

## **History of Ecumenical Catholic movement – adapted from newsletter articles written by Fr. Tom Altepeter, Spokane, WA**

### **Part 1 – More than one “Catholic”, but the same Seven Sacraments**

Let's begin at the beginning. Regardless of our denominational background, most who have been raised in our cultural time and place have come to believe several things: 1) there is only one Catholic church -- the Roman Catholic church; 2) other expressions of Catholicism are unacceptable, invalid, heretical, or schismatic. (Some Roman Catholics even believe that if they participate in these alternative expressions of Catholicism, they commit mortal sin, risk excommunication and eternal damnation. Some Roman Catholic priests have, erroneously, publicly stated as much); and 3) that the leader of the Roman Catholic church, the pope, speaks with infallible authority, as if he were speaking directly from and for God. (In the minds of many, this is traced back to the passage, Matthew 16:18, wherein Jesus says to Peter: "you are rock, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it").

Perhaps we might ask, then, is 'Catholic' synonymous with 'Roman Catholic'? An objective, cursory review of history clearly leads to the conclusion, NO! 'Catholic' is not synonymous with 'Roman Catholic.' Two brief points make this clear. First, the word 'Catholic' comes from the Greek, and means 'universal,' or 'of the whole.' The very word 'catholic' assumes and implies a meaning beyond the particular. Rather than identifying one particular group (e.g., Roman Catholics), it has historically been used to refer to the universal group, that is 'all of the Christians,' or 'all who believe.' To be identified as Catholic is to be connected with the universal body of Christ followers.

Second, although this may be somewhat of a surprise to those raised in our day and time as Roman Catholic, many other denominational groups currently consider themselves just as authentically catholic as do Roman Catholics. For example, the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and some Methodists all believe that their churches are "Catholic" in the sense that they are in continuity with the original universal church founded by the Apostles. We might simply refer to this as the Church Universal.

The Ecumenical Catholic Communion is a compassionate, inclusive, contemporary, expression of Catholicism. We stand in the long tradition of the Church Universal; our core theology is essentially the same as the Roman Catholic church and other expressions of the Church Universal; we celebrate the same seven sacraments that have long been celebrated by the Roman Catholic church and other expressions of the Church Universal. Yet we differ from the Roman Catholic church in some of our 'disciplines' -- i.e., our structure, governance, and some of our practices.

Let's delve into greater detail about the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, our history, our structure, our beliefs and our practices. We will try to highlight how we are similar and how we are different than other denominations.

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### Part 2 – Decentralized, “bottoms up” authority

Let's take a brief walk through a long and complicated history, and highlight the historical roots of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC). There is considerable diversity within the universal church. What many of us have come to identify as "Catholic" -- that is, the particular way that the Roman church exists, witnesses to its beliefs and practices of faith in our experience is only a narrow slice of the depth and breadth of the Church Universal. The church has always been, and will probably always be, characterized by its *unity in diversity*; its diverse ways of encountering and understanding the Holy, and its diverse ways of living out that encounter in our daily lives. How could it be any other way, as we recognize the broad diversity in creation? And indeed, even in that part of creation that we name human?

Within the Church Universal there exists a longstanding tension. We might think of the tension as arising out of two competing ways of being faithful to Jesus, and living out his invitation to love one another. One side of the tension places a higher value on order and tradition within the community of believers. This point of view has a bias toward centralized authority, and a "top down" organizational structure. Those who lean in this direction maintain that the highest authority within the church resides in the central leader, the Pope; therefore, they are at times referred to as "Papists." The other side of the tension places a higher value on the local, lived experience of the community of believers. This point of view has a bias toward decentralized authority, and a "bottom up" structure. Those who lean in this direction maintain that the highest authority within the church resides in the church councils, in which the leaders of the entire church join together to determine and affirm its teaching and governance. Therefore, they are at times referred to as 'Conciliarists.' There are a number of practical differences which flow from these points of view. For example, Papists generally hold that the Pope alone has the authority to appoint bishops. In this approach, bishops are assigned to a diocese from the centralized authority, without the participation or affirmation of the members of the local church or diocese; the bishop is the 'choice of the Pope.' Conciliarists, on the other hand, generally hold that a bishop should be called forth by the local church or diocese, not appointed 'from above.' In this approach, bishops are elected by the community (the process may vary from diocese to diocese) and are 'the choice of the people.'

