

**The Constellation of the
Ecumenical Catholic Communion
in the Independent Catholic
Nighttime Sky**

A keynote
presented at the biannual Holy Synod of the
Ecumenical Catholic Communion

Saint Louis, Missouri

October 10, 2022

Rev. Dr. Jayme Mathias

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Preface

The present work contains the text that I created as part of the preparation for my opening keynote at the 2022 biannual Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), an Independent Catholic jurisdiction that I hold in high esteem. I presented this discourse on Monday, October 10, 2022 in St. Louis, Missouri, at the Drury Plaza Hotel St. Louis at the Arch. As sometimes happens at such gatherings, this 90-minute keynote began late—20 minutes late. I began to lose my voice by the end of it, and, working against the constraint of time, I could not share all of the material I had prepared to fill 90 minutes. The present work shares all that I had hoped to say to our spiritual siblings of the ECC, barring such circumstances, during their synod.

I heartily appreciated the warm response of the 111 lay and ordained leaders of the ECC who gathered in person for this synod, which led me to compile this work as a gift to the jurisdiction—both to memorialize this gathering and to serve as a “snapshot” of the ECC on this occasion of the 19th anniversary of its founding, on which we and others might reflect in another 19 years and perhaps another 19 years after that!

In a special way, I wish to thank now-former Presiding Bishop Francis Krebs and the planning team for his synod, for their invitation to share words at this event. I appreciated the opportunity to reconnect with those who participated in our first three interjurisdictional events and to meet in person those leaders whom I had only previously known through online means. I also treasured the chance to synthesize the themes of the Independent Catholic corpus of the past three years that related to this synod’s bilingual theme, “Church in Action. *Iglesia en Acción.*”

I also wish to thank Master of Ceremonies Jen Reyes Lay of Saints Clare and Francis of Assisi Ecumenical Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri, for her kind introduction of me at the synod; Mallory Rusch of the same parish community for facilitating simultaneous conversation among the 30 virtual participants who joined us through Zoom; and Rev. Dr. Trish Sullivan Vanni of Charis Ecumenical Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, for overseeing the technical aspects of virtually sharing this keynote.

As is evident in this work, I greatly admire and respect the Ecumenical Catholic Communion for modeling within the larger

Independent Catholic movement what it means to truly be a “Church in Action.” I pray that this work might help others to better know and appreciate the great gift that is the Ecumenical Catholic Communion within our movement – and that we might all come to esteem and live the values of ecumenism, catholicity and communion embodied by the ECC!

Greeting

Good morning, ECC! Welcome to Holy Synod 2022!

I am Father Jayme Mathias, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, and I bring you greetings from Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Louis! I'll be honest: The good archbishop had no idea why my husband and I were so interested to jump into a photo with him yesterday afternoon as he greeted folks in front of the cathedral. For us, though, it was like being at Disney World or Disneyland: If you're at Disney World and Mickey Mouse appears in front of Cinderella Castle, you, of course, need to get your photo with Mickey Mouse! Or, if you're at Disneyland and Minnie Mouse appears in front of Sleeping Beauty's Castle, you, of course, need to get your photo with Minnie Mouse!

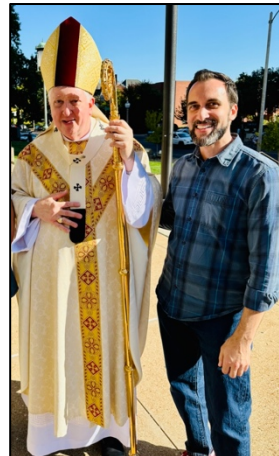


Figure 1. Father Jayme with Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski, October 9, 2022.

The Mickey Mouse Club and the Donald Duck Club

That brings to mind a line by Father Ken Himes, who taught us ethics at the Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C. He famously told his students: "If you want to be part of the Mickey Mouse Club, you have to sing the Mickey Mouse Song. You can't be part of the Mickey Mouse Club and sing the Donald Duck Song!"

Of course, Father Himes used the Mickey Mouse Club as an analogy for...the Roman Catholic Church! I was part of the "Mickey Mouse Club" for nearly 40 years. I served as a priest in the Roman Church for over ten years. I don't know about you – but I am so glad to be part of the "Donald Duck Club" today! And you? If you're glad to be part of the "Donald Duck Club," quack like a duck!



Figure 2. Mickey Mouse Club Mouseketeers, by Macfadden Publications, 1956, image courtesy of WikiCommons.

Being part of the “Mickey Mouse Club” clearly has certain advantages: Mouseketeers have their own song: “M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E!” They share an identity. And they wear some really great ears!

As members of the “Donald Duck Club,” we don’t have our own song, we don’t have a common identity, and we don’t have those cool ears—but we do have the freedom and opportunity to now create our own “song” together!



Figure 3. Broadway Theater's Donald Duck Club, by Sam Hood, 1945, image courtesy of WikiCommons.

Roomies and Zoomies

I want to pause and acknowledge the dual nature of this synod: with the “Roomies” here in this space and the “Zoomies” who are joining us through Zoom. We want to encourage our Zoomies to use the reaction buttons on Zoom, to raise and lower your hands when I ask questions, and to have a conversation among yourselves in the chat box, particularly when our Roomies participate in “Table Talk” and “Pair and Share.”

Where We’re From

It’s great to be with y’all from “deep in the heart of Texas”! Is there anyone else from Texas in the house? Give me the “Hook ‘Em, Horns” sign!

Are you ready to make some noise? For our Roomies and our Zoomies, let’s see where we’re from!

Who’s here from the Golden State: *¿Cuántos son de California?* Californians, make some noise!

Who’s here from the “Land of Lincoln”? Illinois is in the house!

What about “Colorful Colorado”? Who’s here from the Centennial State?

Who’s representing the Evergreen State? The Mariners are here!

And the Grand Canyon State? Who’s here from Arizona?

Any “cheese heads” in the house? Where are our friends from the Badger State, Wisconsin?

That brings us to the central colony of the original 13, which is why we call it the Keystone State: Pennsylvania!

Who’s here from the Empire State: “New York, New York”?

What about the Land of Enchantment: Who’s representing New Mexico?

And the Natural State, the Land of Opportunity: Arkansas!

•What about the Old Colony State, the Bay State, or, my favorite, the Codfish State: Massachusetts?

Who’s coming to us from the northernmost state in the continental U.S.: the North Star State, the Land of 10,000 Lakes, or my favorite, the Gopher State: Minnesota? (We’ll have to have you share a Sven & Ole joke later!)

You knew that I’d get to you sooner or later: Who’s here from the Sooner State: Oklahoma?

Who’s representing the Sunshine State and the Alligator State: Florida?

Show me: Where are our hosts from the Show Me State: Missouri?

What states did I miss? Maryland! Others?

Poland? You were anticipating my next question: Who’s here from other countries? Poland! Mexico! And we’re told that we have Zoomies joining us from Central America and various countries in Africa!

The Nighttime Sky

I want to thank Bishop Francis and the Planning Committee for this invitation to be with you here in Saint Louis for this synod. For me, this is a bit of a homecoming: I studied at Saint Louis University 30 years ago, and I’ll be honest: It was a little too cold for me here, which is why I’m loving Texas!

I came to Saint Louis at age 18 from Ohio – so I’m fond of saying that “I come from the corn fields of Ohio, to the corn tortillas of Texas.” I also joke that Ohio is a great state to be *from* – but one of the things that I miss most about the corn fields of Ohio is the nighttime sky, which, free from the light pollution of so many cities, is filled

with all sorts of stars. Astronomers tell us that the human eye can see some 5,000 to 10,000 stars in the nighttime sky—so we have far eclipsed the promise made to Sara and Abraham, our ancestors in the faith.¹

From the time that I was a boy and then a Boy Scout and then studied astronomy here at Saint Louis University, I have been fascinated with those “great balls of fire”² in the nighttime sky, which illuminate the planets that revolve around them. You’ve no doubt noticed: Some stars are brighter than others, and we know that some stars are larger and/or closer than others. Consider this for a moment: The light from the farthest star that’s visible to the human eye left that star some 16,000 years ago—so that star could have burned out 15,000 years ago, and we still wouldn’t know it for another 1,000 years!

Ready for some “Table Talk”? Have someone at your table grab a notepad, and let’s see how many stars your table can name in 20 seconds! How many stars can your table name in 20 seconds? On your mark, get set, go!

Ancient Views on the Heavens

Though we live in a much-advanced world, in many ways we are not too unlike our ancient ancestors: They were fascinated by the stars as well. Anthropologists suggest that as the rulers of Egypt and Babylonia died, they became gods in the heavens, where their names were assigned to stars. We read of this in the book of the prophet Amos,³ which is why it’s significant that those same stars bowed



Figure 4. A sky full of stars, by ESA/Hubble & NASA, August 1, 2016, image courtesy of WikiCommons.

¹ Genesis 15:5, 22:17, 26:4; Exodus 32:13, Deuteronomy 1:10, 10:22, Nehemiah 9:23, Jeremiah 33:22, Hebrews 11:12..

² An obvious reference to the 1957 hit song recorded by Jerry Lee Lewis.

³ Amos 5:26.

down to worship Joseph in his dream.⁴ Unlike neighboring cultures, our spiritual ancestors were forbidden from worshipping the sun, the moon and the stars,⁵ and in our faith tradition, our God was so great that our God gave us the sun to light the day, and the moon and the stars to light the night.⁶ Indeed, according to the psalmist, our God is so great that our God knows the name of every single star!⁷



Figure 5. The woman of the apocalypse, with a crown of 12 stars, and the dragon whose tail swept a third of the stars in the sky, from "The Revelation of St. John" by Albrecht Dürer, 1511, image courtesy of WikiCommons.

⁴ Genesis 37:9.

⁵ Deuteronomy 4:19.

⁶ Jeremiah 31:35.

⁷ Psalm 147:4.

Balaam prophesied that a star would come forth from Jacob,⁸ and the apocalyptic visions of our ancestors were filled with stars as well: of the Christ holding seven stars in his hand,⁹ and of the woman clothed with the sun, with 12 stars on her head.¹⁰ We hear stories of a dragon whose tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky¹¹ and of a ram whose horn threw stars to the ground.¹² Perhaps most assuring, Daniel prophesied that those who lead others to righteousness will shine like the stars in the sky.¹³

Ready to “Pair and Share”: Turn to a person or two beside you and, in 20 seconds, share with them some of your favorite stories about stars – from scriptures or other sources. In 20 seconds, what are some of your favorite stories about stars? On your mark, get set, go!

The Stars and Constellations in the Independent Catholic Nighttime Sky

Primitive human beings spent a lot of time looking up at the stars, and, in many cultures, they imagined that the stars of the nighttime sky form various shapes or figures. Even the Hebrew scriptures speak of these constellations,¹⁴ naming three constellations in particular: the Big Dipper, Orion and the Seven Sisters.¹⁵

“Table Talk”! How many constellations in the nighttime sky can your table name in 20 seconds? As a table, write down the names of as many constellations as you can in 20 seconds! On your mark, get set, go!

When we gathered three years ago for our first interjurisdictional gathering in Austin, in October 2019, I spoke of the various “vessels” in the Catholic Sea, including the Roman Catholic “supertanker.”¹⁶ When I began this presentation with a reference to the “Mickey

⁸ Numbers 24:17.

⁹ Revelation 1:16.

¹⁰ Revelation 12:1.

¹¹ Revelation 12:4.

¹² Daniel 8:10.

¹³ Daniel 12:3.

¹⁴ 2Kings 23:5, Job 38:32, Isaiah 13:1.

¹⁵ Job 9:9.

¹⁶ J. Mathias, “Old Catholicism and Independent Catholicism: Vessels in the Catholic Sea,” in J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2020), *A New Way of Being Catholic* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 29.

Mouse Club,” I was referencing the stability and some of the other advantages of being aboard that “supertanker” – and we know that many of the greatest frustrations with this “supertanker” is that it can’t “turn on a dime.” As part of that same analogy three years ago, I likened many of the “vessels” within our movement to much-smaller whale-watching boats, fishing boats, kayaks, dingies, and, yes, even jet skis. (Lord know we have enough Lone Rangers – *episcopi vagantes* and *clerici vagantes*¹⁷ – jetting around on the Catholic Sea!) I also spoke of the various “fleets” or jurisdictions.¹⁸ In fact, at that time, to my knowledge, the Ecumenical Catholic Communion was the largest “fleet” in the Independent Catholic Sea in terms of the number of clergy it possessed.¹⁹ (I was wrong, but we’ll come back to that.)



Figure 6. Supertanker, courtesy of WikiCommons.

Today, I’d like to try a new analogy: that the clergy and communities of the Independent Catholic nighttime sky are like the stars in the sky, and that the jurisdictions into which they organize themselves are like constellations!

