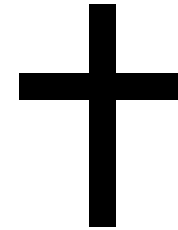


It is found in communities where people gather to pray, celebrate the sacraments, serve their neighbors, and seek together to follow Jesus Christ.

About the Author

Rev. Benjamin J. Stern is a priest, writer, and educator serving within the Independent Sacramental Movement. His ministry includes sacramental care, faith formation, theological writing, and the development of resources for Independent Catholic and Independent Sacramental communities. He is the author of several books exploring the history, theology, pastoral life, and future of the movement. His work seeks to encourage a more faithful, thoughtful, collaborative, and Christ-centered expression of independent sacramental Christianity.



What Is Independent Catholicism?

A Brief Guide to the Independent Catholic
and Independent Sacramental Movement

Rev. Benjamin J Stern

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Churches.

A brief and accessible introduction to Independent and Old Catholic Christianity.

Julie Byrne, The Other Catholics: Remaking America’s Largest Religion.

A scholarly and highly readable study of Independent Catholicism in the United States, with particular attention to the ways independent communities have developed outside Roman Catholic structures.

C. B. Moss, The Old Catholic Movement: Its Origins and History.

A classic history of European Old Catholicism. Although written in an earlier period, it remains useful for understanding an important historical stream that influenced later Independent Catholic communities.

Rev. Benjamin J. Stern, Independent, Not Alone: A Seeker’s Guide to the Independent Sacramental Movement.

A fuller introduction to the movement for readers who want to explore its history, gifts, challenges, discernment, and possibilities for greater cooperation.

Rev. Benjamin J. Stern, Defending the Independent Sacramental Movement as a Catholic Way of Life.

A theological and pastoral defense of Independent Sacramental Christianity that asks how the movement can understand and express an authentically catholic identity outside larger ecclesial institutions.

Online Resources

IndependentSacramental.org

Educational resources on Independent Catholic and Independent Sacramental history, theology, formation, ministry, and community life, including a developing directory of churches and jurisdictions.

ExtraordinaryCatholics.faith

Articles, publications, historical resources, and information for those interested in Independent, Old, and Inclusive Catholic Christianity.

These books and websites represent different perspectives and should not be understood as speaking for the entire movement. Readers are also encouraged to explore the public materials of particular communities and jurisdictions that interest them.

The best introduction to Independent Catholicism, however, is not found only in books or websites.

Finding a Community

Finding an Independent Catholic community may take a little patience. Because there is no single directory for the entire movement, communities are often discovered through local searches, jurisdictional websites, recommendations, or personal relationships.

Try searching for terms such as Independent Catholic, Old Catholic, or Independent Sacramental along with the name of your city or region. If you find a community online, contact it directly to confirm when and where people gather.

Then begin simply.

Learn something about the community's beliefs, worship, leadership, and relationships with other churches. Attend worship if you are able. Speak with clergy and members. Ask questions.

Do not feel that you need to understand the entire Independent Catholic world before visiting one local community.

As an earlier chapter suggested:

Begin with the community in front of you.

Approach the search prayerfully rather than as an attempt to find a church that satisfies every preference. Look for a place where Christ is central, the Gospel is proclaimed, the Sacraments are celebrated with reverence, questions are welcomed, and people are learning to love God and one another.

Finding a spiritual home may take time.

That is all right.

Come with curiosity. Pray for wisdom. And allow relationships, worship, and experience to help guide your discernment.

For Further Reading

Independent Catholicism is diverse, and no single book can represent every community or perspective. The following resources are offered as starting points for readers who would like to explore further.

John P. Plummer, *The Many Paths of the Independent Sacramental Movement: A National Study of Its Liturgy, Doctrine, and Leadership*.

An important introduction to the breadth and diversity of the Independent Sacramental Movement, particularly in the United States.

John P. Plummer and John R. Mabry, *Who Are the Independent Catholics? An Introduction to the Independent and Old Catholic*

Prayer

Gracious and loving God,

bless all who open these pages: those who are searching, those who are curious, those who carry questions or wounds, and those who simply hunger for something more.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon the Independent Catholic and Independent Sacramental movements. Keep us faithful to Jesus Christ. May we proclaim the Gospel faithfully, celebrate the sacraments with reverence, live holy lives, and serve others with humility and love.