The community of Christ followers, from apostolic times through the first few centuries, tended to function in a decentralized, collaborative manner, consistent with a Conciliarist approach. Peter, and his successors, held a special role - the first among the Apostles - but did not function with absolute authority or presumed infallibility. After the conversion of the Emperor, Constantine, and the Council of Nicea (about 325 CE), and continuing for approximately 1500 years, the community of Christ followers fluctuated between a centralized, Papist approach and a decentralized, Conciliarist approach. The First Vatican Council (1869-70) declared that the Pope was infallible and had full and supreme jurisdiction over the universal Church, not only in matters of faith and morals, but also in matters of the discipline and governance of the Church. Within the Roman church, this authority extends over each and all the churches, over each and all the pastors and over each and all of the faithful. A Papal monarchy was firmly established as a result of Vatican I, and remains to this day.

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A renewed interest in Conciliarism was awakened with the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II brought a number of reforms which were Conciliarist in nature, and in the years following the Council there was a move toward Conciliarist values, e.g., greater autonomy of the local church (i.e., local dioceses), greater collaboration among bishops, and greater involvement of the people in the daily activities of the church. More recently, it seems the Roman church was moving back toward Papist values. This shift can easily be seen, for example, in the history of the organization, Call to Action (CTA). CTA was formed in the mid 1970s by the US Roman bishops to increase collaboration between the clerical hierarchy and the laity in implementing Vatican II reforms. However, in the more recent years the bishops have pulled back from CTA; some have even made formal pronouncements forbidding priests or laity from participation in CTA meetings. With the election of Pope Francis, it appears that some change in culture is possible, though no one knows what long-term effect Pope Francis will have on the Roman Church.

While the leadership of the Roman church has continued to function in a strongly centralized, hierarchical Papist manner, many Catholics continue to prefer a Conciliarist way of witnessing to and living their faith. This naturally gives rise to a number of alternative expressions of Catholicism. The Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC) traces its roots to the Catholic traditions of the Conciliarists, who have held that the highest authority within the church resides in the church ecumenical councils. The ECC was organized and lives within the spirit of Vatican II, giving high priority to the collaboration of laity, clergy and bishops. In the ECC, we do not affirm that the Pope (or anyone else, for that matter) is infallible; we have a governance structure that requires the active involvement of laity; and a decision making process that requires affirmative approval of laity, clergy and bishops in order to make changes in our polity and/or practices. The ECC, as a 'communion of communities,' operates with a model of decentralized leadership. Each community is independently incorporated in the state in which it is located, functions as an independent not for profit entity, and owns its own property. No bishop or central authority can take a community's property, close a school or close a church without the involvement and approval of the local community. Many who have been long frustrated with the centralized authority of the Roman church are finding the ECC a breath of fresh air; they are experiencing in the ECC the Catholic church that they have long hoped for and worked to create.

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### **Part 3 - A Communion table open to all: families, singles, divorced, remarried, gay or straight and non-Catholics.**

As a communion, we are relatively young. In the early 2000's, a group of existing non-Roman Catholic communities decided to join together to form a larger communion. Considerable time went into deliberations about how the communities would jointly live out and express their catholic faith. There was strong agreement on a few fundamental points: the group would be a "communion of communities," with each community retaining a degree of autonomy; there would be a decentralized authority structure; the clergy leaders (bishops and pastors) would be selected by the people that they served; there would be term limits for bishops; and, ordination would be open to all who were appropriately trained and qualified, regardless of gender, marital status or sexual orientation. A constitution, regulating the life of the Communion, was developed, that stipulated that major changes in organization, governance, or practices would require the affirmation of laity, clergy and bishops. The communities met in 2003 to finalize the constitution and formally create the Communion. The Communion adopted the following mission statement:

*We are people of God baptized in Christ and professing our faith in a living catholic tradition. We are men and women, lay and ordained, joining together as a "communion of communities" in response to the messianic call of the spirit to preach the gospel of liberation and justice; to offer a refuge in Christ for those who suffer prejudice; to stand open to dialogue with others so called and, to conform our lives to the life and teachings of Jesus, the Christ.*

*We affirm the dignity of all human persons regardless of race, national origin, religious affiliation, gender, or sexual orientation. We strive for justice within the universal church and the whole world. As a community of communities we follow the ancient wisdom of the church as expressed in the words of St. Augustine, "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."*

The ECC has grown steadily since its inception.

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## Part 4 - Governance

The Ecumenical Catholic Communion identifies itself as a Communion of communities. The ECC has 27 communities throughout the United States, and 7 in Europe. The Presiding Bishop of the ECC is Peter Hickman. Bishop Peter resides in Orange, CA, and is the pastor of St. Matthew ECC community in Orange. Bishop Peter is also the local (diocesan) bishop for California. The ECC elected Rev. Frank Krebs as its next Presiding Bishop at its October 2014 Synod in Aurora, CO. The election required a two-thirds vote of the delegates of the House of Laity and the House of Pastors. He was then consecrated a bishop on Friday, October 10, 2014 during the Communion Synod. He will serve as Co-Adjutor until September, 2015, Bishop Francis currently serves as pastor of Sts. Clare & Francis community in St. Louis, and has previously served the Communion as Vicar of the Midwest Region and President of the House of Pastors.

Within the ECC, the United States is divided into 9 regions. Two of the regions (California and Florida) have evolved into autonomous dioceses, and additional regions are currently considering this step. Colorado is in the Rocky Mountain region which includes Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada and Utah. Our region is served by Vicar Teri Harroun, appointed to serve as Bishop Peter's representative.

The ECC is *guided* by a communal constitution which was developed by the original organizing communities in 2003. The ECC is *governed* by the Synod of the communion. The Synod is comprised of the Presiding Bishop in collaboration with the House of Laity (HOL), the House of Pastors (HOP) and the Episcopal Council. The communion meets in Synod every two years. The 2010 Synod was held in St. Louis, MO. The 2012 Synod was held in southern California. The constitution includes provisions for the modification and adaptation of both doctrine and polity; changes require the approval of the HOL, HOP and the Presiding Bishop. Thus, no one person, including the Presiding Bishop, or one group can unilaterally exert control over the communion.

The HOL consists of two or more (depending upon the size of the community) individuals elected from each faith community, according to the election processes determined by that community. Members of the HOL are elected for a term of two years; term limits may be set by each local faith community. Members of the HOL cannot be ordained clergy.

The HOP includes two members from each community. Typically the delegates include the pastor and one associate pastor or lay pastoral associate from each community. Pastors serve on the HOP for the term of their pastorate; others are elected by the local faith community. Term limits may be set by each local faith community. .

The ECC Presiding Bishop is elected by a combined vote of the House of Laity and the House of Pastors. The Presiding Bishop is elected for a term of 4 years, and if re-elected may serve up to 3 consecutive terms (for a maximum of 12 consecutive years). Diocesan bishops are elected by a combined vote of the laity and clergy from the communities within the diocese. Diocesan bishops are elected for a term of 6 years, and if re-elected may serve up to 2 consecutive terms (for a maximum of 12 consecutive years).

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The ECC explicitly supports the autonomy of each local faith community. Pastors, associate pastors and lay pastoral associates are called to ministry by the local community. They are not appointed by an outside authority, such as a bishop.