



The Meaning of a Diocese

A Letter of Council from the Presiding Bishop to the People of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is more than a decade since the 2003 constitutional convocation which called forth the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. We are blessed by the Spirit, who gives life to our hopes and directs our ways. Our growth is in numbers, maturity and self-understanding.

Lessons from History

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. (Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, 3rd century)

We pray for renewal in the manner of the ancient Church, which was organized into autonomous dioceses, and gathered into provinces. These provinces functioned together under the canons of their episcopal synods. Loyal to the leadership of one of five patriarchs (Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem), each area was still self-governing and synodal. Conciliar (Synodal) governance required consensus of the voices of the people and clergy under the guidance of a diocesan bishop – elected by the people. The head of each province was an archbishop, who collaborated with the other bishops in a synodal fashion, so that the consensus of the archbishop and the episcopal synod was required.

A famous example of such self-governance, from the time of Saint Augustine (4th century), was that of the priest Apiarius – judged by the bishops of Carthage to have acted wrongly, and removed from his duties. When Apiarius appealed to Rome, the bishops of Carthage opposed Rome's involvement, since canons of the Councils of Nicea and Sardica stated that only disputes between bishops were appealed to Rome. Carthage was an African province headed by the Archbishop of Carthage, and surrounded by other dioceses belonging to that province. This self-determination of the local Church created growth, where bishop and people joined as one in following Christ. Carthage itself was a province of many dioceses and 286 bishops.

After the period of persecution of the Christians, the Church developed into a metropolitan system. Each city had a bishop – a pastor to the pastors and communities. An example of the fruit of diocesan and provincial organization is Seville, with the leadership of Saint Isidore, the provincial archbishop. Legislation of this synodal province produced some of the first European laws against child abuse – the local Churches responded to the needs of their communities.

Recent Developments in the Communion

Florida was the first diocese to emerge in the ECC. Under this principle of self-determination, the people of Florida elected Father Steve Roszczewski as bishop. In accordance with Canon 67 of the ECC Constitution, they declared their intention to form a diocese to the Leadership Council, who made preparations for the Synod to affirm new diocese. *This was not a matter of asking permission, but of affirming the process as constitutional.* (Each area has the right to declare a diocese, when it has experienced the growth described in Sub-canon 3 of the ECC Constitution.) California followed, and I was elected as ordinary of the Diocese of California. Father Armando Leyva was also elected by the people as my auxiliary bishop.

Recently my office was notified that the people of Austria elected Father Christian Blankenstein as bishop; and the people of New Mexico elected Father Jim Lehman as bishop – following the canons of the ECC constitution. I shared this information with the Leadership Council, in preparation for the coming Holy Synod in Colorado. Additionally, the people of Colorado, and the people of Washington, are in the discernment process regarding the formation of a diocese.

The Wisdom of the Local Church

As a consequence of the basic human right of participation in self-governance, all Catholics have the right to a voice in decisions that affect the, including the choosing of their leaders, and a duty to exercise those rights responsibly. (Canon 61.1.1.8, ECC Constitution)

This new growth will allow the people of each area of the ECC to fully participate as Church:

- They will elect their own bishop and have easy access to her/him.
- The bishop will be a spiritual teacher who is immediate – not so distant that she/he can only visit occasionally; close enough to participate in many local activities and projects.
- The bishop will return to the ancient practice of gathering in synod with the clergy and people of the area, so that the local parishes will easily participate in the polity of the diocese without major expense – and allow more people to attend each diocesan synod.
- Roles will be clarified, as the diocesan synod is formed for each diocese. The people of each diocese will have a sense of their own self-determination as Church.
- The bonds with the larger Communion will be strengthened as each diocese is represented in the Episcopal Council by its own bishop, who will speak for that region.
- Each diocesan synod will participate with its bishop in developing the many ministries inspired by the Spirit – with new parishes, religious orders and specialized ministries.

We can already see the fruit of this growth in the Diocese of Florida. Within two years of electing Bishop Steve and forming the diocese, the number of faith communities has gone from 3 to 10. In California, the 8 communities are on the verge adding 6 additional new parishes.

The Presence of the Bishop

This saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. (1Timothy 3:1)

The election of a bishop by her/his people produces soon attracts others under the bishop's leadership. In 1996, I was elected as bishop by my people. Soon many individuals and communities approached me to join under my episcopal guidance. This resulted in the initial formation of the Diocese of Ecumenical and Old Catholic Communities, which became the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, with discussions started in 2002. We now enter our 11th year of growth under the ECC Constitution – with parishes across America and Europe, growth in the Philippines, and an intercommunion agreement with a similar sister Church in Argentina.

The bishop also provides the wonderful unity within the diocese. Bishop Steve recently opened the Synod of the Diocese of Florida. He gathers regularly with the clergy and people for days of prayer, sacramental celebrations and other occasions. In California, Bishop Armando and I sponsor gatherings for the clergy and people. The California clergy host days of prayer twice a year, monthly clergy conferences, monthly theological study groups, and a yearly Chrism Mass. In California, we will have our diocesan synod, and are developing the diocesan seminary. We have programs for lay ministry, and will begin the Missionaries of Peace – an ecumenical effort to develop our communities both spiritually and in the work of social justice and compassion.

In Summary

I want to address concerns about the increase of ECC bishops. Rather than weaken our unity, new bishops have strengthened the ECC. New dioceses and bishops give more voice to the parishioners of the ECC, and increase new communities. The ECC is on the verge of intense growth by creating more dioceses in America, and around the world. The Holy Synod of 2014 will be international, with representatives from Europe, Asia, and the Americas. We even hope to have a video link with people “back home,” so faith communities of many lands can be present to the Synod. Our Beloved Communion maintains local Church, and worldwide unity.

May Christ bless you in this New Year of 2014,

Bishop Peter

Most Reverend Peter E. Hickman, Presiding Bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion