

Chriszekal Elias a.k.a Peter II: The Pope of Eddystone, Pennsylvania

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After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)—in a few cases just before—there have been a number of men who claimed that they, not the much more recognized person in Rome, were the true leader of the Catholic Church. Though some were elected in alternative conclaves, most claimed to have been mystically elect. The members of the latter group maintain that God had chosen them to become the pontiff of the end times. In this era of crisis, they have argued, a conclave is not necessary anymore. In fact, there are no orthodox cardinals left who can take part in such a reunion. Quite a few of the mystically elect popes were Roman Catholic priests before election, but others were Catholic laymen or, in this case study, a baptized Catholic man, but ordained by another denomination.

Modern alternative popes claimed to have succeeded the Roman pope, but in many cases they announced that the Holy See at their mystical election had moved from Rome to a new place—the place where they lived. In the majority of the cases, the church was re-named, but the institution was not seen as anything else than the One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church in a time of almost universal heresy. Though the mystically elect popes maintained that they were leaders of the one, true Catholic Church, claiming to fight for its traditional teachings, due to private apparitions, the doctrinal development of their churches has often been rapid. In some cases, the teachings became quite

different from a traditional Roman Catholic belief system, though the groups themselves would say that they have developed a deepened, unveiled understanding of the same faith, made possible through continued divine revelation. In other cases there have been no or quite modest liturgical and theological changes.

Some of these mystically elect popes have had thousands of followers — in the case the Kenyan Legio Maria, millions. Most, however, have had a very small group of adherents; often less than a hundred. One of the least known of the modern alternative popes was Chriszekal Elias, later Peter II, an Episcopal priest from Eddystone, Pennsylvania, originally called Chester Olszewski

A Pastor, a Stigmatic and a Statue

Chester L. Olszewski, born in 1943, was a cradle Catholic, raised in a Polish immigrant environment in Buffalo, New York. It is unclear whether he entered a Franciscan minor seminary as a teenager or if he just went to a Catholic boarding school. In any case, he later tried to study at priest seminary at various occasions, but was not admitted. In 1969, Olszewski therefore changed life plans entirely and served for some time as a U.S. Marine.

In the early 1970s, Chester Olszewski met a woman. They married and with time, got three children together. Nevertheless, thoughts on priesthood seem to have remained with him. Around the time of the marriage, he left Roman Catholicism for the Episcopalian Church, and in 1974, Olszewski was ordained an Episcopalian priest in Albany, New York state.

Following ordination, the bishop assigned him as pastor of St. Luke's Church in Eddystone, a Philadelphia suburb. There, serious problems appeared already in the following year. Olszewski became convinced that a statue of the Sacred Heart of Christ, owned by a Roman Catholic woman, was miraculous; it had received bleeding stigmata. Somewhat later, Olszewski brought the statue to St. Luke's church and placed it over the altar. This was the beginning of an ecclesiastical conflict which had many unforeseen consequences.

Anne Poore, the owner of the image of the Sacred Heart of Christ, was born in 1927 and lived in a small town called Linwood, some ten kilometres from Eddystone. As Chester Olszewski, she was of Polish extraction, and like him she was a baptized Catholic. She was a divorcee and had several children. She belonged to the Catholic parish in Marcus Hook, and was obviously devoutly religious. In her home, she transformed one of the rooms into a kind of chapel. There, she kept her precious, about two-foot tall image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; a statue of Spanish origin.

In early 1975, Anne Poore had become known for having received so-called spiritual communions, a phenomenon known in many apparitional traditions, meaning that a communion host miraculously appear in the mouth of the faithful. There are accounts of such miracles at e.g. the Marian apparition site of Garabandal in Spain and among modern-time Catholic mystics, particularly so-called “victim souls”.

In her case, the spiritual communions were said to have begun in her parish church. According to her own testimony, one day when she attended mass, she was waiting for the priest’s blessing. As a divorcee, she could not take communion. When the priest stopped in front of her, she made a loud hiccup-sound, and opening her mouth, she revealed a host on her tongue. It was shortly thereafter, that Poore began to claim that her personal statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus began received the stigmata on Fridays and Holy Days.

