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## In Memoriam : Vinson Synan: Model of Spirit-led Leadership

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# IN MEMORIAM: VINSON SYNAN

MODEL OF SPIRIT-LED LEADERSHIP

SALLY JO SHELTON

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## Abstract

H. Vinson Synan (December 1, 1934—March 15, 2020) was a key successor to David du Plessis, known as Mr. Pentecost to Catholic and mainline Protestant leaders. Like du Plessis, Synan was a classical Pentecostal who dedicated much of his life to promoting the move of the Holy Spirit beyond the confines of his own classical Pentecostal denomination, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. His call to this work came in 1972 at an annual Catholic Charismatic Conference held at Notre Dame University when seeing some 8,000 participants singing in the Spirit, he came to the conviction that Catholics had indeed received the fullness of the Holy Spirit, or what classical Pentecostals call the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This realization was life-changing. In addition to continuing to serve as a top church administrator later, as well as a church historian and author, teacher, and academic administrator, Synan collaborated with other Charismatic leaders to hold national conferences in the 1980s and 1990s and then international conferences of Empowered21. After reviewing Synan's diverse accomplishments, the rest of the piece analyzes the leadership style that Synan modeled, which was visionary, Spirit-led, and bridge building. Although Synan remained true to his Pentecostal upbringing, he celebrated the outpouring of the Spirit on churches and denominations far different from his own,

and exhibited great humility and love in the process. Those who have benefited by his bridge building are deeply indebted to Synan's work.

## Introduction

H. Vinson Synan (December 1, 1934—March 15, 2020) was unquestionably one of David du Plessis's key successors. Du Plessis (1905–1987), heralded as “Mr. Pentecost” due to his extensive ecumenical work beginning in 1947,<sup>1</sup> was one of the first classical Pentecostals after the Second World War actively to encourage mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders to open their hearts and their churches to the move of the Spirit. Having received a call in 1936 through a prophetic message from Smith Wigglesworth, du Plessis had dedicated the second half of his life to serving as an unofficial Pentecostal ambassador to the rest of the Christian world, for eighteen of those years sacrificing his affiliation with the Assemblies of God USA to do so.<sup>2</sup> Although Synan did not engage with the World Council of Churches as du Plessis had, he did follow in du Plessis's footsteps in promoting the outpouring of God's Spirit on all Christians.

By the grace of God Synan was able to lay aside the prejudice he had conceived in his youth against Catholics,<sup>3</sup> a bias he freely admitted, to recognize the authenticity of the outpouring of the Spirit on all Christians regardless of ecclesial or denominational affiliation. Once Synan recognized this surprising outpouring of the Spirit on what Pentecostals had tended to regard as ritualistic, dying churches, he responded first with tears and then, for the rest of his life, celebrated with joy, taking advantage of every opportunity to promote this unprecedented move of God.

To call Vinson Synan du Plessis's successor is to acknowledge the visionary, Spirit-led, bridge-building leadership whereby he, like du Plessis, came to serve the larger renewal that far exceeded the limits of his own denomination, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC). However, before analyzing the leadership Synan exercised so effectively throughout his life and ministry, let us first review, as has been done to some extent elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> his many accomplishments. Then the rest of the article will be devoted to a brief analysis of Synan's leadership, which, though typically Pentecostal in many ways, far exceeded that of most of the Pentecostal leaders of his time in the boldness with which he embraced the Charismatic movement, particularly the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among

Catholics, and his efforts to build bridges of friendship and reconciliation with those of other traditions.

## **Achievements**

Synan's lifework was multi-faceted, his leadership capabilities evident in virtually every task he undertook whether as pastor and church official, historian and author, teacher and academic administrator, or advocate of Christian unity and bridge builder, to say nothing of his personal roles as wise mentor, warm friend, and devoted family man. Whatever the level of his work—whether teaching a high school or seminary class, preaching in a small church of less than a hundred members or sharing the platform with Pope Francis, addressing over 30,000 Catholic Charismatics in Rome's Circus Maximus—Synan humbly but authoritatively proclaimed what the Spirit was saying to the church of his time.

