



**Bishop Gérard LaPlante and the clergy of Vancouver's Old Catholic Church combine the tradition, ceremony and comfort of Catholicism with a liberal dose of tolerance**



Newly elected Bishop Jürgen Schmode found his calling at the Old Catholic Church after being ordained into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada. Photo-Jason Lang

## **Mass appeal**

by Sandra Thomas-staff writer

*in: Vancouver Courier*

*published on February 7, 2007*

St. Raphael's church is chilly on a cool December morning and as members of the congregation drift in, they keep their coats buttoned. A Hispanic woman in a back pew wraps a warm pink blanket around her infant daughter to keep out the cold, and in an effort to keep out the elements an attendant at the back of the church ensures the doors close firmly after each person enters.

It's 10:45 a.m. and the church begins to fill as the clergy, dressed in flowing robes, complete the 14 Stations of the Cross, a Catholic devotion marking the final hours of Jesus Christ. At 11, church bells ring and the pews in the tiny church at East 51st Avenue and Fraser Street are full. The crowd gathered for mass has the makings of a United Nations meeting and offers no clue to the denomination of the church. That inclusive feeling, says Bishop Gérard LaPlante, is one of the joys of leading St. Raphael's, also known as the Old Catholic Church of B.C.

"We have people from 42 different nationalities," the 65-year-old LaPlante told the Courier during an earlier interview. "We do the mass in English, but when we say the Lord's Prayer we invite people to pray in their native language and sometimes we hear eight or 10 different languages."

This Sunday, LaPlante, Father Jürgen Schmode and a visiting priest from Surrey, are joined by the congregation in chanting the English version of the Lord's Prayer.

"Our Father who art in heaven\_"

The priests then repeat the prayer separately in French, German and Latin. Upon completion of their prayers, one by one, individual members of the congregation repeat the words in their native tongue. In total, the prayer is said in at least eight different languages this day including Polish, Russian, Spanish, Hebrew and Cree.

Welcome to the Old Catholic Church of B.C.

Sitting in the dining room of the rectory of St. Raphael's, often referred to as the "Little Church," LaPlante explains the invitation to

share prayers in various native languages is not

the only difference between the Old Catholic Church of B.C. and the Catholic Church of Rome. Visually, services at the two churches are almost identical, but at the Old Catholic Church parishioners find the same pomp and ceremony without what many perceive as the guilt trip. Speaking with an Acadian accent, LaPlante explains that unlike the traditional Catholic Church, Old Catholic priests do not have to remain celibate, though the priests at St. Raphael's have all chosen a vow of celibacy. As well, the Old Catholic Church does not condemn abortion as long as it's not used for birth control, and accepts same-sex marriage. Instead of individuals attending confession, each week the Old Catholic Bishop absolves the congregation as a whole of their sins and everyone is welcome to take part in open communion. Those who don't wish to take communion can still partake in the ceremony, but instead of sipping wine and dissolving the host on their tongues, they fold their arms in front of their chest to receive a blessing. The church ordains women, as well as gays and lesbians, to all orders and maintains the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons.

Locally, Old Catholic priests are ordained at the UBC School of Theology. Some, though, found their calling after serving for years with other religions. LaPlante was baptized Catholic in Quebec. In 1960, he graduated from Sacred Heart (Catholic) University in Fairfield, Connecticut, before continuing his studies in religion first at the University of Moncton and then the University of Montreal. LaPlante moved to the West Coast in 1964 and attended St. Raphael's, eventually becoming part of the clergy. This month, Schmode was elected to the position of Bishop by St. Raphael's board of directors and its parishioners, and will eventually take over from LaPlante.

"I'm 65," said LaPlante, laughing. "I'm not eternal. Even Bishops have to retire one day." Schmode's soft-spoken style is in contrast to that of the gregarious LaPlante. Sitting at the dining room table of the rectory, Schmode lets LaPlante do most of the talking, but adds to the conversation when he sees fit. He says the chanting of the Lord's Prayer in various languages is a way to unite the congregation.

"We teach love for one another," he says. "Young people are not interested in a lot of theory. They just want the basics."

Schmode was born in Hagen, Germany, where he earned an associate degree in business administration before moving to Berlin. There, he worked for two years with a social missionary organization and became a certified bookkeeper. It was then he decided to become a priest. His studies led him to the University of Heidelberg and University of Wuppertal in Germany. While in Heidelberg, Schmode became a member of the local Old Catholic Church. He later moved to the U.S. and graduated from the Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, with a Master of Divinity with a focus on cross-cultural studies.

