

Maintaining Vibrant Prayer Groups

This is an edited transcription of the workshop held in Rome on 1 June 2017 with this topic as part of the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal #ccrgoldenjubilée2017

The speakers were Deacon Christof Hemberger and Jim Murphy, with translations in English and Portuguese.

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This is the link for the video recording: <https://youtu.be/H68UKXNat4E>

Deacon Christof Hemberger: Welcome everyone to this workshop. It might be that some of you have never led a prayer group. With this workshop we would like to encourage you to learn how to do it. Some are leaders of prayer groups for a very long time and would like to learn how to get the group vibrant again. You will also get some tools and hints to do this. Jim and I are involved in leadership since many years. But still we are learning. We can never come to a stage where we can say that we know everything.

But we are going to use this time ahead of us to share with you what we have been learning and experiencing in the last years. I will start with some basics, some general outlines that every leader needs to know about and Jim later on will give some more practical experience.

No matter whether you want to start or whether you are already leading for a long time, I think the main task of a leader is to **know the vision of the group**. You need to have the vision clear in order to reach your goals. What is the purpose we are meeting for?

In every prayer group usually there is two end groups. One part is searching for a spiritual home. The people are coming and they are asking for teachings, for good prayer times, for experiences to grow in the discipleship. They are searching for 'koinonia', for community, and they regard the prayer group as a discipleship training centre for their spiritual journey.

But there is also a second end group, the people who are not there yet. Prayer groups also have a goal to evangelise, to make a space for those who can be brought along. Many years ago I had a conversion experience and my sister who was a member of a prayer group just told me, 'Come along'. I didn't know anything about how to live with God in my daily life. I needed teaching, I needed experience, I needed training, explanations, before I was actually able to become a disciple.

So when I speak about we have two end groups, leaders and those involved in prayer groups need to understand there is discipleship and the purpose of evangelization always in a prayer group. When we only focus on the first, we will start pleasing those coming for many years and we will become a cozy club. But if we only focus on the second we will not give food to those who are coming and after some time they will search for other places where they can get food.

Maintaining living charismatic groups means to be open for discipleship and evangelization.

A second aspect: **Know Your Identity**. 10 years ago my wife and I have moved into the village we are living now. Some man came to us, approaching us, and he said, 'Well I am responsible for the rabbit club in this village' and I said, 'What's this? What rabbit club?' And he said, 'Well, we are the ones that raise rabbits. But we are also open for those who have horses and chickens, open for all, but we are the rabbit club.' Well, I didn't have rabbits, I didn't have chickens, so I never became a member of the club. But I was thinking, why is he inviting everyone raising anything if he is the chairperson of the rabbit club? Sometimes our prayer groups look the same.

There is lots of space in the kingdom of God and the Church is wide and bright, but if we are Catholic charismatic prayer groups your prayer group needs to have a Catholic charismatic identity.

Some prayer groups have lost their Catholic identity. They do a lot of Holy Spirit things but they don't teach and live anymore Catholic identity. Some prayer groups have lost the charismatic identity. They are very faithful, true followers in the Church but you can't hardly see anything charismatic in their meetings anymore.

I encourage you to live your identity in fullness.

Personal relationship to the living God. You need to teach about this and you need to live it, the reality of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the power of the Holy Spirit. Teach and speak and share about this.

Receiving and using the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So often I come to prayer groups. Somebody is there who is sick and the people say, 'let's intercede and when we go home during the next week we are going to pray for you. No! Interrupt your meeting. Take this person to the front, lay hands on, and pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for healing and deliverance, and for everything else.

Praise and Worship. In the Church the Renewal is known as the movement that is known for praise and worship. Ten years ago I was involved in the preparations for the World Youth Day that took place in Cologne (Koln), Germany. There was a meeting of many, many people in the Church and I had to introduce myself and I said, 'I am Christof, I am from the Charismatic Renewal'. One person said, 'What's this? I have never heard about this?' Another person gave the answer. 'Oh, those are the people who are always singing when they start their programs'. It is part of our identity to praise the Lord, to have praise and worship.

The love for the Word of God and the Sacraments. So many people say, 'after I found a renewed relationship to the Lord I suddenly understood the bible in a personal way; the sacraments became important for me.'