### **Churchman**

Synan's church work was widely diverse, including the establishment of an interdenominational, city-wide youth ministry patterned after the Jesus Movement. He served in the IPHC administration for twelve years, his highest offices being General Secretary and Assistant General Superintendent. At one point, he was called upon to oversee the trial of a bishop charged with misadministration. While others jockeyed for political power, Synan maintained a neutral stance, distancing himself from the fray, refusing to take advantage of the situation to advance his own position within the denomination.<sup>5</sup> His energy was particularly manifest during his tenure as Director of Evangelism when in the space of four years he oversaw the planting of over 150 new churches. He was also instrumental in helping to unite two Chilean churches—the Pentecostal Methodist Church of Chile and the Pentecostal Church of Chile—with the Pentecostal Holiness Church USA, thereby forming the IPHC.

### **Educator**

Synan was also a successful educator, beginning his teaching career first as a high school history teacher and then serving at Emmanuel College, an IPHC college in Franklin Springs, Georgia, teaching history and economics and heading the Social and Behavioral Science Department. He later taught at Southwestern College in Oklahoma City, where he also served as interim president for a brief period. Then,

from 1990 to 1994, Synan was professor of Pentecostal and Charismatic history at Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as well as Director of ORU's Holy Spirit Research Center. Moving to Virginia Beach, Virginia, in 1994, he became dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University, serving there for twelve years, and after retiring from the deanship, teaching there several more years. After his return to Oklahoma, he served a year as ORU's interim dean of the College of Theology and Ministry and then remained as Scholar in Residence, working with Billy Wilson, ORU's president, on Empowered21.

While dean at Regent, Synan had created a PhD program in renewal theology, a project he had originally hoped to accomplish at ORU while there the first time. When Synan's return to ORU coincided with the establishment of its PhD in theology program, he jumped at the opportunity to help ORU's new College of Theology and Ministry dean Wonsuk Ma and the assistant PhD program director Eric Newberg in completing that process. Though suffering from serious ill health by that time, Synan took great delight in seeing his dream for an ORU PhD program fulfilled when it was launched at the beginning of the fall of 2019, ORU's fully ATS-accredited doctorate in Spirit-empowered global Christian theology, with contextual theology being the first track offered.

### **Pentecostal Scholarship Promoter**

Apart from his academic achievements, Synan's greatest contribution to the Pentecostal scholarly world was the founding of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS). Synan had first discussed the idea with two of his fellow Pentecostal academics—Horace Ward and William Menzies—then worked with them to inaugurate the Society by holding a banquet for prospective members at the 1970 World Pentecostal Conference in Dallas, Texas. Synan demonstrated his flexibility and sensitivity by responding to a concern expressed by a church leader who questioned his welcome into the Society because he did not hold a graduate degree. As soon as Synan's team realized that the name originally chosen—The Society of Pentecostal Scholars—posed a potential barrier, they quickly changed the word *scholars* in the name to *studies*. Synan was elected SPS's General Secretary in 1970 and then President in 1973.

Upon its formation, the Society became the venue for the International Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Dialogue led initially by David du Plessis and Fr. Kilian McDonnell, a prominent Catholic scholar, Synan himself participating in the earliest meetings. The Society rapidly became a venue for Pentecostal scholars

from around the world, a catalyst for global Pentecostal research, and a hotbed of Pentecostal scholarship in the US. While other scholarly Pentecostal societies would later emerge, SPS continues to play a major role.<sup>6</sup> Having come from a background in which Pentecostals with advanced degrees had been few and far between, Synan lived to enjoy a day when Pentecostals with doctorates abound and in which Pentecostal scholarship continues to expand rapidly through SPS, the doctoral programs he helped to create, and beyond.

