

Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion

The Local Church

A Pastoral Letter of the Presiding Bishop to the Faith Communities of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

April 4, 2012

Feast of Saint Isidore

Wednesday of Holy Week

Introduction

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The local Church has been historically understood as comprising the bishop, laity, and clergy of a specific geographical area, in accord with the ancient Catholic tradition – an understanding of the Church which is embraced by the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC). The local Church is constituted whole, full and complete with these three elements – yet remains part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (marked as such, which is rightly called a “communion.”) *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:5-6)*

Local Churches are “in communion” with one another, and the ECC reflects this in the first canon of its constitution, which states that *“The Communion is a confederation of independently incorporated faith communities...” With the bishop and laity the local Church is fully constituted* – and in relation to other fully constituted local Churches becomes what has

been historically called an “eparchy” (in Greek) – or the familiar term, diocese. So a diocese is correctly called “the Church,” for it is comprised of all the elements of “the Church.” No local faith community is complete without its bishop – the successor of the apostles, elected by the people of that diocese and ordained to that holy order of bishop by other bishops who share in the historic collegial apostolic succession of the Church.

It is important to note here that, in the ECC, a bishop serves a term when elected to be the bishop of a diocese. However, her/his sacramental holy order as bishop is permanent, even after she/he is no longer the bishop (ordinary) of the diocese – just as a priest remains a priest even after her/his term ends as the pastor of a parish. For Catholics, the sacrament of holy orders is permanent.

In these dioceses, faith communities (parishes) experience the presence of the Risen Christ among us in the proclamation of the Word of the Gospel – especially at the Eucharist – and in the celebration of the sacred Mysteries (the Sacraments). In these dioceses, the faithful gather as a Holy Synod to discern the call of the Spirit. In the dioceses of the ECC, we find the people of God, the baptized laity – from whom are called those ordained to minister in the specific holy orders of bishop, presbyter and deacon. These are all constitutive elements of the fullness of the Catholic Church in a given locality.

The Ecumenical Catholic Communion is now on the verge of remarkable growth. It is growing in the United States, as new dioceses are being formed, new faith communities are developed, and the maturation of existing communities is witnessed by all. Additionally, the Communion is experiencing an expansion to Europe and South America through various agreements and arrangements with others who embrace this renewal of the vision of ancient Catholicism – now experienced in the life of our beloved Communion.

In the face of such growth, this understanding of the ancient Catholic structure and polity is being examined and tested in the very existence of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. It is our intention to share with you our understanding of our continuing development.

The Lessons of History

So much of the history of the Church chronicles its splintering and division into denominations that do not share the same ecclesiology – that is, the same theological understanding of “Church.” In the early centuries, the Church showed a sense of inclusivity in its structure, as the laity and clergy elected their bishops, and were consulted in the decisions of their bishops. This is affirmed in the teaching of Pope Leo I (5th century), who stated that “the one who is to govern all should be chosen by all.” This inclusive posture is demonstrated even earlier by Saint Cyprian (3rd century), who wrote “I have made it a rule, ever since the beginning of my

episcopate, to make no decision merely on the strength of my own personal opinion without consulting you [*the priests and deacons*] and without the approbation of the people.”

As the centuries continued, the Church was influenced by the political forces of civil government, until the point of its abandonment of this early formula of the consultation of the people in the decisions of their bishop. This unfortunate development was further complicated in Western Christianity as a bureaucracy (the Curia) developed that continued to acquire power and centralize the administration of the Church in Rome.

Previous to this rise of the centralized control of the Western Church, the Bishop of Rome enjoyed the position of being the first among equals among the bishops of the Western Church. As the Patriarch of the West, the pope was seen as the spokesperson of the Western Churches, and even as the spokesperson and senior bishop of the universal Church. Rome was the yardstick of faith, by which the orthodoxy of other Churches was measured. Rome was the court of appeal to which other Churches appealed in disputed issues.

Yet many of the bishops of Rome sought an even more powerful role, as was shown in the administration of medieval popes – such as the bureaucracy established by Gregory VII in the eleventh century. This moved the Bishop of Rome from the role as arbiter of the Catholic tradition to that of administrator for the entire Western Church. Rome took upon itself the appointment of the diocesan bishops for all the Roman Catholic dioceses of the world.

This bureaucracy further distanced the people from their participation in the processes of the local Church, as the Bishop of Rome gained more authority over the workings of local dioceses, as well as the internal workings of religious orders, religious schools and other Catholic institutions. Of course, such structures of Church authority mirrored the imperial structures of civil government, as European kings and emperors consolidated their power.

Prior to this rise of the papacy, provincial synods met with regularity, bishops consulted with the local “chapters” of the clergy, and the people had some voice (even if only by acclamation) in the choice of the bishop. This accumulation of power by the Roman Church culminated in the sixteenth century with the bishop of Rome – and the curial bureaucracy of the Roman Church – supplanting the authority of even an ecumenical council, so that after the Council of Trent there were no more ecumenical councils for three hundred years.

The Lesson for the Ecumenical Catholic Communion

Now our Beloved Communion is engaged in its own growth, and is struggling to revive the polity and culture of the ancient Catholic Church. We are learning the lesson that the efforts of self-determination must be affirmed, while carefully maintaining the unity of the apostolic faith, the sacramental life, and the structures of the Catholic Church developed in the early part

of the first millennium. It is with great caution that we lead the Communion as your bishops, in accordance with the vision and canons of the ECC constitution.

