

ECC Ecclesiology and Theology

Bishop Kedda Keough, 2023

The Ecumenical Catholic Communion has been around since September 19th, 2003. There was a desire by many former Roman Catholics who had experienced alienation and exclusion from their church to find a way to remain Catholic. People who are Catholics often describe themselves as having a “Catholic soul.” While some were able to transfer into other traditions that were like their Catholic roots, others stopped attending any church, but a few yearned for a place to call home that was authentically Catholic in history, theology, and experience. Before there was an ECC, people managed to find each other and formed small faith communities and attempted to continue being Catholics, but in exile. They were seekers.

On November 17, 2001, a woman named Mary Ramerman was ordained a Catholic priest by an Old Catholic bishop by the name of Peter Elder Hickman. This event drew national attention. It was this event that brought attention to Bishop Peter, and he was sought out by disenchanted Roman Catholics and asked if he would be their bishop. A newly published book by Bishop Peter and Judith Jones called *Through an Open Door: A Life and a Ministry* tells this story in more detail. The fact is that these former Roman Catholics recognized their need to form a relationship with a bishop. Once they found Bishop Peter, the journey into the ECC began. Continuity is personalized in a bishop. When this group of former Roman Catholics found an authentic Catholic bishop, they were expressing their wish to continue being church, and to continue being Catholic.

When these Catholics discovered that there was a way to be Catholic, with an authentic history and theology, they became eager to share this discovery with others. They recognized the need to organize themselves in some manner. Several small communities sought to come together to form a new entity with a possibility for growth and a future.

In the beginning the people who came together to form the Ecumenical Catholic Communion pulled together the threads of at least three Catholic traditions. They crafted a new ecclesial body by interlacing the threads together. The main thread was the Old Catholic tradition, Bishop Peter’s tradition, and this thread formed the primary source for our ECC ecclesiology. The other threads were elements from various documents of the Council of Vatican II and the Eastern Orthodox tradition, especially as expressed by John D. Zizioulas. His book, *Being As Communion*, was often shared with the newly ordained.

Following the tradition of the Old Catholics and the Orthodox, the interpretive or hermeneutic guide for the ECC became the faith and order of the early church. The ECC would express our tradition by saying we followed the convention of Vincentius of Leninum, more commonly known as St Vincent of Lerins: “That we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” The Old Catholics’ appeal to the early Church and this principle is a dominant feature of that tradition. Even before the split after the Council of Vatican I in 1889 when the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht were formed, the term “Old Catholic” was being used to describe those who appealed to the early Church before the schism of 1054. Appealing to the early church is claiming apostolicity as the continuity and identity of the message being handed

down in every local church from generation to generation and believing it needs to be repeated in every time and place and interpreted and made active for today.

The founders of the ECC did not see themselves as creating a new church or a new denomination. They were reclaiming the legacy and tradition of Catholicism at its roots and seeing themselves as continuing the Catholic tradition of the early church. Therefore, for us in the ECC, tradition is this continuing conversation with the past while simultaneously moving forward into the future. We share this concept with the Old Catholics and the Orthodox. We are open to new conversations around contemporary issues and open to creativity, but firmly rooted in the past. We believe in having broader conversations with present day voices, with other traditions, while at the same time making sure that the voice of the early church is always included. Our main conversation partner has been and continues to be the Old Catholic church based in Utrecht. Many of our clergy have attended summer school in Utrecht to learn more about this tradition. Since we see tradition as this ongoing conversation, our understanding of tradition is that it is something that is living, not stagnant.

One of the first elements reclaimed by the ECC was the episcopal-synodal model of the early church. This was natural, since this was the tradition of the Old Catholics. The way this is described by the Old Catholics is that there is an interaction and ongoing conversation of the bishop and the people of a diocese, or local church. Because we are Catholic, it is natural that these local churches or dioceses come together to form a broader communion, where the conversation continues with a council of bishops and representatives of the local churches or dioceses.

In our communion, the founders also looked to the style of government found in the United States, and formed a house for the pastors that was like the Senate, and for the laity, that was like the House of Representatives. They looked forward to an Episcopal Council once dioceses were formed. For years we continued in what we now call the proto diocese because we had only one diocesan bishop, Peter Hickman. It was only as dioceses began to be formed that an actual Episcopal Council was formed. Eventually this body was renamed as the Council of Bishops.

From the beginning, and following the tradition of the Old Catholics, we said that every local church (bishop, priests, deacons, and laity) is the whole church. They represent the whole in one place. It helps to remember that the original model that tradition shares with us is the episcopal-synodal model, or bishop-people model. Our ECC decided to copy the form of democratic governance in this country. We have the House of Pastors (made up of pastoral leaders as delegates who may or may not be ordained), the House of Laity (delegates from each community proportionate to membership), and the Council of Bishops. We did this to ensure that the laity had a guaranteed and true voice in the ECC. By the way, not all clergy are in the House of Pastors and not all laity are in the House of Laity. The Houses and Council of Bishops primarily consider legislative concerns.