## **Historian and Author**

Synan gained a global reputation as a church historian and author with the publication of his dissertation in 1971, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States*, re-titled in its 1997 edition, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*. In this his major work, Synan traced the origins of the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition back to the perfectionism of John Wesley and the subsequent Holiness and Keswickian movements. Due to a frustrating four-year delay in finding a publisher for the dissertation, Synan had the time to develop further the section that traced the beginnings of the Charismatic Movement by writing a chapter on the Catholic Renewal, thereby expanding the book's influence far beyond those in the Pentecostal Movement to all those in the Renewal, especially Catholics. Throughout his lifetime, Synan wrote some two dozen monographs as well as numerous journal and magazine articles. Considering the many aspects of his work and the extensive travel he undertook, this prolific literary output speaks to Synan's lifelong energy and self-discipline, although he also credits Carol Lee, his wife of fifty-nine years, for her assistance as she had faithfully served as his editor, relieving him of the close work required to prepare manuscripts for publication.

## **Ecumenist**

While Synan's life would be considered highly productive in light of his many achievements enumerated thus far, what makes him truly worthy of being called one of du Plessis's successors is the bridge-building role he played, promoting the move of the Holy Spirit among all the denominations, not just Pentecostals. Even before recognizing the authenticity of the move of the Holy Spirit among Catholics, Synan had heard of the Spirit's movement among the mainline Protestant denominations through the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI). What Synan saw when attending his first FGBMFI

meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1970, helped lay the foundation for his understanding that God was doing things Pentecostals had never dreamed possible.<sup>7</sup>

After meeting Fr. Kilian McDonnell at the Pentecostal World Conference in 1970, Synan invited him to Franklin Springs, Georgia, to visit Emmanuel College there. Synan was fascinated as McDonnell told of the birth of the Catholic Charismatic Movement at Duquesne University in 1967 and its spread to Notre Dame, the University of Michigan, and beyond. Synan was deeply gratified to hear from McDonnell how grateful the Catholics were to Pentecostals for helping them rediscover the Pentecostal experience, which McDonnell called “a treasure of the Gospel and the church.”<sup>8</sup>

Synan’s call to ecumenical bridge building came when, at the invitation of McDonnell, he attended the sixth annual Catholic Charismatic Conference at Notre Dame University in 1972. Whenever recounting this event, Synan enjoyed explaining how that from youth he had been “more afraid of Catholics than of Communists or rattlesnakes.” (This down-home, humor-padded honesty is partly what makes Synan’s message so compelling and his books so readable.) Apparently, at that point in his life, even though he had developed a friendship with McDonnell and written a chapter on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal for the published version of his dissertation, he was still not fully convinced of the authenticity of Catholics’ experience of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Upon arriving on the Notre Dame campus, Synan heard that a preliminary prayer service would soon be held at the basketball coliseum. Not wanting to miss a minute—Synan’s usual *modus operandi*—he rushed to the meeting, taking a seat as high in the stands as he could to distance himself from the crowd, and gazed down in fascination at the sight of some 8,000 Catholics raising their hands in praise and worship to God. Then, to his amazement, arose the sound of those 8,000 voices singing in the Spirit in four-part harmony. Suddenly, the realization that the Catholics had indeed received the baptism in the Spirit overwhelmed him, and he began to weep. Hardly able to breathe for the deluge of tears, he went to a restroom to regain his composure, but sobbed only harder. Then he heard God’s message in his heart as clearly as though he had heard it with his ears:

This is real. I am doing a new thing in the Catholic Church, and it will spread over all the earth. You will be a part of it and will contribute to this great awakening. You must tell your own people

what you have seen and lead them to pray for these Catholic Pentecostals.<sup>10</sup>

Later that year, when given the opportunity to speak briefly at the annual IPHC conference, Synan gave the message that God had told him to share: that the Holy Spirit had indeed fallen on the Catholics as on the Azusa Street Pentecostals. At the time, he thought this announcement would be his “ecclesiastical swan song,” the last he would be invited to speak on an IPHC platform. Instead, two days later, the IPHC delegates voted him the General Secretary of the church, placing him in the third highest administrative position in his denomination. While Synan found great joy in serving in the administration of his denomination as he was following in the footsteps of his father who had been IPHC bishop for many years, he never lost sight of the call to have an active part in promoting the Charismatic Renewal and was obedient to that call to the end of his life.<sup>11</sup>