Make our communities places of refuge, hope, healing, and welcome. Help us accompany those who seek you with patience and compassion, honoring the dignity of every person.

May those who come among us encounter not merely another institution, but the living Christ.

Guide every reader in wisdom and discernment, and wherever this journey may lead, draw us all more deeply into the mystery of your grace and love.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

1 An Invitation to Explore

Perhaps you received this little book after attending a wedding, baptism, funeral, or Eucharist celebrated by an independent priest. Perhaps you discovered a small chapel or ministry online. Perhaps you love Catholic worship but never realized that sacramental Christian communities existed beyond the churches most familiar to you.

Perhaps you have discovered the beauty of ancient Christian worship, liturgy, and sacramental life but want to explore these traditions in a setting that feels more personal and accessible. Or perhaps you are simply curious.

Whatever brought you here, you are welcome.

Independent Catholics are Christians who seek to follow Jesus Christ within the Catholic sacramental tradition while belonging to churches and communities outside the Roman Catholic Church and other larger

historic communions. Their communities take many forms, from established parishes to small missions and specialized ministries.

This book is a brief introduction to that world.

It does not attempt to describe every Independent Catholic church, explain every historical development, or settle every theological disagreement. Independent Catholicism is too diverse for any small book to accomplish that. Instead, these pages offer a place to begin.

We will explore what Independent Catholicism is, where it came from, what many Independent Catholics believe, why the sacraments matter so deeply, and what you might experience if you encounter one of these communities.

Independent Catholicism is best approached with prayerful curiosity. You do not need to understand everything before asking questions, attending worship, or beginning to explore.

At its heart is a simple possibility: the ancient sacramental life of the Church can take root in unexpected places and among ordinary people.

A community may gather in a beautiful chapel, a rented room, a private home, a hospital, or another simple setting. Its clergy may serve without salaries while working ordinary jobs. Its congregation may consist of many people or only a handful.

The surroundings may vary greatly, but Christians have never believed that the presence of Christ depends upon wealth, prestige, impressive buildings, or institutional importance.

Where the Gospel is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated, people seek holiness, and neighbors are served in love, the life of Christ can become visible.

This little book is an invitation to learn more.

Come with your questions.

Come with your curiosity.

And perhaps discover a part of the Christian family you did not know was there.

ordination, sacramental form and intention, marriage laws, and other considerations.

An Independent Catholic minister should be able to explain what their own church believes about its sacraments without promising that another church will necessarily recognize them.

May I receive Communion?

Practices differ among communities.

Many Independent Catholic churches welcome baptized Christians to receive the Eucharist, while some practice a broader Eucharistic hospitality and others have particular expectations for reception.

If you are uncertain, simply ask the priest or community before worship. You are always welcome to attend, pray, and participate as you are able.

Is “Old Catholic” the same as “Independent Catholic”?

Not necessarily.

Old Catholic has a particular historical meaning connected especially with the Church of Utrecht and the Old Catholic churches that emerged following the First Vatican Council.

Many Independent Catholic churches have been influenced by Old Catholic theology, spirituality, worship, or apostolic succession, but that does not necessarily make them members of the Union of Utrecht or part of historic European Old Catholicism.

What if there is no Independent Catholic community near me?

Independent Catholic communities are not found everywhere.

Some churches offer online prayer, education, and fellowship while gathering periodically in person for worship and the sacraments.

Others maintain missions or clergy who serve larger geographic areas.

Online relationships can provide meaningful connection, but sacramental Christianity ultimately values embodied community. If you find a community at a distance, ask how often people gather in person, how pastoral care is provided, and whether there are opportunities to build real in-person relationships.

If no Independent Catholic community is nearby, continue to pray, learn, and seek faithful Christian community wherever you are. The purpose of this movement is not to separate people from the wider Body of Christ, but to help people encounter Christ more deeply within it.

For some readers, an Independent Catholic community may become such a home.

Others may visit, learn something valuable, and ultimately remain within or seek another Christian tradition.

That is all right.

This little book is not meant to pressure anyone into joining a particular movement. God is at work far beyond the boundaries of any one church or communion. Discernment should be patient, prayerful, and free.

