

Not as the Romans Do

A Catholic church with fewer hang-ups

By **Kevin Osborne**

They tend to be introspective, soft-spoken and spiritual -- not exactly the typical characteristics associated with renegades.

But in earlier centuries the beliefs and teachings of Deacon Ed Kuhlman and the other people who worship at the newly formed Holy Family Church in Bellevue, Ky., would have caused the congregation to be labeled as heretics.

Described as an independent Catholic church, the congregation is part of a growing trend, mostly in the United States, of people who reject some traditional Roman Catholic tenets but still consider themselves Catholics and want to continue celebrating their faith instead of attending a non-denominational church or converting to the somewhat similar but more liberal Episcopal Church.

In the five weeks since Kuhlman, who prefers to be called "Deacon Ed," began performing Saturday afternoon services, the fellowship has grown to include about 35 people, a mix of the devout and the curious. Notice of the church's creation has spread through word of mouth and a flyer describing the church's beliefs and inviting people to check it out for themselves.

"So far, the reception has been very positive," Kuhlman says. "A lot of people didn't even know such a thing existed, and they're very interested in learning about it."

Decentralized Catholicism

Holy Family, which meets at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church at the corner of Center and Taylor streets in downtown Bellevue, is affiliated with the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA. One of several independent Catholic groups that operate churches, the Ecumenical Catholic Church traces its origins to the 19th century and their line of apostolic succession to Archbishop Joseph René Vilatte, who in 1892 was consecrated bishop by the Patriarchate of the Syrian Orthodox Catholic Church in India.



Photo By Jared M. Holder

Ed Kuhlman, the deacon at an independent Catholic church in Bellevue, Ky., says his congregation is attracting people who like the Roman Catholic liturgy but reject some of the dogma.

Based in Missouri, the Ecumenical Catholic Church has parishes, chaplaincies and religious institutes in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine and Virginia.

The church permits both men and women to be ordained priests, allows clergy to marry, opens communion to everyone, allows members to get remarried after divorce without the need for an annulment, recognizes the "practical necessity" of using birth control and supports the individual's personal responsibility before God in making choices in many areas of life.

In short, the church appeals to people who like the core beliefs, sacraments and ritual associated with Roman Catholicism but not the rigid dogma.

"It holds special appeal to young people and the Baby Boomer generation, who are seeking more out of their spiritual experience and life but may not like the exclusionary nature of some churches," says Kuhlman, 31, who also is a teacher at Gray Middle School in Union, Ky.

Baptized and raised a Roman Catholic, Kuhlman became dissatisfied with some of the church's practices and started exploring alternatives. He eventually discovered the Ecumenical Catholic Church and began studying under the tutelage of Bishop David Kocka, who leads the All Saints Congregation in Louisville. Kuhlman is studying for the priesthood.

Kocka, who is the presiding bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Church, is a former Roman Catholic priest who left the vocation to get married. He still felt a devotion to his beliefs and a calling to help minister to people's spiritual needs, which prompted his journey along a new religious path.

"There are a lot of independent movements out there, and they're not all in concert with each other," Kocka says. "Some are more liberal than others, but the movements are growing in spurts."

Unlike the Episcopal Church, for example, the Ecumenical Catholics don't perform civil unions for same-sex couples.

"It's kind of like walking the razor's edge," Kuhlman says. "We do not perform gay marriages or unions. On the other hand, we don't deny sacraments or anything else to homosexuals."

Kocka says the Ecumenical Catholic Church tends to draw lapsed Roman Catholics and others who appreciate "a sacramental view of life," which he says is rare in American culture.

"We host a lot of people with different views," he says. "We're small and we like to remain humble. We try to minister the holy operation of the Lord to whoever needs it. All are welcome."

11th century beliefs

Like other churches under the Ecumenical Catholic Church banner, Holy Family is a self-governing Catholic faith community that's not under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church.

For more than 1,000 years after Jesus Christ's death, there was only one Catholic Church, and both east and west were united under a number of equal patriarchs with the Roman pope just one of them.

In 1054, Christendom suffered a schism, resulting in Rome becoming the seat of ecclesiastical authority in the west and Constantinople -- now Istanbul -- becoming the seat of ecclesiastical authority in the east. Catholics in the west became known as Roman Catholics, while Catholics in the east became known as Orthodox.

Similar to the Orthodox and Old Catholicism movements, the Ecumenical Catholic Church believes infallibility only arises from an ecumenical council of the undivided church. Because the church has been divided since 1054, its true dogma hasn't been changed since that time, which explains its differing beliefs and practices from Roman Catholicism.

As a result, the church's teachings are based on the Scriptures and the first seven ecumenical councils of the undivided church, which excludes the later Council of Trent that created much of prevailing Roman Catholic theology and philosophy.

Generally, the Roman Catholic Church doesn't acknowledge or condone the independent Catholic movement.

"They sort of consider us fleas on the tail of the dog and don't bother with us," Kocka says. "We are considered valid and part of the church in the general sense as Christians, but we're considered illicit or illegal.

"There's no open hostility, for the most part," he says, referring to the Roman hierarchy. "There's sympathy in general among many of the parishioners in the U.S."

In western rite, independent Catholicism, most jurisdictions expect their clergy to be self-supporting and perform their ministry freely as a service to their congregation. Many jurisdictions do not own property; they conduct services wherever they are invited or in whatever facility a congregation can afford to rent.

The Ecumenical Catholic Church isn't considered part of the reformed Catholic tradition, because it doesn't seek to reform or change the Roman Catholic Church structure and doesn't present its members as Roman Catholics.

The church does minister to interested Roman Catholics, however, and defines its mission as providing a spiritual home for any who, for one reason or another, find themselves estranged or disenfranchised from their previous church community.

"Americans tend to be individualistic, and our whole culture is based on that," Kocka says. "When people are teenagers, we all want to be independent. As you get older, you realize we're all interdependent.

"Our church is really interdependent. If Rome were ever to embrace us, I know we would embrace them back." ©