Being elected to serve in IPHC administration in no way detracted from Synan’s response to his call to promote the expansion of the Charismatic Movement. For some ten years Synan met annually with a Charismatic leaders group in Glencoe, a small town near St. Louis, Missouri. At these meetings, the leaders discussed issues and strove to resolve controversies that arose from time to time in the movement, the most well-known of which was called the “shepherding movement.” Synan also served for some fifteen years as a member of the North American Renewal Service Committee (NARSC). As part of the NARSC planning committee, he helped to orchestrate the 1977 Charismatic Conference in Kansas City, which had some 50,000 in attendance, the largest gathering of Charismatics and Pentecostals held to that point, with Catholic Charismatics accounting for half the attendance.

Ralph Martin, in his preface to Synan’s *Charismatic Bridges*, credits Synan for envisioning such a meeting for the purpose of “witness[ing] . . . to the world God’s power to unite in love.”<sup>12</sup> In reflecting on the 1977 event, Synan claimed that “the conference was not just a call for unity. It was a demonstration of the unity the Lord has already given.” He considered it to be “one of the most significant religious gatherings in the history of this nation . . . [and] certainly the most important denominationally sponsored ecumenical gathering in our history.” For Synan, “[T]he message of Kansas City is that the charismatic renewal is the most vibrant, powerful force in Christendom today, and that this great force is not going to be fragmented but is going to move in the same direction.”<sup>13</sup>

Under the aegis of the NARSC, Synan chaired three other major national Charismatic conferences: the New Orleans Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelization (1987), the Indianapolis Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelization (1990), and the Orlando Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelization (1995).

In the ensuing years, Synan continued to promote the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on an even more global scale by working with Billy Wilson, who currently serves as ORU President, Global Co-chair of Empowered21, and Chair of the Pentecostal World Fellowship. Synan had worked with Wilson, first, on the Azusa Street Centennial (2006). Then later, he served as a leader and scholar participant in the Empowered21 conversations beginning in 2008. Despite health problems, he traveled with Wilson, visiting cities all over the world. He also served as chair of the scholars track for the first Global Conference on Holy Spirit Empowerment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 2010, and the Empowered21 conference held in Jerusalem in 2015.

How fittingly climactic that in June 2017 Synan spoke to a gathering of some 30,000 Catholic Charismatics from 230 countries on the Golden Jubilee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, sharing the platform of Rome's Circus Maximus with Pope Francis, Billy Wilson, and other Charismatic leaders.

## **Synan's Leadership Style**

Having reviewed Synan's many accomplishments, I will now analyze the kind of leadership he exercised, which was primarily visionary, Spirit-led, and bridge-building.

### **Visionary**

As a faithful son who had closely observed the example of his father, Joseph A. Synan, bishop of the IPHC from 1950 to 1969, Synan naturally would have wanted to serve as the head of his denomination as his father had before him. However, God had a bigger plan for his life. The call of God on Synan's life went far beyond parochial churchmanship, transcending denominational ties and destining him for bigger things. Synan was able to respond to this call because he was willing to follow God's leading despite any loss to his personal ambitions or desires. In fact, in later years, when offered the opportunity to run for the top office

in his denomination, he declined. He had long ago left behind that early desire, having answered God's call to serve the church in a much broader capacity.

Visionary leadership for Synan meant that he had the humility and courage to look beyond what he was familiar with and to allow God to broaden his horizons. It meant looking not only beyond his own denomination but beyond the Pentecostal Movement itself to see and acknowledge the move of the Spirit first among the Charismatics in the mainline Protestant churches and then among Catholics as well. The vision God gave Synan, like that of du Plessis, was the same as the early ecumenical vision of the Azusa Street revivalists, the vision of "the renewal of the entire church by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit before the second coming of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

To become a leader on a national and global scale required Synan to open his mind and heart to acknowledge and embrace the gracious largesse by which God was pouring out the Holy Spirit not only on classical Pentecostal folk but on all who called themselves Christian. It also required Spirit-inspired boldness to announce to his fellow Pentecostals this surprising move of God that far exceeded their imagination and to lead them in celebrating the fulfillment of the promise from the lips of Joel that Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost: "I shall pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (2:28; Acts 2:17).

