

PRAYING AND FALLING...WHAT'S GOING ON WITH "RESTING IN THE SPIRIT?"

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"Why do some people fall down when they receive prayer? What's up with that anyway?" I have been asked this question and have tried to come up with some relevant and helpful information. Here are my observations and reflections.

SOME BACKGROUND

I have been involved in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) since close to the beginning of the movement and I would say that this phenomenon of "resting in the Spirit" or being "slain in the Spirit" was not very evident in the early years of the CCR. I don't think it was really seen much until about the mid to late 1970s - that is, about ten years after the CCR began. It was most recognized in the ministry of Francis MacNutt, and then with other ministries, especially those who prayed for healing, such as Fr. Robert DeGrandis. It should also be noted that other powerful healing ministries, such as those of Sr. Briege McKenna and Fr Emiliano Tardif, did not have resting in the Spirit at their services.

I think it's fair to say that there were mixed reactions to the emergence of this phenomenon in the CCR. For example, Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, who was appointed by Pope Saint Paul VI to have pastoral oversight of the CCR, was rather negative and critical regarding the practice. He even devoted one of his Malines Documents to it - *Resting in the Spirit: A Controversial Phenomenon* (1987), an extensive and thorough study, in which the Cardinal expressed serious concerns and strong cautions against its occurrence within the CCR. It's interesting that, even though there has been a recent "re-discovery" of the Malines Documents and a papal encouragement to follow the directives contained therein, I haven't heard much reference to this particular one!

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

While much about this phenomenon may be mysterious and complicated, this much we do know...the power of God can cause people to fall down for various reasons; there are several examples of that happening in Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments. See the Scripture passages listed in the Appendix at the end of this article.

However, what we commonly refer to today as "resting in the Spirit" after receiving prayer with the laying on of hands is not really found in Scripture. There are no examples of it happening.

In the Old Testament, there are incidents of persons spontaneously falling on their faces as they encounter God, the glory of God, or an angel (in the case of Daniel). The New Testament also records examples of persons spontaneously falling down. The three apostles fell at the feet of Jesus at the Transfiguration, as did St. Paul on the Damascus Road; the Jewish guards fell when encountering the power of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; and the Roman soldiers "became like dead men" upon seeing the angel at Jesus' Resurrection. **But again, nothing in Scripture is comparable to the contemporary experience of resting in the Spirit after the laying on of hands in prayer.**

Also, nothing like "resting in the Spirit" is listed as a charismatic gift. There are some 27 charismatic gifts mentioned in the New Testament but **resting in the Spirit is not listed as one of them.**

SO, WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?

What really happens then, when individuals have hands laid on them in prayer, and fall on the floor? It is admittedly mysterious; however, based on 57 years of experience and observation, it seems to me that there are five different possibilities. Let's look at each.

1. **The Power of God** comes upon someone who doesn't know exactly what is happening. He or she has no control over it and is literally "knocked down" or "knocked out" for a while. The person is overwhelmed, so to speak. Sometimes this may happen without being touched in prayer by anyone else. Something like this happened to both David Mangan and Patti Mansfield in the chapel at the Ark and the Dove when the CCR began on the Duquesne Weekend.
2. **Feeling Something and Yielding.** The person may feel "something" - perhaps a certain warmth, a flow of energy, a very relaxed feeling, etc. - but is generally in control of his or her functions. The person can **choose to yield and "go down," or not.** Observation shows that most people do in fact "go down," especially if others are there to catch them and if they perceive that falling down is expected of them. This is more a situation of "yielding" than of being overpowered. There is some freedom of choice involved.
3. **The Courtesy Drop.** The person being prayed over feels nothing, or not much at all, by way of physical or emotional sensations. What happens often enough is that the one doing the praying keeps on praying and expecting the person to go down but it doesn't happen, until finally there occurs what can be referred to as a "**courtesy drop.**" That is, the person being prayed over simply goes down as a "courtesy," so that the prayer minister won't feel badly! I admit to having done this many times.
4. **Being Pushed Down.** Another possibility is that the person being prayed over is **pushed**, nudged, or physically pressured to fall backwards. This does happen more than you might think! Here, I am tempted to paraphrase the Beatles, "I go down with a little help from my friends."
5. **Demonic activity** can cause a person to fall. I don't want to dwell on this but it needs to be mentioned as a possibility. Usually, however, some other indications of the work of evil spirits would be present as well.