The legislative leadership of the ECC is retained in the House of Laity, the House of Pastors, the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and the Episcopal Council – each with roles in passing and affirming specific canonical legislation. The administrative leadership of the Communion is now being exercised by those you have chosen to be consecrated as bishops, for the proper exercise of the episcopal ministry as defined by our constitution and as informed by the earliest Catholic tradition.

This is still a relatively new experience for many in the Communion, as dioceses are being formed and the energy of the ECC is changing. This energy is now being experienced as a de-centralization, in full accordance with the style of the early Catholic Church. Dioceses are electing their own bishops, forming their own synods, and responding to their own regional needs. Soon they will be collaborating with other regional dioceses in efforts that are better suited to such cooperation, such as the establishment of regional/provincial seminaries, the creation of regional/provincial catechetical programs for the training of the laity in their appropriate ministries, and the formation of youth programs that involve multiple dioceses in a region (a project of particular concern for the Latino communities within the ECC).

The affirmation of this de-centralized structure is of extreme importance in the growth of our Communion. No national bureaucracy can readily strengthen the participation of the people of the local Church in the way that the life of the diocese can. While some may ask about fostering the unity of the Communion through national efforts, your bishops now respond that the constitution provides for that unity in two ways:

1. The Holy Synod of the ECC meets regularly to allow the voices of the local communities to speak, and to discern – as a body of faith and polity – the call of the Spirit. Canonical legislation emerges from these gatherings to declare the discernment of the Holy Synod.
2. The Episcopal Council is a collegial body of collaboration in the ongoing administration of the Communion. Additionally, it deliberates on disputes appealed to it. These gatherings of the bishops continue between the convening of the Holy Synods, in accordance with specific canons of the ECC constitution, to administer and amend guidelines for the reception of faith communities, the admission of new clergy, theological and liturgical matters, missional endeavors, as well as issues for judicial review.

Additionally, there are various forms of communication, various religious orders and various programs that go beyond diocesan boundaries, and provide a sense of the Communion's unified mission.

In particular areas, the Episcopal Council has formed committees and commissions with laity and clergy members that will result in amendments to specific guidelines of the Communion. Thus, the newly formed commissions of the Episcopal Council will have qualified members of the laity and clergy to create a code of ethics for the ministries of the Communion; develop liturgical resources; create educational and theological resources; and promote ministries of justice and compassion in the Communion.

These are all important and necessary efforts for the Communion. Yet the members of these commissions and committees are reminded that any new canonical legislation will always require the convening of the next Holy Synod, the introduction of that legislation to the House of Pastors and the House of Laity, the voting and passage of that legislation by both houses, and the signature of the Presiding Bishop. This process of legislation is already specified in the constitution, and it is fundamental to the synodal polity of the Communion.

The Energy of the Local Church

It is of utmost importance that the principle of subsidiarity be upheld in the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. This principle emerged as one of the hallmarks of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. Subsidiarity is understood as the process of retaining activity in the field of the local Church whenever possible. Only when necessary, the collaboration of many local Churches, and/or the deliberation of the entire Communion will be required. Usually, those decisions are specified in the ECC constitution, and the confederation of the ECC will be engaged in such concerns at the subsequent Holy Synod.

Additionally, specific issues will be appealed to the national Communion (for subsequent legislative efforts at a synod), or the Episcopal Council (for subsequent amendments to particular guidelines under the direction of the Episcopal Council). It is then required that the administration of the Office of the Presiding Bishop (or of the Episcopal Council) be engaged, in accordance with canons of the ECC constitution. Additionally, the local dioceses will cooperate and support one another in the greater mission of the Church universal: the affirmation of the Gospel, the creeds of the Church, the sacramental life of the Church, the universal call to holiness, and the episcopal administration of the Church when needed (such as the ordination of a new bishop for a diocese by other ECC bishops).

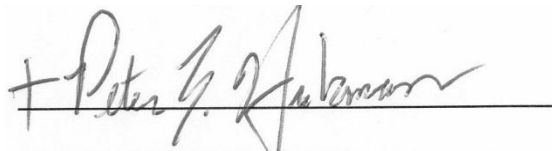
It is our firm conviction that the enthusiasm for the work of the Church is nurtured when the diocese is cultivated as the basic structure of the Church – with its own synodal structure, and its own ministries, that respond to its own needs. When too much energy is focused on the larger structures of the Communion, the energy is dissipated on the diocesan level. The right balance between the diocese and the national Communion can be reached through the discernment of the energy of the people. They are exhausted in their efforts when multiple

committees require answers for distant deliberations. Yet they are also exhausted by strife and confusion when too much of the burden is placed upon them to develop programs that really require provincial, regional or national efforts to be effective.

Skillful insight will engage this principle of subsidiarity as the gauge of the effectiveness of structures in the Church, as well as a good understanding of the wisdom of the early Church as it rapidly grew. The autonomy of each diocese, and the collaboration of dioceses in regional efforts gave a good balance to the efforts of the early Church. This, we believe, is the primary model for the ECC.

I send my blessing to all my sisters and brothers on this Feast of Saint Isidore, a 7th century bishop of Seville, who fostered regional growth through the collaboration of the dioceses of the Iberian Peninsula.

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Peter G. Hickman". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

The Most Rev. Peter Elder Hickman
Presiding Bishop
President of the Episcopal Council

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Rick Hollingsworth". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

The Right Rev. Rick Hollingsworth

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Right Rev. Steven M. Rosczewski". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

The Right Rev. Steve M. Rosczewski

_+Raphael Adams__

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