Look [pointing to “constellations”]: There’s the Ascension Alliance! And there’s the Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch! There’s CACINA, the Catholic Apostolic Church in North America! And there’s the American National Catholic Church! Yikes, do you see that black hole where TOCCUSA – The Old Catholic Church of the U.S. – used to be? And, of course, there’s the Ecumenical Catholic Communion!

¹⁷ I’m not aware of anyone who uses the phrase *clerici vagantes*. I coined it as an acknowledgement that not all “wandering” Independent Catholic clergy are bishops.

¹⁸ Mathias, J. & de Uriarte, M.L., Eds. (2020). *A New Way of Being Catholic*. Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

The “Big Dipper” of Independent Catholicism

For the purpose of today’s presentation, if I were to liken the ECC to a particular constellation in the nighttime sky – and please don’t take offense at this – I would liken the ECC to...the Big Dipper! With all due respect, the ECC and its communities are the “Big Dipper” in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky”! Follow me now.

Before we called it the Big Dipper, we called it the Big Bear, *Ursa Maior* – that constellation mentioned in Job 9:9! The Big Bear or Big Dipper is not the largest constellation in the sky – and, since 2019, we have discovered websites that suggest that there are other jurisdictions with more clergy than the ECC,²⁰ but I would venture to say that no “constellation” in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky” is more recognizable than the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, with its brightly-shining stars and its distinct shape!

To be clear, publicly-available data suggest that there are jurisdictions with more *clergy* than the ECC; but there is no publicly-available record of any Independent Catholic jurisdiction in the U.S. with more *laity* than the ECC. Why does the “constellation” of the ECC shine so brightly in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky”? Because of its laity and its communities! In a movement filled with “communities” of clergy,²¹ the ECC is a community – or communion – of communities! It’s not just Reverend Rosa [Buffone] holding up her light; it’s the community of Holy Spirit in Newton, Massachusetts holding up their lights together! And that’s a lot of light! It’s not just Father Gianni [Passarella] holding up his light; it’s the community of Holy Angels in North Tustin, California holding up their lights together! And that’s a lot of light! The same could be said of any ECC community – and that’s a lot of light! The ECC is bringing a lot of light into this world!

“Pair and Share”! Before I start bragging on the ECC, what do you see as the greatest “lights” within the ECC? Find a person or two close

²⁰ J. Mathias, “The Present State of Inclusive Catholicism at the Dawn of 2022,” in J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2022), *Our Better Version of Catholicism* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 24..

²¹ I use the term “community” lightly here: Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, Texas belonged for six years (2012-2018) to a jurisdiction that possessed clergy, but with very little community among those clergy. In my ten years of experience within Independent Catholicism, the same could be said of a number of Independent Catholic jurisdictions.

to you and share in 20 seconds what you perceive to be the greatest lights in the ECC. On your mark, get set, go!

The ECC is bringing light to a world where, to cite a phrase of my former associate pastor, Fr. Libardo Rocha, “Christian children become non-Christian adults.”²² You bring light to a world where churches marginalize and avert their eyes from certain people, allowing you to be the Good Samaritans²³ that you are – the good, despised, marginalized people of our day – reaching out as the hands and heart of Christ to those in need. You bring light to a world where the number of former Roman Catholics in the United States eclipses the number of members of any non-Catholic Christian denomination.²⁴ You bring light to a world where 1,000 Mexicans leave the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico every single day.²⁵ These “prodigal children”²⁶ are not running home, but a number of them do discover us on social media and hear of us through friends and pass by our doors, and a number of them appreciate the loving embrace that we extend to them!²⁷ Father Libardo is fond of saying that our Independent Catholic communities are “ports,” where the “ships” come and go,²⁸ that our communities are “flowers” that provide “nectar” to the “hummingbirds” and “bees” that pass by.²⁹

So, yes, the ECC is like the Big Dipper in that it is so recognizable and in that it consists of so many bright “stars,” bringing light to our world – but there’s another reason that I liken the ECC to the Big Bear or the Big Dipper: In the same way that the Big Dipper points us

²² L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 4.

²³ An obvious reference to Luke 10:25-37.

²⁴ T. Roberts (October 11, 2010), “The ‘Had It’ Catholics,” in *National Catholic Reporter*, available online at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/had-it-catholics>.

²⁵ LegallySociable (April 6, 2011), Statistic: “More Than 1,000 Mexicans Leave Catholic Church Daily,” available at bit.ly/3CVNmdK.

²⁶ An obvious reference to Luke 15:11-32.

²⁷ L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 4-5.

²⁸ L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

beyond itself, to Polaris, our current “North Star,”³⁰ around which the stars of the nighttime sky appear to circle as a result of the earth’s rotation, the ECC points people toward the “North Star” of our faith: Christ! Like John the Baptist, the ECC is not yelling, “Look at me! Look at me!” but instead points to the Lamb of God,³¹ whom, we note, is likened by the Christian scriptures to the bright morning star.³²

Of all the constellations in the nighttime sky, there’s just something about the Big Dipper, and in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky,” there’s just something about the “constellation” that is the ECC!

My History with the Ecumenical Catholic Communion

Before we get too deeply into our time together, let me sing the praises of the ECC as one of the largest, brightest and most recognizable “constellations” within our movement. I’ll be honest: 3.5 years ago, I knew nothing of substance of the ECC. I knew no one within the ECC, and the Ecumenical Catholic Communion was merely a name among the many names of other Independent Catholic jurisdictions. After Holy Family stepped out of its relationship with another Independent Catholic jurisdiction in 2018,³³ I encouraged my three priests and two deacons at Holy Family to connect with the jurisdictions with which they felt some simpatico. As a result, for example, I reached out to the American National Catholic Church and attended their 2019 convocation, Deacon Angelita Mendoza-Waterhouse built a relationships with the Ascension Alliance and attended their 2018 and 2019 convocations, and Father Libardo Rocha

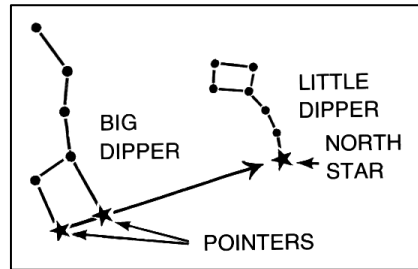


Figure 7. The Big Dipper pointing to the North Star, by Pearson Scott Foresman, courtesy of WikiCommons.

³⁰ Many people are unaware that, due to a slow wobble in the Earth’s rotation, the “North Star” changes over time. See, for instance, “The Changing Pole Star” (September 25, 2020), available at bit.ly/3SvciPk.

³¹ John 1:29 & 1:36.

³² 1Peter 1:19, Revelation 2:28 & 22:16.

³³ At that time, Holy Family became a large, bishopless Independent Catholic community, like St. Stanislaus Polish Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri; Rabbouni Catholic Community in Louisville, Kentucky; and All Saints Priory in Ridgewood, New York.

built a relationship with the Spanish-speaking clergy of your ECC California Diocese. Bishop Armando Leyva invited Father Libardo to speak at a clergy retreat there, and in May 2019, we, at Holy Family, being a bishopless community, had the pleasure of hosting Bishop Armando Leyva for a parish celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation. That was my first encounter with a member of the ECC.



Figure 8. Bishop Armando Leyva of the ECC (second from right) concelebrating at Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, May 2019.

In the summer of 2019, I experienced the Utrecht Summer School with one of your ECC lay leaders from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and, greatly impressed by what I learned in Utrecht, I began planning an interjurisdictional gathering of lay and ordained leaders in Austin for October 2019. When I first spread word of this dream, the first person to respond was your presiding bishop, Francis Krebs, who called me and asked, “How can I/we support this?” I didn’t know Bishop Francis, and he didn’t know me. I want to acknowledge the risk that he took in reaching out to an unknown member of the Independent Catholic clergy. I will always hold Bishop Francis in high, high esteem for his willingness to reach out—not a common trait in this movement—and to take the risk of supporting that effort. He brought Bishop Raphael Adams and Bishop Denise Donato aboard our planning efforts, as well as Bishop Rosemary Ananis of the now-

defunct TOCCUSA. Other members of the ECC took the risk as well, investing considerable resources to journey to that gathering, which resulted in our book, *A New Way of Being Catholic*.³⁴ Because I hold them in such high esteem, I want to recognize them by name: Reverend Rosa Buffone, Reverend Cynthia Drew, now-Reverend Mary Hartjes, now-Reverend Michele “Mimi” Maki, Father Dewayne Messenger, Reverend Dr. Trish Sullivan Vanni, Father Donald Sutton and Gregory Yonker. Please join me in a round of applause for the 11 ECC ambassadors at that first interjurisdictional gathering in October 2019!



Figure 9. Our first interjurisdictional gathering of lay & ordained leaders in Austin, Texas, in October 2019, with 11 ambassadors of the ECC.

The ECC is “Flippin’ Alright”!

When I lived here in Saint Louis, an old Franciscan priest, Father Joel Burgos, had just returned to the U.S. after some 20 to 30 years in Zambia, Africa. He tried to convince us that the Gabon spiders in Africa are this big – but he also left us with a joke that captures exactly how I feel about the ECC.

Father Joel told the story of Father John, the local parish priest who went fishing with his parishioners, and we’ll cleanse this joke by using the phrases “son-of-a-gun,” okay? Father John didn’t know anything about fishing, but he had the luck of catching the largest fish

³⁴ J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte (2020). *A New Way of Being Catholic*. (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

that day – it must have been this big! – and when Father John pulled that big fish into the boat, his shocked parishioner exclaimed, “That is one big son-of-a-gun!” (Remember: We’re cleansing this story.) Father John’s face registered the shock of hearing such language from one of his parishioners, and his parishioner, now very embarrassed, lied to his priest. He said, “No, Father John, that’s what this fish is called. It’s called a...son-of-a-gun fish!” Huh, in addition to having the largest catch, Father John learned something new today!

Father John took the fish back to the rectory, and Sister Margarita was there to greet him. He opened the trunk of his car, and Sister Margarita remarked about the size of his catch. “I know,” Father John said, “That is one big son-of-a-gun!” (Remember: We’re cleansing the story.) Sister Margarita’s face registered the shock of hearing such language from her priest, and, seeing her shock, he explained, “No, Sister Margarita, that’s what this fish is called. It’s called a...son-of-a-gun fish!” Huh, Sr. Margarita also learned something new today!

As luck would have it, Father John and Sister Margarita hosted their bishop that night, and, you guessed it, they prepared that fish for dinner. Now seated at table, Father John cut into his catch, tasted it, and exclaimed, “This is one good son-of-a-gun!” (Remember: We’re cleansing the story.) Sister Margarita tasted it and agreed, “This is the best son-of-a-gun I’ve ever tasted!”

The bishop looked at Father John, and the bishop looked at Sister Margarita, and he said (and we’re cleansing the story here): “Y’all are flippin’ alright!”

After that experience in October 2019, seeing how 11 members of the ECC took the risk and traveled to Austin for our first interjurisdictional gathering, I could only conclude that you, our siblings of the ECC, are “flippin’ alright!”

As I share my praises of the ECC, I’d like to invite you to share what I call a “Hollywood applause” after each praise. When you participate as an audience member in a taping in Hollywood or New York, they instruct you to clap as fast as you can, so that it sounds like more people in the room. Are you ready to practice your “Hollywood applause”?

After that initial gathering three years ago, many of you within the ECC have continued to build bridges with other lay and ordained leaders within the larger Independent Catholic movement.

- COVID struck in March 2020, and Bishop Raphael Adams heroically stepped up to co-lead our first-ever 2020 Virtual Summer School. Bishop Francis Krebs presented, Bishop Denise Donato brought in Bishop Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, and now-Reverend Lori Vail coordinated a panel to lift up the voices of our sisters. Y'all are "flippin' alright!" [Applause.]
- That two-week experience was followed by our two-week Virtual Summer School in Spanish, and we were blessed with presentations by Bishop Armando Leyva, Father Humberto Chacon and Father Jose Andres Morales. Y'all are "flippin' alright!" [Applause.]
- With no intended lack of respect, I'll drop the titles for the long lists that follow. Many of you have participated in our interjurisdictional virtual happy hours and clergy coffee chats, representing the ECC to the larger Independent Catholic movement: Alice Bradley, Rosa Buffone, Denise Donato, Cynthia Drew, David Gerardot, Teri Harroun, Peter Elder Hickman, Kedda Keough, Michael Nicosia, Mir Plemmons, Frank Quintana, Trish Sullivan Vanni, Peter Veitch, George von Stamwitz and Gregory Yonker. Y'all are "flippin' alright!" [Applause.]



Figure 10. The faculty of our 2020 Independent Catholic Virtual Summer School, including Bishop Raphael Adams & Bishop Francis Krebs of the ECC.