As Peter Ben-Smit says, synodality goes beyond democracy. It is based on the ideal of consensus and discernment of truth as a eucharistic community. (page 21). In other words, it is not a matter of majority rule, but of prayer and discernment together. A group that has learned to do this well is the Quakers. They have a communal discernment process and manage decision-making in both

large and small groups. Such a discernment model is based on the belief that there is something of God in each person. Perhaps the ECC could learn something from the Quakers.

Because we are rooted in the Old Catholic tradition from which we get our apostolic succession this is our main source of ecclesiology. It is why we encourage our clergy to study this tradition and encourage our members to go to Utrecht. We base our understanding of what it means to be church by claiming for ourselves the Declaration of Utrecht, September 24, 1889. This declaration is an introduction to ecclesiological principles. (see attached) Because of this declaration we too are opposed to the doctrine of papal jurisdiction over the whole church and we believe that only the Holy Spirit possesses infallibility. We join the Old Catholics in their pursuit of unity based on the faith and order of the early church and seek revitalization of the life of the church. We celebrate our continuity with the undivided church, the early church.

As the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, we remain authentic Catholics in good faith, because we, too, are tracing the faith and order of our Catholicism in an unbroken apostolic tradition. For us tradition is guided by the Holy Spirit in a communal process of dialogue and reception, just like the Old Catholics. The principle of subsidiarity is congruent with our commitment to “reception,” in that the bishop(s) stands with tradition as s/he listens to prayerfully receive and consider the word of the Spirit from all members. The dialogue includes conversations with many other voices, but especially with the witness of the early church. This conversation happens through the episcopal-synodal structures in each diocese or region. If the diocese has a bishop-people dialogue going, it is meeting the goals of this part of our tradition. Not every diocese will pattern itself after the governance model of the USA, as if it were a mirror image of the whole Communion, but all will have an ongoing dialogue of bishop and people. (page 35)

With the Old Catholics and the Orthodox traditions, we affirm a *koinonia* or communion theology. Out of this common theology comes our understanding of the basic doctrines first described by the seven church councils of the early church. Communion is the paradigm or pattern for the essence of what it means to be church. As it says in Peter Ben-Smit’s book *Old Catholic Theology* – “A Communion of people, which by the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and by the outpouring and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit is constituted as a unity in a given place around a bishop with eucharist as its center, is a complete church that carries out its tasks autonomously in a given place.” (page 41) He goes on to write, “Each local church is a representation of the ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church as confessed by the ecumenical creed of Nicea-Constantinople. (Year 381)’” And, “Each local church is the Body of Christ living a common life in *martyria* (witness), *leitourgia* (liturgy), and *diakonia* (service).” (page 42)

The Old Catholic tradition teaches that our dioceses are both instruments and proof of salvation. At least, this is what they are called to become. We are called to be a people who can come together with much diversity and maintain our unity. We are taught by our tradition that God has been about the business of rescuing humanity from itself, and this rescuing is what we call salvation. As we experience our world today, we easily see that humanity, and all the creatures on planet earth, need rescuing. Salvation then is bringing us back into communion with God, with one another, and with creation. Catholicity means everyone is to be saved, and salvation is offered to all. We could even say that every church is on its way to catholicity.

God invites every kind of diversity to come into communion. Salvation is the same thing as communion with God and is accomplished through the reconciliation of broken relationships. To act in ways that break relationships is to work against salvation. We like to say that one of the main characteristics of an ECC church is unity with diversity and, according to our Old Catholic tradition, such a church is proof that salvation is real. We prove salvation is real by our unity with diversity. Salvation is communion, and therefore implies there must be community. Being a community in unity should be the church's main characteristic. Seeking the restoration of relationships is our ministry.

It is this desire for unity that makes us Catholic because we know that salvation is for everyone, everywhere. The desire for unity makes one small faith community want to be part of a diocese, it makes a diocese want to be part of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, it makes the ECC want to be part of the World Council of Churches. Moved by the Holy Spirit toward communion, we are constantly reaching out to a greater communion and discovering that the Holy Spirit even moves us beyond the boundaries of what we call church. The one thing that holds us together is this "Catholic soul," – the desire for communion.

