

I returned to San Francisco knowing that I had to eliminate the 'falling phenomenon' from my ministry. I stopped talking about 'resting in the Spirit' before the blessings, had the people kneel instead of stand during the blessings, and stopped the blessing when anyone showed the slightest movement. This eliminated a large percent of the phenomenon, but it seemed that nothing would completely eliminate it until a Mass in November of 1988.

Not one helper showed up for that Mass, so there were no ushers. I instructed the congregation that they would have to come forward, row by row, for the blessing, and added that those who knew what I meant, should protect their heads. Not one person who was blessed that day went over, and not one person has gone over since.

At first, the number of people attending the Masses for healing decreased. The people who helped with the Masses kept urging me to reintroduce the 'falling phenomenon' into the Masses. It did not matter if not one person attended the Masses, I was not going to reestablish the practice, having been convinced that it was psychological and than to reintroduce it would have been deceptive and dishonest.

Soon attendance began to increase and, in fact, became larger than before. The best result of eliminating the phenomenon, however, was that the Masses became much more prayerful. No longer were people being distracted either by hoping to go over,

worrying that they would, or counting which priest was putting more people on the floor.

Yes, I do believe that the 'falling phenomenon' sometimes can be the direct action of the Holy Spirit but much, much more often it is not. Therefore, we should pastorally proceed with caution and always discourage circumstances in which the phenomenon would occur. The Catholic Church, after all, has a long tradition of spiritual discernment, caution, and persistent effort in protecting the faithful from deception and illusion.

This is a final thought: We have seen on television over the years, Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa, two living saints in our day, touch and bless thousands and thousands of people, yet we have not seen one person fall as a result of their prayers.

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Pamphlet 324

## **“The Falling Phenomenon”**

Father Richard Bain

Recently I received a letter from a woman asking why the phenomenon sometimes called 'resting in the Spirit' or 'slaying in the Spirit' but which is best called 'the falling phenomenon', does not occur when I pray with people at our Mass for Healing. This is a phenomenon of falling (usually backwards) and it sometimes occurs when a person is prayed over at a healing service. By observation, one might conclude that the person is falling or fainting because he or she has been touched by the Holy Spirit. That is, in fact, what I thought for a long time until I did some reading on the subject, and some experimenting, and discovered that the phenomenon is more often psychological rather than spiritual.

For several years the phenomenon of falling occurred when I prayed with people for healing. I thought I had a special gift. There were times when as many as ninety percent of the people that I prayed over fell on the ground. Some people would fall even before I touched them or even before they knew I was there. Some people fell when I simply walked by them, some fell while I was reading the gospel, and some fell when I sprinkled Holy Water on them. One man fell over when I prayed over his picture. He was thirty-five miles away from where I was, talking to his boss, when he fell over. They took him to the hospital where his doctor found no reason for his fainting. That

evening he told his mother about it. The mother asked him what time he fell. It was the exact time I had prayed over his picture.

Even I would fall when prayed over. I could control the impulse and not fall if I wanted, but I usually let myself go. While resting on the floor I would experience the deepest form of relaxation and the most mystical prayer ever. Often, I would say that the 'falling phenomenon' put me in a deeper state of contemplation in a few seconds, than two or three hours of prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

I felt that it was important to prepare people who were at their first Mass for healing for the 'falling phenomenon' by announcing that it was going to take place and why. I knew that it would frighten those who had never seen it before, and thought that an explanation would eliminate some of the fear. Also, I understood that some would consider the 'falling phenomenon' to be bizarre, and I wanted to explain that it was actually part of our tradition, had wonderful spiritual benefits and was well worth the effort to try to be open to it. I thought that criticism of the phenomenon came from ignorance.

My very positive attitude about the 'falling phenomenon' began to change when I was given a draft of a book written by, I believe, Father Theodore Dobson. As I best recall, Father Dobson insisted that the 'falling phenomenon' is almost entirely psychological, induced by one's own mind, yet it is ministered at healing services as

though it were purely spiritual, coming from God. He felt that the phenomenon must be eliminated from all public prayer.

Father Dobson said when people are told that the phenomenon will occur, or if there are ushers standing directly behind the person being blessed, or if just one person goes over, or if someone goes up to receive a blessing determined not to go over, or if the person giving the blessing wills that it occur, then a psychological environment is created that produces the phenomenon.

The late Joseph Cardinal Suenens' book, *The Sixth Malines Document*, "Resting in the Spirit", Veritas Publications, gave insight into the mistake of allowing the 'falling phenomenon' in public worship. Cardinal Suenens was the most authoritative person in the world in these matters. There would not be an official Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church if it were not for this most highly respected Cardinal. He convinced Pope Paul VI in 1975 to give the Church's approval to the Charismatic Renewal by assuring the Holy Father that the Charismatic Renewal would have guidelines and theological credibility (see *Memories & Hopes*, Joseph Cardinal Suenens, Veritas pgs. 270 & 276). The Malines Documents are the fruit of this promise.

In the sixth Malines Document, Suenens points out many of the same psychological elements of the 'falling phenomenon' as Dobson, and he adds that the major scriptural and mystical references do not

lend themselves to a claim that the 'falling phenomenon' belongs to a long Christian tradition. He writes that it is most important to exclude any phenomenon of this kind from liturgical celebration, and that a mere policy of non-intervention falls short of what the faithful are entitled to expect of their spiritual guides. He concludes by agreeing with the Bishops of Ireland that we not invite ministers whose prayer or teaching is associated with this phenomenon.

What finally convinced me to experiment with taking the 'falling phenomenon' out of Masses for healing, was learning that David du Plessis (the representative for the Pentecostal Churches at Vatican II) beseeched Catholics to avoid the mistake by Pentecostals in the past, and not to introduce the 'falling phenomenon' which had given them nothing but trouble.

At the time, August 1988, I had scheduled a three-day parish mission for healing in Savannah, Georgia. This would be the perfect time and place to experiment since no one knew me and especially if the people coming to the mission had never experienced the 'falling phenomenon'. I tried my best to eliminate all the elements that Father Dobson had suggested create a psychological environment for the phenomenon to occur. The church was packed all three evenings. Over 1,200 people were blessed, yet not one person went over. That proved that Father Dobson, Cardinal Suenens, Professor Heribert Muhlen, Father Yves Congar, O.P., and others were correct.