

## **FAQ: How Can You Be Catholic if You Are Not Under Rome?**

While those of us who have been with the Ecumenical Catholic Communion for many years no longer think about this question, it still comes up in conversations. There is a simple answer to this question. We are Catholics because we are rooted in the original Catholics of the early Church. This is one of many topics the Council of Bishops discussed at our annual retreat October 20-24 in Colorado. This article is meant to summarize the elements that continue to make us Catholic, and more specifically that tie us with the Old Catholic Church in Utrecht.

It is important to remember that all of those who followed the teachings of the first apostles were Catholics. All the distinct churches were unified under the same umbrella, even with their diversity of expression. In other words, to be Catholic means we still hold to the teachings of the early Church before the various separations that would happen down through history. We are faithful to the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.

In the formation of the Ecumenical Catholic Church our founders made the decision to choose a bishop within the Old Catholic tradition. We chose to be those who look back to the early Church for our understanding of what it means to be Catholic. The story of the Old Catholic Church is not one of rebellion, but of remembrance. It is the quiet thread that runs through the tapestry of Christian history, holding fast to the faith of the apostles, the wisdom of the early councils, and the spiritual depth of the mystics and martyrs. It is not a new church—it is the Church that endures.

From the first century, the Christian community was marked by shared leadership, sacramental life, and a deep commitment to the teachings of Christ. The apostles did not build empires; they built communities. Their successors, the bishops of the early Church, governed not by decree but by discernment—gathering in councils, listening to one another, and seeking the Spirit's guidance.

St. Ignatius of Antioch coined the term "Catholic" to describe the Church. This early bishop's letters continue to be a treasure as they reveal the earliest understandings of the structure of the Church. He was born in the first century and died in the second century. When St. Ignatius calls the Church "Catholic" it means "according to the whole." Or as St. Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century would explain, Catholicism is: "That we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all."

As the Church grew, so did its entanglement with imperial power. But even then, voices of resistance rose. The Desert Fathers and Mothers fled to the wilderness to preserve the purity of the Gospel. Benedictines built communities of prayer and labor, rooted in humility and liturgical rhythm. Gregory of Nyssa spoke of the soul's infinite journey into God, resisting the static certainties of empire. Francis of Assisi renounced wealth and status, embracing poverty and creation with open arms. Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich stood for Mysticism, critique of power, and divine love. These were not fringe figures—they were the heartbeat of Catholic tradition. And the Old Catholic Church, especially in Utrecht, listened closely to that heartbeat.

For centuries, Utrecht remained within the Roman Catholic fold, quietly preserving local autonomy, conciliar governance, and theological integrity. Its bishops were elected by the clergy and people, not appointed by distant powers. Its theology was rooted in the early councils and the Church teachers, not in later innovations. It was catholic in the deepest sense—whole, universal, ancient, and alive.

In 1870, the First Vatican Council introduced two major changes: the doctrine of papal infallibility and the pope's universal authority. For the catholic community in Utrecht and many others, these changes were seen as moving away from the Church's tradition of shared leadership and decision-making. With a sense of regret but strong conviction, these catholics chose to separate—not from their faith, but from a Church structure they felt no longer reflected its original foundations. They became known as “Old Catholics” because they did not accept the new teachings introduced by Rome. Others also adopted the principles outlined in the Declaration of Utrecht, which the Ecumenical Catholic Communion recognizes as a key founding document. The ECC considers itself part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, remaining faithful to the Scriptures and the ancient ecumenical councils of the undivided Church.

Since then, those who see themselves as part of this authentic catholic tradition have continued to live out the original catholic vision: sacramental, inclusive, ecumenical, and rooted in tradition. They have welcomed dialogue with Anglicans, Orthodox, and Protestants and embraced liturgical renewal, pastoral care, and theological reflection. They have remained faithful—not to an institution, but to the Gospel.

This Catholic Church is not a remnant—it is a witness. It reminds us that the Church is not defined by power, but by presence. Not by control, but by communion. Not by infallibility, but by faithfulness. We are not a new denomination. We are a continuation of early catholicism. The catholicism of the early Church has always been with us and still is with us and the ECC continues in this tradition.

Within the ECC we have a group of laity, clergy, and bishops known as the Ecumenical Advisory Commission who have been studying our catholic tradition to help the ECC and our faith communities navigate ecumenical relationships, seeking connections with other Christian faiths, to share and live the Gospel.

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