Evangelisation and Mission. If we focus on ourselves we will forget the task we have been given by Jesus. We are called to evangelise. We are called to bring in our friends, neighbours and colleagues.

And also part of the Catholic charismatic identity is the **heart for the whole Body of Christ**.

Why am I saying this? I say this because I want to encourage you to live your identity in fullness. If you are a member or a leader of a Catholic charismatic prayer group, make sure your program is Catholic charismatic and is seen as Catholic charismatic. Don't only know about the charisms, use the charisms. Don't only know about the personal relationship to the Lord, live the personal relationship to the Lord.

Some people ask, usually in those meetings, 'give us a structure of a perfect prayer meeting'. I can't. You need to find out your perfect structure for this evening.

But I can give some recommendations:

Have some time for **welcome**. A prayer meeting is not just a program we are running. It is a time of relationship and community. Make sure people feel welcomed. Draw in those who are new and don't know how to behave. Explain what is going to happen.

Usually we start with some time of **praise and worship**. We focus on the Lord. We give Him our honour and our glory. This helps us because we come from our daily life to focus on the greater thing that is been given to us.

Usually afterwards we have some time of **bible study, teaching or preaching**. We want to learn from God.

I usually ask the people in my prayer group, '**What is the Lord saying to us today?**' for our situation, in our time, for the next week?

You can follow by a time of **sharing of your experiences**. Some people will have experiences with God and can give a testimony, or you can share experiences that you have been doing long ago but can help others understand what to do and how to live. A prayer group is a community, is koinonia, it is not that the leader is standing in front telling the others what to do. 90% of the things that I have learned for my Christian life I have learned by the testimonies of friends.

Never finish without having a **time just for the Lord**. Sometimes this is related or linked to the praise and worship time. Sometimes it is linked to the preaching or to the **intercession time**, no matter, but don't leave without having a time asking the Lord to speak to us, speak into our situations. What shall I do now personally? What do You want to tell me?

I would like to speak one minute about the **tasks of a leader**.

Of course we need to prepare and moderate and lead the prayer meetings. Did you hear properly? **Prepare the meetings**. This is some work. It is very easy to say, 'O the Holy Spirit will do everything!'. Maybe the Holy Spirit is using you as a leader to do the things. You don't need to do everything by yourself and you don't need to take the tasks that are the Holy Spirit's but you need to take your tasks, and your task is to prepare, moderate and lead the prayer meetings.

Be an example to the others. You are not responsible for their personal lives. You are also not their spiritual directors. You are not responsible for the decisions they are doing in their personal live, but you should be a good example as a disciple of Christ.

One topic we could spend a whole weekend about is **establish a team** that can support you, and **establish a next generation of leadership**. It is a bit naughty when I say a good leader makes himself not needed any more from the same day he took on leadership. Those leaders after many years don't find successors have not done their job in establishing new leaders early enough.

A last task of a prayer group leader: You are the **watchman of the vision**. Keep in mind the charismatic and Catholic identity and division of your group and once in a while take some time asking yourself, 'Are we still living according to our vision?' 'Are we still open for new people to come in?' 'Do we still help others to grow in discipleship?' 'Are we still living our charismatic identity?' 'And are we still living our Catholic identity?'

My last thought, because I think it is essential for many, many prayer groups. **The use of the charisms**. Know and teach and use the charisms in your prayer group. Charisms are not medals for personal holiness. They are gifts to us for the sake of building the kingdom of God. They don't fall from heaven like apples. Ask for the gifts. Use the gifts. Make space for the gifts in your programs. Once in a while go to the music ministry and talk to them, 'How can we establish charisms in praise and worship?' Try to find out what is the charisms of my people? And find possibilities where they can bring them into the group. Teach and train the

gifts and their use. And ask for the charisms. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Foster a mature use of the charisms among your people.

When you are thinking about the program of the next prayer group evening keep times of silence during the evening. So often we do this and this and this, and sometimes the Lord doesn't even have the possibility to talk to us. If prophecies and words of knowledge are coming, find a way how to discern them. Is the prophecy a real prophecy? Is it for everyone or just for a few? How do we need to react to this word of God now? One practical hint, singing and praying in tongues helps to open for the other charisms. Teach and use the charisms in your prayer groups.

