

History of Ecumenical Catholic movement - Part 2/4

Lets take a brief walk through a long and complicated history, and highlight the historical roots of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC). In last week's newsletter we talked about the 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 its faith in the Northeast during this period of time -- 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 with us to this day.

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, the Roman church has been 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.

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.