The story about the bleeding statue became known and Chester Olszewski read about it in a local newspaper, *Delaware County Daily Times*. He was interested in the story, but skeptical, and decided to go to Linwood to talk to Anne Poore in person, and examine the purportedly miraculous statue. Their initial meeting, which took place in April 1975, had dramatic effects on both of them. Olszewski developed a strong belief in the miracle and fully believed Poore’s testimonies, and she thought that he was chosen for a higher purpose. From then until Poore’s death seventeen years later, the two formed a closely-knitted team. In November 1975, Olszewski decided to move the image of the Sacred Heart to hang it three metres over the altar of St. Luke church, where it

was said to bleed every Friday. At that time, Anne Poore claimed that not only the image, but she, too, had received the stigmata.

This chain of events, including the pastor's decision to include a new central devotion in the church, must have had a bewildering effect on the Episcopalian congregation. Many were critical or at the very least sceptical. Still, news about the miracles spread in broader circles. The accounts attracted not only locals, but people from other parts of the United States, too. There were even pilgrims from Europe and Asia. Inevitably, there were stories about healings connected to the bleeding statue, including cures from blindness and lameness. However, the new devotion estranged a major part of the old parishioners. Moreover, in 1977, the development forced Olszewski's wife and their three young children to move far home.



St. Luke's Church, Eddystone

By that time, Olszewski and Poore were certain that they been divinely chosen to restore traditional Catholic faith. Through the miracles, God had converted

them to a true, unaltered Catholicism that was not tainted by the decisions of the Second Vatican council and the general apostasy that had followed in its wake. They should restore the Tridentine mass and ban communion in the hand.

To Catholic traditionalists, the new Mass order, the *Novus Ordo*, established in 1969, was the most appalling result of the council, and communion in the hand was often regarded as a sign of irreverence. Many also found the decreased official focus on traditional devotions such as novenas catastrophic. Olszewski therefore started to read mass in Latin and only use communion on the tongue. Though not stated explicitly, by 1977 Olszewski and Poore had probably assumed a sedevacantist position, i.e., they believed that was no true pope in Rome any longer. And if he, in fact, thought that Paul VI was the pope, he would soon have to leave the papacy for another person, as he held heretical views.

In order to re-establish the One True Catholic Church, Chester Olszewski thought that he first needed to become a validly consecrated bishop. After a while, he encountered a person who was willing to provide him with the much sought-after apostolic succession. In early 1977, he was conditionally ordained to priesthood and then consecrated by Edward Michael Stehlik, a bishop of the American National Catholic Church, which had its centre in Watertown, Wisconsin. Stehlik had apostolic succession through the Duarte Costa lineage that originated from a Brazilian Roman Catholic bishop who left the church in the mid-20th-century to form the Brazilian National Catholic Church. The bishops and churches that claim apostolic succession from him include an impressive denominational and theological diversity, from very liberal to very traditionalist, among them many independent Catholics and Orthodox.

By 1977, the American National Catholic Church had recently taken over the Queen of the Holy Rosary Mediatrix Shrine in Necedah, Wisconsin, which was the base of the apocalyptic apparitions to Mary Ann Van Hoof from the late 1940s onwards. The apparitions were declared false by the local Roman Catholic hierarchy and Van Hoof was ultimately placed under interdict. In 1975, the Catholic Church also issued a formal interdict against the shrine, prohibiting Roman Catholics from attending it. Then, the American National Catholic

Church took over the administration. Shortly after the consecration of Chester Olszewski, however, Bishop Stehlik would regret his act, for reasons that very soon would become obvious.

The Papacy

On 31 May 1977, Chester Olszewski proclaimed himself Pope Chriszekiel Elias at a ceremony in St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Eddystone. About seventy people had gathered for the occasion. He proclaimed that God had elected him pope in an apparition to Anne Poore, and provided him with his papal name. Now, he was nothing less than the leader of the One True Catholic Church, the Vicar of Christ on earth.

