



Office of Presiding Bishop  
Ecumenical Catholic Communion  
10 West Lockwood  
St. Louis, MO 63119

January 14, 2024

Dear Leadership and Delegates of our Communion,

This past Monday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Council of Bishops received communication that the two parishes and the Executive Council of the MidAmerica Diocese had made the decision to withdraw from the Ecumenical Catholic Communion.

There have been various narratives floating around during this past year regarding what has been transpiring in the Diocese of MidAmerica. In brief, here is a summary of what took place, recognizing it is impossible to represent all the actions and interpretation of action.

There are many people in a variety of roles who have been involved in navigating the transition following the retirement of Bishop Rafe in the MidAmerica Diocese and their process of electing a new bishop. Over many months, differences in values, ecclesiology, perception, leadership roles and responsibilities arose among the communities of the MidAmerica Diocese, the Executive Council of the MidAmerica Diocese, the ECC Leadership Council, and the Council of Bishops.

At an early stage of this process in March 2023, recognizing that there had already been some challenges, the former presiding bishop and I invited leaders from the four parishes that made up the Diocese of MidAmerica to meet in person. It appeared that our fervent discussion made progress in moving forward together. Those involved agreed to hold another in-person meeting to further the dialogue and build relationships. Unfortunately, this meeting never took place.

Some felt very strongly that the MidAmerica diocesan constitution concerning the election (especially timeline) had to be followed to the letter. The communities of Sts. Clare and Francis (St. Louis) and the Community of Emmaus (Oshkosh), each being in the middle of the transition/search process for new pastors, became very frustrated with the process, as well as the timeline. Their desire to slow down the process to build relationships was experienced by other members of the diocese as a means of delaying the election process. As a result of the tension, members of Sts. Clare and Francis and Emmaus decided to leave the Diocese.

Though half the parishes of the Diocese left, the process of the election of a bishop moved forward with delays requested by the COB. At their diocesan synod in early November, Rev. Dewayne Messenger was elected by members of the Diocese including Sr. Thea Bowman (Little Rock) and All Souls/Todos Los Santos (Tulsa). Believing that they had followed all the guidelines for the election of a bishop, the Executive Council of the diocese became frustrated by the postponement of the required ECC Communion-wide affirmation of their elected bishop.

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, an ultimatum was sent to the Council of Bishops setting a deadline of December 29<sup>th</sup> to agree to move the affirmation process forward, with an explanation that, if not, they would be leaving the ECC. The Leadership Council, tasked with bringing the election results to the delegates of the synod for affirmation or negation, believed that in good conscience they could not move this process forward under the current circumstances. When the Council of Bishops came to this impasse, we discerned together that the best course of action to attend to all the complaints would be to follow our Council of Bishops guidelines for establishing a judicial process, an ad hoc "hearing committee," that would review all the information leading to this situation and bring a recommendation back to the Council of Bishops. The Leadership Council agreed to this course of action. On December 21<sup>st</sup>, I joined a Zoom call with the MidAmerica Executive Council and Fr. Dewayne. I shared the decision of the COB to proceed with a "hearing committee" as a way of moving forward, and strongly urged them to participate.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, we unfortunately received notification that they did not agree to participate in this process. Efforts of all concerned to listen and respond to each other, in person and remotely, were not successful in reconciling a way forward and the Diocese made a decision to withdraw from the ECC.

Here we are now, many of us with deep pain in our hearts, hurting with the pain of separation/division. I would ask at this moment to remember the following:

- ***We are a very young Communion still working out the details of our ecclesial structures.***
- ***We have dioceses and regions that are often separated by great distances making relationship building very challenging.***
- ***We come into the Ecumenical Catholic Communion from various denominations with differing interpretations of our ecclesiology.***

The Council of Bishops will be working with the Leadership Council to initiate the establishment of a "hearing committee" or "fact-finding and recommendation-making" task force to report to the COB about why we ended up where we did and what can be done to avoid similar occurrences. Its report, due in 2-3 months, will inform our efforts going forward.

Additionally, we intend to establish a longer-term commission that will deal with some of the substantive principles that were argued over by various parties during the past year or more in this connection, e.g., the relationship between dioceses and the Communion, etc.—all with a view toward achieving consensus on these more foundational questions. Hopefully the commission will be able to recommend some clarifying resolutions and legislation that can be processed at our next Holy Synod.

We call for a hold on major changes regarding diocesan matters while these groups are at work, allowing our beloved Communion to achieve consensus on unsettled questions before we have more unsettling actions.

On a personal note, as I finish up my pilgrimage here in El Salvador today with my Romero House students, I have been reviewing this past year of listening deeply to communities, councils and individuals whom I have met with by phone and in person. I have been blessed and burdened to hear the joys and struggles of so many good people on all sides of these issues. I have found universally, wonderful, intelligent and prayerful people seeking to follow the voice of the Spirit. Even with this as a given, I am also very cognizant of the strength and yet fragility of our beautiful and beloved Ecumenical Catholic Communion. We at times are like the small boat being battered by the waves in the open sea.<sup>1</sup>

Given this reality, I am convinced that we are stronger together. We can reach out and be a refuge to those individually struggling to keep their heads above the water, hungering for acceptance, community, compassion, and stability if we commit our lives to each other, come what may.

### *Let Us Pray....*

*Compassionate God, grant us your mercy and the grace to heal.*

*Give us insight and humility  
about where we stepped off the path.<sup>2</sup>*

*Assist us in our course correction for unless you build the house  
our work is in vain<sup>3</sup>.*

*In your expansiveness,  
allow the MidAmerica diocese and our Communion  
to both fulfill the ministry of Christ  
as we journey forward into our futures.*

*Help us to find ways to walk together in a new way.*

*Create in us clean hearts, O God,<sup>4</sup> toward one another,  
hearts where there is no bitterness but only love.*

*We pray in the name of Christ.*

*Amen*

1. See Mark 4:35-41
2. See Matthew 7:3-5
3. See Psalm 127
4. See Psalm 119

Paz y amor!

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Bishop Paul Burson  
Presiding Bishop  
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*"In an atmosphere marked painfully by impasse and despair,  
Wisdom-Sophia sings words of unity and hope,  
of revelatory wonder and beauty.  
Above all, she summons us to freedom  
and full participation in the life story of God."  
Christopher Pramuk*