

San Damiano Ecumenical Catholic Church to Hold Parish Launch

First of its Kind in Arkansas, New Church “Catholic” but Not in Communion with Rome

On Wednesday, September 26, 2007, Little Rock’s religious heritage will be richer by one more denomination. That’s when San Damiano Ecumenical Catholic Church will hold a formal parish launch during a 6:30 p.m. evening mass.

“Like the earliest Christian churches, we started meeting in private homes,” said Father Fred Ball, pastor of San Damiano. “Since then, we’ve steadily grown to the point where our regular attendees are ready to take it to the next level and make a formal commitment as members of this community.” The congregation currently meets at St. Michael’s Episcopal Church in Little Rock.

The new church is part of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, which is not in union with the Roman Catholic Church. The ECC has its roots in the Old Catholic movement, which separated from Rome after the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870, though it maintains a valid line of apostolic succession. An article in the June 16, 2007, *Arkansas Catholic* warned those in the Diocese of Little Rock not to attend San Damiano.

The ECC also differs from the Roman Church in its acceptance of gay, lesbian, and transgender relationships. “We try to practice a Franciscan spirituality,” said Ball, “one which says to people, ‘All are welcome in this place.’ Besides practicing a radical hospitality, we also stress issues related to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.”

In addition, the ECC ordains women as priests, does not prohibit the use of birth control, and allows intercommunion with other Christian denominations. San Damiano is the first ECC church established in Arkansas. ECC churches around the country have attracted members who felt marginalized or excluded from full participation in other faith communities.

“Struggles of conscience with issues like divorce and remarriage, sexual orientation, or women with a vocation to ordained ministry have caused many people to drop out of church,” Ball explained. “We’re not looking for people to leave their church and come to us, but we do want to offer a place of welcome for those on whom the church has closed the door in many ways, who still hunger for Catholic worship.”

The community has, since its inception, become the home to many people from a variety of religious backgrounds. San Damiano offers an alternative to Catholics and non-Catholics who are drawn to the liturgy but who cannot make their way to Rome for various reasons.

“The charism of the ECC, its fully Catholic nature, and its progressive style won me quickly,” said Ball, who was first ordained in 1979, and had served as pastor of a number of churches when he encountered the ECC in 2005. “Once I found this movement, I knew that I had come home.” A member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans, Ball was ordained as a priest by ECC Bishop Peter Hickman on January 27, 2007, and holds a Ph.D. in liturgical theology.

Bishop Hickman, who resides in Orange, California, will be on hand to preside at mass for the Wednesday evening parish launch. He will also be present for a public forum at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday to field any questions members of the public might have about the Ecumenical Catholic Communion and to share the ECC vision. Everyone is invited to attend events on both evenings.

San Damiano Ecumenical Catholic Church meets every Sunday at 6:00 p.m. at St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, 12415 Cantrell Road, in Little Rock. Its website is www.sandamianochurch.com. For more information, contact Father Fred Ball at 501-831-3146 or fred.ball@franciscans.com.