## **Spirit-led**

The leadership style Synan modeled was Spirit-led leadership, the underlying principle on which it was based being that God is the true leader and that authentic human leadership is based on one's consecration to God. Such leadership is neither self-appointed nor self-directed, but divinely appointed and is contingent on sensitivity and docility to the Spirit. This kind of leadership can be exercised only by those who are humble and teachable, attentive to the voice of the Spirit not only as they hear it in their own hearts but also as the Spirit speaks through others.<sup>15</sup> This was seen in the life of du Plessis who held the call in his heart for some ten years after he had first heard it from Smith Wigglesworth, and in the life of Synan who responded to God's calling by tirelessly promoting the work of the Spirit among Charismatics, Catholic and otherwise, despite the prejudice against Catholics with which he had been burdened from youth.

As Synan acknowledged in the title of his most recent autobiography, *Where He Leads Me*,<sup>16</sup> spiritual leadership depends, first, on followership, submission of one's life to God's will. Unless a leader follows God's leadership, that person may

lead—as he or she may have natural leadership abilities—but where that person leads may not be beside the still waters or in the paths of righteousness to which the Good Shepherd calls his followers (Ps 23:3; John 10:11, 14).

For Holiness Pentecostals as well as those that came from the Keswick, or Higher Life, movement, whether or not submission to God’s will begins with an instantaneous experience of sanctification, it is lived as a continuous consecration, a daily dying to self and a moment-by-moment obedience to the leading of the Spirit. Although Synan believed in sanctification as “a definite, instantaneous work of grace,” as affirmed by the IPHC and other Holiness groups, he did not claim his every action or word to be totally aligned with the move of the Spirit, although that was indeed his earnest desire and firm purpose.<sup>17</sup> Those who knew him well can personally testify to his authenticity as a true follower of God who sought daily to attune every thought, word, and deed to that of the Spirit, although as we all know from our own self-knowledge, no one meets that standard perfectly.

The earliest modern-day Pentecostals understood leadership to be dependent on listening to and following the voice of the Spirit rather than relying on human leadership. William Seymour testified to the leading of the Holy Spirit whereby he was called to Los Angeles in his first article in the Azusa Street newsletter *Apostolic Faith*: “God put it in the heart of some of the saints in Los Angeles to write to me that she felt the Lord would have me come over here and do a work, and I came, for I felt it was the leading of the Lord.”<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, in “Letter from Bro. Parham,” the article that immediately follows Seymour’s, an editor of the newsletter calls Charles Parham “God’s leader in the Apostolic Faith Movement.” However, in a later issue that statement is corrected:

Some are asking if Dr. Chas. F. Parham is the leader of this movement. We can answer no, he is not. . . . We thought of having him to be our leader and so stated in our paper, before waiting on the Lord. We can be rather hasty, especially when we are very young in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are just like a baby—full of love—and were willing to accept anyone that had the baptism of the Holy Spirit as our leader. But the Lord commenced settling us down, and we saw that the Lord should be our leader. So we honor Jesus as the great Shepherd of the sheep. He is our model.<sup>19</sup>

The article then goes on to name Seymour as the human leader but describes him as “simply a humble pastor of the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made him

overseer, according to Acts 20.28.” From the earliest days of modern Pentecostalism, then, the Holy Spirit was the acknowledged leader.

At Azusa Street, greater emphasis was placed on unity and harmony than human leadership: “All work together in harmony under the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Seymour described the basis of Christian unity in terms of the description of the expectant disciples on the day of Pentecost—“they were all with one accord in one place.” For Seymour, “[T]he Apostolic Faith doctrine means one accord, one soul, one heart. May God help every child of His to live in Jesus’ prayer: ‘That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee; that they all may be one in us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me.’”<sup>21</sup>

In acknowledging Seymour as the Spirit-appointed “humble pastor of the flock,” the Azusa Street participants clearly considered him to be the leader of the revival, even though that leadership was challenged by Parham and later others. But clearly, from the beginning, Pentecostal leadership was considered authentic only if Spirit-appointed and Spirit-led and exercised with the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit, especially love and humility. Synan followed Seymour’s leadership style, always seeking to be obedient to God’s calling.