If you do discover a spiritual home within Independent Catholicism, you will become part of shaping what that community becomes.

Bring your faith.

Bring your questions.

Bring your gifts.

Bring your hope.

And be willing to receive the gifts of others as well.

The invitation is simple:

Come and see.

Perhaps you will discover not simply a church to attend, but a community in which you can pray, serve, grow, and belong.

A Few Common Questions

Do Independent Catholics have apostolic succession?

Many Independent Catholic bishops trace their episcopal ordinations through historic lines connected with Old Catholic, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, or other bishops.

Apostolic succession is important within sacramental Christianity, but it is more than a historical chain of ordinations. It also includes fidelity to the Gospel, sacramental life, Christian mission, teaching, and service.

Will other churches recognize Independent Catholic sacraments?

Different churches answer this question according to their own theology and church law.

Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, and other churches may evaluate Independent Catholic sacraments and ministries differently. Questions may involve apostolic succession,

2 What Is Independent Catholicism?

The word Catholic comes from a Greek word commonly translated as “universal” or “according to the whole.” In the ancient Christian creeds, the Church is confessed as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In this older and broader sense, catholicity is not simply the name of one institution. It points toward the fullness of Christian faith and life handed down across generations: faith in Jesus Christ, worship of the Triune God, proclamation of Scripture, celebration of the sacraments, and life in communion with the Church.

In everyday conversation, Catholic usually means Roman Catholic. This is understandable because the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most familiar Catholic body in the West yet the Christian world is larger and more complicated. Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Old Catholic, Anglican, and other sacramental traditions also understand themselves, in different ways, as sharing in the catholic and apostolic inheritance of the ancient Church.

Independent Catholics belong within this wider Christian landscape.

They worship in churches and communities outside the Roman Catholic Church and usually outside the larger historic communions. Many confess the Nicene Creed, celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments, honor the saints, observe the Christian liturgical year, and maintain the ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons. Their worship may look familiar to people from Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, or other sacramental backgrounds.

The word independent primarily describes an institutional relationship.

An Independent Catholic church is not governed by the pope, a Roman Catholic diocesan bishop, the Union of Utrecht, the archbishop of Canterbury, an Orthodox patriarch, or another larger ecclesiastical authority. Its bishops and clergy serve within their own jurisdictions, communions, dioceses, missions, or other structures.

Independence, however, is not meant to imply independence from Jesus Christ, the Gospel, Scripture, Christian tradition, or the wider Body of Christ. The word describes how a church is governed, not a desire to practice Christianity in isolation.

Nor does independent necessarily mean a single congregation standing alone. Some Independent Catholic jurisdictions contain several parishes, missions, clergy, and bishops. Others consist of one local community. Still others are specialized ministries serving people

in hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, private homes, or other settings where sacramental and pastoral care is needed.

Independent Catholic churches are also not part of the Roman Catholic Church. Their bishops are not appointed by the pope, their communities do not belong to Roman Catholic dioceses, and their clergy do not minister under the authority of Roman Catholic bishops.

This distinction can be stated clearly without hostility.

Many Independent Catholics have been deeply shaped by Roman Catholic spirituality, theology, liturgy, social teaching, education, or religious life. Others draw strongly from Old Catholic, Anglican, Eastern, Oriental, or other Christian traditions. Independent Catholic communities may therefore receive and preserve gifts from several parts of the Christian family while developing their own ecclesial identities.

You may also encounter two related expressions: the Independent Catholic Movement and the Independent Sacramental Movement. They overlap, but they are not identical.

Independent Catholicism generally refers to churches and communities that explicitly identify themselves with Catholic faith, sacramental worship, and ministry.

The Independent Sacramental Movement, often shortened to ISM, is a wider term. It can include Independent Catholic and Old Catholic communities as well as Liberal Catholic, independent Orthodox, esoteric Christian, and other small sacramental bodies. Not every community included within this larger movement holds the same theology, celebrates the same liturgy, or understands the word Catholic in the same way.

There is no single leader or governing body for the entire Independent Catholic or Independent Sacramental movement. No universal headquarters speaks for every community, and no single jurisdiction represents them all.

