

May They Be One

A Pastoral Letter of Bishop Peter Elder Hickman

The Feast of Saint Pachomius

May 9, 2014

Greetings to all the Sisters, Brothers, and Friends of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion!

My dear beloved companions in Christ,

"May they be one, even as we are one." This is the prayer of Jesus for all those who would follow Him. *"Remain in Me as I remain in Abba and He remains in me."* This is the desire of Jesus for all who would share in His life. Unity within the body of Christ is not merely an ideal that we profess but it a reality that we, as disciples of Jesus, must realize at every moment. The failure to live in unity with one another is to fail to live in accord with the expressed will of Christ for all those who would bear His name. To live in unity with one another is the mandate of the Gospel of Christ.

This unity of which Jesus speaks cannot be achieved apart from love. This is why Jesus commands us to love one another even as He loves us and gives His life for us. Without love unity cannot become our lived experience. The failure to remain in unity with each other is ultimately a failure to love. This is why schism is so very abhorrent to us because the act schism is never an act of love. Unity is always the sweet fruit of love and disunity is always the bitter fruit of the absence of love. *"The world will know that you are my mine if you love one another."* To act in disunity is never an act of love but always an act of selfishness. Whenever schism manifests itself selfishness is always behind it.

This is always true and it is at the very heart of what it means to be catholic. To be Catholic is to be a part of the whole. The religion of Jesus is the religion of inclusivity. To fail to be inclusive is ultimately a failure to practice the religion of Jesus. To fail to be inclusive is to rob the religion of Jesus and to make of it our own religion of exclusivity. This is self serving and not Christ serving. To act inclusively is to be Catholic. To act exclusively is to be sectarian. This is always true. What does this kind of catholic unity look like? Saint Augustine, the fifth century bishop of Hippo, gave us this formula when he wrote these words: *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; and in all things, charity (agape, love)."*

The statements, "I am more Catholic than you; I am more Christian than you; I am a more faithful disciple than you; I am greater than you; or, I am not a part of you," are by definition non-Catholic. The moment we embrace this attitude of divisiveness then we can be sure that we are no longer remaining Catholic.

We of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion believe ourselves to be authentically Catholic. We see ourselves as being a part of the whole Body of Christ. Some say to us, "How can you be Catholic and not be in communion with Rome?" To those I would say concerning Ecumenical Catholics, "We have not separated ourselves from the Church in Rome but, rather, that Rome has rejected us. We are the divorced and remarried, the married priest, the woman with the priestly calling, the gay and the lesbian, yes, we are the excluded ones. Yet, we remain Catholic in our identity and we practice a faith tradition that is distinctively Catholic. We profess the creeds of the of the historic Catholic Church; we celebrate the Catholic liturgy; we participate in the same ministerial priesthood that is considered valid by the Roman Catholic Church; and we celebrate the same sacraments as all other Catholics. Yes, we strongly affirm our Catholic identity. That is the very reason for our existence as the Ecumenical Catholic Communion!

Over the past months, several communities of our Beloved Communion have informed us that they have decided to depart from our beloved Communion: Holy Family in New Mexico, on February 21, 2014; the Koinonia Community of Austria on April 20, 2014; All Saints in California on April 27, 2014; and, most recently, some of the communities of the ECC Diocese of Florida on May 4, 2014. I know that these recent events have been troubling for some of us. I must confess that they have been troubling for me. It is always a sad moment when friends decide that they wish to part ways with you.

Let me publically affirm that each of these individuals and communities freely sought to be part of the ECC family. We welcomed them warmly into our family of faith. We have been companions through this phase of our journey of faith, and have shared many wonderful moments together. We have appreciated the many positive contributions that they have made to our Communion. I have come to value these relationships, and consider these people my dear friends. Perhaps many of you share these same sentiments. And now, in response to their discernment they freely choose to depart from our Communion. I affirm and honor their right to discern and follow their own path forward. As they begin this next chapter of their faith lives, it is my sincere prayer that God will continue to richly bless them, and make fruitful their ministries among God's people!