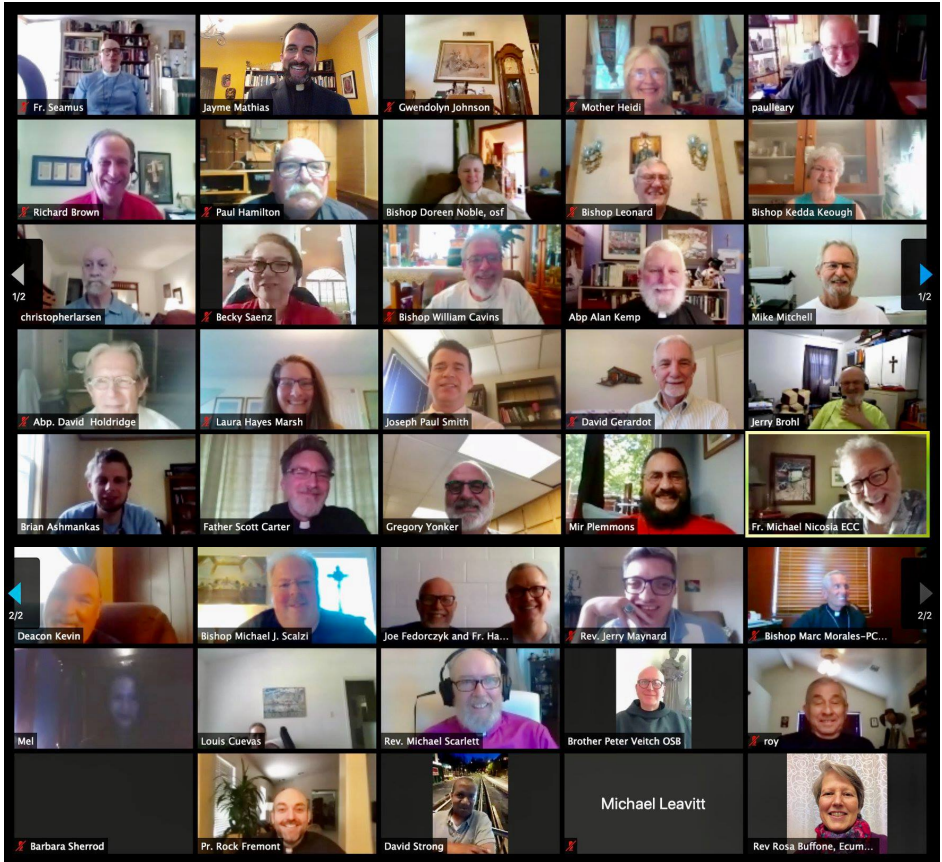


Figure 11. Participants in a 2020 Zoom conversation of Independent Catholic laity & clergy in 2020, including several members of the ECC.

- Many of you have contributed to our bimonthly, bilingual publication, *Extraordinary Catholics* magazine: Terri Harroun, Francis Krebs, David Justin Lynch, Mimi Maki, Michael Nicosia, Gianni Passarella, Len Schreiner and Trish Sullivan Vanni. Y'all are "flippin' alright!" [Applause.]
- Some of you participated in our second interjurisdictional gathering, "Saints in Sin City," in Las Vegas in November 2021, which resulted in our book, *Our Better Version of Catholicism*:³⁵ Rosa, Buffone, Michael Nicosia, Frank Quintana and Trish Sullivan Vanni. Y'all are "flippin' alright!" [Applause.]

³⁵ J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte (2022), *Our Better Version of Catholicism* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

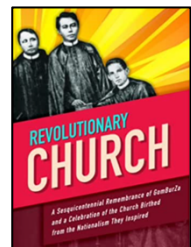
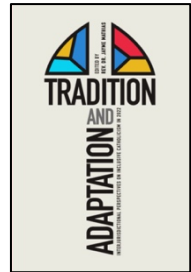
Saints in Sin City November 4-6, 2021
 4:00 p.m. Thursday through noon Saturday
 Santa Niño Catholic Church 820 H Street, Las Vegas, Nevada
 An Interjurisdictional Gathering of Old/Independent Catholic Clergy & Laity
 Get to know Old/Independent Catholic clergy & laity from throughout the U.S. and discuss the present & future of Old/Independent Catholicism!

Rev. Dr. Trish Vanni, Eden Prairie, MN
 Mr. Louis Nuñez, New York, NY
 Rev. Dr. Jayne Mathias, Austin, TX
 Rev. Mike Lopez, Brooklyn, NY
 Most Rev. Martin de Paredes Griffin, Sacramento, CA
 Rev. Dr. Mares Boitek, St. Louis, MO
 Most Rev. Thomas Abel, Las Vegas, NV

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Figure 12. The flyer from our second interjurisdictional gathering in Las Vegas, Nevada in November 2021, with Rev. Dr. Trish Sullivan Vanni of the ECC.

- Some of you participated in the “think tanks” that led to our recent book, *Tradition and Adaptation*:³⁶ Rosa Buffone, Cynthia Drew, Dennis Giblin, Constance Hunter, David Justin Lynch, Michael Nicosia, Mir Plemmons, Frank Quintana and Trish Sullivan Vanni. And we credit Michael Nicosia for the title of that work! Y’all are “flippin’ alright!” [Applause.]
- Some of you participated in our third interjurisdictional gathering, a sesquicentennial celebration of GomBurZa, in Austin in May 2022, which resulted in our book *Revolutionary Church*:³⁷ Rosa Buffone, Frank Quintana and Trish Sullivan Vanni. Y’all are “flippin’ alright!” [Applause.]



³⁶ J. Mathias, Ed. (2022), *Tradition and Adaptation: Interjurisdictional Perspectives on Inclusive Catholicism in 2022* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

³⁷ J. Mathias, Ed. (2022). *Revolutionary Church: A Sesquicentennial Remembrance of GomBurZa and a Celebration of the Church Birthed from the Nationalism They Inspired* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

- The ECC was the *only* jurisdiction that we highlighted during our 2022 Virtual Summer School—for being not merely an Independent Catholic jurisdiction of *clergy*, but a real “community of communities.” We enjoyed outstanding presentations by Francis Krebs, Mir Plemmons, Trish Sullivan Vanni and George von Stamwitz; Rosa Buffone and Donald Sutton also participated in this event. Y’all are “flippin’ alright!” [Applause.]

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Featured Presentation
**Forming a
Communion of Communities:
The Ecumenical Catholic Communion!**

Most Rev. Francis Krebs
Presiding Bishop

Mr. George von Stamwitz
Chancellor

Figure 13. A flyer from our 2022 Inclusive Catholic Summer School, featuring presentations by ECC Presiding Bishop Francis Krebs & Chancellor George von Stamwitz.

- Most recently, in September 2022, we shared a survey for Independent Catholic laity, and I would be remiss if I didn’t give a shout-out to the ECC community with the highest *per capita* response by lay people—and that award goes to (drumroll, please) Emmaus Ecumenical Catholic Communion in Oshkosh, Wisconsin! Y’all are “flippin’ alright!” [Applause.]

Ready for another “Pair and Share”? Now that I’ve bragged on the ECC, I’ll give you a chance: Turn to a person or two beside you, and, in 60 seconds, share the things you love most about the ECC. What do you most love about the ECC? On your mark, get set, go!

The ECC at 19 Years Old

Now, let's jump in and explore what we've learned these last three years about the place of the "constellation" that is the ECC within the "nighttime sky" of Independent Catholicism!

First, we want to acknowledge that the ECC is still young: Wikipedia suggests that you celebrated your 19th birthday last month, on September 19. That's significant in this movement, which is not known for longevity and for sustainable communities and ministries! That's right: You've come through your infancy and adolescence, but I'm imagining that you might still see some words and actions within the ECC that might characterize 19-year-olds. Neuroscientists tell us that the prefrontal cortex of the brain is not yet fully developed at age 19, inhibiting us from suppressing impulses and from organizing our behavior to reach out goals. A similar phenomenon might be true of young organizations, but it's beautiful to see and to celebrate the growth of the ECC during these 19 years, to see your proposed legislation at age 19, and to imagine the challenges that lie ahead for you.

Two Lions

As we look back on the past 19 years of the ECC, and as we look toward the next 19 years of the ECC (and the next 19 years after that), I'm reminded of the stories of 2 lions.

The first lion sang a song that went something like this. [Note: Due to copyright restrictions, the lyrics of the song of the Cowardly Lion in "The Wizard of Oz" are not reprinted here.]

Do we all recognize that song? It comes from the 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz," which was based on the 1900 children's fantasy novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.³⁸ It tells the story of a young lady named Dorothy, and she finds herself in a strange, new land called Oz. But she's not alone. Dorothy finds herself in Oz with her dog, Toto, and they soon meet two new friends: the Scarecrow, who needs a brain, and the Tin Man, who needs a heart.

³⁸ L.F. Baum (1900), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago, Illinois: George M. Hill Company).

And now the story gets good: Dorothy and Toto are walking along the Yellow Brick Road with the Scarecrow and Tin Man when they come to a dark, dark forest. And they begin imagining that this forest could be filled with...“lions and tigers and bears (oh my!), lions and tigers and bears (oh my!)” Suddenly, from behind a tree jumps the large, fierce Lion who lets out a bellowing roar! Do you remember the scene? The Lion scares Toto, causing Dorothy to slap the Lion and say, “You’re nothing but a cowardly lion!” And what happens from that moment on? We know him as the Cowardly Lion!



Figure 14. Bert Laahr as the Cowardly Lion, 1939, courtesy of WikiCommons.

This is my question for you: Do cowardly lions really jump out from behind trees, trying to scare people? Wouldn't a cowardly lion shudder in fear and hide behind the tree, hoping not to be seen? Instead, what we see here is that this Lion didn't have a clear sense of who he was, and was thus more easily influenced by the words and perceptions of others. ECC, it's important that you, at age 19, have a clear sense of who you are as a jurisdiction and as a “community of communities.”

When I think of the ECC at the young age 19, I also think of another lion. His story was told in the 1994 Disney film, “Lion King.” It's the story of a lion cub named Simba, whose father, Mufasa, was the king of the animal kingdom. So, when Mufasa died, naturally Simba was to succeed him – except that Simba's evil uncle, Scar, tried to kill him, and Simba ended up in the wilderness. There he met two new friends, Pumba and Timon, who convinced Simba to live a carefree life: “Hakuna matata!” Do you remember the story? The turning point comes one night, when Simba is walking beside a body of water. He hears the voice of his deceased father call to him from the heavens: “Simba, remember who you are!” He looks down into the water and what



Figure 15. Disney's “The Lion King,” July 8, 2010, courtesy of WikiCommons.

does he see? His image as king! And suddenly Simba remembers who he is.

ECC, my message to you today is simple: Remember who you are!

Remember Who You Are: A Church in Action!

After nearly three years of interjurisdictional collaboration, many of us from outside the ECC more clearly see who and what the ECC is. You, no doubt, more clearly see yourselves as well. Like Simba, we gather here at this synod to remember – and to celebrate – who you are!

ECC, remember who you are! Who you are might best be summarized in the theme of this Holy Synod: “Church in Action, *Iglesia en Acción*.” I’d like to focus today on those two distinguishing elements of the ECC: You are the Church, and you are in action!



Figure 16. The logo of the 2022 ECC Holy Synod.

The ECC is Church

Firstly, the ECC is Church. If Wikipedia is to be believed, the ECC may have some 10,000 members. If this is true, you’re larger than the little ole “so-called Jansenist Church of Holland”³⁹! If that’s true, Bishop Francis and Bishop Peter are a bigger deal than Archbishop Bernd and Archbishop Joris! (Don’t tell them I said that!)

What does it mean to be a church? Our English word, “church,” comes from a Greek word, *ekklesia*, which literally means the “assembly.” The church is not a building or a type of building. The church is not about clergy or about individuals sharing private prayers on the “streets corners” of cyberspace, where they can be heard and seen.⁴⁰ The Church is the people of God, plural, walking

³⁹ An obvious reference to the book by the same name by J.M. Neale.

⁴⁰ This is an obvious reference to Matthew 6:5, causing us to reflect on the many clergy in the Independent Catholic movement who direct private

together, breaking open the Word together, and breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine together.