Schmode was then called to Seattle, where he was ordained in 1991 into the United Church of Christ. He studied clinical counselling and completed a course in clinical pastoral education. In 1993 he moved to Vancouver and was ordained into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, at Martin Luther Church on East 46th Avenue. Schmode was ordained deacon in the Old Catholic Church of B.C. in 1995 and the next year to the Holy Priesthood—both times by Bishop LaPlante.

New Westminster resident Theresa Sutherland sees a huge difference between the traditional Catholic religion she was raised in and the teachings of the Old Catholic Church. Sutherland, 47, never expected to attend church again and says negative feelings about the Catholic Church and organized religion in general kept her away for more than three decades. Her feelings changed after meeting Schmode at her father's (Edward Gilligan's) funeral in September. Since then, she's made the trip into Vancouver to attend mass several times. "Something just clicked. These guys are so different they made me want to educate myself about religion," says Sutherland who works as a homecare aid and freelance graphic designer. "I didn't believe in God for a long time, but because of them I wanted to gain an understanding." Sipping a cup of coffee on a rainy, windy November day, the ultra-thin Sutherland appears fragile and still shaken from her father's death, Aug. 27. While she lives in New Westminster, at the time of the interview Sutherland was staying

with her ailing mother at her parent's home in Southeast Vancouver.

Sutherland explains her father was a devout Catholic until the day he died, so she was shocked when the family couldn't find a priest willing to proceed over his public funeral service. The problem was her father, always looking out for the family, asked to be cremated because he thought it would cost less money than being buried in an expensive coffin in an even more expensive plot.

Although Gilligan suffered an aneurism six years ago and had some health issues, no one was prepared when he became sick last summer and died suddenly.

"We thought he was recovering, but before I could even go see him again he died of a heart attack," said Sutherland. "It all happened so quickly we didn't get the chance to bring in a priest for his Last Rites."

She adds because of that it became even more important to the family that their dad have a proper Catholic burial. That proved difficult.

"My dad always worked two jobs and gave 10 per cent of each paycheque to the Catholic Church," says Sutherland. "But then he decided he wanted to be cremated because he thought it would save some money."

The family ended up paying for two services as a way to ensure their father received a proper Catholic blessing. Sutherland says a priest from her father's church, which he had attended for decades, relented and agreed to proceed over a small private service for the immediate family held before her father was cremated.

"The priest was cold and crabby and it was obvious he didn't want to be there," says Sutherland.

Paul Schratz, spokesperson for the local Catholic archdiocese, explains there are guidelines for cremation. He says a Catholic service is allowed for practising Catholics who have been cremated, but adds the remains are not allowed in the church.

"There are some exceptions though," he says.

"For example if someone died overseas and had to be cremated before being sent home. I can't speak to this particular story because I don't know the circumstances."

After the initial private service, Sutherland, her brother and two sisters tried to find a second

Catholic priest to proceed over the public service for friends and extended family at Glenhaven Memorial Chapel on East Hastings Street. At Glenhaven, she met Schmode, who was working there at the time helping with administration and presiding over some services.

"We had never met Father Jurgen before, but when we told him one of our dad's favourite songs was "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," he just went with it," said Sutherland. "He said that was a coincidence because at the seminary he attended there was a statue of a brother holding a brother. Then he just rolled with it."

Sutherland visits the priest regularly and has developed a particular trust with Schmode, whom she is teaching computer programming to. At the time of the Courier interview, Sutherland was trying to gain enough courage to go through her father's belongings. She adds her growing trust might help her get the job done.

"Father Jurgen said he'd help me if I need it," says Sutherland. "And I might just get him to do that."

Back at the church it's obvious that even after 30 years LaPlante is an enthusiastic leader of the St. Raphael's flock. During this day's service he is resplendent in a purple vestment and fuchsia skullcap. He explains to the congregation that he will not be conducting the service this Sunday because he is sick with a cold and has little voice left. Oblivious to the chill in the room, he adds that his poor health is the reason he had the heat turned up in church. The lack of heat makes sense because the Old Catholic Church is the church of the poor in the literal sense. None of the clergy are paid and all hold day jobs-LaPlante is retired from a long career as an immigration officer. The church runs on the wages made by the clergy and by donations. The working-class congregation includes many new and settled immigrants and seniors.

As the Sunday mass ends LaPlante stands at the open front door and greets each parishioner as they leave. Bags of bread are placed on the stairs for those in need to take.

In a history book of the Old Catholic Church of B.C., written by local author, retired reverend and auxiliary bishop of St. Raphael's, L.M. McFerran, better known as Bishop Mack, describes a service at the church: "One is slightly surprised by the snapping on of the six tall

electric altar candles towering over the six natural wax votive candles," he writes. "Then one also becomes conscious of the profusion of flowers—all being artificial. This is a congregation of the poor, where beeswax candles and fresh flowers are luxuries they can ill afford."