## **Bridge-building**

The first piece Synan wrote after his experience at the 1972 Catholic Charismatic conference was published as the lead article of the April 1973 issue of *New Covenant*, a Charismatic magazine edited by Ralph Martin. It was an exhortation to build Charismatic bridges rather than the walls of new denominations that would serve only to further subdivide the church.<sup>22</sup> Synan later used the article as the basis for his book entitled *Charismatic Bridges*. Bridge building then became the metaphor of choice for ecumenical leadership.

In contemplating bridge building as a metaphor for working toward Christian unity, what first comes to my mind are the six unforgettable words with which United States President Ronald Reagan addressed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in his 1987 Berlin Wall speech: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” He repeated it twice. Two years later the demolition began.

Vinson Synan, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, urged something similar to the classical Pentecostals and to the new Charismatics in the early 1970s. The language he used, however, was not one of destruction but of construction—his emphasis less on the tearing down of walls and more on the building of bridges. In reporting the move of the Holy Spirit on the traditional churches, Synan said, “I

have endeavored to build bridges of love and understanding between classical Pentecostals, the neo-pentecostals, and the charismatic Catholics. I realize fully the doctrinal and historical problems that still divide Christians who come from different backgrounds and traditions. Yet I have faith in the Holy Spirit that He will continue to break down those barriers in His own time and way.”<sup>23</sup>

What was the origin of Synan’s bridge-building metaphor? When recently finding Léon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens’s book on rediscovering Jesus written two years before the publication of Synan’s book on Charismatic bridges, I found that the cardinal had also used the bridge-building metaphor:

In the person of Jesus Christ, God purposes to re-establish communion between himself and all humanity, and thus by the dynamism of love that Christ sets in motion, to *build bridges* [my emphasis] among all nations, all races, all families, all human beings. In this way Christ serves as the principle of a vast network of reunion, the longitudes and latitudes of this zone of Christ extend[ing] to all human horizons [my translation].<sup>24</sup>

Could it be that Synan borrowed the building metaphor from Suenens? Or, perhaps, the Holy Spirit inspired both of these Charismatic leaders, the Catholic bishop and the Pentecostal churchman, to use the same metaphor. The difference was that, rather than expressing his thought in christological terms as Suenens had done, Synan interpreted bridge building pneumatologically, the Charismatic Movement being the means by which the Holy Spirit was transforming the face of Christianity. Cecil Robeck, himself an eminent Pentecostal ecumenical leader, has employed that same metaphor in several articles including one in which he refers to David du Plessis as a bridge builder.<sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis used the same metaphor when Aslan, his Christ figure in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, called himself the “great Bridge Builder.”<sup>26</sup>

In envisioning ecumenical bridge building, Synan was thinking in terms not of orchestrating formal, structural unity but rather of encouraging spiritual unity. He sought to create opportunities for Pentecostals and Charismatics of different traditions to pray and worship together, share spiritual gifts, and develop friendships. Though each church would concentrate on the renewal of its own constituency, the underlying foundation was unity: “one body and one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–6). As Synan realized, “If there’s ever going to be a healing of Christianity’s

divisions, it'll have to be God's work, because men cannot do it. Even when you're exactly alike [doctrinally and culturally], you can't get together; breaking down barriers must be the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>27</sup>

For Synan, the reason unity was so urgently needed was that the classical Pentecostal denominations were too small and growing too slowly to fulfill the Great Commission. To reach "the rapidly expanding world population," Synan asserted, "the Holy Spirit must use larger structures to bring change and renewal." Ironically, the Pentecostal who could not imagine the Holy Spirit falling on Catholics just a short time earlier was now pointing to the Catholic Church as the solution to global evangelism:

Of course, the greatest structure in Christianity is the Roman Catholic Church, world-wide, but I never dreamed that such a thing could happen. To really meet the needs of this hour, the Roman Church would have to have a real renewal in the Holy Spirit and the hundreds of millions of Catholics around the world would have to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and begin to meet the spiritual needs of the world. It is happening, and it is having the effect of accelerating what we wanted to see done in the beginning [of the Pentecostal Movement] in a way we never could have foreseen. It's a move of the Holy Spirit. God has just gone ahead and done it, not making Pentecostals out of Catholics by making them join our church but by renewal just as the Holy Spirit renewed our church in the beginning.<sup>28</sup>

The quandary for honest ecumenical bridge builders is how to be truly open to the possibility of finding truth in other traditions and yet remain faithful to their own: How far can I go in appreciating what is good and true and beautiful in the teachings and liturgies of other traditions without compromising my own? Naturally, each tradition assumes that its own doctrines should not be compromised; however, eventually it becomes apparent that other traditions have elements of truth that our own has neglected or perhaps missed altogether. This is the dilemma with which all honest ecumenists struggle. That is why, despite the dialogue principle that participants remain within their own tradition,<sup>29</sup> ultimately each person must be allowed the freedom to obey should God call them to embrace another tradition because each is personally accountable to God.

Bernard Lonergan has articulated another side of the same dilemma. Ecumenists, with few exceptions, can go only so far in terms of expanding their horizons because eventually almost all reach a point where, regardless of their efforts

to understand the other's perspective, they can go no further; they find themselves back almost to where they started: the other's doctrines are wrong, and their own are right. Once ecumenical leaders realize this natural, very human propensity, the only solution is prayer. Only the Holy Spirit can help them to bridge that seemingly impassable obstacle that separates them from seeing the truth in the other. As Synan said, only the Holy Spirit can unite us. Only the Holy Spirit can bridge these deeply embedded divisions and free us from the walls that divide us.

To my knowledge, Synan remained unwaveringly true to his Pentecostal roots even while at the same time acknowledging and rejoicing in the authenticity of the move of the Spirit in churches that differed so significantly doctrinally and liturgically from his own. While delighting in bridge building and enjoying worshipping and fellowshiping with his Catholic and mainline Protestant Charismatic brothers and sisters in the Lord, he apparently never considered conversion to any other tradition. From his perspective that would have been compromise. His perspective coincided fully with the Pentecostal stance articulated in the fifth phase of the International Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue: "Pentecostals are cautious in regards to ecumenism. Although they recognize the work of the Spirit in other Christian traditions, and enter into fellowship with them, they are hesitant to embrace these movements wholeheartedly for fear of losing their own ecclesial identity or compromising their traditional positions."<sup>30</sup>

Even when, through a genealogical study, he came to the realization that the Synan family roots were in Catholic Ireland, not Protestant Ireland as his family had assumed, though delighted that Pentecostalism had come full circle in his family through the Catholic Renewal, he remained faithful to the classical Pentecostalism in which he had been raised.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Vinson Synan was a beloved, highly respected figure not only within his own denomination, the IPHC, but also among Pentecostals worldwide, as well as among Charismatics, especially the academics and scholars. These groups each have their own special reasons for thanking God for this Pentecostal leader who had the vision to follow the Spirit's leading in building bridges that helped unite Pentecostals and Spirit-empowered believers around the world in joint witness to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit whom God continues to pour out on all flesh to this day. Vinson Synan deserves special honor and gratitude