Within the “nighttime sky” of Independent Catholicism, one of the things that makes the “constellation” of the ECC so unique is its number of laity and its esteem for laity. The *laity* are what make the ECC the “Big Dipper” of the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky”! You have a House of Laity! (How many Independent Catholic jurisdictions have that?) You have the people to justify structures and clergy and bishops. In our recent book, *Tradition & Adaptation*, Father Marek Bożek even suggests that the ECC, due to its laity and communities, is the only Independent Catholic jurisdiction in the United States that might justify having a bishop.⁴¹ Does it make sense to have clergy without laity? Does it make sense to call oneself a shepherd if one doesn’t have or smell like sheep?⁴² The ecclesial aberration of sheepless shepherds, which characterizes many corners of Independent Catholicism, is not found in the ECC! The ecclesial aberration of clergy celebrating mass alone in their living rooms, which characterizes many corners of Independent Catholicism—which would cause our ancestors in the faith to frown—is not the norm in the ECC! In fact, I imagine that those who’ve gone before us and who are now part of that great cloud of witnesses are smiling down on you, the ECC, and I imagine them saying, “Y’all are flippin’ alright!”

Those of us who are outside the ECC admire your model, where individual communities call their pastors, and where clusters of communities call their bishops. ECC, remember who you are: The

masses, often from their living rooms, into cyberspace—quite far from the early community of believers who gathered at sunrise on a weekly basis to celebrate their Risen Lord and to break bread together.

⁴¹ M. Bożek, in J. Mathias, Ed. (2022), *Tradition and Adaptation: Interjurisdictional Perspectives on Inclusive Catholicism in 2022* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 357.

⁴² I first spoke of the phenomenon of “sheepless shepherds” within Old/Independent Catholicism in J. Mathias (2019), *Extraordinary Celebrations, Extraordinary Growth* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 2. The concept of shepherds smelling like their sheep can be found in such works as L. Anderson (2002), *They Smell Like Sheep* (New York, New York: Howard Books) and Pope Francis (2017), *With the Smell of the Sheep* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books).

great gift and blessing of the ECC are your laity and your communities!

30 years ago, when I lived here in St. Louis, one of our formation directors, Father Hans Christofferson, was fond of saying, “Every gift comes with a challenge.” With the gift of laity and communities come several challenges as well. Shepherds, think of all the responsibilities that come with having sheep!

Allow me to get really personal with you for a moment. 90 years before I moved to Saint Louis, my great great great grandfather, Father Frederick Volm, served as a Roman Catholic priest at Saint Leo Roman Catholic Church, some two miles from here. Let that sink in for a moment. (Why am I a priest today? I often joke that it’s because the priesthood is in my blood!) I said that I’m from Ohio, so what was my great great great grandfather, Father Frederick Volm, doing in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis? Father Frederick, a German immigrant, was no longer welcomed in Ohio. When he was 46 years old, he visited the parish where my great great great grandmother, Susana Hoffbauer, a Belgian immigrant, served as the housekeeper of the rectory. She was 20 at the time, so there’s no need to imagine that what happened between them was entirely consensual. What was a dark secret in my family for 150 years resulted from the clerical abuse of power committed against a member of the People of God. For me, that encounter—likely a very unfortunate encounter for my great great great grandmother—is a metaphor of the many ways in which laity are not treasured by clergy today. Clergy, we fail to honor the people we serve when we see them as anything less than the tremendously-gifted People of God that they are! We abuse them when we don’t collaborate with them, when we don’t empower them, when we don’t listen to them and learn from them!

To be clear, I’m not pointing fingers: I know that when I point one finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at me. Instead, my message is simple: ECC, remember who you are! You are the Church—and there is no Church without the people, the *ekklesia*!

Findings from a September 2022 Survey of Independent Catholic Laity

Are you interested in listening to and learning from our laity? In September, we shared a survey with Independent Catholic laity. It

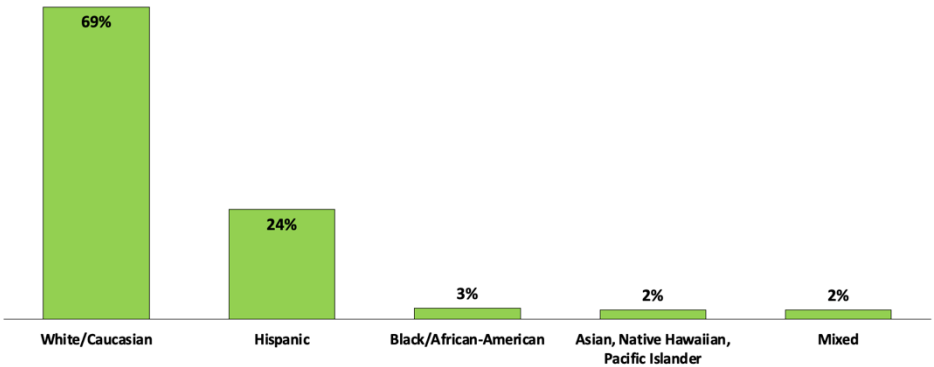
resulted from an August meeting of the pastors of the large, bishopless Independent Catholic communities in the U.S., where we agreed that we would replicate the research study of Dr. Julie Byrne, the author of *The Other Catholics*, among Independent Catholic laity. Nearly 250 lay people responded to our September survey, and I'll be honest: Outside of Emmaus Ecumenical Catholic Community in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, we had an underwhelming response from the ECC—but that also means that we now possess the opportunity of replicating the study in the future, and this time solely with ECC laity!

Are you sitting down? Are you ready for the responses from that first-of-its-kind survey of nearly 250 Independent Catholic laity?

Before we jump in and look at the data, we remember that we need to be careful about generalizing what we see here to the entire population of Independent Catholic laity in the U.S. What we see here is certainly represented of the four large, bishopless communities from which many of the responses come—so we'll speak of these data simply as representing this sample of respondents.

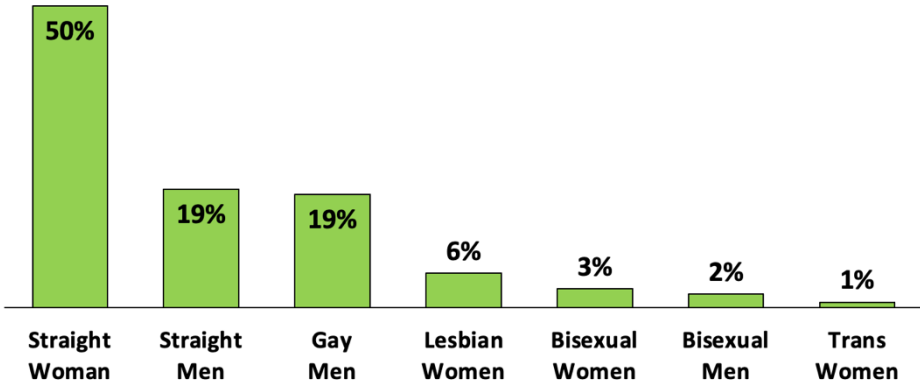
242 laypeople participated in this survey. Let's look at their demographics. As we see here, 69% of them are White, which is likely representative of our larger movement. Look around this room, we see that the ECC, too, is primarily comprised of White faces.

Race/Ethnicity of Lay Respondents



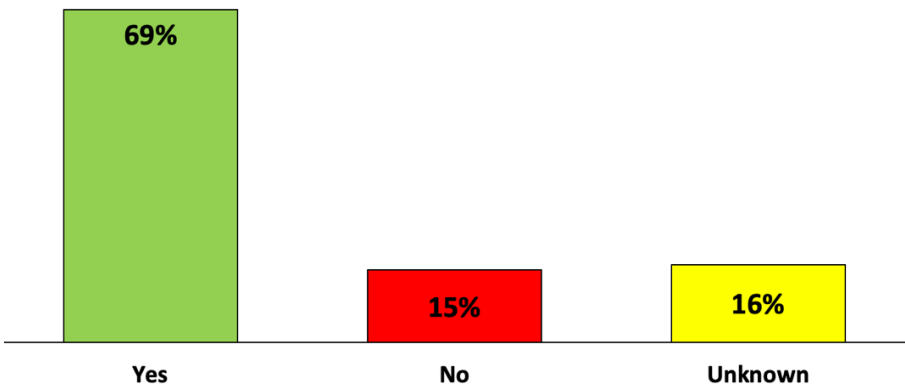
69% of respondents self-identify as straight, and 31% as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. There's no reason to think that this isn't largely representative of the ECC.

Sexual Orientation of Independent Catholic Lay Respondents



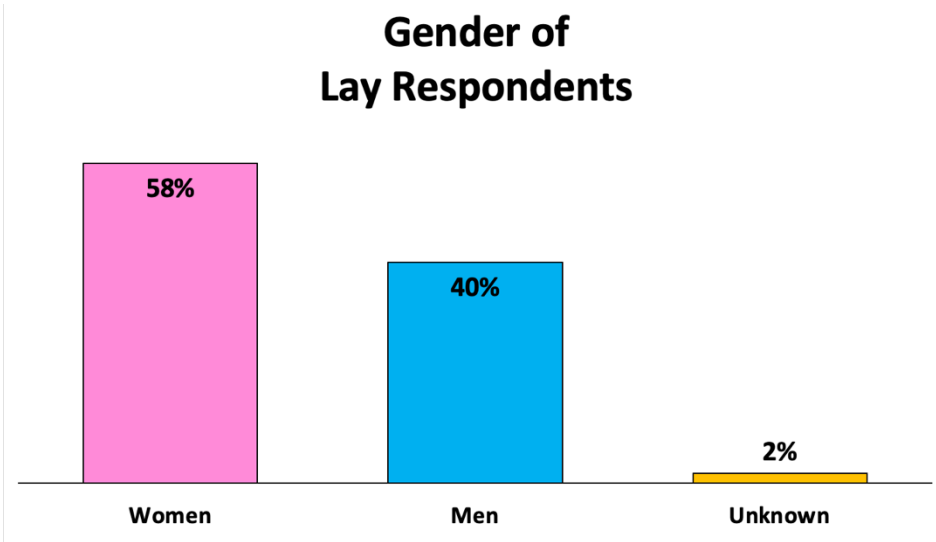
Interestingly, 69% of the laity in this sample are also former Roman Catholics. Sociologist Geert Hofstede speaks of culture as the “software of the mind,”⁴³ and we recognize that many people have come to us with a certain “programming” from the Roman Catholic culture.

Independent Catholic Lay Respondents Who Are Former Roman Catholics

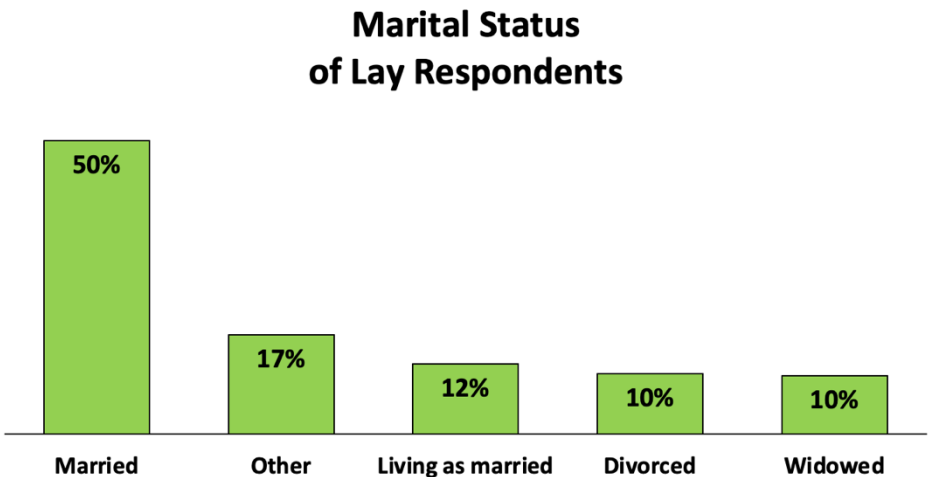


⁴³ G. Hofstede & G.J. Hofstede (2005), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York, New York: McGraw Hill).

58% of respondents are women, and 40% are men. If this is true of the ECC and/or of the larger Independent Catholic population, then we might expect to find more lay (and, in the ideal world, ordained) leaders who are women than men.

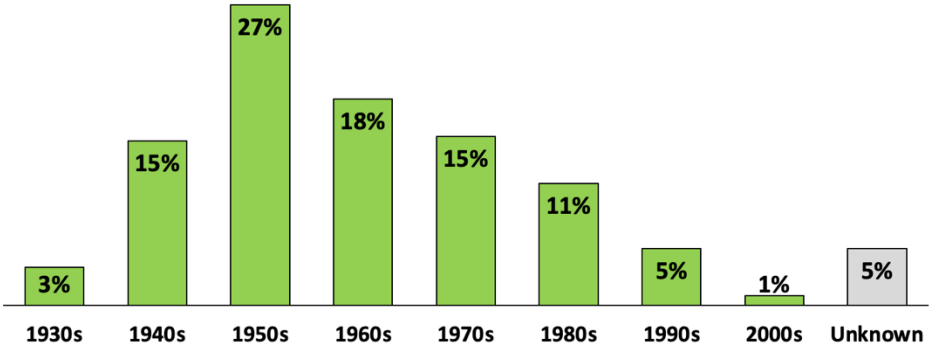


50% of respondents are married, 17% are single, 12% are living with another person outside of marriage, 10% are divorced, and 10% are widowed.