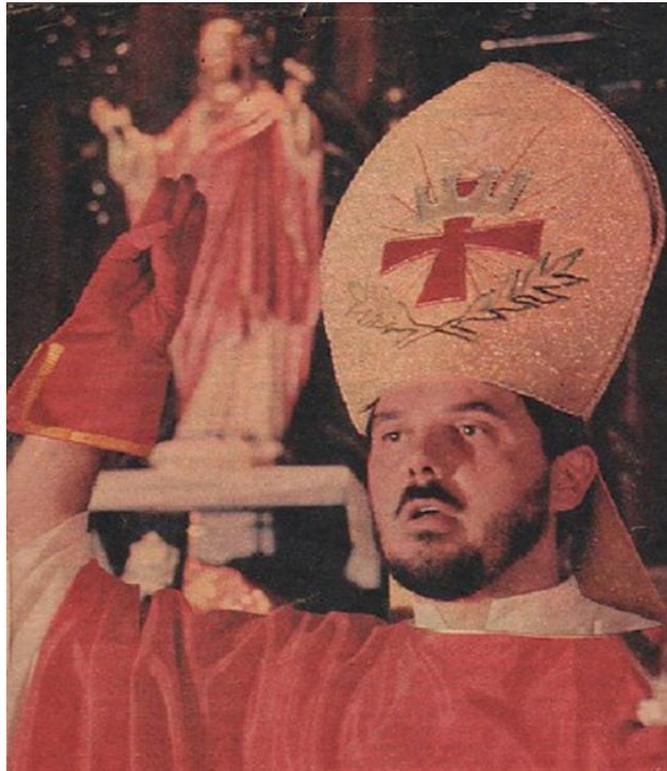
The ceremony became public news. Few people had heard about modern alternative popes, and he was the first papal claimant in the United States. In interviews Chriszekiel Elias claimed that "the keys of St. Peter has been removed from the pope [Paul VI] and I am in charge of the Catholic Church". As to further strengthen the claims to the papacy, he stated that a bloody cross had appeared on the consecrated host when offering his first papal mass.

Bishop Edward Michael Stehlik, the consecrator of Olszewski, was upset and commented upon these unexpected events: "I made a horrible mistake in judgement. It's something I have to live with the rest of my life ... I hope that any Catholic or Orthodox stays as far away from that church as possible".

Inevitably, Olszewski's activities in St. Luke, the episcopal consecration and finally the papal proclamation caused reactions from the church that had ordained him in the first place. Episcopal church leaders received worrying reports about Olszewski's ministry already in 1975, but in 1977, after the consecration, the diocesan bishop took decisive action against the unorthodox pastor in Eddystone. First, in March, the diocese revoked his license to function as a priest and cut the funding. This was the first time in the almost 200-year history of the diocese that such thing happened. Secondly, Olszewski was temporarily suspended—inhibited—by the bishop of Albany, New York.

On July 1 [1977], the Bishop of Albany, acting in accordance with the provisions of Title IV, Canon 10, Section 1, inhibited the Rev. Chester L. Olszewski from officiating in his ministry in the diocese for six months, after which he will be deposed unless he retracts or reports the facts to be false. [Fr. Olszewski reportedly has been ordained and consecrated as a bishop of the American National Catholic Church in Eddystone, Pa.]

According to interviews in newspapers, by that time, Olszewski still considered himself an “Episcopalian – an Episcopalian priest who has been given a miracle”, and said that he would ask for an ecclesiastical trial to clear himself from the accusations. Nevertheless, as the six months passed, on 1 January 1978, Bishop Hogg of Albany defrocked him. When the suspension from priesthood became known, Olszewski said that he did not care about it: “It doesn’t matter. It is a miracle. I am a priest”.



Chester Olszewski as the Pope

The group of faithful around Chriszekiel Elias and Anne Poore was small—and decreasing. Press sources say that at the very beginning, no less than 50 families composed the congregation. However, in December 1977, the pope made a purge, excommunicating all but some 15-20 people, who were considered true believers. The others were accused of “plotting” against him. Still, in interviews, the pope was confident that the true church would grow “because it’s a miracle”. According to a testimony by a former member, the core group of adherents were “mostly blue collar, reformed alcoholics, former drug-users, and those with a deep religious faith considered to be middle class.” By 1978, the pope planned to open up missions in Wickenburg, Arizona and his old hometown Buffalo, New York, and bring the miraculous image on pilgrimage to other places, too. It is not known if, and to what extent, these plans were realized.

Despite being expelled by the bishop, Olszewski refused to leave St. Luke’s church, and he actually managed to remain on the premises until 1980. There, masses according to the Tridentine rite were read three times a day, and Olszewski started to form a clergy. First, he envisioned a group of twelve priests, just like the twelve apostles, but in the end, he came to ordain three men to priesthood, all of whom also became Franciscan religious.

By 1980, perhaps even the year before, Olszewski started to use Peter II as his papal name, claiming that he would be the last pope in history. He was Petrus Romanus named in the papal lists in the so-called Prophecies of Saint Malachy, an important source in Catholic traditionalist circles.