This diversity is one reason Independent Catholicism can initially seem difficult to understand. It also means that the beliefs and practices of one community should not automatically be attributed to another.

Independent Catholicism, however, should not be defined primarily by what it is not.

It is not simply Christianity without Rome. It is not merely a collection of people who disagree with another church. Its deeper question is a positive one:

forms of authority. Others first encounter an Independent Catholic priest or community through a wedding, baptism, funeral, illness, or season of spiritual searching.

Whatever has brought you here, your reason for arriving does not have to determine where your journey ends.

A spiritual home is more than a place where people agree with you.

It is a community in which you can worship God, receive grace, offer your gifts, grow in faith, face the truth about yourself, and learn more deeply what it means to love God and your neighbor.

Finding such a home takes time.

You do not need to decide immediately whether a particular community is right for you. Come and pray. Listen to the Scriptures. Share in worship as you are able. Speak with people. Allow yourself to learn gradually.

If you come carrying wounds from another church, you may need time simply to worship before deciding what comes next. Healing and trust cannot always be hurried.

One of the gifts of a smaller community is the possibility of being known.

Your name may be remembered.

Your absence may be noticed.

Your questions may have room to be heard.

Your gifts may become part of the life of the community.

But belonging is more than being noticed.

A spiritual home is not simply a church that offers something to you. It is also a place where you are invited to offer something of yourself.

You may be called to pray faithfully, welcome newcomers, care for neighbors, support ministries, learn with others, help with ordinary tasks, or simply become a steady and loving presence in the life of the community.

Christian belonging is never only about finding a church that meets our preferences.

It is also about discovering where we are being called to love.

Christian freedom does not mean freedom from commitment. It is freedom for love, truth, holiness, generosity, and service. A healthy spiritual home gives people room to grow while also inviting them beyond themselves.

Does the community serve beyond itself?

Is there joy?

Can people ask questions?

Can leaders admit when they are wrong?

Can disagreements be handled without turning people into enemies?

Is there evidence that people are sincerely trying to follow Jesus Christ together?

Healthy communities will still have weaknesses. They will sometimes misunderstand one another, make poor decisions, or struggle with limited resources. What matters is how they respond.

Humility, honesty, forgiveness, learning, and a willingness to repair relationships are themselves signs of Christian maturity.

Serious concerns should never be ignored. Abuse of authority, manipulation, dishonesty, sexual or financial misconduct, secrecy, or disregard for the dignity of others deserve careful attention. Christian community should never require someone to surrender conscience, safety, or dignity.

But discernment is not meant to make us suspicious of every church.

It is meant to help us recognize life.

Take your time. Attend worship. Speak with clergy and members. Ask questions. Pray.

Above all, look for a community in which Christ is at the center, the Gospel is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated with reverence, people are treated with dignity, and Christians are sincerely trying to grow in love of God and neighbor.

That is a good place to begin.

9 Finding a Spiritual Home

People come to Independent Catholic communities for many different reasons.

Some long for the Eucharist after feeling distant from or excluded by another church. Some are drawn to the ordination of women or the full sacramental inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. Others come from more traditional or conservative backgrounds and are seeking ancient liturgy, traditional devotional practices, or forms of worship that may no longer be readily available in the churches they know. Some seek a smaller community in which they can be known by name. Some love ancient liturgy and sacramental worship but struggle with centralized

How can Christians faithfully receive and live the catholic sacramental inheritance in their own communities and circumstances? Different Independent Catholic communities answer that question in different ways. Many seek a Christian life centered upon Jesus Christ, rooted in Scripture and the ancient faith of the Church, nourished by the sacraments, open to the work of the Holy Spirit, and expressed through prayer, community, compassion, and service.

Independent Catholics can also remain in relationship with the wider Christian family. Independence does not prevent them from learning from Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Old Catholics, Protestants, and others. Catholicity itself points beyond isolation toward communion.

The simplest definition is therefore a modest one:

Independent Catholics are Christians who seek to live the catholic sacramental tradition in churches and communities not governed by the Roman Catholic Church or another larger historic communion. That definition does not answer every question.

It is simply a place to begin.

3 Where Did It Come From?

Independent Catholicism does not have a single founder or one origin story. It developed from several historical streams that sometimes met, separated, and crossed paths again.

