

CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL - REMOTE BEGINNINGS

By Al Mansfield

March 2026

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) will mark its Diamond Jubilee of 60 years on February 17-19, 2027.

As a preparation and "lead-in" to this anniversary, it was suggested that I devote some blogs to the historical background of the beginnings of the CCR. Here in this blog, I will look at two events that we could consider "remote" antecedents to the CCR - the communication of St. Elena Guerra with Pope Leo XIII and the Topeka, Kansas, outpouring of the Spirit - both happening at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th.

ST. ELENA GUERRA

St. Elena Guerra, who founded the Oblate Sisters of the Holy Spirit, was born in Lucca, Italy, on June 23, 1835. She was quite well-educated, zealous to spread the faith, and tireless in nursing cholera victims. In 1866 she began an association of lay people dedicated to the education of young girls. One of her students was Gemma Galgani, who is also a canonized saint. St. Elena attended a session of the First Vatican Council in 1870.

Around 1885 St. Elena received an inspiration to write Pope Leo XIII and urge him to renew in the Church a much greater devotion to the Holy Spirit. However, she did not act on this leading until eight years later, in 1893, when the Lord revealed to a worker in the kitchen staff, Erminia Giorgotti, what He had asked Mother Elena to do. Once she was confronted by Erminia, Elena confided all this to her spiritual director, Bishop Giovanni Volpi. With the Bishop's help, St. Elena was able to send twelve confidential letters to Pope Leo, imploring him to call the Church into earnest prayer and devotion to the Holy Spirit.

Pope Leo took Elena's messages seriously and responded by writing an Apostolic Letter, *Provida Matris Caritate*, dated May 5, 1895, requesting the whole Church to keep a novena to the Holy Spirit during the nine days before Pentecost Sunday. The Pope then published *Divinum Illud Munus* on May 9, 1897, a landmark document of faith, theology, and devotion regarding the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

Unfortunately, however, the response to the request in both letters to hold the pre-Pentecost novena was not enthusiastic. Those bishops who did follow the directive did so for one year only, then let it drop.

St. Elena also asked the Pope to begin the 20th century invoking the Holy Spirit in a solemn way by singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus* - the ancient, official hymn to the Holy Spirit - in the name of the whole Church. In compliance to her request, Pope Leo did this on January 1, 1901.

On that very same day, providentially, another very different group was gathered in Topeka, Kansas, to earnestly seek the Holy Spirit.

TOPEKA

Who were the people in Topeka? A group of Bible students from a Methodist/Holiness background had gathered in a large, oversized mansion nicknamed "Stone's Folly." The owner, Erastus Stone, was forced to sell the structure before the building could be completed. A minister named Charles Fox Parham acquired it and opened his "Bethel Bible College" at the site in 1900.

The students were assigned to study what the Scriptures said regarding the reception of the Holy Spirit. They noticed in the Acts of the Apostles a mysterious connection between the coming of the Spirit and charismatic activity, such as tongues and prophecy. On January 1, 1901, a student named Agnes Ozman asked Reverend Parham to pray over her that she would receive the Holy Spirit, and she began to speak in tongues. Eventually, others in the group began speaking in tongues as well.

This outpouring of the Spirit in Topeka is commonly referred to as the beginning of the modern-day Pentecostal movement, referred to by scholars and historians as "classical Pentecostalism."

Charles Parham moved to Houston, Texas, where he began another Bible School. A student there, William J. Seymour, was a major leader in the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. Due to the widespread and unusual charismatic activity surrounding it, this event attracted media attention and thousands of visitors from around the world. Some would even consider the Azusa Street Revival the actual beginning of Pentecostalism as a worldwide phenomenon.

TWO INTERESTING FACTS

It is noteworthy that the Topeka event occurred **on the same day** that Pope Leo XIII invoked the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the 20th century, as St. Elena requested.

Another interesting fact is that on the very site of "Stone's Folly" in Topeka, there stands today a Catholic Church dedicated to the Most Pure Heart of Mary, the "Spouse of the Holy Spirit."

WHAT WE CAN SAY FROM ALL THIS...

We can say that "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform!" The Lord inspired St. Elena Guerra to write to Pope Leo XIII. The Lord inspired Pope Leo to call the Church to turn to the Holy Spirit with greater fervor. But the Lord inspired Erminia Giorgotti and Bishop Volpi as well to play their roles in this whole sequence of events.

The Lord also worked through Charles Parham, Agnes Ozman and W. J. Seymour, together with countless others from Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal backgrounds to do their part to spread this contemporary visitation of the Holy Spirit, which we are experiencing in our own day and time.

It is clear that God willed and planned this 20th century - and now 21st century - Renewal in the Holy Spirit. The Lord used souls that were hungry, willing, and obedient to carry out His plan. All we can do is give Him praise and thanks and continue to take advantage of the Living Water He offers!