Every experience of such a church is an opportunity to experience salvation through communion (page 42). Therefore, at the heart of our ecclesiology is the eucharist. Eucharist is the primary expression of our restored unity with God and with each other. No wonder so many of us were offended when told who could or could not receive communion from God's table. Exclusion is the opposite of communion. It is when we celebrate the liturgy of Eucharist that the church is "most fully itself, as a communion of God and creation and of creatures among each other." (page 44)

Liturgy in the ECC is meant to be shaped by what we believe. Liturgy also forms and shapes our understanding of our ecclesiology, of what it means to be church. Trinitarian language is at the core of our faith and our liturgical prayer always reflects this faith. We have a Trinitarian spirituality. The ECC enjoys a distinction from many churches by embracing a level of creativity in liturgy not often found in other traditions. While we are guided by and devoted to Catholic tradition as shared with us down through the ages from the early church, each community strives to express the "*lex orandi, lex credenda*" of its people in their particularity. Liturgy, just like other aspects of our tradition, is having a continuing conversation with the early church and contemporary voices. In liturgy we find this ongoing relationship with the communion of saints, past, present, and future.

Jesus the Christ, sent by God as the incarnation of everything that God wants to say to us, extends God's invitation for a covenant relationship with all people, everywhere, and more. The Holy Spirit, breathed out upon our earth, works to bring all things together through Christ into the loving embrace of the God of Love. In church the working of the Holy Spirit is in and through our sacraments. In our liturgies we stress the *epiclesis*, calling on the Holy Spirit, in all our consecratory prayers. (page 50) The church itself is a sacrament because it is our intense experience of the incarnation of Christ Jesus.

From the beginning God breathed the Holy Spirit into us and formed us for love. Every baby comes into this world ready to be loved and ready to learn how to love. This is what it means to

be created in the image and likeness of God. The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Body of Christ, dwelling in each church, dwelling in each person. The spirit of divinity within each of us is the basis for our synodality. Like the Quakers, we too, believe that there is something of God in each person. This is why synodality is not a majority rule sort of thing. It is based on a theology of communion, as celebrated in eucharist.

The image that the Old Catholics like to share is of a bishop presiding at the table and all the people gathered around the table, all gathered around Christ, gathered in the Holy Spirit that is the soul of the Body of Christ. There is an interdependence of laity and ministry. Clergy and laity are in relation to each other the same way as call and response. Ministry is not above laity but is before laity. The primary role of ECC clergy is to inspire in their people a commitment to the Gospel.

The bishop is the sign and symbol of the unity of the local church and incarnates the apostolicity of the Church. The bishop speaks on behalf of the early church and is the guardian and sign of that apostolicity and catholicity. The authority of bishops in the Communion is focused on creating unity, on pastoral leadership, and on discerning the call of the Spirit for the community.

This image of a bishop at table with the people gathered around it is not just for liturgy. It carries over into how our relationships work within the structure of being church. Synodality – the way we make decisions – is not a matter of majority rule. It is the shared discernment of the Holy Spirit's guidance, and it involves conversations with the past witness of the early church, the insights of contemporary movements, and a consensus of believers. Every Christian is a representative of Christ, and every ministry can only be fulfilled in the power of the Spirit. Each person has the responsibility to take part in the process of being the Church.

We have several distinctions from the Roman Catholic Church: We are the people of God who seek to dive deeper into the Catholic faith handed down to us by our ancestors from the teachings of the early Church. We believe that anyone who is gifted and called by God, qualified for ordination, and is called by a community, may present themselves for ordination. We believe that marriage is a partnership for the whole of life, and if two adults intend to commit themselves to such a union, they may celebrate a sacramental marriage. We believe that persons have the right to follow their sincere and informed consciences in moral decision making. We recognize that only the Holy Spirit possesses infallibility. No human or institution can claim this.

The Hebrew scriptures, especially through the words of the prophets, established clearly that God is concerned for humanity and cares deeply about how we treat one another. From creation on we have experienced the constant involvement of God in human history. God has chosen to rescue, help, shield, chastise, and challenge humanity, always standing for justice, mercy, and compassion. Through the prophets God teaches us that the opposite of love and goodness is indifference. There is no lack of pathos, or emotion, with the God we find in scripture. God is not an indifferent Being off in some heaven somewhere.

A Trinitarian spirituality means we recognize that by being in Christ we are drawn into the divinity of Christ, and like God, form a community of love and self-giving. We call this community the Body of Christ. As a community of love and self-giving we now participate with

God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to draw all things together into the Unity of God's love. With God we cannot be indifferent to others or indifferent to creation. We are called to share the pathos of God and become like the prophets of old – indignant at political evil, calling it out, protesting, and standing for justice, mercy, and compassion.

With Christ we cannot be bystanders, but are called to be actors, seeking out the lost, restoring relationships, showing up for others, standing with those who are denied their dignity, each of us doing our small part to create communities of justice, peace, and love. All our concern about ecclesiology comes down to this, a concern to be about the business of bringing to earth the ways of God. Our Communion is meant to be an instrument for this work.

Reference: Old Catholic Theology: An Introduction. By Peter Ben-Smit. Published in 2019.

The Declaration of Utrecht, as referenced by the ECC. It was published in 1889