from those who in their own journey to obey God have crossed the ecumenical bridge he so courageously helped to build.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Others may well lay claim to successorship to du Plessis in his role as Mr. Pentecost, Cecil Robeck being the first to come to my own mind.
- <sup>2</sup> David du Plessis, *The Spirit Bade Me Go: The Astounding Move of God in the Denominational Churches* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1970); David du Plessis with Bob Slosser, *A Man Called Mr. Pentecost* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1977).
- <sup>3</sup> Vinson Synan, *Charismatic Bridges* (Ann Arbor, MI: Word of Life, 1974), 22, 23.
- <sup>4</sup> E.g., Daniel Silliman, “Died: Vinson Synan, Historian Who Saw Breadth of Pentecostalism,” *Christianity Today*, 17 March 2020, n.p., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/died-vinson-synan-pentecostal-charismatic-historian.html> (23 October 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Vinson Synan, *Where He Leads Me: The Vinson Synan Story* (Franklin Springs, GA: LifeSprings Resources, 2019), 145–47.
- <sup>6</sup> E.g., European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association.
- <sup>7</sup> Synan, *Bridges*, 19, 20.
- <sup>8</sup> Synan, *Bridges*, 20, 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Synan, *Where He Leads*, 90.
- <sup>10</sup> Synan, *Where He Leads*, 90.
- <sup>11</sup> Synan, *Where He Leads*, 90.
- <sup>12</sup> Ralph Martin, “Preface,” in Synan, *Bridges*, v.
- <sup>13</sup> Vinson Synan, “A Challenge to the Churches,” *New Covenant*, October 1977, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Vinson Synan, “Charismatic Walls,” *New Covenant*, April 1973, 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., preacher of the papal household since the days of John Paul II, teaches that “humility must shine in renewal leaders and in anyone who ministers in some way. We need to let ourselves be challenged without immediately taking offense. We need to let ourselves be admonished and corrected

by brothers and sisters.” *Sober Intoxication of the Spirit: Filled with the Fullness of God*, trans. Marsha Daigle-Williamson (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, 2005), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Synan, “Walls,” 1.

<sup>17</sup> According to Synan’s father, the conferral of sanctification does not guarantee “absolute perfection . . . angelic perfection . . . [or] ‘sinless perfection’”; rather it is the beginning of “a life of devotion to all the will of God.” “Articles of Faith: Amplification by Bishop Joseph A. Synan,” art. 10, *IPHC*, n.d., n.p., <https://iphc.org/beliefs/> (22 October 2020).

<sup>18</sup> “Bro. Seymour’s Call,” *Apostolic Faith*, September 1906, 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Jesus Our Protector and Great Shepherd,” *Apostolic Faith*, December 1906, 1.

<sup>20</sup> “Jesus Our Protector and Great Shepherd,” 1.

<sup>21</sup> William J. Seymour, “The Baptism of the Holy Ghost,” *Apostolic Faith*, May 1908, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Synan, “Walls,” 1–2.

<sup>23</sup> Synan, *Bridges*, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *Redécouvrir Jésus Christ* (Brussels: Éditions Foyer Notre-Dame, 1972), 34.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Pentecostals and Christian Unity: Facing the Challenge,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 26:2 (Fall 2004), 338; “Taking Stock of Pentecostalism: The Personal Reflections of a Retiring Editor,” *Pneuma* 15:1 (Spring 1993), 38.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 215.

<sup>27</sup> “Sixth International Conference,” *New Covenant*, July 1972, 5.

<sup>28</sup> “Sixth International Conference,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> “In the process of growing mutual understanding and trust, our stereotypes of one another diminish. In other words, we change, but the change is not compromise. . . . No one is called to compromise. Common witness is not a call to indifference or to uniformity. In fact, though division and separation are contrary to the will of God, the diversity within the unity of the one Body of Christ is a precious and indispensable gift which is to be recognized, valued and embraced.” Joint International Commission for Catholic–Pentecostal Dialogue, “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue 1990–1997 between the Roman Catholic Church and some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders,” n.d., §§119, 122, *Dialogue with Pentecostals*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/sub-index/index\\_pentecostals.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/sub-index/index_pentecostals.htm) (22 October 2020).

<sup>30</sup> “On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings with Some Contemporary Reflections: Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Dialogue Between Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders and the

Catholic Church (1998-2006),” *Dialogue with Pentecostals*, n.d., §171, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/eccl-comm-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20060101\\_becoming-a-christian\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/eccl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20060101_becoming-a-christian_en.html) (22 October 2020).

<sup>31</sup>Vinson Synan, *The Synans of Virginia: The Story of an Irish Family in America* ([Juneau, Alaska]: Xulon, 2003).

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