterpart in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For their part, the People of Praise adopted a new stance, a more

optimistic, upbeat approach to the world, one heavily influenced by many themes from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et Spes.* The military imagery disappeared and the coordinators began calling for dialogue with the world. This was in strong contrast to the Word of God community, which continued to teach about a "crisis of truth" in the church and about God's judgment on our sinful world.

As a result of this wrong turn, the People of Praise lost its vision of what it was and began describing itself in terms that apply better to the Church as a whole than to a group within it Certain intellectual initiatives having little to do with the life of the community were undertaken. The Center for Christian Studies was established, and this body launched a respectable scholarly quarterly, *The Center Journal.* They also started an experimental prep school for community members and qualified students from South Bend. However, the old dynamic of the war against evil was gone, and there was nothing to take its place for the common member of the group. The role of the ordinary member had become "pray, pay, and obey."

To redefine the sense of purpose and vision, the coordinators called a special three-evening series of meetings for all members in June of 1983. At this, all the activities and projects of the community were presented, along with a strong appeal for funds. At the end of this meeting, Paul DeCelles told us what the People of Praise and its mission are: "We are the Body of Christ," he said. "Our mission is to renew the face of the earth." Every indication that I have seen is that they really do believe this. DeCelles' zeal is commendable, but the Church is the only body that can call itself the Body of Christ. Only she can claim that her mission is to renew the face of the earth. Only in union with her does that claim make sense. The People of Praise is not the Church. Indeed, whatever value it might have derives from its relationship with the Church. Lacking a clear idea of its relation to the Church, the People of Praise must necessarily lack a clear sense of its own identity.

Papal Direction and Community Response

In May 1984, charismatic renewal leaders from around the world met for a conference in Rome. Present at that meeting were at least two of the coordinators of the People of Praise (including Kevin Ranaghan, who at the time was a member of the International Council for the movement). Pope John Paul 11 addressed the conference in a private audience: "The Church's mission," he told them, "is to proclaim Christ to the world. And you share effectively in that mission *insofar as your groups and communities are rooted in the local churches, in your dioceses and parishes*" (emphasis added). He went on to call the sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist "the most precious gifts [that God] has given to us," because "they are full enactments of the Word of God." He went on to exhort those present to "center your whole lives on the encounter with the Redeemer in his sacraments." During a similar event in May 1981, the Pope had made a similar plea, encouraging leaders to center their own prayer lives on the Church's liturgical prayer and to lead those in their groups farther into the riches of the Liturgy.

It is hard to overstate the significance of these audiences. If Paul VI had expressed a joy and a hope in his 1975 remarks, John Paul 11 had given clear direction. Yet both these meetings passed without any discernible impact on the life of the People of Praise. In short, the Pope said clearly what he wanted, and the People of Praise disregarded it.

A Bright Promise Ruined by Hubris

The needs that led us to the People of Praise still exist. The Church universal remains indefectible, but serious problems can render it impotent in particular places. The Church in this country is under severe attack. We have seen how the pro-abortion forces deliberately

used the Catholic Church to advance their cause.

If the Church continues to stand for moral purity, the sanctity of pre-natal life, and for renunciation of the consumer mentality, she will be increasingly hated and rejected by American society. Yet within the Church are strong forces to undermine this witness. I have talked with junior high school children in Catholic schools about their faith. Most do not seem to know even the basic truths about the Incarnation, the Eucharist, the moral law, or the nature of the Church. The evidence is strong that the next generation of Catholics will be spiritually illiterate and morally indistinguishable from their counterparts in the world.

I believe that the Church in this country faces the danger of a real schism. It happened in England under Henry VIII, and we fool ourselves if we think we are immune. There *is* a battle and it has been joined. Souls are at stake. The Church in this country desperately needs a renewal of faith.

Zealous But Misguided

There are in South Bend some six hundred adults who love God and hate sin. They have experienced the touch of our Lord's love, and they know from experience that He can act. They believe that the devil is real, that Jesus has triumphed over him and that they can share that triumph. They are zealous to love and to serve, but they are misguided. Genuine forces of evil and despair are invading the Catholic Church; and off in a circle, away from the fray, the People of Praise does its communal dance. It does not need the Church. Nor does it offer the Church its service. Believing itself able to do what the Church cannot, to establish a working Christian community with no nominal Christians, to accomplish great deeds by the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about effective unity between denominations, to root out sin from individual lives -- in short to get it right for once - the People of Praise has betrayed the promise that it once was. Established to help its members to grow, it became the center of their life of faith. Intended to renew the Church, the People of Praise pulled its members out of active commitment to their parishes. Impressed with its own discipline, it scorned the small victories of parish life and disregarded the genuine service of those who do not measure up to its standard of discipline and commitment. Believing itself to be on the cutting edge of God's work, the People of Praise have overstepped its bounds. The result has been the anemic apostolic fruit of a misbegotten hybrid.

What Went Wrong?

What went wrong? Was the People of Praise flawed from the beginning, or did it start out well, only to stray later? With the benefit of hindsight we can find little danger signals from the earliest days of the group, but they were ignored. Promising initiatives were not taken, or they were dropped prematurely. In other words, nothing doomed the People of Praise to necessary failure. It could gone better had leaders and members not allowed themselves to become so ingrown. The People of Praise went wrong - fatally wrong, in my opinion -- when it forgot its relationship with the Church. It is now self-sufficient a group that needs neither ground nor justification outside of its own perception of God's will for it In a real sense it has become totalitarian. The community has become an end in itself. What is good for the community is good for me: the coordinators' plan for the community is the surest sign of God's will for my life.

Finally, it should be noted that the coordinators have recognized what has been a fact for several years: that though its roots may historically have been in the charismatic renewal movement, neither the People of Praise nor its leaders are active in that movement any more. Once again South Bend is ripe for a vibrant charismatic renewal. Now there can be a movement of exuberant praise and expectant faith; but this new movement must be

marked by commitment to the local Church, a movement focused on the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist a movement fully in and for the good of the Catholic Church and not just looking out for its own self-interest.

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Adrian J. Reimers *received his B.S. in mathematics and M.A. in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame. He and his wife joined the People of Praise community at its inception in October 1971 and remained members until they were dismissed from it in 1985. He was employed by Charismatic Renewal Services as a Conference Administrator from September 1974 until April 1985 and is currently living in Liechtenstein, where he is working for and studying at the International Academy of philosophy.*

Cultic Studies Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1986