Plastic flowers also heavily adorn much of the rectory. In fact the words "garage sale," come to mind in describing the kitchen and dining room. A picture of Queen Elizabeth II, accompanied by a letter from her to the church, adorns a wall near a velvet painting of a flamenco dancer. On another wall, a framed picture shows Bishop LaPlante, wearing period clothing and wielding a large hammer, and huge biceps, posed for the cover of a glossy pamphlet for the Burnaby Village Museum.

LaPlante spent decades as a body builder and during a visit to a downtown gym several years ago met one of the most famous musclemen of all, Arnold Schwarzenegger, now governor of California. In a letter Schwarzenegger sent the bishop in March 2000, he writes, "It was a pleasure meeting you in the hotel gym recently. It is good to know that you are not only spiritually fit, but physically fit as well... If I am ever in town on a weekend I will try and attend Sunday Holy Mass\_"

"Now Arnold sends us postcards and Christmas cards every year," says LaPlante.

A cardboard cutout of a monk greets visitors at the side door of the church while a brass plaque on the back door reads "Shalom." Schmode points out a cupboard full of coloured vestments and jokingly refers to the church as a thrift shop because most of the beautiful robes have been donated over the years. During a tour of the church and rectory an ancient dog, Raphie II, named after St. Raphael's, wanders about while in a back bedroom his owner, retired Father Gordon Hangerud, plays the organ.

As the gregarious bishop continues to reminisce, he's quick to laugh while sharing stories about the church and congregation. While explaining the multicultural make up of the congregation, the reporter asks for clarification on a comment she thought she'd heard.

"You have a Jewish daughter?" asks the reporter, to which the bishop laughs uproariously.

"Now that would be a story," he says. "No, I said I even have a Jewish doctor."

It was the bishop's easy-going, cheerful attitude that drew long-time parishioner Tony Klymchuk to the Old Catholic Church. The pair met 30 years ago when they both worked out at the same gym on Broadway.

"He has such a gregarious, large presence," says Klymchuk, who was raised Roman Catholic. "I had known him for about five years when he invited me to visit the church and I've been going regularly for 25 years."

The 52-year old electrician describes the gym they attended as designed for serious bodybuilders, with no "fancy machines."

"The language used to get pretty colourful, but Bishop Gérard would just stay in his corner working out, not saying anything," says Klymchuk. "But then he'd go and shower and come back out wearing his collar. I used to get a kick out of that."

Klymchuk says he enjoys the traditional liturgy performed at St. Raphael's, which is similar to the Roman Catholic Church. He disagrees with papal infallibility, which is a main reason the Old Catholic Church broke away from the Church of Rome in the late 1800s.

"I like the fact the Old Catholic Church is tolerant," says Klymchuk, who had his son and daughter baptized at St. Raphael's. "And I really enjoy the liturgy."

According to the history written by Bishop Mack, St. Raphael's was established here in 1921 as a Liberal Catholic Church, which originally held services in the Blue Room at the Hotel Vancouver, with B.C. Bishop Irving Cooper officiating. The congregation made several moves during the next 40 years, settling on East 51st in 1962. In 1975, the board of St. Raphael's voted to break away from the Liberal Catholic Church because of theological differences. The board of directors of the day voted to join the order of the Old Catholic Church and LaPlante was named Bishop. Today, the Old Catholic Church of B.C. has affiliates in Quebec and Washington State. Churches belonging to the Old Catholic Church of Canada, founded in Ontario in 1949, follow the same order and beliefs as the Old Catholic Church of B.C. St. Raphael's does not belong to the Canadian order though. Instead, the church stood as an independent until earlier this year when it was accepted as a member of the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches in

Holland. It is the first Old Catholic Church in North America to be accepted to the order. Bishop Mack noted churches around the world have declared themselves "Old Catholic" at differing times. The first group of churches to proclaim themselves Old Catholic formed in the Netherlands in the 18th century when Dutch Catholics extended sympathy and hospitality to French Catholics who were denied religious liberty in their home country. Their defence of religious liberty brought them condemnation from Rome and since 1739, the Archbishopric of Utrecht of the Netherlands has remained independent of the Catholic Church. To this day the Old Catholic Church maintains that under Christ one can find perfect freedom, without the constraints of the Catholic Church. Rather than disavow their historical principles altogether, though, Old Catholics have maintained a similar yet separate existence from Rome since the 18th century. Other churches joined them in 1870 when the first Vatican Council proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility. Since many churches around the world agreed with the Utrecht that only Christ is infallible, there was a shift at that time towards the Old Catholic Church. Neal Adams, communication officer for the local Anglican archdiocese, explains the Old Catholic Church does have a historic connection to the Anglican Church. He adds while both are historically connected to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England, there is no modern day formal agreement of partnership between the Anglican Church and Old Catholics. "But we're certainly friendly with the Old Catholics," says Adams. When the Courier contacted the local Catholic archdiocese about the Old Catholics, spokesman Paul Schratz said it has no comment other than that the Old Catholic Church deserves the same respect any other religion does. On the other hand, LaPlante says, that while he respects the Catholic Church, he'd like to see it relax some of its more stringent rules. "They're driving people away because they find it so strict," said LaPlante. "Cathedrals are closing all over Quebec because no one is attending. One of them is being used by Cirque du Soleil for practice."

