

Letter on the Heresy Trial

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Dear sisters, brothers and friends of the ECC,

I am writing in response to the many inquiries requesting a comment on the recent event of the heresy trial of Fr. Ned Reidy by the Bishop Gerald Barnes of the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino.

I am grateful to all those who would like to include me in this important conversation. I have read the communications issued by the Roman Catholic bishop of San Bernardino with keen interest as they argue their case from the finer points of the Code of Canon Law. I am saddened that our Roman brothers in the Diocese of San Bernardino perceive us as a threat to their ministry to the people of God, rather than seeing the experience of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion as another way that people are encountering Jesus in the context of the Catholic Faith Tradition. They seem to view us as the enemy that is bringing spiritual harm to Catholic people. Some have even said that we are leading people into eternal damnation. This is very sad indeed.

If only they would speak to us as their brothers and sisters and realize that much good can come from a mutual friendship. So many in the world are looking for some kind of hope that love always prevails, that the Gospel message of Jesus really breaks down the walls that separate us; walls that we all have built over the centuries with the bricks and mortar of fear and hatred. Nonetheless, I will continue to pray for these brothers of ours that their hearts would soften and that someday they would be willing to sit at table with us and mutually share in the joy of the mystery of Christ among us and the great love God has for all of human kind.

I think that it is interesting to note that they have put so much trust in the canons of the church and in the men who govern the Roman church when we are warned to “put not our trust in men nor in the princes of men.” Jesus was not opposed to leadership but he did oppose the use of leadership as a means to oppress and to lord it over others. That kind of use of leadership is, I think, a contradiction to the Gospel and the spirit of Jesus.

The Code of Canon Law is filled with hundreds of commands, none of which come from the mouth of Jesus and, in fact, often contradict the spirit of the teachings of Jesus. Jesus had only one commandment and that is that we, as his followers, must love one another even as He loves us. He said this repeatedly. I think he meant it. This is why I believe that the Gospel of Jesus must always take precedence over Canon Law. After all, Canon law was written long after the time of Jesus and the apostles. Canon Law is always subject to change. The command of Jesus to love one another is immutable.

All of Canon Law must be held up to this ultimate standard of Christ's great commandment of love. When a canon falls short in either spirit or practice of the high calling of the Gospel of Jesus then it is the canon that has failed the test not the other way around. I know that I might be somewhat simple minded but that is how it seems to me.

In the statement issued by Bishop Gerald Barnes in the 30-page verdict condemning our friend, Fr. Ned Reidy, no where is there any mention of the teachings of Jesus nor is there any mention of the all important word of love. Why has this been omitted? Because I think, there is no compatibility between the Gospel of Jesus and their use of Canon Law. It is my belief and that of all the people of the ECC, including Fr. Ned Reidy, that if we err, let it always be on the side of love and compassion. In their treatment of Fr. Ned Reidy I have seen no evidence of either love or compassion. This saddens me.

It appears to me that the leadership of the Diocese of San Bernardino is both afraid of and angry with the existence and ministry of the people of the ECC as well as other Old Catholic Communities of faith. Have they ever bothered to ask themselves why we even exist? Why is it that so many Catholics have sought our ministry? They seem to suggest that it is because we are somehow deceiving these people for some kind of personal gain and that these people do not know any better. Is it not possible that this is a reflection of some kind of failing in the system they so vigorously uphold? Is there something that they should be doing but are not? I wonder. It seems to me that these self-reflecting questions ought to be asked by our brothers who are seeking to oppose us.

"Come to me," Jesus said, "I will never send anyone away." That is the invitation of Christ. We believe that everyone has been given a place at the table of Christ. Who are we to prevent anyone from coming to Jesus? Why is it that so many are denied access to the table of Christ merely because one thinks differently than Rome about who is the boss? We believe that no one, not even the Pope, has exclusive control over the Holy Spirit. She is like the wind that blows where She wants. She cannot be contained by anyone. I think it would be true to say that no church leader has a monopoly on the sacramental ministries of the Church. The Sacraments are a gift of the grace of God so that ALL people may encounter the blessed presence of the Risen Christ. That is what it is all about, isn't it? To enter into communion with God and one another is that not what the mystery of salvation is all about?

Finally, Jesus said that his followers would be known by the fruit they produce in their lives. We are called to enter into another kind of life by the Holy Spirit. We have been birthed by the Holy Spirit into this new kind of life. Therefore we must continue in that life through the working of the Holy Spirit in each of us. The evidence that we are living in the life of the Spirit is the fruit that is produced in us. And the fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, "is love, joy, peace, patience, humility, and self control, against such there is no law." And I would add, against such no canon of the Church will stand, against such no absolutizing of the Canon Law will stand, against such the religion of exclusivity will give way to the triumph of the inclusivity of the religion of Jesus.

I urge everyone to seek the Holy Spirit, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and walk continuously by the leading of the Holy Spirit wherein we discover that true Life which is the Light that enlightens all human kind. And we must avoid walking in the flesh where the Law only condemns and kills. For ultimately there is no life to be found in the works of the Law and, I think, that that would include the Code of Canon Law.

My love abounds toward you as I continue to feel your love abound toward me. How great it is to be alive in this time and in this place! We are blessed even when we don't know it!

Most Reverend Peter E. Hickman

PS. I think our Roman brothers ought to hear the voice of the prophet who said, "The Kingdom is being taken from your hands and given to another. It is the Lord who does this and it is marvelous in our eyes!"