

A Pastoral Letter Addressed to the Pathfinder Community in Response to a Recent Statement Issued by the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino entitled "Instruction on Old Catholic Groups in the Diocese of San Bernardino"

April 2000

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Ancient Church has experienced the anguish of disunity for centuries. Throughout each era of Christianity, there has been a struggle for power and control over the body of Christ that has included injustice, and often brutality, of one Christian group toward another.

You have now experienced this disunity in a most personal fashion. Your community has been singled out as "separated," and you have been in anguish over the words exchanged in this conflict. Yet the saddest part of this situation is that each side of this conflict is suffering. It is for us to approach this grief with the mind of Christ. It is Christ alone who will re-unite the Church. With the Didache, the ancient "Teaching of the Apostles," we pray, "As grain once scattered on the hillsides was in this broken bread made one, so from the four winds bring Your Church into the Reign of Your Son..."

Our Catholic Tradition is also an experience of disunity. While the Roman Church maintains itself as the sole heir of this Tradition, we point to an even older Christian experience of shared responsibility among the bishops of the Church: the democratic participation of all Christians in the governance of the Church through the election of their bishops; and the tradition of both married and celibate clergy in the Church. Because we cling to this older understanding of Catholicism, we are called "Old Catholics." Our spiritual ancestors sought to re-establish these traditions in 1870, when they formed the Union of Utrecht, in the Netherlands. It is not so much that we have separated ourselves from the Roman Church, but that the Roman Church has yet to complete its own renewal, which was begun in Vatican II, but seems to have come to a halt in recent years.

It is with compassion that we speak of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. They now suffer greatly under the weight so many burdens. The Roman Church is short of clergy, experiences tremendous financial loss from legal proceedings against its priests for sexual misconduct, and is engaged in a great struggle over such issues as the ordination of women and married men, contraception, and the voice of the local community in the daily life of its members. It is just such issues as these which have led many of you to join with this Diocese of Ecumenical and Old Catholic Faith Communities. Your quest for inclusiveness and your thirst for justice in the Church were motivators that called you, not so much to separate, but to join with others who journeyed on this same quest and experienced this same thirst. Ultimately, it is the reconciliation of Christ that will bring us all together in the end. We must await this day in patience, though it may feel like the waiting of the tomb. Do not forget that glory of Christ which broke forth from the tomb in light and joy.

And do not forget to take refuge in Christ. It is Christ who brings “peace beyond understanding.” This peace is now necessary if you are to maintain the courage of your actions. Ultimately, we are in error if we ask who is right and wrong in this struggle. We are in grief until the day that all Christians, and all humanity, are united in God. With the words of the New Testament, we proclaim that on that day, God will be “all in all,” and “every tear shall be wiped away.”

Yet, our “validity” is questioned by some authorities. And we are compelled to discuss the understanding of validity. We can show that we are in an unbroken line of Apostolic Tradition in which all our bishops were ordained by validly ordained bishops who trace their ordinations to the apostles of Christ. We have maintained the Scriptures, the sacraments and the tri-fold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon. We confirm the words of Saint Paul when we say that we “hand on to you what we have received from the Lord” through this Apostolic Tradition.

Yet we differ from our Roman brothers and sisters, in that we do not see the Bishop of Rome as having a claim to infallible teaching authority. Our vision is that of collegial authority with the whole Church as represented by all who hold the office of bishop. We also differ from the understanding that the bishop of Rome has the right to make all decisions on the life of the Church in every local community of Christians, regardless of their own local understanding of the Christian way of life.

The world has questioned its own stand on gender and sexuality. It has moved from a repressive stand, which was threatened by an equal place for women and men, to an emerging acceptance of such a change. The world has affirmed the goodness of sexuality and family life, and has seen this as compatible with service to humanity in the name of God. For this reason, we have asked if such changes are compatible with the heart of the Gospel, and we have answered with a resounding YES! Not only is this compatible, it is now a demand of the Gospel – the demand for justice within the Church.

We have proclaimed, with so many of our fellow Christian denominations, that married men have a right to ordination, as called by their communities. Women, too, have a right to ordination, as called by their communities. Couples have a right to the self-determination of the size of their families. All baptized Christians have the right to share in the table of the Lord – barred only by a refusal to reconcile their own injustices.

As our young men and women experience this affirmation of gender and sexuality in the world – as they equally make choices of career into the occupations of doctor, attorney, teacher, engineer – they must question why gender has disallowed women, and marriage has disallowed many men, from the honor of service as a Catholic priest or deacon. As they experience responsible sexuality and the joy of family life, they may ask why they are not allowed to make their own decisions on the size of their families. As they learn about the acceptance of all people as sisters and brothers, they may ask why some baptized Christians do not have the right to receive the body and blood of Christ, simply because they are not Roman Catholic. They will not ask such questions in the Diocese of Ecumenical and Old Catholic Faith Communities. We join with our Anglican brothers and sisters, as well as many Protestant communities, in the call to renewal in such areas. For too long the Christian church has been lagging behind society in hearing this call for justice and renewal. While others may incorrectly question our “validity,” we may respond

by questioning their fidelity to the message of Christ in the constant renewal of the Church; their sense of justice in the face of inadequate theology that seeks to shore up the status quo; and their charity, which seems absent in terms of creating more harmony within the entire Christian Church.

We do not blame individual bishops, priests, or canon lawyers for the harshness that is often felt in official letters and statements. It is important to remember that we are all members of very fallible organizations, which often sweep us into “an official stance.”

Let us endeavor to stand with the heart of Christ. This courageous heart sought always to encounter each individual as a person: a prostitute was seen as a woman, a Pharisee was seen as a troubled seeker, a Samaritan was seen as a victimized human. We are challenged to see past the “official roles” and to call again to our fellow Christians – who bear titles and hold offices – but may themselves be suffering under the weight of policies that bring more anguish and disunity.

We pray “that all may be one.” We pray that prayer of Christ that we may some day maintain a oneness like that of Christ and the Father. Until that day, we must speak the truth with a prophetic voice that calls for justice, but we must also reach out with a hand to those who may hear the cry for justice, yet may feel powerless to claim it for themselves and for their people.

The Spirit alone can loosen these paralyzing conflicts which keep the Church as wrapped as Lazarus in the tomb in his bindings of death. For we were meant for more than internal squabbles of “validity.” The presence of Christ seems so absent, even in the most “valid” of Eucharistic celebrations, when love is absent. There is, perhaps, a better way to express the “valid” presence of Christ in the sacramental actions of the Church. We urge you to find that way through prayer and dialog with our fellow Catholics – of all ecclesial connections – so that it may bring harmony and peace to the whole and entire Church. Then we shall be moved by the Spirit to stand with Christ, and respond to our true calling – best expressed in the fourth chapter of Luke’s Gospel:

“...to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners; to announce a year of favor from the Lord.”

In the Hope of Christ,

The Most Reverend Peter E. Hickman
Bishop