Jim Murphy: I really believe in the value of Catholic charismatic prayer meetings. I believe that prayer meetings are one of the foundational pieces of the Renewal and I sincerely want to thank all of you who have invested so much of your life to building up good prayer meetings. I know many of you have invested your life into this and at times it gets difficult, but what you are doing is important and it is an honour to speak to you today.

I'm also honoured to speak with my good colleague Deacon Christof. He's a very good teacher and he's a good friend. Our time is very short today and I wish we could talk about everything but we can only cover a few basics. But Christof has written an excellent book* and a lot of the material he has covered today is found in his book. And this will be on the table later if you want to find out how to get it. Also you can go to our ICCRS website and find out more about our various leadership training programs, which I hope could give you a lot more information. (* 'Living Charismatic Groups: A Handbook for Leadership Formation' by Christof Hemberger, 2016, New Life Publishing)

I'm going to focus on two points this morning. One is how to maintain dynamic praise and worship at a prayer meeting and the second aspect is how to give a good teaching. Due to time constraints I am going to leave out most of the theory and just talk about practical points.

So let's first talk about **dynamic praise and worship**. In my estimation praise and worship is the most essential part of a prayer meeting. To me everything flows from praise and worship. And when the praise and worship is weak everything else falls down. In this conversation when I use the word worship I am not speaking of quiet adoration before the Blessed Sacrament but dynamic praise and worship. There is absolutely a place for quiet adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, but in this conversation we are talking more about a charismatic experience.

So where do we start? One thing that I believe is essential to praise and worship, we need to educate people on the biblical principles of dynamic praise and worship. We have to be fair to our brothers and sister fellow Catholics, as Catholics many of us were raised using very traditional prayers. Look the prayer style of Catholicism is usually quite rote. They are more used to a traditional style of prayer. So when people join us in these very dynamic meetings they're really not quite sure how to respond. One of the first times I went to a prayer meeting I turned to the person next to me and said, 'Is this Catholic?' And I think we have to be careful, we've become very comfortable with this, but this is a new experience for others.

And I believe it is essential that we teach people what is the scriptural background and even in Catholic tradition where this fits in. Wouldn't you love to go to a prayer meeting led by St Francis of Assisi? So charismatic praise and worship is very much in scripture and in tradition, but that's not known by many Catholics and even some charismatics.

Our time now does not allow me to exactly give this teaching, but I would urge you to study on this topic. There's a lot of good material out there. As a prayer group leader you have to help people understand why we

do it this way. It is not enough to lead praise and worship, but we have to become advocates of praise and worship. We have to be able to explain it to others.

So the first step is to **be an advocate for and to teach people about praise and worship**. Prepare good teachings to give your people on why we do it this way.

The second step is we need to **get people engaged in prayer and worship**. A prayer group leader is not supposed to praise and worship for the people, but the leader's job is to encourage and aid and help the people praise the Lord. A leader doesn't praise God for the people. A leader praises God with the people.

So how do we get people engaged? A very practical way is the physical proximity of the leader to the people. In a situation like today, because of the nature of our program, this is how things are arranged. If I was leading a prayer meeting here I'd be out there with you, and we'd all be close together. A leader helps by making eye contact with the people, by literally reaching out to the people.

In too many prayer groups there is a group of people leading and everybody else is just watching. We have to change that. We have to connect with the people and then encourage them and lead them. 'Come one, let's do this together'. The people are not there to watch you pray. You are there to help them pray. Don't let the group become passive spectators.

Now music can be a great way to help people praise God. But let me offer a caution. In some places prayer meetings have turned into concerts. The music is great, but it has almost become a performance and they're fantastic, but we all sit there and watch them do the music. It's really a nice event, but it's not praise and worship because the people are not engaged.

Don't just play one song after another, after another. There should be music, but then the leader should be encouraging spontaneous praise and worship. The leader should be saying, 'Come on, come on, let's go', encouraging people. Usually when a group of people start worshipping God we often experience praying in the Spirit, praying in tongues. Encourage people to keep going with that, because when the whole group is praying or singing in the Spirit, then they're engaged; they're invested; they're doing something. And then when that dies down we do another song and we start the process again.

Usually when we enter into this kind of prayer we start receiving prophetic words or scriptures, and the job of the leader is to keep all these things in balance. So when a scripture is given, maybe there is a song that is perfect as a complement to the scripture, or maybe the leader feels we should respond by standing and praising together.

But a **prayer meeting leader has to be able to focus on many things**. It's not just music. It's not scripture only. It's not a particular dynamic. All of these things are happening at once. And the leader has to be discerning this. It's a dynamic process, you can't just do it off a schedule.

It's also important as a worship leader to be able to summarize what the Lord is doing. Maybe there was a strong prophetic word, maybe somebody had a scripture, or there is a particular song that really moved people. It is the leader's job to make all of these connections and present to the people what it seems the Lord is doing. And then encourage the group to respond.

There's a main principle here that we have to keep in mind. **A leader of a prayer meeting has to be connected to God and connected to the people at the same time**. Sometimes as a leader you just want to pray and get lost in heaven, but you are leaving the rest of us out. And some leaders are so busy keeping everybody happy they're not even paying attention to what God is doing. So you have to keep these two things in balance. What is the Lord doing or saying? But how are the people doing? And to keep these two in balance is important.

So let me summarize this section:

1. We must be advocates of praise and worship. We want to teach people the principles but also the methods.
2. We must engage the people. We stay close to them. We stay connected to them. We work with music and encouraging the people.
3. A worship leader must be able to manage many things at the same time.
4. A worship leader must be attentive to God but also attentive to the people.

Let's take a few minutes now to talk about **giving a teaching**. There are three things necessary to give a good teaching: Proper discernment of what teaching to give; Preparation of your material; Proper delivery of the teaching. These three elements are essential.

If you look at our friends with their cameras, the cameras are sitting on tripods. One of the jobs the cameraman has is to ensure all three legs are extended. If all three legs are not correct, the thing tilts over. It's the same with a good teaching. You need these three elements to make the thing stand right.

The first one is **proper discernment of what to teach**. Why do we give teachings? Are we just trying to fill in the time? Hopefully not. We're giving teachings because we are trying to impart the word of God. We're trying to share a word with our brothers and sisters. So it is very important that we know what it is God wants us to say.

So how do we know what God wants us to talk about? I think there's three normal ways that we understand what to teach on. Sometimes people in authority give us the assignment. And if you are part of a group and the pastoral leadership says, 'Would you give us a teaching about this?', well then, do it. Sometimes we just get – we sense what the people need. They might need some encouragement in an area, or perhaps they need some correction. So sometimes a theme is not given to us by divine revelation but our pastoral instincts show us what the people need at this time. And sometimes, the third way, God puts in our heart what we need to teach about. An idea starts forming in your mind, and then you go to Mass on Sunday and the scripture speaks to that, and then you hear a song on the radio that fits with that very thought. God's probably trying to tell you something.

So whether somebody is telling us what teaching to give, or our pastoral instincts give us some direction, or we just get a sense in our heart – these are three common ways we know what to teach.

Now the best way to **prepare your material** is what I do is I keep small pieces of paper with me – an index card – and I always carry these cards with me. And I find a scripture that speaks about that teaching, I write it down on a card. I'm having a conversation with a friend and they say something that fits in with that teaching, I write it down on that card.

So I am constantly looking for how the Lord might be speaking to me. And I keep collecting these cards with these ideas. Then I sit down at home. I take all my cards and I put them on the table. 'Lord, what are You saying with all this?' In my cards I have many different scriptures. I might have a particular story. And I just pray with this material. And then I start organizing the ideas.

One of the problems most of us have; we try to put too much material in. You can't use everything. But all these things help us to prepare our material. And then I take a blank piece of paper and just put down my key points. So when I give the talk I'm not reading all these cards, but they just help me remember what order to go in.

And then finally when we **actually give the talk**, be sure people can hear you. Be sure people understand what you are saying. Be sure to stay connected to the people. Be sincere. Be focused on Christ and then when you are done, sit down. I'll sit down.