

# Breakaway group offers more progressive form of Catholicism

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October 16, 2012

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FAIRFAX, Va. (RNS) About 30 people are gathered in a dark, makeshift sanctuary at St. Anthony of Padua Church as the sun dips into the horizon. The service follows the familiar pattern of a Catholic Mass, but something is different: The worshippers are dressed casually, many in jeans, and the priest speaks directly and informally to his parishioners. Even the words of the liturgy seem slightly off.

This isn't a typical Roman Catholic Mass. The church is barely a year old, and it's part of a new independent Catholic movement, the American National Catholic Church, and bills itself as a home for "Contemporary Catholics."

Founded in 2009 by a bishop and a group of priests seeking a more inclusive religious experience but not ready to leave the Catholic tradition completely, the ANCC aims to follow the spirit of reform established by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

While the sacraments and many fundamental beliefs remain identical to those of Roman Catholicism, the ANCC presents a more progressive version of Catholicism: divorced members can take Communion, women and gays can be ordained, and priests can marry.

Mass is conducted in the "Novus Ordo" liturgy that was widely practiced in Catholic parishes until last year, when revamped — some say clunky — language was introduced by the Vatican. The movement follows a "congregational model" of governance, which means that parishes make decisions largely independent of the national group. And no church leader — including the pope — is viewed as superior.

The movement claims its priests and bishops are validly ordained in the chain of "apostolic succession" tracing back to the early church. The bishops were ordained by a group that traces its chain back to a Brazilian Catholic bishop who died in 1961, who himself had split from Rome and founded a breakaway group.

But beginning a religious movement from scratch requires much more than simply determining a set of guiding beliefs.

"It's a big undertaking," explained the Rev. Matthew Bailey, who followed Bishop George Lucey and a few other priests in launching the breakaway group. "A number of us had explored different options, so we sat down and talked about what was really good, what didn't work, and tried to craft something that addressed it."

According to Bailey, independent Catholic movements typically falter because their standards are too low: Priests are too easily ordained and may call themselves clergy without having any real ministry.

In response, the ANCC founded a seminary in 2010 that provides distance-learning courses to candidates, who must spend two years in preparation and submit to background checks.

"We're doing this deliberately and intentionally: We want what we're building to last," said Bailey, adding that the group reaches out to priests with small ministries or who may have left the church. "We're not trying to open 20 parishes tomorrow. Maybe we'll open just two in a year, but they need to be high quality, with good clergy and solid liturgies."

So far, the ANCC consists of seven parishes around the U.S., including one in Fargo, N.D. Few of the priests receive payment for their work; funding is plowed back into the parish. And at this point, lacking a brick-and-mortar home, church leaders are spread out; Lucey is in New Jersey, while Bailey is located in Connecticut.

According to the Rev. Thomas Reese, a Jesuit and senior fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center, the ANCC faces an uphill battle. There are some 200 independent Catholic movements in the U.S., but the majority are conservative groups. Other than a couple of established groups like the Polish National Catholic Church and the North American Old Catholic Church, successful liberal movements are rare, he said.

"Those people who are upset with the church's teaching — on women or birth control — a lot of them stay; they just don't agree with the church," said Reese. "Some do leave, but they tend to become unchurched, or join more liberal Protestant churches." Convincing them to join a new Catholic tradition can be a challenge.

But at St. Anthony of Padua, a number of parishioners who were discontented with Roman Catholicism have found the parish on their own, though the group remains small.

Stuart and Elke Andrews, both psychologists, found St. Anthony of Padua online and have been attending for six months. "I was raised a Catholic and was looking for that, but something that had an openness and was accepting of others," Elke Andrews explained.

Cathy and Rob Frye, who described themselves as listless Catholics, found the church when their daughter was getting married; unlike Roman Catholic priests, ANCC clergy will conduct a Catholic ceremony outside of a church.

"The community is warm and welcoming-it truly feels like a community," said Rob Frye.

The church is led by the Rev. Jason Lody, one of the ANCC's founding priests. A gregarious former Franciscan, Lody peppers his sermons with an emphasis on faith in action and says he's determined to imbue the parish with the egalitarian spirit of Vatican II.

The church has faced some stumbling blocks, most notably its lack of a permanent home. But Lody recently located an Episcopal church nearby whose congregation is willing to share the space with his, and says the move will free him up to finally implement an outreach plan.

"I want to create a perception of stability," explains Lody. "The people coming to us have the option of not going anywhere. We want them to see they can have a full expression of their faith here. We can be that bridge."