One important stream is Old Catholicism.

The Church of Utrecht in the Netherlands experienced a long and increasingly difficult relationship with Roman authorities. In 1723, it continued an episcopal life outside communion with Rome. More than a century later, another important Old Catholic movement emerged following the First Vatican Council of 1869–1870.

At Vatican I, the Roman Catholic Church formally defined teachings concerning papal jurisdiction and papal infallibility under particular conditions. Some Catholics in Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere rejected these definitions because they believed them inconsistent with the faith and structure of the ancient Church. They eventually organized churches of their own and became known as Old Catholics because they understood themselves as preserving an older catholic faith and a less centralized understanding of church authority.

The Dutch, German, and Swiss Old Catholic churches came together in 1889 to form what became known as the Union of Utrecht. They

developed formal ecclesial structures, theological agreements, and important ecumenical relationships.

Historic Old Catholicism, however, should not be equated with every church that later adopted the name Old Catholic. Over time, many independent churches drew inspiration from Old Catholic theology, worship, or episcopal succession without becoming part of the Union of Utrecht. Some developed in significantly different directions.

Old Catholicism was only one stream.

Other expressions of independent sacramental Christianity emerged as bishops, priests, and communities exercised ministry beyond the boundaries of established churches. Their stories are remarkably varied. Some served immigrant or ethnic communities seeking sacramental care within their own cultural setting. Some ministered among people who felt excluded from larger churches. Some pursued liturgical, theological, or ecclesial renewal or preservation.. Others developed communities shaped by ecumenical, mystical, evangelical, or other expressions of Christian spirituality.

These different streams eventually contributed to the broad family of churches and ministries now often described as the Independent Catholic or Independent Sacramental movement.

In the United States, Independent Catholic communities have often developed in response to particular pastoral circumstances. Some were founded to serve ethnic or cultural communities. Others welcomed people who found themselves unable to participate fully in larger Catholic churches, including divorced and remarried people, LGBTQ+ Christians, women called to ordained ministry, and those who desired Catholic sacramental life while holding different convictions on questions of liturgy, doctrine, or discipline.

Other communities began when clergy left a larger communion but remained convinced that they were called to sacramental and pastoral ministry. Still others developed around specialized forms of ministry rather than conventional parish life.

Because these communities arose in so many different circumstances, Independent Catholicism has never been completely uniform. Its churches differ in theology, worship, organization, ministry, and culture. Some remain closely connected to historic Old Catholic traditions, while others have developed distinctive identities of their own.

Independent Catholicism also continues to change. Communities are founded, form partnerships, merge, develop new ministries, and

Gospel? Does its life help people grow in prayer, compassion, repentance, hope, and love?

A healthy Catholic community should help people encounter Christ. Look also for genuine community.

Do people know and care for one another? Are newcomers welcomed? Are people supported when they are sick, grieving, lonely, or struggling? Do clergy and laypeople share responsibility for the life of the church?

A community does not need to be large to be alive. What matters is whether real relationships are being formed and whether people are learning to love one another.

Healthy communities also take formation seriously.

Clergy should be prepared for the ministries they undertake through prayer, study, supervised experience, and continued learning. Scripture, theology, liturgy, pastoral care, ethics, and the responsibilities of ministry all matter.

Formation does not end at ordination. Christian ministers remain learners throughout their lives.

Good leadership is also accountable.

Bishops, priests, and deacons hold important responsibilities, but Christian authority is meant to be exercised as service. Healthy leaders listen. They welcome counsel. They recognize the gifts of others. They are willing to learn, to explain their decisions, and when necessary, to admit mistakes.

Transparency is another sign of health.

A community should be able to explain who it is, what it believes, how it is governed, how its clergy are formed, and how it relates to other churches. Honest questions should be welcomed.

Hospitality matters as well.

A healthy church receives people as persons loved by God, not simply as potential members, donors, or supporters. People come carrying different histories, hopes, questions, wounds, and levels of faith. Good pastoral ministry makes room for those differences while continuing to invite people toward deeper life in Christ.

Perhaps the most important question is one Jesus himself taught Christians to ask:

What fruit is being produced?