Anne Poore became a nun, known as Sister Della Maria Consolata, member of the Order of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Family. She claimed an increasing number of charismatic gifts. Her spiritual communions took place in the presence of the faithful either at the moment of consecration, or at the subsequent Elevation of the Host. At one occasion, she even received multiple hosts at the same time. Sister Della Maria also asserted to have the gifts of spiritual discretion—“the reading of hearts”—and of bilocation, being at two—or more—places at exactly the same time. While Sister Della Maria was the great charismatic figure in the True Catholic Church, and the main speech-box for the

celestial messages, at times Pope Peter II claimed to be able to read hearts and to bilocate.



Anne Poore as Sister Della Maria Consolata

In late 1979, there occurred an unexpected thing in the church. Pope Peter II stated that God had commanded him to smash the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that had been the devotional center during the last four years. Now, it had served its purpose. After celebrating mass he wrapped the image in an altar cloth and threw it on the floor, where it broke into pieces. He proclaimed that he should bury it at an undisclosed place. Still, the hands of the statue continued to ooze blood. This was looked upon as a sign, and they were therefore kept, and integrated into another image.

In “The Monastery”

In 1980, Peter II, the Pope of Eddystone finally left the St. Luke church premises when a county judge had ordered him to abandon it as it was the property of the Episcopalian church. After the move, little, if anything, about the Pennsylvanian pope reached the newspapers. The group virtually escaped the

media radar screen and most people thought that Chester Olszewski did no claim to be pope anymore. Though he held a lower profile, he, and the group around him, still believed that he was the Vicar of Christ on earth. During the next fifteen years the number of faithful remained stable at around fifteen to twenty people; almost nobody came or left. In the first years of the 1980s, after leaving St. Luke's, the group had no permanent gathering place and mass was offered in group members' homes.

In 1983, however, Chester Olszewski was able to purchase a corner row-home, which was on Saville Avenue, only two blocks away from St. Luke's church. On the first floor, a small chapel was constructed. The property also included a store front, which was transformed into a thrift shop. A former church member told me that the house

was known as "The Monastery" by the faithful, and the adjoining shop was well-known to local residents as Saint Joseph's Thrift Shop. Chester was well-liked by many in the neighborhood and took daily walks. Although he was no-longer receiving media coverage, he was a very active and visible member of society at that time

The same ex-member, who was among the pioneers in the group and stayed for a long time, but now refers to it as a sect, still has many good words to say about the Olszewski:

Chester had a fun-loving, thoroughly disarming, well rounded and charismatic personality. His dedication to God and genuine love for the Holy Mass was considered undeniable by anyone who knew him well. His ministry in Eddystone was very active and covered everything from baptism and marriage, through exorcism and ordinations.

Sister Della Maria claimed to receive a large number of apparitions from the Virgin Mary, but also from Christ, angels and different saints. The apparitions to her had great importance in the life of the group, and the organization of the true church. The pope was elected by Christ in an apparition to her, the exclusive

use of the Tridentine rite was demanded by Christ himself in another apparition, and a new version of the Ave Maria prayer was dictated by the Virgin:

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is thy Divine son, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, and our mother, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of His coming. Amen. The priests adds as a continuation to the Sign of the Cross, "Mary, mother of God."

Apart from daily rosaries, other important devotions included the Stations of the Cross, Novenas, and First-Friday devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Moreover, there were well over 30 Holy Days of obligation per-year. As regards modern Marian apparitions and devotion, Peter II decided that the cases of Fatima and older ecclesiastically recognized apparitions were true, as were the popular apparitions at Garabandal in the 1960s. He took no formal decision on the apparitions at La Salette, but more recent cases like Bayside and Medjugorje were banned, and Necedah was never mentioned at all.

Two people with very far-reaching spiritual authority and power, presiding over such a small group of people, pose obvious risks in the form of excesses and abuses. As an answer to the question if Peter II and Sister Della Maria could be considered abusive, the ex-member stated.

Mostly no. Although they both knew that members of the faithful were willing to go to *any* length to remain obedient to God through them. The faithful held them both in high regard, and as an extension of our fear of God, feared them as well as their responsibility before God was great.

Peter II and Sister Della Maria surely had detailed knowledge of, and control over, all parts of the faithful's life. In fact, his or her eternal salvation depended on their obedience to the leader of the only true church.

Sister Della Maria died in 1992 at the age of 65. The death of the main visionary meant a great setback for the church, not least for Peter II. One former adherent states:

The faithful witnessed how shocked Chester was from the event. He was outwardly stricken and shocked, in regard to the future direction of the ‘Miracle’. He was present at her death in the hospital and said she gently ran her hand across the side of his face as she ascended into Heaven.