SOME OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS

In my experience, I would say that a small percentage of occurrences would be #1 above; a much greater percentage would be #2, #3, and perhaps #4. A very small percentage would be #5.

It is interesting to note that David DuPlessis, an extremely respected teacher from the Classical Pentecostal tradition, was also rather critical of the practice of "resting in the Spirit" and urged Catholic Pentecostals (as we were known back in the sixties) not to adopt it.

As mentioned before, the examples cited in the Scripture as a basis for resting in the Spirit don't seem to line up at all with the current experience; so, any appeals to Scripture to justify the current practice don't appear to be relevant or convincing.

SO WHERE ARE WE NOW?

So, after all this, where do we stand now with "the falling phenomenon" - the term that some prefer to "resting in the Spirit." Just as a side note, "resting in the Spirit" was adopted because the original term - "slain in the Spirit" - struck some people as a bit too "violent!"

It's probably still true to say that there are some mixed reactions in the CCR. But the reality is that now, as it has been for decades, there are many Catholic Charismatics who continue to look forward to heading for the prayer line, having hands laid on them, falling back into the hands of a waiting catcher, and resting in the Spirit. They

relish the experience and testify to receiving the Lord's blessing in various ways as a result of it. It would seem that the "majority opinion," so to speak, probably rests in favor of resting in the Spirit. So it seems safe to say that this practice will continue into the foreseeable future.

However, there are also those who, like Cardinal Suenens and David DuPlessis, are definitely not enthusiastic about the practice. What are their concerns? One seems to be St. Paul's admonition in 1 Cor. 14:40: "Let all things be done decently and in order." Somehow the image of bodies strewn wall to wall across the floor doesn't quite comport to their idea of "decently and in order." Especially with cell phone photos and videos going viral, there is a concern for "bad optics" and a poor witness being spread to the four winds.

Another real concern is the prevalence of confusion between "resting in the Spirit" and being "baptized in the Spirit." All too many people identify the two experiences and think that if they don't fall down and rest in the Spirit, then they are not truly baptized in the Spirit - this is definitely not the case!

To refer to Cardinal Suenens again, in the Malines Document on the subject, he writes that it is "inappropriate" and "wrong" to identify the falling phenomenon with the charism of speaking in tongues or any other charism (pp. 75-76).

In fact, the Cardinal concludes his Document by stating that the phenomenon of resting in the Spirit "threatens the authenticity and credibility" of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (p. 79).

Finally, there is also a concern about the risk of bodily harm - to the person being prayed over (hitting one's head), to the person catching (strained back), and even to the person praying (being inadvertently pulled down). Yes, these things do happen.

So, there we have it. Neither camp is likely to convert the other to their position. And even now I can hear St. Paul exhorting both sides to charity and tolerance...but also to use wisdom and prudence!

APPENDIX: SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

OLD TESTAMENT

1. Genesis 17:3...Abram fell on his face before God.
2. Joshua 5:14-15...Joshua fell on his face at a vision of the commander of the army of the Lord.
3. 1 Kings 8:10-11 and 2 Chron. 5:11-14...The priests could not stand up to minister in the Temple because of the glory of the Lord.
4. Ezekiel 1:28; 3:23-24...Ezekiel fell on his face before the glory of the Lord.
5. Daniel 8:17-18; 10:9-10...Daniel saw a vision of the angel Gabriel and fell on his face.

NEW TESTAMENT

1. Matthew 17:6...Peter, James, and John fell on their faces while witnessing the Transfiguration.
2. Matthew 28:4...The Roman guards at Jesus' tomb trembled in fear of the angel and became like dead men.
3. John 18:5-6...Those who came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane drew back and fell to the ground.
4. Acts 9:4; 26:13-14...Saul (Paul) fell to the ground as he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus.
5. Revelation 1:17...John, on the Isle of Patmos, fell at the feet of Jesus in glory.