

ECUMENICAL CATHOLIC COMMUNION
Report to CORPUS Board
9-21-03

In July of this year, Linda Pinto attended the FCM conference in Rochester. While there she met Allison Sansone, the executive director of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. This group was represented at the Atlanta Conference in 1999 under the name, Diocese of Ecumenical Catholic Communities and had a display table. They were favorably received.

At the FCM conference, Linda entered into a dialogue with Allison and both parties apparently were impressed. Allison, who was in charge of planning the Communion's 2003 Convocation, was considering inviting representatives from the various Catholic reform groups to attend their convocation as observers and extended the invitation to Linda. Linda, feeling that a CORPUS representative should be someone who had more official ties to the Board and geographically closer to the site of the convocation, suggested to Allison and Russ Ditzel that I attend as a member of the advisory committee. With the Communion offering to pay for my expenses, Russ agreed that I should attend all four days of the convocation.

It is impossible, especially in writing, to detail and convey to you the events, impressions and reactions to four very intense days. "You had to be there..." as the saying goes. However, until I can meet with you in person, I'd like to outline for you the following: 1. A sketchy history of the Communion. 2. The agenda of the convocation. 3. My personal reflections. 4. Some ideas about possible responses.

History of the Communion

(Nick De Los Reyes has a more intimate and detailed knowledge of the organization. He served on their vocation board, did testing of candidates for orders and occasionally said mass for the community and performed marriages. However, Nick always maintained his identity as a married Roman Catholic priest.)

Peter Hickman was ordained for the American Baptists, the more liberal branch of the Baptist family. He was well trained in scripture and even today is known for his knowledge and use of scripture. He began, however, to sense in himself a need for something more in the Baptist worship and spirituality. He became interested in ritual and liturgy, exploring different faith traditions, especially Catholic, and incorporating elements into his Baptist services. Eventually it became

clear to Peter and to his superiors that he had to make a choice between the Baptist tradition and the more liturgically oriented traditions. Peter chose to leave the Baptists. He was very attracted to the Catholic faith, doctrine, tradition and liturgy, but had trouble with the structure and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, especially mandatory celibacy. He eventually discovered an Old Catholic parish in Los Angeles and was eventually ordained and served that parish. I'm not sure of the exact chronology of the following events, but Peter was consecrated a bishop of the Old Catholic Church, moved to other parishes, the other bishop died, the Los Angeles parish gradually dissolved, Peter established St. Matthew's parish in Orange, California. This parish apparently has had some ups and downs and some difficult personnel issues, not unlike hundreds of parishes elsewhere. However, there seemed to be a steady and growing emphasis on inclusivity, gospel values and a strong Catholic identity. Eventually Peter ordained a woman deacon, then a woman priest and most recently ordained Mary Rammermann and Denise Donato of Spiritus Christi parish in Rochester. Gradually, other groups began to approach Peter asking for affiliation and for priests. In the last few years, approximately thirteen different communities have requested affiliation with this movement – communities from Colorado, New Mexico, St Louis, Tucson, Los Angeles, Desert Springs, Florida and most recently, Puerto Rico. Some of these are very small fledgling groups, many are communities pastored by Roman Catholic priests. Candidates for ordination have been subject to a review by a vocation board on which Nick De Los Reyes sat for several years. What seems significant is that Peter and his staff did not seek out these affiliations but were approached by the different groups on their own and there are additional groups seeking affiliation now.

This growth has created the need for clearer guidelines and operational structure so an experimental constitution was approved at this convocation providing a structure that is flexible, inclusive and representative of the different constituencies in the Communion.

In view of this growth, the Communion is beginning to explore the potential for mutual awareness, contact and cooperation with the various Catholic reform groups. Peter and Allison have been attending COR meetings and will seek membership. The Episcopal Church sent an official delegate from their national office to the convocation and seems interested in dialogue.

