



Old Catholic Bishop Gerard LaPlante (left) welcomed his new understudy Bishop Jürgen Schmode at a consecration ceremony Sunday that drew people from as far away as the new bishop's native Germany.

Photo-Dan Toulgoet

Big turnout to welcome Old Catholics' new bishop

By Sandra Thomas-Staff writer

A standing-room only crowd spilled onto the steps and sidewalk of St. Raphael's Church on East 51st Avenue last Sunday as the congregation gathered for the consecration of Father Jürgen Schmode to bishop.

"There were at least 170 people and 20 different nationalities," said Schmode. "On a good day we can maybe squeeze 100 in the church so people were standing outside."

Schmode will take over as bishop at St. Raphael's, also known as the Old Catholic Church of B.C., should serving bishop Gerard LaPlante be unable to perform his duties.

"My parents and my sister flew in from Germany," said the German-born Schmode. "My uncle attended and another couple drove down from Valemont [near the Rocky Mountains]. They left at two o'clock in the morning the night before."

LaPlante said parishioners from as far away as Los Angeles and Palm Springs made the trip to Vancouver to celebrate Schmode's consecration.

"We also had people we sponsored come to visit us on Sunday, from Kenya and from Iraq," said LaPlante, in his strong Acadian accent. "The family from Iraq has six children. It was very nice."

While most of the church's parishioners live nearby the church building at East

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51st and Fraser Street, some live in other Canadian cities and other countries.

"But they consider this their church," said LaPlante.

Last Sunday, as with every Sunday, those attending were invited to recite the Lord's Prayer in their native languages. On a typical Sunday the prayer is said in six or eight different languages, including Polish, German, Spanish, Hebrew and Cree. Schmode notes that because of the crowd last Sunday, the prayer was recited in at least 12 tongues.

That variation of the Lord's Prayer is one of many rituals setting the Old Catholic Church apart from the Catholic Church of Rome, which does not recognize the former group as part of the Catholic faith. Old Catholic priests are not required to remain celibate and can marry, though the priests and bishops at St. Raphael's maintain a vow of celibacy. The Old Catholic Church does not condemn abortion as long as it's not used for birth control, and it also accepts same-sex couples.

LaPlante said the Church lost two members but gained five new ones after a Courier cover story noted the acceptance of same-sex couples. The church ordains women, gays and lesbians to all orders and maintains the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons.

Schmode's journey to becoming bishop began in Hagen, Germany, where he earned an associate degree in business administration before moving to Berlin. After working for two years with a social missionary organization he became a certified bookkeeper. He decided to become a priest and studied at German seminaries in Wuppertal and Heidelberg, where he became a member of the local Old Catholic Church. Moving to the U.S., he graduated from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota with a Master of Divinity and a focus on cross-cultural studies.

In 1991, Schmode was called to Seattle, where he was ordained into the United Church of Christ and studied clinical counselling and 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 entered the priesthood.

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