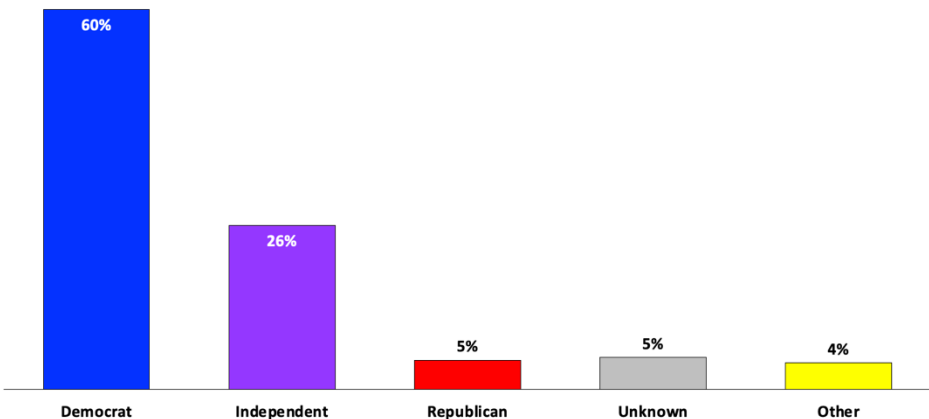
The age of respondents skews older, with a mean (or average) age of 59 and a median age of 61. Look around this room: There is no reason to believe that the ECC greatly differs from this.

Decade of Birth of Lay Respondents

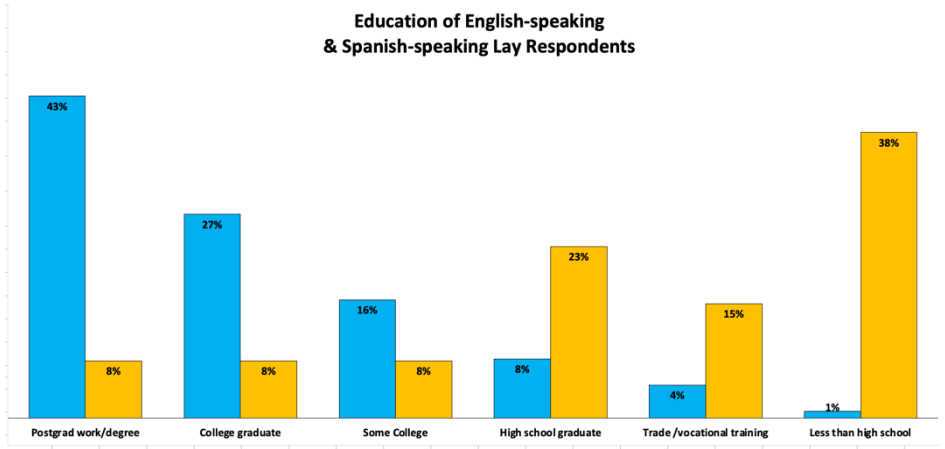


This is interesting: Let's look at our politics. At Holy Family, I'm fond of saying that "we check our politics at the door." Outside our church doors, 60% of respondents self-identify as Democrat, 25% as Independent, and 5% as Republican.

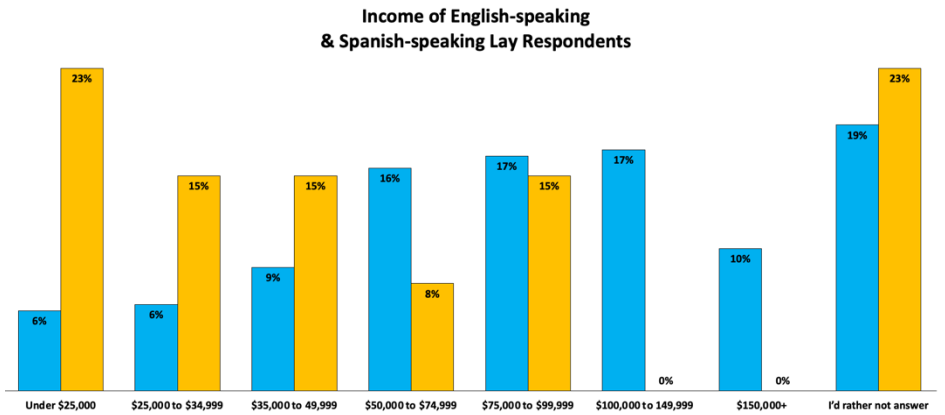
Political Self-identification of Lay Respondents



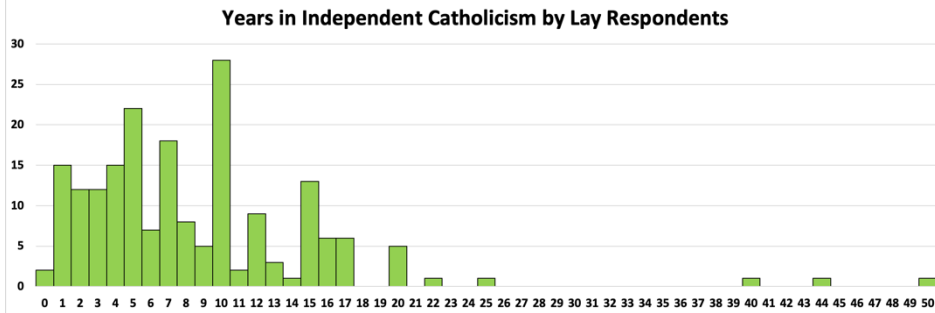
Here we see the education of respondents. When we examine these data disaggregated by language, we see that English-speaking respondents (the blue bars) are well-educated, with 70% being college graduates, while 61% of Spanish-speaking respondents have no studies beyond high school.



Not surprisingly, then, English-speaking respondents possess higher levels of income. This is witnessed in bilingual (English/Spanish) communities where Spanish-speaking persons often outnumber English-speaking persons, but where English-speaking persons financially sustain our ministries.

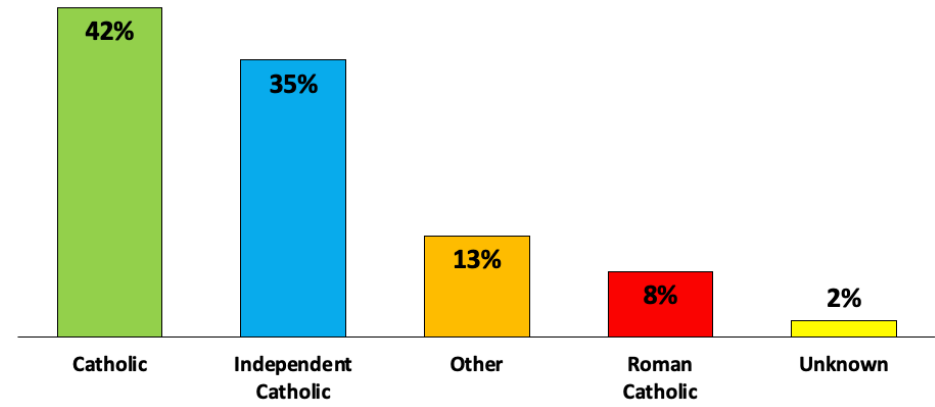


Respondents have been part of the Independent Catholic movement for an average of 8.5 years. This is no surprise, since various large, bishopless U.S. communities have existed for just over ten years now.

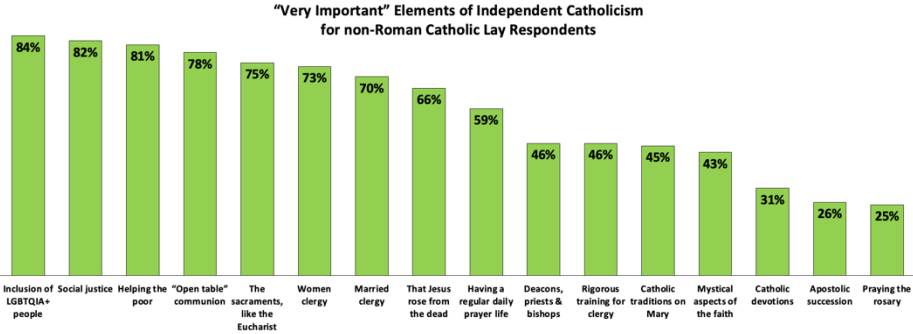


In addition to Dr. Byrne’s study, we asked respondents how they self-identify. Here you see that 35% self-identify as Independent Catholic, compared with 42% who self-identify simply as Catholic. This lends some support to my thesis that many Independent Catholics see themselves as “Catholic-but-not-Roman-Catholic,” that is, as more “Catholic” than “Independent Catholic.” 13% of respondents self-identify as Roman Catholic, and the 13% of “Other” include such self-identifications as Old Catholic, Polish Catholic, Christian Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Protestant, “Post-Catholic,” “Recovering Catholic” and the three respondents who self-identify as Ecumenical Catholic.

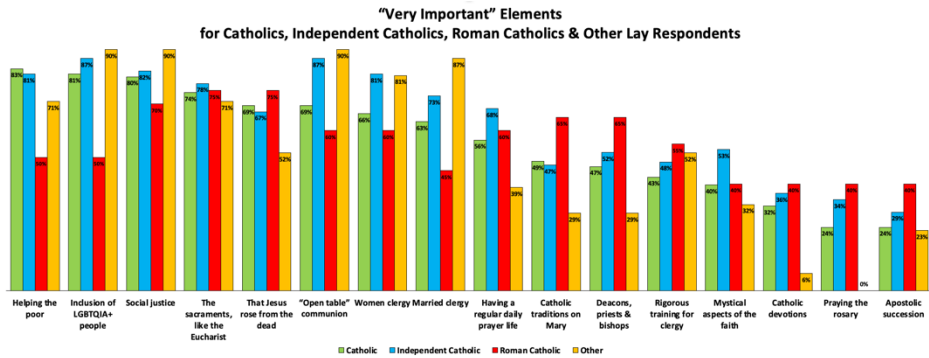
Self-identification of Lay Respondents



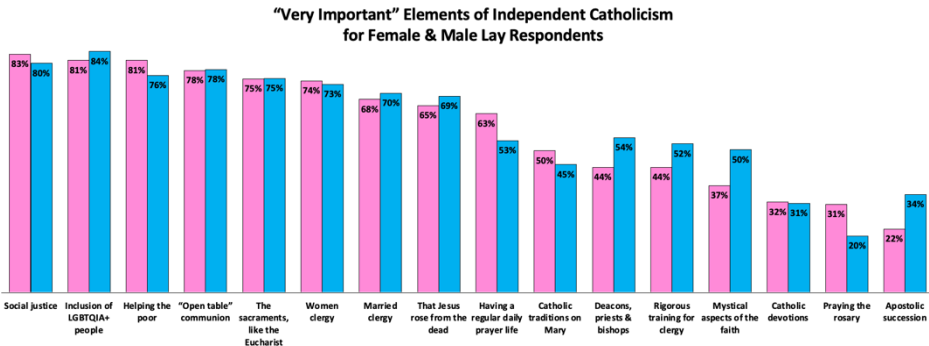
Which elements of Independent Catholicism are “very important” to laity? Here we see that the highest percentages of respondents agree that inclusivity, social justice, and helping the poor are “very important.”



When we disaggregate these responses by self-identification, we see that higher numbers of Roman Catholics (the red bars) see hierarchy, Catholic traditions and apostolic succession as “very important.”

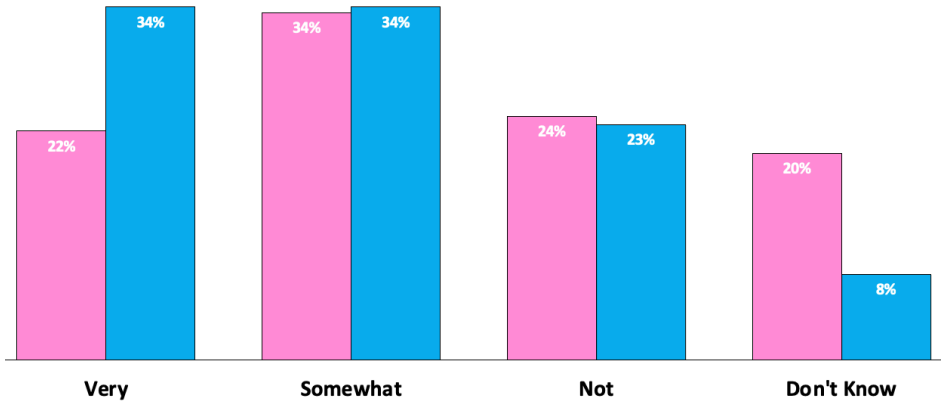


We can also see differences in beliefs by gender.