Father Alwin Hyndman, a priest with Our Lady of Nativity Old Catholic Church in Surrey, holds LaPlante in high regard. "I warmly commend Bishop Gérard for many years of diligently defending the holy tradition of reformed Catholicism in B.C.," says Hyndman. He adds "it's wonderful" being an Old Catholic priest because the order is close to the Utrecht, which is an historic landmark for the catholic faith. Hyndman explains "catholic" is an all-inclusive term used in reference to both the Old Catholics and the Church of Rome. He adds while the Old Catholic Church does not differ in ceremony to the Church of Rome, he adds the Catholic Church will not accept them because of the disagreement over papal infallibility. "But we all have contributions to make," he said. "And no one has a perfect history. In all due respect we do pray for the Pope." He adds the teachings of the Old Catholic Church are vital in this time of materialism and secularism. "There are some who try and undermine the integrity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ," says Hyndman. "I would like to commend Bishop Gérard for his steadfast loyalty to the teachings of the Old Catholic Church. The church can fill the needs of any Christian, sacramentally, liturgically, mystically and evangelistically." LaPlante's serious about the Old Catholic Church's teachings and makes it clear the only sin the church won't tolerate is intolerance. "The church allows women priests, and if you are divorced you are welcome. I don't happen to agree with divorce, but it is a fact of life and who am I to judge," says LaPlante. "The same as abortion. I cannot say it is a crime as long as it's not used for birth control. I don't think under any circumstance that I should be allowed to judge you." An elderly parishioner recently complained to him about a same-sex couple attending the church. "He said, 'Father, I can't come here anymore' and told me why," says LaPlante. "I told him they were just as welcome as he was. He joined an orthodox church and that hurt me, but I cannot accept intolerance." LaPlante adds while he would prefer to see couples married before they live together, he understands common-law relationships. The

church also prays for peace while not getting involved with politics.

LaPlante says every Christian and most non Christians are welcome to St. Raphael's and notes because the church is non-judgmental doesn't mean it doesn't follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. "Jesus Christ teaches us to love and we love everybody," he says. "All are welcome to St. Raphael's."

published on 02/07/2007

Letters to the Editor re. this article

No prayers or collections at Sunday morning meetings

To the editor:

Re: "Mass appeal," Feb. 7.

Contrary to the title and content of your cover story about a local Catholic Church, not everyone in British Columbia finds "mass appeal" in organized religion, regardless of the denomination (of which there are thousands). The most recent census by Statistics Canada showed that more than one-third of the population claims no religious affiliation. Of that large and growing segment, many freethinkers meet every Sunday morning at 9:30 at the Railspur Alley Bistro on Granville Island for informal breakfast and casual conversation. No prayers are said, no collections are taken, and any topic is open for rational discussion. All are welcome (but you do have to pay for your own breakfast).

Glenn M. Hardie,

Roman Catholics had no problems with mom's funeral

To the editor:

Re: "Mass appeal," Feb. 7.

As a Roman Catholic born and raised in Vancouver, I had never heard of this church. I found the article most enlightening. I found the experiences Ms. Sutherland had around her father's death quite the opposite to the death and funeral of our mother who passed away at the age of 98. The service was arranged by a Catholic funeral service. Following the funeral mass at our mother's parish church the coffin was taken to a crematorium for cremation. About 10 days later the same priest who conducted the funeral mass

presided over the interment of Mother's ashes placed in the same plot as my father at Ocean View Cemetery.

Edwin Pearson,  
Vancouver

To the editor:

Re: "Mass appeal," Feb. 7.

The article on the Old Catholic church in East Vancouver was an excellent read. But you may have done them a disservice in that every lapsed Catholic in Vancouver may beat a path to St. Raphael's door. I think that would be a fitting retirement gift for Bishop Gérard LaPlante.

Terry LeBlanc,  
Vancouver

published on 02/14/2007