My sadness, and perhaps yours, is compounded by the manner in which these communities have communicated their decisions to depart from us: with widely distributed public letters containing in part what I believe to be false statements and accusations about our beloved Communion. These statements have served only to further and intensify the misunderstandings and divisions among us. Moreover, division and discord are never the work of the Holy Spirit.

We are called to unity and to bear each other's burdens: *bear with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:2-6).* Therefore, I must take this opportunity to respond to some of the assertions made. I do so in charity, with the intention of speaking the truth in love, to clarify misunderstandings which may have developed, and with no ill will or malice toward our sisters and brothers who have made these statements.

First, a number of claims have been made about the catholicity of the ECC. Specifically, it has been asserted that the ECC has "a non-functional Catholic identity;" accommodates non-catholic forms of worship; teaches that the bodily resurrection did not occur, and that the Creed need not be accepted or affirmed. Perhaps most concerning is the impression given by these assertions that these are widespread beliefs and practices among us. Let me state clearly and directly: these accusations are at best a great distortion, and at worst simply not true. As noted above, the very purpose of the ECC is to provide a way to remain faithful to the Catholic Tradition. We exist not because we reject Catholicism, but because we are Catholics who have felt unwelcomed or uncomfortable in the Roman Catholic Church. We in the ECC are, and wish to remain, faithful Catholics. Moreover, we seek to practice a faith that is characteristically Catholic. The ECC is secure in its Catholic identity!

Second, it has been alleged that our Episcopal Council has collapsed; that within the ECC the bishops are viewed as unnecessary to the Catholic faith, no more than sacramental machines. Again, this is simply not true. Our Communion appreciates the vital role of the episcopacy, both historically and currently. By historical standards we are quite young as an ecclesial body, and many of our geographic regions have yet to form their own dioceses and elect their own bishops. Thus, our Episcopal Council is presently small, but we are still growing into the fullness of our organizational polity - a polity which includes strong pastoral leadership on the part of the episcopacy. Our Episcopal Council has been quite active in the recent past, and is stronger and more vital than at any time in the life of our beloved Communion.

Third, it has been alleged that the ECC has abandoned our synodal approach to governance, in which all three groups (laity, clergy and bishops) have distinct voices and unique perspectives; that the Leadership Council (LC) has functioned like the Roman "curia;" and that the laity have not had a voice in important decisions, such as in the selection of the next presiding bishop. Each of these assertions are false. We continue to function with a synodal polity, and continue to grow in our appreciation of the beauty and vitality of this way of being a faith family. Our LC is comprised of our elected Presiding Bishop and the elected officers of each of our two Houses. Its role is defined in our constitution. Our LC functions collaboratively. The leaders of

both houses who serve on the LC routinely meet with steering committees of their respective houses, seeking input and guidance from the broader membership of each house. It is a wonderful model of collaboration, and functions quite unlike the Roman curia. And, let me also affirm that the laity have had an active voice (at times direct, at times through a representative processes) in the process of selecting our next presiding bishop. And, our laity will continue to have an active voice in all of our major decisions, including the election of our next presiding bishop at our Synod in October.

Finally, it has been alleged that the ECC leaders have turned a deaf ear to the grievances and calls for reconciliation voiced by those who have decided to depart from us. Again, this is simply not true. One specific example highlights this situation. Many of those who have decided to separate from us had a particular view of how the nomination and election of our next presiding bishop should be handled. They expressed this view prior to our last synod in 2012. It was widely discussed and debated, not ignored. Legislation was put forward at the last Synod to effect the changes which they sought. This legislation was soundly defeated in the House of Laity, 50-3. Subsequently, as the Presiding Bishop Nominating Committee (PBNC) began their work in anticipation of our upcoming Synod, those who would eventually leave the ECC again put forth their ideas, and attempted to shape the nomination and election processes to suit their preferences. In so doing they ignored the strong voice of our laity at our last Synod. When the nominating committee did not make the changes which they sought, they complained that their point of view was being ignored, that their opinions and ideas were falling on deaf ears. Much of the discord and division within the communion over the past year has been focused by this group on this very issue. Are these acts - which ignore the strong voice of our laity at Synod - those which seek genuine reconciliation within our beloved Communion? No, they are not. They are acts which sow the seeds of conflict and division among us.