Are people becoming more prayerful, merciful, truthful, generous, courageous, and loving?

Independent Catholic communities may speak of bishops, dioceses, jurisdictions, communions, ordinariates, missions, religious orders, and other forms of ministry. These structures can differ considerably from one church to another.

Their purpose, however, should be simple.

They exist to support the mission of the Church.

A bishop is called to shepherd. A priest is called to proclaim the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments, and care for people. A deacon is called to serve. Councils, dioceses, and jurisdictions have value when they help Christians worship faithfully, grow in faith, support ministry, and serve the world.

For someone encountering Independent Catholicism for the first time, there is no need to understand every jurisdiction or map every relationship.

Begin with the community in front of you.

Learn its story.

Ask how it is connected to other communities.

Discover how its leaders understand their ministry and how the community serves the people entrusted to its care.

The Independent Catholic world may look complicated from a distance, but Christian life is always lived somewhere particular: among real people, in real relationships, gathered around Christ.

A jurisdiction can provide history, structure, and identity.

But the life of the Church is ultimately revealed in people who pray together, receive the sacraments, care for one another, and seek to follow Jesus Christ.

8 What Should I Look for in a Healthy Community?

No church is perfect. Every Christian community is made up of people who are still growing in faith, wisdom, and love.

Discernment is not a search for flawlessness. It is the work of asking whether a community is helping people grow more deeply into the life of Christ.

Begin with Christ.

Is Jesus Christ at the center of the community's worship, preaching, prayer, and service? Does the church point beyond itself toward the

sometimes close. The movement remains difficult to map precisely because it is not governed by a single institution and has never followed only one historical path.

Its history is therefore not simply the story of separation from larger churches.

It is also the story of Christians asking an enduring question:

How can the sacramental life of the Church continue to serve people wherever they are found?

Independent Catholics have answered that question in many different ways.

Their answers continue to shape the movement today.

4 What Do Independent Catholics Believe?

There is no single catechism or statement of faith binding every Independent Catholic church. Beliefs and practices can differ, sometimes significantly. Nevertheless, many Independent Catholic communities share a recognizable center rooted in the historic Christian faith.

Independent Catholics generally believe in the God proclaimed by historic Christianity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They confess Jesus Christ as truly divine and truly human, crucified and risen for the life of the world. They receive the Scriptures as sacred and authoritative witnesses to God's saving work and pray the ancient creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

At the heart of this faith is grace.

Grace is not merely an idea or theological concept. It is the loving action of God: calling, forgiving, healing, transforming, and drawing people into communion with God and one another.

Independent Catholics also understand the Church as more than a voluntary association of people who share similar beliefs. The Church is a people called by God, joined to Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, nourished by Word and Sacrament, and sent into the world in love and service.

The Church is both visible and mysterious. It becomes visible in actual communities, worship, ministry, relationships, and acts of service yet the fullness of Christ's Church cannot be reduced to the boundaries of any single institution. For many Independent Catholics, catholicity therefore means belonging to something larger than one

jurisdiction or denomination: the continuing life of Christ in the Church across cultures, centuries, and communities.

Sacramental life stands near the center of Independent Catholic faith and spirituality.

Most Independent Catholic communities recognize the traditional seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and marriage. The Eucharist holds a particularly important place as the gathering of the Church around Christ's presence and grace.

The next chapter will explore more fully why the sacraments matter so deeply.

Many Independent Catholics also honor Mary and the saints, observe the seasons of the Christian year, and pray with forms of worship shaped by centuries of Christian tradition. Their liturgies may draw from Roman, Old Catholic, Anglican, Eastern, Oriental, or other historic traditions.

There is also significant diversity within the movement.

Independent Catholics may differ on questions of church authority, ordination, marriage, sexuality, discipline, and pastoral practice. Many do not accept universal papal jurisdiction or believe that communion with the bishop of Rome is necessary for a church to participate authentically in the catholic and apostolic life of Christianity.

Some communities ordain women as deacons, priests, and bishops. Married clergy are common. Some fully include LGBTQ+ Christians in sacramental and ordained ministry, while others maintain more traditional positions.

For this reason, the name Independent Catholic does not tell you everything a particular community believes.