Let’s drill down on apostolic succession. Here we see that apostolic succession is considered “very important” to a higher percentage of men than women.

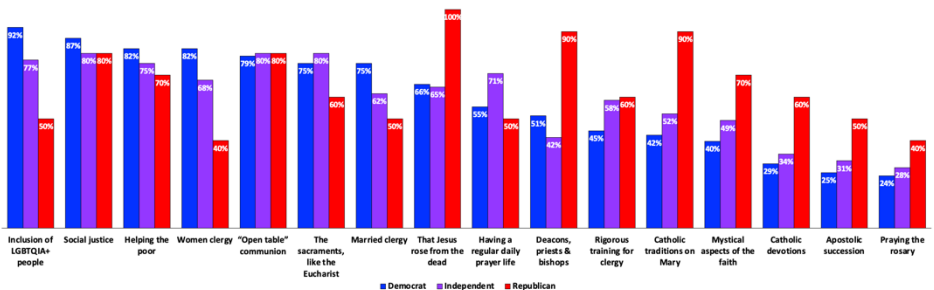
The Importance of Apostolic Succession for Female & Male Lay Respondents



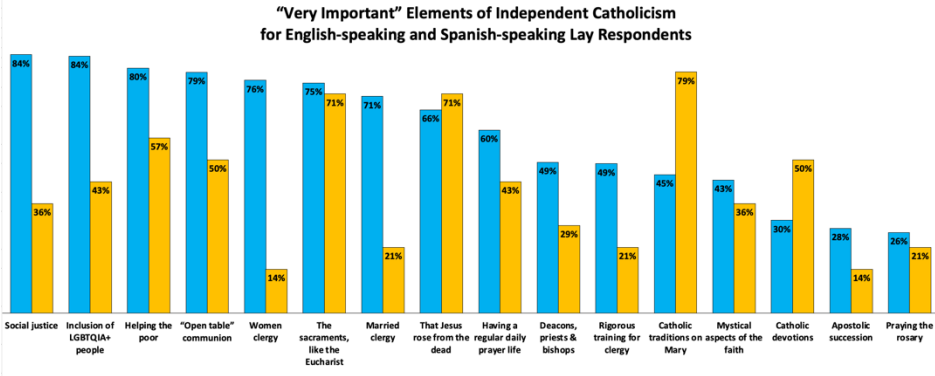
As the next bar chart shows, apostolic succession is also more important to Republicans than Democrats. Conversely, 23% of lay respondents tell us that apostolic succession is “not important” for them. Let’s come back to apostolic succession later.

We look at political differences: Democrats tend to esteem inclusivity, social justice, helping the poor and women clergy as “very important,” while Republicans see Jesus’ resurrection, hierarchy and tradition as “very important.”

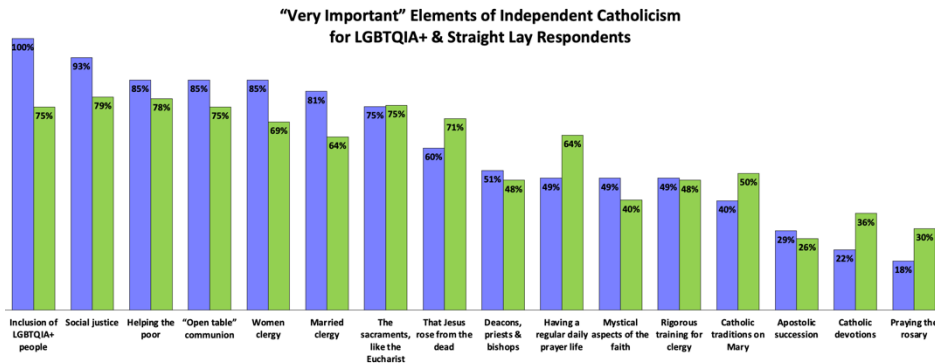
“Very Important” Elements for Democratic, Independent & Republican Lay Respondents



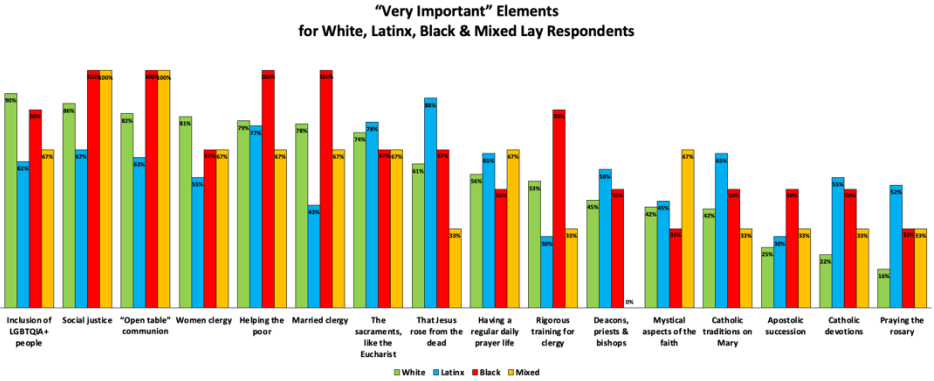
When we disaggregate these data by language group, we see that Spanish-speaking respondents deem Catholic sacraments, traditions on Mary, and devotions as “very important,” as well as their desire that their children grow up to be Catholic (63%, versus 33% among English-speaking respondents).



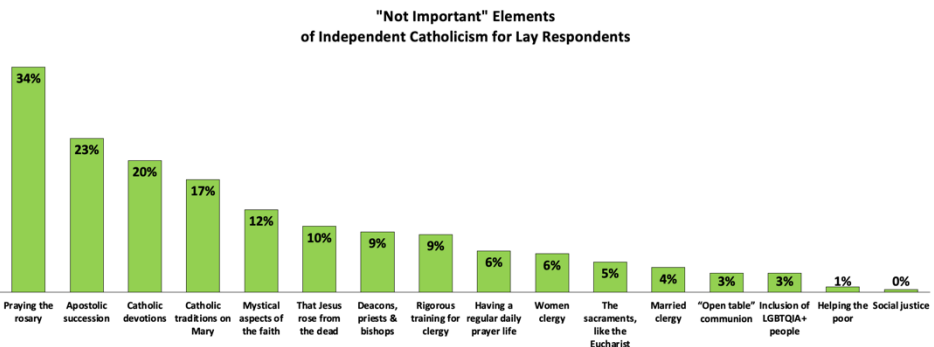
When we disaggregate by sexual orientation, we find that those who self-identify as LGBTQIA+ esteem inclusion (100%), social justice, open table communion, helping the poor, women clergy and married clergy, while those who self-identify as straight tend to respond in higher percentages than LGBTQIA+ persons on such factors as belief in Jesus’ resurrection, the importance of daily prayer, Catholic traditions on Mary, Catholic devotions, and praying the rosary.



When we disaggregate by race/ethnicity, we see that respondents who self-identify as White are more interested in inclusion, social justice, open communion, women clergy and married clergy. Latinx respondents believe more strongly believe in the importance of Jesus' resurrection, hierarchy, Catholic traditions on Mary, Catholic devotions and praying the rosary. Black respondents more strongly believe in the importance of helping the poor, married clergy, and rigorous training for clergy. Respondents of mixed race more strongly believe in the importance of a regular daily prayer life and the mystical elements of our faith.

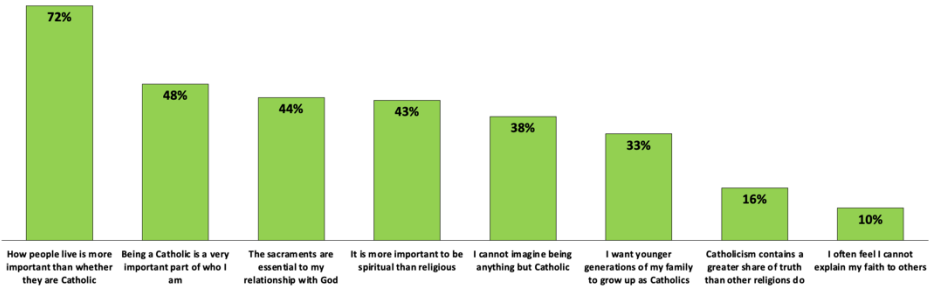


Which elements of Independent Catholicism from Dr. Byrne's study are most widely considered "not important" to this sample of respondents? Catholic devotions, praying the rosary, and apostolic succession.



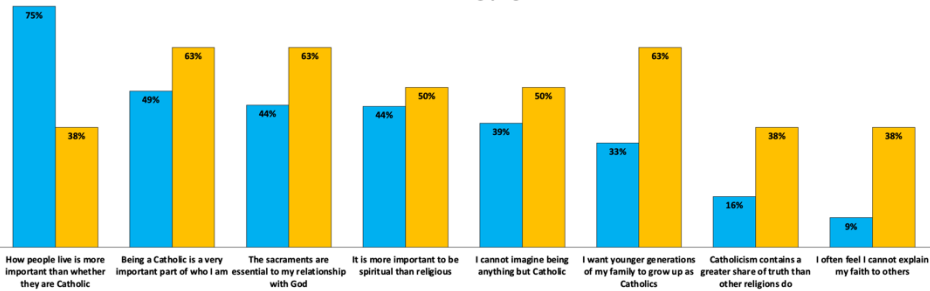
From Dr. Byrne’s study, we tested a number of beliefs with this sample. Here you can see that they most strongly agree with the statement that how people live is more important than whether they are Catholic.

Beliefs with which Independent Catholic Lay Respondents Strongly Agree



When we disaggregate beliefs by language groups, we see that the only belief held by a higher percentage of English-speaking respondents (the blue bars) is that how people live is more important than whether they are Catholic. Higher percentages of Spanish-speaking respondents agree on the importance of all other beliefs.

Beliefs with which English-speaking & Spanish-speaking Lay Respondents Most Strongly Agree



This is merely a foretaste of the results of this September study of Independent Catholic laity. More will come after the pastors of our large, bishopless U.S. communities review these data at their next meeting on October 25. With this survey, though, it’s as if the laity of our movement are saying to us: Remember who we are!

Ready to “Pair and Share”? Turn to a person or two beside you and share in 20 seconds what most strikes you about these data from our recent study of Independent Catholic laity. What struck you most about these findings? On your mark, get set, go!

If indeed its laity and communities are the great blessing of the ECC, we must listen to them and remember who they are!

Church Inaction

The theme of this synod is not merely “Church.” It’s “Church in Action”! Similarly, the ECC is not merely Church. It’s not merely an *ekklesia*, a great assembly of people. It’s a people...in action! It’s moving. It’s doing something. Its wheels are in motion, and it has left the station!⁴⁴

Before we talk about “Church in Action,” though, let’s talk about church inaction. We can likely all think of examples of inaction in the Church. I was ordained in the Roman Catholic Church less than a year before that church’s clergy sexual abuse scandal was made public: That was a case study in Church inaction! But let’s be honest: A lot of inaction characterizes the Independent Catholic movement, too. Not all the “stars” in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky” seem to be moving!

Much of our inaction as a movement results from an inward, rather than outward, focus.

In a word, it results from self-absorption, from “navel-gazing.” We borrow that phrase from the Greeks, whose word, *omphaloskepsis*, literally means “navel examination.” Eastern spiritual traditions believed that the navel was the site of the *nabhi*, one of the body’s most powerful chakras. The Greeks caught on to this, and the omphalopsychians of Mount Athos strove to experience otherworldly joy by gazing at their own umbilical region and dialoguing with the “Divine” that is there!



Figure 17. A 2nd-century Roman statue of navel-gazing satyrs, January 16, 2010, Louvre, photo by Gregg Tavares, courtesy of WikiCommons.

⁴⁴ L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 75.

Are you ready for a bit of exercise: Look at your navel. Now, without lifting your eyes from your navel, look at your neighbor. You can't do it!

We see Independent Catholic navel-gazing all the time in the topic *de jour* on social media, which propels us toward navel-gazing and away from our mission and ministry. Last week, for instance, the navel-gazing topic *de jour* was whether bishops should wear their pectoral crosses above or below the chasuble. I often inwardly laugh and/or roll my eyes when I see these conversations arise, and I'll admit that I'm often tempted to opine – my personal peeves include red slippers, fiddleback vestments, gloves, lace and rings – but then I remind myself that whether bishops wear their pectoral crosses inside or outside the chasuble does not advance the presence of the *malkuth Yahweh*, the reigning God, in our world. Nor do these things lead to growth in our movement!