THE CONVOCATION

The convocation was similar to the CORPUS conferences but this one emphasized the issues associated with growth and was more focused on working out an experimental constitution. There were over 60 delegates from all of the above-mentioned localities. The agenda follows:

Wednesday, 9-17-03 (Wednesday morning and afternoon was attended primarily by the pastors and leaders of the communities. Members of the communities joined the group in the evening)

Diversity in the Communion - *Charlie Davis*

FCM and the Global Ministries University – *Jean and Michael Conley*

Wednesday afternoon – *Pastors met to discuss pastoral concerns*

Wednesday evening – Registration, Opening Prayer Service, Bishop's Address

Reception. Thursday, 9-18-03

Opening Prayer

Diversity of Spirituality Within The Catholic Faith Tradition – *Rev. Scott Jenkins*

Discussion in small groups

What Makes Us Catholic? – *Rev. Fred Mason*

Discussion in small groups

Bus trip to Lakewood for dinner at one of the parishes

Friday, 9-19-03

Opening Prayer

Presentation of the Constitution

Discussion, revisions, etc.

Community caucuses

Discernment

Consensus

Ordination to the diaconate for Puerto Rican delegate

Dinner hosted by St. Matthews Parish

Celebration and ceremony of signing the constitution.

Saturday, 9-20-03

Spotlight on Community – *a faith community shares its history and work* – *Ned Reidy* – *Desert Springs*.

Report on the state of the Communion

Presentation of Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality: The Sacred Body – *committee*

Discussion

Closing remarks – *Bishop, CORPUS observer, Episcopal Church observer.*

Closing Prayer.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS (Necessarily, what follows are my personal observations and subject to my perceptual biases. I'm sensitive to the fact that others may have seen things differently.)

I confess to approaching this convocation with a great deal of skepticism. My limited experience with the alternative "catholic" communities has been somewhat negative. I am suspicious of anyone who wants involvement with a hierarchical structure when it is just such a structure I sought to escape. But I tried to approach the experience with an open mind and with the awareness of my own tendency to make snap judgments. Sensitive to my status as observer, I usually did not enter the large group process but did share in the small groups and with individuals between sessions. The more I listened, the more impressed I became with the intelligence, sincerity and spirituality of the participants. I had a sense that they genuinely practiced inclusivity in their governance and in their ministry. I could easily imagine myself at a CORPUS conference encountering CORPUS members with the same strengths and weaknesses, the same failures and successes, the same hopes and dreams. These were not people without faults, without struggle, without their differences. They were people united in a strong desire to be Catholic but to be free and inclusive in their Catholic faith and its day-to-day practice. Because of their structure and their freedom from hierarchical restraint and dominance, they seemed to be living what we in the reform groups are still working for.

Peter is not what we usually think of when we think of "bishop." His dress, his demeanor, his interactions, his words are clearly pastoral. Even as he presided at the liturgy, he seemed to project the image of servant more than of leader. I suspect he is uncomfortable with conflict and struggles with administrative details. But he seems to have learned to seek out staff that compensate for his own deficits. Moreover, the proposed structure of the Communion's new constitution, with its checks and balances and its opportunity for involvement and dialogue at all levels, will go far in eliminating the type of absolute power and authority we have seen in other church groups.

I sensed in the Communion the same spirit of community and caring that I do with our small faith groups on the peninsula (Kay and AJ

Mullen) and here in South Puget Sound. What the Communion provides that our groups here do not, is a healthy sense of organizational structure and a broader sense of community and identity with other groups around the country.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

There would seem to be some mutual benefits from an ongoing dialogue between ECC and CORPUS. We would benefit from their experience with a married priesthood, women priests and gay/lesbian personnel.

The EEC pastors and community facilitators often are in need for "supply" priests for weddings, funerals, vacation replacements, etc. CORPUS priests could help out and still maintain their identity as married Roman Catholic priests. We might want to explore some form of relationship with EEC much like the Episcopalian initiative. As a matter of fact, the Communion is currently in the initial stages of entering a dialogue to explore a similar relationship.

Small faith communities formed by CORPUS members might find benefit from some type of affiliation with the Communion and its small faith communities and to learn from their experiences. I was surprised how adamant some of the convocation participants were about maintaining their "Catholic" identity and how much the image of "bishop" in a pastoral sense meant to them.

I would like to propose the following:

1. Invite Peter and Allison to the '04 conference to set up a table as they did in Atlanta and do give a workshop on small faith communities. We have a lot of people asking for some input on small faith communities and I think Peter and Allison have expertise in this area. At the same time they could share who they are and what they are doing. I would like a response from the Board on this immediately.
2. I would suggest the Board put them on their agenda just to meet them and as a possible prelude to later dialogue.

I appreciate the opportunity to have had this experience.

Allen