Independent Catholicism should not be understood primarily by the positions on which its churches differ from one another or from larger Christian communions.

Its deeper center is positive.

Many Independent Catholics seek a Christian life centered upon Jesus Christ, grounded in Scripture and the ancient faith of the Church, nourished by the sacraments, open to the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, and expressed through prayer, compassion, service, and love.

Different communities will express that vision in different ways.

If you visit an Independent Catholic church, it is always appropriate to ask what it believes. A thoughtful community should be able to speak

particular theological convictions, liturgical traditions, pastoral needs, languages, and understandings of church authority.

Some emphasize Old Catholic heritage. Others draw more heavily from Anglican, Eastern, Roman, or other sacramental traditions. Still others have developed distinctive identities of their own.

Independence also gives communities considerable freedom to organize themselves according to local circumstances. A new mission may begin because Christians in a particular place want to gather for sacramental worship. A specialized ministry may develop around a particular pastoral need. Several communities may form a jurisdiction in order to share episcopal oversight, clergy formation, resources, or mission.

This flexibility is one of the reasons the movement has taken so many forms.

It has also sometimes contributed to fragmentation. Independent communities have occasionally divided over theology, leadership, personality, or questions of structure. Some jurisdictions have endured for generations, while others have existed only briefly.

This is part of the movement's story, but it is not the whole story.

Many Independent Catholic churches seek meaningful relationships with one another. Jurisdictions may cooperate in clergy formation, retreats, education, charitable work, worship, and other ministries. Some establish formal communion agreements. Others maintain friendships and partnerships without creating a larger governing structure.

This reflects an important conviction:

Independence does not have to mean isolation.

Catholic Christianity has always valued communion. Independent communities therefore face an ongoing task: how can churches preserve legitimate freedom while also building relationships strong enough to encourage cooperation, responsibility, learning, and mutual support?

There is no single answer.

Some communities prefer close relationships within a larger jurisdiction or communion. Others maintain greater local autonomy while cooperating with neighboring churches or ministries. The structures vary, but the deeper question remains the same: do these relationships help the Church carry out its mission?

The language of church organization can also sound unfamiliar.

Practices surrounding Communion differ. Some communities welcome all baptized Christians. Others have broader or more particular expectations. If you are uncertain whether you should receive, it is always appropriate to ask the priest or another community leader before worship.

You do not need to know every response, gesture, or prayer before attending.

You may simply come and pray.

Stand, sit, kneel, sing, or remain quiet as you are comfortable and as the community directs. Observe. Listen. Let the rhythm of the liturgy carry you.

Catholic worship has always been learned in part by participation. No one understands every symbol or prayer the first time.

What matters most is not whether everything looks impressive or whether every custom is familiar.

The purpose of worship is to turn hearts toward God.

A faithful liturgy should proclaim the Gospel, gather people around Christ, nourish them through Word and Sacrament, and send them back into the world ready to love and serve.

Different Independent Catholic communities may express that worship in different languages, styles, and settings.

But the hope is the same:

that in prayer, Scripture, Sacrament, and gathered community, people may encounter the living Christ.

7 Why Are There So Many Jurisdictions?

One of the first things newcomers notice about Independent Catholicism is the number of jurisdictions, communions, dioceses, religious orders, missions, and ministries.

At first, the landscape can seem confusing. Names may sound similar even when communities are unrelated. Some jurisdictions include several parishes, clergy, and bishops. Others are much smaller. Some are organized around a particular region, spiritual tradition, or form of ministry.

There are several reasons for this diversity.

Independent Catholicism did not develop from one founder or one institution. As we have seen, it grew from different historical streams and in different cultural settings. Communities formed around

clearly about its understanding of Christ, Scripture, the Church, the sacraments, and Christian life.

The word Catholic carries a rich inheritance.

For Independent Catholics, the challenge and the hope are to receive that inheritance faithfully and allow it to bear fruit in the world today.

5 Why Sacraments Matter

Sacramental life stands at the heart of Independent Catholicism.

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign through which God communicates grace. This familiar definition is brief, but its implications are profound.

Christianity is not merely a set of ideas about God. God meets human beings within creation: through bodies, relationships, water, food, touch, speech, promise, suffering, and joy. The material world can bear divine presence because God created it, the Word became flesh, and Christ is risen.