ECC, our time is limited: Will we use it writing and/or arguing about such minutia? Will we miss the “forest” for the “trees”? Historically, we have broken from traditions that are steeped in legalism and rigidity and that fixate on such details: Do we really want to spend time fixating on the “flesh pots” from which many (but not all) of us have come⁴⁵?

Before we use social media to project into cyberspace our own thoughts on such “controversies,” we do well to remember who we are, and we do well to listen to our laity. They likely see such matters as “very unimportant”!

Again, I'm not pointing fingers. In fact, I confess that I've fallen prey to my own share of navel-gazing and that I've inadvertently encouraged it within our movement – even as recently as September. Perhaps you've read the September/October issue of *Extraordinary Catholics* magazine: In my desire to give voice to large number of people from throughout our movement, I made the decision to publish an article on apostolic succession by my friend, Fr. Marek Bożek. (I told you we'd return to apostolic succession.) He submitted an article for publication, and our team edited it, so as to reduce the possibility of confusion by clergy and laity alike. Needless to say, the unedited version was released on social media two days before the magazine appeared, and our laity (at least at Holy Family) were

⁴⁵ Exodus 16:3.

confused by his words and by the subsequent firestorm of comments on social media. “Utrecht doesn’t consider our bishops to be valid?” “Do they deem our sacraments—including Holy Orders—to be invalid as well?” At Holy Family, we invited Father Marek for a robust conversation at our Holy Family Theological Institute, to help our lay and ordained leaders to understand the issues involved, but I’m aware of the attention that I and we drew to our Independent Catholic “navel”—to something that many respondents in our September survey deem to be “not important”!

For the sake of those who haven’t yet seen that recorded conversation from our Holy Family Theological Institute, I’ll summarize our conclusions here. Isn’t it true that, even if the lines of apostolic succession of Arnold Harris Mathew and Joseph Rene Vilatte are eliminated from the “pedigrees” of our bishops, they have enough remaining valid lines of succession left to support claims of valid sacraments within our tradition? Why are we so thirsty for validation from the Roman Catholic Church (which consider Anglican and Aglipayan orders and sacraments as invalid as well) and/or why do we place so much on the words of the little ole “so-called Jansenist Church of Holland”⁴⁶—a church that is smaller than the ECC? Why didn’t the churches of the Netherlands and Switzerland “do their homework” before consecrating these men, why did they defend Mathew after his consecration, and don’t they subscribe to the traditional Catholic belief that sacraments, once performed, cannot be undone or repealed? Yikes, we’ve gone farther down the “rabbit hole” of our Independent Catholic “navel-gazing”!

But wait: We remember that the Cyprianic perspectives on the transference of apostolic succession, with which the ECC sides (where apostolic succession is only shared within the context of community), is very different from the Augustinian view, which is more akin to a mechanical transference of apostolic succession through the laying on of hands, even by an individual (a seemingly shamanistic act that has corrupted the understanding of the ancient Church and cheapened the episcopacy). Wait: We just went farther down the “rabbit hole” of our Independent Catholic “navel-gazing”!

And aware of the Cyprianic and Augustinian views on apostolic succession, we now see a theoretical framework for two classes of

⁴⁶ An obvious reference to the book by the same name by J.M. Neale.

Independent Catholic bishops: of those Independent Catholic bishops (like the ECC's bishops) who serve communities, versus the "sheepless shepherds" who characterize many corners of the Independent Catholic world. And now we understand the New Catholic Community's controversial stand in March that bishops "check their miters at the door" and not exercise episcopal functions within the NCC. What are we doing? Do you see how far we've gone down the "rabbit hole" of our Independent Catholic "navel-gazing"?

That is church...inaction! This is not church! We do well to ask ourselves: What growth has resulted from the Independent Catholic scramble for apostolic succession through so many *sub conditione* consecrations of the past? What growth has resulted from the creation of beautiful episcopal coats of arms and extensive codes of canon law? (Full disclosure: For 6.5 years, Holy Family was part of a jurisdiction with a fine-enough coat of arms and with 993 canons to govern four geographical dioceses under a single archbishop—factors that did nothing to contribute to that jurisdiction's growth during those 6.5 years.)

To borrow a phrase from our friend, Father Jim Farris, sometimes we tend to "burn the muffins." We have various successful ministries within our movement. Rather than learn from them and replicate them, fashioning the beautiful "cake" that we could be creating, we're "burning the muffins"! Indeed, any business that were so inwardly-focused as the Independent Catholic movement would fail! So, let's listen to the laity of our movement, and let's not confuse church inaction with a Church in action!

Church in Action

As we lift our eyes from our movement in itself, to those whom we serve, we do well to remember the example of Saint Willibrord. Why is Willibrord so esteemed within the Ultrajectine tradition? What did he do, that my great great great great grandfather—and likely many others of our ancestors—were named for him? Because he was a navel gazer? No!

Saint Willibrord embodied what it means to be...a Church in action! He exemplified evangelization. He personified what we celebrate each Sunday when, after being nourished by Word and Sacrament, we hear those words: *Missa est!* You are sent! Go out and

be what you have received: the Body of Christ! Go out and be who we are called to be: the Church in action!

I'm fond of the story that's told of the Society of Friends, the Quakers. For those who may not know, their gatherings are often characterized by silent prayer together. You can imagine the surprise of the woman who visited a congregation of the Society of Friends one Sunday. With all the people there, praying in silence, she wondered when their service would begin, so she quietly asked the person nearest her: "What time does the service begin?" The response: "When our prayer ends, our service begins." That's a Church in action: We gather to pray, and then we are sent out into the world, to begin our service there!

Our friends of the Old Catholic tradition emphasize this in their highlighting of an essential element of our Catholic tradition: *diakonia*, service! Think back to our September survey of laity: Those whom we serve strongly believe in the importance of service, of *diakonia*, mission and ministry! I think of our Independent Catholic community (or Old Catholic community, as they prefer to think of themselves) in Ridgewood, New York: Moreso than many other communities, they combine prayer and service. They tend to the spiritual and physical needs of those whom they serve, thus bringing the *mal'kuth Yahweh*, the reigning God, to this world in a very palpable way. That's Church in action!

Perhaps our sisters and brothers of our Spanish-language communities have a better handle on this, since so many of their songs speak of what it means to be a Church in action. In one popular song, for instance, they pray and sing: *Juntos como hermanos, miembros de una iglesia, vamos caminando al encuentro del Señor*. (Together as siblings, members of the same church, we are walking toward an encounter with the Lord.) They are in motion! They are in action! The third verse of the song makes this clear: *La Iglesia en marcha está, a un mundo nuevo vamos ya, donde reinará el amor, donde reinará la paz*. (The Church is marching on toward a new world where love and peace will reign.) It's a similar sentiment of action to what we hear in the English song: "When the saints go marching in." As a Church in action, we're moving together, marching together toward the reigning God who continues to proleptically break into our world through us! With its many communities of empowered lay people, nowhere in our movement is this better captured than in the ECC!

There's a lesser-known song by Father James Marchionda, which was brought to my attention by Bishop Kedda: "Becoming What We Pray." This is one of those rare songs that really captures what we are about as a Church in action. Listen to Father Marchionda's lyrics. [Note: Due to copyright restrictions, the lyrics of Father Marchionda's song are not reprinted here. I encourage you to find the lyrics online.]

Sisters and brothers, we need to become what we pray! Then we will see the fruits of our outward focus, not only in numerical growth, but also in the amount of light that shines from the many "stars" and "constellations" of our movement! When we are a Church in action, we will shine more brightly in the Independent Catholic nighttime sky, and we will be the "light of the world" that Jesus called us to be!⁴⁷

The Ecumenism of the ECC

I'm not done bragging on the ECC. The ECC is a church, the ECC is in action, but one other characteristic that makes the ECC unique among the other "constellations" in the Independent Catholic nighttime sky is the fact that the ECC is...ecumenical! The Ecumenical Catholic Communion truly lives up to its name! The ECC doesn't just "talk the talk." It "walks the walk" and is on the leading edge of ecumenism.

In a movement characterized by what I've called an "island pathology,"⁴⁸ the ECC is building bridges! In his work, *Islands and Bridges*, Father Libardo asks: What would Venice be like without its 400 bridges, or what would Amsterdam be like without its 1,200 bridges?⁴⁹ I dare say that the ECC has usurped the traditional title of the bishop of Rome, the *pontifex maximus*; the ECC is filled with all sorts of *ponitifces maximi*, supreme bridge builders!

You are building bridges. You are living the *communio* ecclesiology that is so important in the Old Catholic tradition. You are fostering communion within and without: Your intracommunion is evident

⁴⁷ Matthew 5:14.

⁴⁸ J. Mathias, "Preface" in L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), ii.

⁴⁹ L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 12

between ECC communities, and your intercommunion with others outside the ECC is palpable.

When we look at the Independent Catholic nighttime sky, we might be tempted to think that Independent Catholics are merely “Catholic but not Roman Catholic,” that we are merely “Vatican-free Catholics.” Too often we overemphasize the independence that characterizes our movement and is even found in our name. We are not and we cannot be *episcopi vagantes* or *clerici vagantes*, free spirits with no accountability to one another, or to those who’ve come before us and after us. We can’t use our independence as a pretext to separate ourselves from the ecclesial reality of the Church.⁵⁰ Living in such a way puts at risk our very identity as Catholics!

Again, I’m not pointing finger: After all, I pastor a bishopless community!⁵¹ I also recognize the importance of being in communion with others, which is why I respect and admire the intracommunion and intercommunion of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion in a movement that too often overemphasizes the mechanical, Augustinian understanding of apostolic succession. We can all think of instances where Independent Catholic bishops and clergy collaborated for some time, then, because of some disagreement, took their “toys” and went to play in their own “sandbox.” Independent Catholicism is not unique in this respect: At our virtual summer school this year, we learned of the split between the Roman Catholic Womenpriests and the recently-formed U.S. entity, the Association of Roman Catholic Womenpriests. Then in August, at a more macro level, we saw the split in the worldwide Methodist Church of 13 million members over the church’s teaching on sexuality. Even the Roman Catholic press wonders whether the center of its church will hold around the much more progressive bishop of Rome, who is deemed heretical by those who pine for a continuation of the conservative tendencies of his predecessors. Certainly, we don’t judge the hearts of others; we simply note this human tendency toward splintering. Here in these United States of America, we may be less attuned to this. Father Libardo has noted how the U.S., unlike

⁵⁰ This is a sentiment that I shared in *Islands & Bridges*, i-ii.

⁵¹ I have pointed out in the past that I *am* a bishop in the original sense of that word, as an “overseer” of a local community. See, for instance, J. Mathias (2022) *Tradition and Adaptation: Interjurisdictional Perspectives on Inclusive Catholicism in 2022* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 64.

Italy (where he spent his adult life), is filled with all sorts of Christian churches populating the same neighborhoods.⁵² As Bishop Cathy Chalmers of the Ascension Alliance points out: “Sometimes we overuse our energy to be schismatic. [Our challenge thus lies in saying:] Let’s be diverse without splitting.”⁵³

From an outsider’s perspective, it seems that the ECC has largely resisted this temptation to splinter. Instead, at least from this outsider’s perspective, it seems the members of the ECC continue to come closer together. You’re coming together within your jurisdiction, which is evident at this Holy Synod. You’re coming together with other members of the National Council of Church. And now the ECC is on the leading edge of drawing together the bishops of the Catholic Bishops Forum, with support from the Episcopal Church. These are sources of great light within our movement! I, for instance, am particularly heartened to see the bishops of the Catholic Bishops Forum coming together around its pentilateral—the Lambeth Quadrilateral, with an additional element of synodality or “walking together”—and I wonder how we might continue to multiply such efforts toward unity.

It’s heartening to see that your ECC House of Bishops continues to “walk together,” despite the drama that some of us, as outsiders, occasionally see on social media.

It’s heartening to see how various members of the ECC involve themselves in their state councils of churches.

At a regional level, it’s heartening to see the intracommunion of the ECC Rocky Mountain Region, where communities are partnering, discerning and making decisions together. It’s also heartening to see the intercommunion of that same region with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

In the words of Bishop Denise, all of these encounters are like family reunions: We recognize that we share DNA, that we are members of the same family of origin, even if we find ourselves on different “branches”!

⁵² L. Rocha (2019), *Islands and Bridges: Three Essays & an Interview on Independent Catholicism in the United States* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 50-51.

⁵³ C. Chalmers, “The Greatest Challenges for Old/Independent Catholic Clergy & Laity in the United States,” in J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2020), *A New Way of Being Catholic* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 19.

All of us do well to ask ourselves what we are doing at the local level to achieve greater intracommunion among ourselves and greater intercommunion with others. We are not called to be islands. Perhaps this synod, this “walking together,” might be an occasion for us to challenge ourselves to connect with others—both within the ECC and without. (Should you have an interest in the latter, our Extraordinary Catholics group offers multiple opportunities, including virtual happy hours, clergy coffee chats, think tanks and interjurisdictional gatherings. Join us!)