On January 10 of this year, Bishop Steve Roszczewski of the ECC Diocese of Florida sent a communication to members of the Florida Diocese publically condemning the Episcopal Council. This communication was not sent, previously or concurrently, to members of the Episcopal Council. And, Bishop Steve made no attempt to resolve his concerns with the Episcopal Council prior to sending this letter. Is this an act that reflects a genuine attempt to resolve one's grievance, or suggests a sincere desire for reconciliation? No, it is not. It is an act which distorted facts, inflamed misunderstanding and furthered division - division which has now come to fruition in the schism which we are experiencing.

On January 30 I sent out a pastoral letter, *A Call for Reconciliation*, in which I directed the entire ECC to enter into quiet reflection and examination of conscience for the whole season of Lent and Holy Week, as a first step toward reconciliation. Many of those who have decided to depart from us ignored this call to enter into quiet reflection and self-examination. They

continued to post statements of accusation on Facebook and other social media, attack others in the Communion, and create much dissension among us.

On February 21 Holy Family in New Mexico left our communion. On March 8, the Diocese of Florida gathered to openly discuss their concerns. This gathering resulted in the publication of a formal statement, distributed on March 16, in which their grievances and concerns were again expressed. Is this the way of Catholicism? Simply ignoring and defying the direction of one's bishop with regard to the call for a Lenten period of quiet reflection and self-examination? It is ironic that those who have alleged "a non-functional Catholic identity" of our communion, that our Episcopal Council has collapsed, and that bishops' pastorals are ignored are the very ones who ignored my recent pastoral letter, and the call to observe a period of silent reflection. What was so pressing that this gathering could not have waited a few weeks, until after Holy Week? And now, as Lent and Holy Week has passed and the time to take up the difficult work of reconciliation is upon us, they have decided to depart from us, without entering into any meaningful dialogue or attempt at reconciliation. I even offered in the days immediately following Easter Sunday to go to Florida and meet with the leaders of the ECC Diocese of Florida. Bishop Steve Rosczewski wrote back to me saying that "a visit from me would not be helpful."

As I have already mentioned, division and discord are never the work of the Holy Spirit. We are called to unity and to bear each other's burdens. Unity is to be found in truth. Therefore, I have taken this opportunity to respond to some of the assertions made. I do so in charity, with the intention of speaking the truth in love, to clarify misunderstandings which may have developed. It is my hope that these brief comments have clarified any misunderstandings which may have occurred.

While the recent decisions of some communities to leave our communion have caused some of us sadness, we honor their right to discern and follow their own path forward. Although we no longer share a common membership in a common ecclesial organization we remain sisters and brothers in the mystical Body of Christ. It is our sincere prayer that God will richly bless all of their ministerial efforts on behalf of the people of God and in the service of the Gospel of Christ as they continue their journey separate from us. I am sure that I speak for many in our beloved Communion when I say that they will be deeply missed and that we will always value the memories of better times that we shared together. Please join me in wishing these, our sisters and brothers in Christ, every blessing as they continue to seek the guidance of the Spirit in their communities and their lives.

And, let me also affirm that our beloved Communion remains stable, strong, and Catholic. We have many vibrant communities throughout our country, and beyond. Many good things continue to happen among us. We recently celebrated the 10 year anniversary of our formation as the ECC, and we look forward with hope to the election of our next presiding Bishop in October.

Indeed, the Spirit of Love continues to accompany us and guide us! God is not yet finished with us! May the good work that God has begun in us be brought to completion! I have no doubt in my heart that our best days are yet to come!

May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ remain with you always!

This comes with both gratitude and love from your brother,

+Peter Elder Hickman

Presiding Bishop

Ecumenical Catholic Communion