Sacramental Christianity therefore teaches us to see the ordinary world with different eyes.

Water can become a sign of new birth. Oil can carry the Church's prayer for healing and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Human promises can become covenant. Bread and wine can become communion with Christ.

Most Independent Catholic communities recognize the traditional seven sacraments.

In baptism, a person is joined to the death and resurrection of Christ and welcomed into the life of the Church.

In confirmation, the Church prays for the strengthening and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In reconciliation, sin is named honestly and the mercy and forgiveness of God are proclaimed.

In anointing of the sick, the Church surrounds those who suffer with prayer, compassion, and hope.

In marriage, a covenant of faithful love is blessed and entrusted to the grace of God.

In holy orders, deacons, priests, and bishops are set apart for service to Christ and the Church.

At the center of Independent Catholic sacramental life is the Eucharist.

The community gathers. Scripture is proclaimed. Prayers are offered. Bread and wine are brought to the altar in thanksgiving. The saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are remembered and celebrated, and the faithful share in Holy Communion.

Independent Catholics generally believe that Christ is truly present and truly gives himself in this sacrament. Different communities may describe this mystery in different ways, but the Eucharist is more than a symbolic recollection of something that happened long ago.

It is communion with Christ.

It is also communion with one another.

At the Eucharistic table, Christians are reminded that none of us is self-sufficient. We receive before we achieve. We come with open hands. Grace is given before it is earned.

The Eucharist also draws us beyond ourselves. The Christ encountered at the altar is the same Christ who calls us to recognize him in the hungry, the lonely, the wounded, the forgotten, and the stranger. Sacramental worship is meant to bear fruit in mercy, repentance, reconciliation, justice, generosity, and service.

This sacramental life does not depend upon grandeur.

The Eucharist may be celebrated in a beautiful church or chapel, but it may also be celebrated in a rented room, a private home, a hospital, a nursing facility, or beside the bed of someone who cannot travel.

The surroundings may be simple.

The mystery being celebrated is not.

Sacraments also teach Christians how to see the world beyond the liturgy.

If the waters of baptism proclaim new life, then every human life must be treated with dignity.

If bread and wine become communion, then hunger and loneliness cannot simply be ignored.

If oil carries the Church's prayer for healing, then those who are sick or suffering deserve compassion and presence.

If hands are laid upon someone in ordination, ministry must be understood as service rather than status.

If promises are blessed before God in marriage, then faithfulness, forgiveness, and covenant must be taken seriously.

The sacraments are therefore not decorations added to Christian life. They help shape Christian life.

They announce that grace comes near.

They remind us that God works within creation rather than abandoning it.

They teach us to recognize holy possibility in ordinary things.

And they call the Church to become what it receives: the Body of Christ, given in love for the life of the world.

6 What Might Worship Look Like?

If you visit an Independent Catholic community, some things may feel familiar and others may be new.

Many communities worship in ways shaped by historic Catholic liturgy. You may hear readings from Scripture, prayers of confession and thanksgiving, the Nicene Creed, intercessions, the sign of peace, and a Eucharistic prayer over bread and wine. Vestments, candles, incense, icons, processions, and other traditional elements may also be present.

The particular form of worship can vary widely.

Some communities use liturgies closely related to the Roman Rite. Others draw from Old Catholic, Anglican, Eastern, Oriental, or other sacramental traditions. Some have developed local forms of worship while preserving the basic shape of ancient Christian liturgy.

The setting may vary just as much.

A community might gather in a traditional church building or chapel. It might worship in a rented space, a home, a retreat center, a hospital, a nursing facility, or another place suited to its ministry. Some communities also gather online for prayer, study, or fellowship while celebrating the sacraments in person.

Do not be surprised if the congregation is small.

Independent Catholic communities often have fewer members than large parishes, and this can create a different kind of worship experience. Participation may feel more personal. Visitors may be greeted by name. Clergy and laypeople may share responsibilities in ways that are more visible than in a larger congregation.

The Eucharist normally stands at the center of worship.

As in other catholic and sacramental traditions, the community gathers to hear the Scriptures, offer prayer and thanksgiving, remember the saving work of Jesus Christ, and share in Holy Communion.