I bring to your attention the two schools of thought on greater interjurisdictional collaboration within our movement at present. We saw these two schools of thought emerge at our first interjurisdictional gathering in Austin in 2019. One school of thought is characterized in the words of Father Kevin Przybylski of Rabbouni Catholic Community in Louisville, Kentucky, who shared his hope that we might find more ways to continue “coming together without coming together.” Hence, our many interjurisdictional efforts since 2019. The other school of thought was characterized by Father Mike Lopez of Ridgewood, New York at that same gathering: that we work toward the formation of a meta organization, an “umbrella” organization that might bring us together in closer unity with one another. *La unión hace la fuerza*, we say in Spanish. Unity creates strength. Or, as the scriptures say, “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”⁵⁴ This school of thought has led to the largely-failed attempt for a hoped-for New Catholic Community, as well as the dream shared at our interjurisdictional gathering in May of a future “constitutional convention.” In this spirit, we’ll also host our next interjurisdictional gathering in Phoenix, Arizona in November, to discuss greater unity within our movement.

With respect to unity, the ECC has been a model and blessing within our movement. Indeed, it has been beautiful to hear many of you ask, “Why do we need a New Catholic Community? We already have the ECC!” The ECC is no doubt the greatest meta organization of local communities in the U.S. Independent Catholic movement at present. If only we could get everyone to come to the ECC and join “your” team, rather than engage in the messy work of creating something new of which all might feel part!

⁵⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:12.

The ecumenical spirit, the catholicity and the communion of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion are all very attractive. Even I have to admit: If I and/or Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin were to join another Independent Catholic jurisdiction in the future, the ECC would likely be one of the most natural fits for Holy Family and for other similarly-large Independent Catholic communities.

The Challenge of Maintaining Unity

One of the beautiful elements of the ECC is the way in which its communities covenant with one another. You make mutual commitments to one another, as people do in the sacrament of Marriage. You walk together in good times and in bad, despite the things that people sometimes say and do (or fail to say and do), despite the growing pains and changes over time, and despite the drama that might be expected from any 19-year-old – which brings me to one of my last outsider observations: Unity and communion are fragile things. We all know this. It’s the reason that 50% of marriages end in divorce. We’ve even seen this fracturing of unity in our civil discourse as a nation during these past two years, since the general election of November 2020. Since 1776, our seal as a communion of colonies (or states) has included the words *E pluribus unum* (From many, one). The ECC, it seems, lives such communion. But, just as Benjamin Franklin observed that “[we] have a republic, if [we] can keep it,” the ECC possesses a communion...if you can keep it. If the ECC is to celebrate another 19 years and another 19 years after that, I encourage you to continue to focus on your intracommunion with one another. Our world needs the ECC, but the ECC will be of no use in this world if it goes the way of the now-dissolved TOCCUSA. In ministry, we tell our clergy and volunteers that their families come first; in the same way, keep your ECC “family” first, and focus on its health and preservation.

Communion is no easy thing to maintain: There are so many factors in our world, in our society and in the human psyche that work against it! There’s a volatile element in each of us, and let’s be honest: Our personalities sometimes get in the way. We aggrrieve others, and other aggrieve us—and our communion dissolves. In community organizing, we say, “There are no permanent friends, and

there are no permanent enemies.” Human relationships are dynamic and need to be continually stirred into flame.⁵⁵

Now that the ECC is celebrating 19 years, I’m imagining that you are quickly arriving at a fork in the road. Organizationally, as entities mature, they evolve toward greater structure, and the ECC no doubt has greater structure today—with its House of Laity, House of Pastors, House of Bishops, etc.—than it had 19 years ago. Such structure characterizes larger and more stable institutions, and the Roman Church, for instance, could not exist as the worldwide organization of influence that it is without such structure.

Like various manifestations of the early Church, it seems that the ECC has esteemed unity over uniformity. The early Church is often characterized as a “walking together” of unique, diverse, autonomous communities. Within 300 years, though, imperial forces drove the Church toward universal uniformity. In our interjurisdictional conversations, Father Frank Quintana often speaks of this imperial Church. You can also read more about this “Constantinian virus” in Father Len Schreiner’s article of the same name in the May/June issue of *Extraordinary Catholics* magazine.⁵⁶

That drive toward uniformity would reach its apex at the 16th-century Council of Trent, which settled the scriptural canon, set the number of sacraments at seven, defined the Eucharist, and established the seminaries that would ensure uniformity of teachings throughout the Church. It is no coincidence that Independent Catholicism would rise from the ashes of this context within 160 years of the Council of Trent—or that Old Catholicism would be birthed as a result of the Roman Church’s consolidation of power in 1870. To be clear, we need not parrot the “Mickey Mouse Club.” They forged their “new way of being Catholic” largely in the 1850s and 1860s, and we must critically reflect on and forge our own “new way of being Catholic” today.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ 2Timothy 1:6.

⁵⁶ Available at www.extraordinarycatholics.faith/magazine.

⁵⁷ The title of the proceedings of our first interjurisdictional gathering in 2019 remind us that we are creating our own “new way of being Catholic,” but we would be remiss if we neglected to acknowledge the view, according to the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches, that the Roman Church, too, created its own “new way of being Catholic” beginning in the 1850s and

Within the ECC, you will undoubtedly need to continue to discern the extent to which you will esteem and celebrate your differences and diversity, versus the extent to which you will drive toward uniformity. Differences between individuals and communities are to be expected. The point of pre-marital counseling is not to drive a couple toward uniformity with one another, but to help them manage their differences in ways that will allow their love to flourish as they attempt to walk together for years to come. As you continue to mature and as you continue to strive toward unity, I caution you: Social media is not the place to work out your differences. The people in the pews don't need the drama, and those of us outside the ECC don't need to know of your "family problems." Who among us would counsel an engaged or married couple to air their grievances against one another on social media? Instead, be patient with one another, practice all those values that we preach, and remember the wise words of Sister Theresa Koernke, who constantly reminded us as young seminarians at the Washington Theological Union that "we earn our salvation through one another"!

Indigenous People's Day

I'm almost done bragging on the ECC—but I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the significance of this day and its significance for the Independent Catholic movement. Whereas U.S. society has historically "canonized" Cristoforo Colombo, esteeming so many myths about him and overlooking his brutal treatment of the people he encountered, and whereas so many churches have constructed sword-wielding societies in his name,⁵⁸ we recognize today as Indigenous People's Day, an opportunity for us to esteem and celebrate the peoples who inhabited this land before the peoples of many of our ancestors committed unspeakable atrocities against them. Here in Saint Louis, we honor the Osage, Miami, Sioux and Haudenosaunega. Here in Missouri, we also honor the Chickasaw, Delaware, Illini, Kanza, Ioway, Otoe-Missoria, Quapaw, Sac & Fox and Shawnee. Many of you know and honor the people who once

culminating at the Vatican Council of 1870, which resulted in the reaction of "Old Catholicism."

⁵⁸ Full disclosure: Though I lack a sword or any other symbol of violence, I'm told that I'm a lifetime fourth-degree member of the Knight of Columbus.

inhabited the lands where you live. (If not, today is a tremendous opportunity to research them!)

The way that we have treated our indigenous siblings in history, and the way that we have sinned in honoring and celebrating their oppressors and the many myths that surround them, leads to our great confession: that “[we] have greatly sinned in [our] thoughts and in [our] words, in what [we] have done and in what [we] have failed to do, through [our] fault, through [our] fault, through [our] most grievous fault”

In Latin America, today is known as *el día de la raza* (Day of the People) or *el día del respeto a la diversidad cultural* (Day of Respect for Cultural Diversity), and the symbol for this day in many places is the rainbow – a symbol of unity in diversity! Bishop Denise has spoken of our unity in diversity as a beautiful mosaic comprised of so many colorful pieces.⁵⁹ Similarly, I have spoken of the marvelous stained-glass window that is the Independent Catholic movement, allowing God’s light to shine through our many, diverse pieces of glass.⁶⁰

As we celebrate Indigenous People’s Day, we recognize that what we have done to our indigenous siblings is part of a larger human dynamic that includes what we have done to other spiritual siblings, including our sisters. As a movement, we bear less complicity in the atrocities committed against indigenous peoples – but we bear much responsibility for our participation in the continuation of other social sins, like patriarchy and misogyny, and of such ecclesial sins as clericalism.

The ECC’s Esteem for Our Sisters

As we all try to figure out this new way of being Catholic, I want to honor the ECC for its inclusion of our sisters, for its esteem for our sisters. The ECC possesses strong women lay leaders. The ECC possesses strong women pastors. The ECC’s Leadership Council is comprised solely of women. The nominating committee for your next ECC presiding bishop was comprised almost exclusively of women.

⁵⁹ D. Donato, “A Homily for the Mass of the Holy Spirit,” in J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2020), *A New Way of Being Catholic* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 7

⁶⁰ J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2020), *A New Way of Being Catholic* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 39.

The ECC possesses three women in its House of Bishops. These are rare elements in the Independent Catholic movement, which is still largely characterized by several “good ol’ boys clubs” and which is still often seduced by patriarchy, hierarchy and clericalism. These elements speak to the ECC’s willingness to be on the right side of history, atoning for sins of the past, and striving to fully live Jesus’ “discipleship of equals.”⁶¹ Don’t get me wrong: I’m not so naïve as to think that this journey has been easy for everyone in the ECC, nor to think that the ECC has arrived at the Promised Land of full inclusion and gender equality. Bishop Denise was part of the early movement of those who discerned which of our sisters might be ordained and consecrated by our brothers of the Roman Church. I’m fond of her observation that we can’t come through thousands of years of patriarchy and a Roman understanding of Catholicism without seeing vestiges in ourselves.

It is sometimes difficult for us to recognize our own privilege, and it’s even more difficult to give up perceived power and control. Like some of my brothers in this room, I was blessed with more than a few years of seminary education by Holy Mother Church. If Father Hans Christofferson was right in asserting that every gift has its challenge, then I suggest that we now possess a tremendous responsibility to humbly share with others the gift of the education we have received, rather than use it as a weapon against them. We have the responsibility to lift up others, rather than perpetuate patterns of oppression. We possess the responsibility of modeling healthy ways of relating to other members of the Body of Christ.

This Indigenous People’s Day reminds us of our responsibility toward all those voices that have been squelched and marginalized throughout history. This Indigenous People’s Day challenges us to consider those whom we’ve hurt through our words and our actions, and through our inaction and our silence. As the Church in action, we can and must do better. We are not perfect, but, as the transcendent beings God created us to be, we must continue striving toward that which is currently outside our grasp.

⁶¹ An obvious reference to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work by the same name.

Let's Follow the "Westward-leading, Still-proceeding" Spirit of Columbia!

I conclude by returning to our initial analogy of the stars in the nighttime sky. The scriptures speak of various stars, but perhaps the most famous star is one that we have not yet mentioned. It's the report of a star that...moved! Of course, nearly all the stars in the nighttime sky appear to move as our earth rotates on its axis, but there was something special about one star: Though astronomers readily tell us of the impossibility of this, there was one star in Matthew's account of the infancy narrative that appeared to move through the sky and come to rest over the newborn King.⁶² It was a star in action, reportedly spurring magi from afar to follow its guiding light. Like the Church in action, that star moved, which is why we celebrate it today every time we sing: "Oh, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!"

Here we are, sisters and brothers, in Saint Louis, the Gateway to the West. Westward expansion occurred through the movement of people through this city: They came from the original colonies and later from various states, following the spirit of Columbia as she led explorers westward. Let's follow that "westward-leading, still-proceeding" spirit of Columbia. Let's follow the promptings of the Spirit who is bringing to birth a new way of being Catholic and who is calling us to new places, to serve new people in new ways!



*Figure 18. "American Progress," by John Gast (1872),
image courtesy of WikiCommons.*

⁶² Matthew 2:9.

ECC, I pray for you. I pray that you—as individuals, as communities and as a “communion of communities”—might continue to follow the promptings of the Spirit, bringing greater light into this world. 19 years from now, and 19 years after that, I look forward to seeing where the Spirit has led the ECC and how all of you together will continue to be...the Church in action!

Concluding Hymn

As we reflect on our mission of bringing light to this world and of being the Church in action on this Indigenous People’s Day, the words of liturgical theologian Ruth Duck ring in my ears. Nearly 40 years ago, Marty Haugen set her words to music, to the tune of Beach Spring, or “God of Day & God of Darkness.” Grab the hand of the person next to you, and let’s conclude by praying these words together!

[All conclude by singing, “As a Fire Is Meant for Burning.” Due to copyright restrictions, the words are not reprinted in this work, but you can easily find them online.]