

## CONTINUED...

## Old Catholics

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Ramerman states on the Spiritus Christi Web site that she sought out Bishop Hickman after failing to find a Roman Catholic bishop who would ordain her. Himself ordained and consecrated a bishop by other Old Catholic clergy, Bishop Hickman has never been a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, his ordination of Ramerman has no legitimacy in Rome, said Father Joseph A. Hart, vicar general for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

"It is not a Roman Catholic bishop who's ordaining (Ramerman and Donato). It's the bishop of a Protestant church," Father Hart said.

## Origins in Europe

The Old Catholic Church broke with the Catholic Church following the First Vatican Council and, in 1889, joined with other schismatic churches through the Union of Utrecht. Chief among the churches' grievances against the Catholic Church were the definitions of papal primacy and infallibility emphasized at the First Vatican Council in 1869-70.

The Polish National Church is the largest and most organized group of Old Catholics in the United States and, perhaps, in the world. It formed in the early 20th century, when many Polish-American parishes began differing from their bishops over such issues as greater local autonomy regarding ownership of church property; governance by parish-elected committees; and appointments of pastors. At a synod organized in 1904 by Father Francis Hodur, these parishes voted unanimously to form their own church.

In 1907, Father Hodur was consecrated in Utrecht, Holland by three bishops of the Union of Utrecht. Two years later, with Bishop Hodur as its leader, the Polish National Catholic Church was founded in Scranton, Pa.

Early in its history, the church decided to allow married clergy and Mass in the vernacular. Membership grew steadily and as of 1999, the Polish National Catholic Church had 250,000 members in the United States and Canada, according to Catholic News Service.



Pat Mott/Orange County Catholic  
The entrance to St. Matthew Ecumenical Old Catholic Church.

ed States and Canada, according to Catholic News Service.

Yet Father Joseph Frankovich, pastor of St. Casimir Polish National Catholic Church in Irondequoit, says that Polish National Catholics do not differ greatly from Roman Catholics. "I think it's very important to be understood (that) the break did not occur over theology," he said.

In fact, beginning in the mid-1980s, leaders of the Polish National Catholic and Roman Catholic churches have engaged in discussions aimed at a hoped-for reunification.

"We are extremely excited with the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and we hope and pray to be reunited," Father Frankovich said, offering the analogy that a child always goes back to a parent at some point in his or her life.

Father Frankovich added that Polish National Catholics are clearly opposed to women's ordination. In fact, he noted, the Polish National Catholic Church is reconsidering its pact with Utrecht because some European Old Catholic churches have begun ordaining women.

## Loose confederation

Other Old Catholic denominations in the United States do permit the ordination of women. However Father Frankovich maintains that these churches are not truly Old Catholic since their bishops were not consecrated through the Union of Utrecht.

"We (the Polish National Catholic Church) are the Old Catholic Church in the

United States and Canada," Father Frankovich said. "People can claim whatever they want to be. There is no Bishop Hickman that is part of the Union of Utrecht."

But in a telephone interview from his St. Matthew Church in Orange, Bishop Hickman claimed that an association with Utrecht is not needed to be legitimately Old Catholic. The common link among all Old Catholics, he said, is that they oppose papal infallibility and share "a very strong commitment to our identity apart from Rome."

Beyond those two points, the lack of an organizing body makes it difficult to define the core teachings of Old Catholic churches, said Father Ron Roberson, associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"It's extremely complicated," he remarked. "Some Old Catholic groups are more organized than others."

In a recent statement Bishop Matthew H. Clark described Old Catholics as "a loose collection of Protestant churches that have never been in communion with Rome."

Bishop Hickman rejects the Protestant label. "We identify ourselves as Catholic, not Protestant," he said. "After that you would find a great amount of diversity, the same as the Roman Catholic Church. Some of us are very progressive; that's how you would characterize St. Matthew. And some are more conservative than Rome, celebrating the Latin Mass."

Among this range of groups are the Old Catholic Church of America, which has seven parishes in Wisconsin, Illinois and Florida; the Old Roman Catholic Church in North America, which exists in 16 states and the Caribbean; and the Old Catholic Diocese of Oregon, which also operates in California and Washington.

St. Bathildis Orthodox Christian Church on Rochester's South Avenue is a member of the American Old Catholic Church, based in Colorado, and is led by the Order of City Monks of St. Andrews. American Old Catholics permit married clergy; consider artificial contraception a matter of conscience; welcome divorced people to remarry and receive the sacraments; and invite all baptized Christians to join in church worship and sacraments.

Bishop Hickman said most Old Catholic bishops and priests are former Roman Catholics, and acknowledged that the Old Catholic movement is top-heavy with bishops and priests. "Some have virtually no community that they minister to," he said.

"Sometimes there are more bishops than faithful," Father Roberson agreed, adding that several Old Catholic bishops have been consecrated with little formal training.

While noting that Old Catholic priests are required to have master's degrees in theology or the equivalent, Bishop Hickman allowed, "We are aware there are bishops and priests in the movement that don't have the proper education. We're very concerned about it." He explained that such bishops and priests seek ordination in the hopes of starting Old Catholic communities, but are not always successful.

One priority that is common to all Old Catholics is the desire to follow apostolic succession — the unbroken chain of episcopal consecration tracing all the way back to the apostles.

The Roman Catholic Church accepts the lineage of Old Catholic bishops, but asserts that succession is meaningless unless the chain is connected by bishops in communion with Rome.

"A valid but illicit ordination is insufficient to participate in apostolic succession," Bishop Clark's statement noted. "A bishop can be said to be a successor of the apostles only insofar as he is in communion with all the bishops united with the pope."

Father Daniel Condon, diocesan chancellor, emphasized this point by referring to Canon 336 in Revised Code of Canon Law:

"The college of bishops, whose head is the Supreme Pontiff and whose members are the bishops by virtue of sacramental consecration and hierarchal communion with the head and members of the college, and in which the apostolic body endures, together with its head, and never without its head, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church."

## 'Refuge for schismatics'

Bishop Hickman, 46, is twice-married and the father of five children. He received bachelor's, master's and doctoral

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