



A Catholic congregation with a twist

*By Kevin Eigelbach
Post staff reporter*

When Ed Kuhlman told his parents and family that he wanted to start a church affiliated with the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA, they supported him totally.

But they also wondered, if he wasn't happy with the Roman Catholic Church any longer, why didn't he just join the Episcopal Church.

"What is this?" they asked him about the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA. "No one had ever heard of it," he said.

The 31-year-old Gray Middle School teacher, who lives by Blessed Sacrament Church in Fort Mitchell, Ky., will lead his fifth worship service in his new church Saturday at 4:30 p.m.

It's billed as The Holy Family Church ... an independent Catholic community," and it meets at the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Bellevue.

The services have attracted between five and 30 worshippers who appreciate the Catholic form of worship, but don't accept some core Roman Catholic beliefs.

For example, the church allows the ordination of women, married clergy and birth control for married couples, and doesn't believe in the infallibility of the pope.

Theologically, the church falls somewhere between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Episcopal communion.

"We don't do gay unions, but I wouldn't discriminate in terms of giving the Eucharist to someone," said Kuhlman, who's not married.

It's a good place to be for Crescent Springs resident Anne Gauder.

A "cradle Catholic," Gauder has been very involved in local Roman Catholic churches, including St. Mary of the Assumption in Alexandria, Ky., and St. Joseph's in Crescent Springs, Ky.

But lately, she said the old way of doing church "just doesn't seem to fit anymore."

She found out about Holy Family from a friend, and was eager to experience the worship service. She found it very similar to the ones she grew up with and had grown to love over the years.

She likes the familiar order of worship and the way it builds toward the consecration of the wine and bread into Christ's blood and body.

She also likes the fact that the church observes saints' feast days and church holidays such as Pentecost.

Once, she went to a woman's retreat on Pentecost offered by another church, and no mention was made of the holiday at all.

"It made me realize how important the church year is to my spiritual life," she said.

She also doesn't want to give up the Roman Catholic Church's reverence for the bread and wine used in communion.

"Because of this holiness, there is a sense of awe in the Catholic church that seems to be absent in other churches," she said.

"So you see, I'm pretty Catholic in some ways," she said. "In other ways, such as the dogma and the exclusivity toward 'outside' groups, I don't fit in."

After years of attending at first St. Agnes Church in Fort Wright and then Blessed Sacrament, Kuhlman also felt he didn't fit in.

He learned about the independent Catholic movement while a student at Thomas More College. Its democratic structure and its ideas of religious equality attracted him.

Last spring, David Mark Kocka, the presiding bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA, ordained him as a deacon.

This enables him to conduct communion services, but not Masses. He has to have the bread and wine blessed beforehand by a priest in Louisville.

He plans to become a priest within a year by completing Internet-based courses offered through the movement's Vilatte Theological Seminary in Missouri.

It's one of about a dozen churches or institutions in the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA.

The independent Catholic movement that Holy Family belongs to originated with German Catholics who rejected the decrees of the First Vatican Council in 1870, especially the doctrine of papal infallibility.

Another independent Catholic movement, the traditional Catholics, broke away from Rome after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Local examples of these churches, which typically have a Latin mass, are St. Gertrude the Great in West Chester and Immaculate Conception in Norwood.

Roman Catholics would view Holy Family as a schismatic church at best, and Kuhlman doesn't pretend otherwise.

He takes pains to make it clear that the church isn't affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church in any way.

He's not looking to steal parishioners from other churches, he said, but wants to reach out to those who haven't been to church in a long time or who have never gone.

"The people who would come to a church like this are out there," he said. "I don't have to create them."