Just after Sister Della Maria’s death, Peter II canonized, her and an image of her was placed in chapel. The only other person he canonized was Padre Pio, the famous Italian stigmatic. One in the tandem leadership, Sister, was dead and there were doubts about the future of “the Miracle”. Still, Peter II and the core group around him continued for yet another five years with their masses and devotions.

After the Papacy

In 1997, however, Chester Olszewski suddenly decided to leave Eddystone or Bradford, Pennsylvania. His group in Eddystone was taken by surprise and felt betrayed by his relocation, leaving them alone. Most of them had regarded him as the true pope for two decades. Still, they did not follow him to Bradford. There, Olszewski soon began to offer the traditional mass for a new small community, and his old followers did not feel at home there.

There was a clear reason for him ending up in Bradford. In January 1997, there were reports about miracles in the town’s Holy Family Church. It belonged to the independent Western Orthodox Church in America. Altogether, this church had less than a thousand members, and their local mission at Bradford served no more than fifteen people. Just after New Year’s Day 1997, however, many people became well aware of the church’s existence.

On 8 January 1997, *The Buffalo News* reported about large groups of pilgrims coming to the Holy Family Church in the last couple of days, and that the great influx of people caused serious traffic problems on the avenue where it was located. The newspaper wrote that

The Rev. Robert M. James, the pastor, estimates that as many as 10,000 people have visited his little white clapboard church at Walker Avenue and Mechanic Street since Sunday, when he initially reported the apparitions. Believers and skeptics filed in a steady stream Wednesday into Holy Family Western Orthodox Church, drawn by reports that images of Jesus, Mary and angels miraculously appear on the walls in the corner of the sanctuary. At times Wednesday, as many as 200 people crowded into the church, standing five and six deep at the front to gaze at the sanctuary walls and taking turns climbing the stairs to the choir loft for a different view.

In the interview, James, who had been a parish priest at the Holy Family Church for ten years, claimed that less than a week ago, church organist Paula Edwards, her son and he had seen miraculous holy images on the church wall after hearing footsteps in the church and going there to check. *The Buffalo News* interviewed a number of visitors belonging to a variety of denominations, and some of them claimed that they, too, had seen images on the wall. The journalist summarized: “Visitors to the church Wednesday said they saw a variety of images, including a cross, a pair of crossed swords, angels, Mary holding a baby, Joseph and Jesus.” In the weeks to come, hundreds of people would claim that they had been able to see images of various celestial beings appearing from the wall. Still, after less than a month, the great interest faded away.

On 21 May 1997, *The Buffalo News* printed an update on the events. They interviewed Bishop Nickolas Careone of the Western Orthodox Church of America, who told the reporter that after investigations into the purported miracles, he had found that the testimonies were incredible and that the alleged apparitions were void of any truth. In the name of the church’s board of bishops, he declared that Fr. Robert M. James should be suspended if not complying with the negative evaluation.

Still, without the knowledge of Bishop Careone, Father James had already left the mission and transferred the responsibility for the Holy Family Church to another priest. That priest was Chester Olszewski, formerly known as Pope Chriszekal Elias and Pope Peter II. In Bradford, he most often appeared under the name Christen Elias, stating that he was a Franciscan. At least at an early stage, he used the title Catholic Archbishop of Bradford. Evidently, at least

publically, he did not claim to be Petrus Romanus, the last pope in history anymore.

In Bradford, Chester Olszewski/Christen Elias established close contact with Paula Edwards, the organist who was among the first to witness the miraculous images at the church wall. She became a nun with the name Sr. Veronica. Apart from Olszewski there was another priest at the church: Fr. Peter James, who had been ordained to priesthood by Pope Peter II in 1980. The three made up a community connected to the church that now was known as Holy Family Catholic Church.

According to observations made around 2005, the Holy Family Catholic Church basically used the Tridentine Mass liturgy. Still there were some important differences. For example, parts of the liturgy were chanted in Church Slavonic and Hebrew. Christen Elias, often wore a light blue habit, but occasionally dressed in Eastern Orthodox liturgical vestments. As earlier in Eddystone, the group of faithful who gathered around Olszewski was small; at most twenty or thirty people attended mass. Most of the faithful were not local residents, but travelled long distances to get there.

In the last decade, there have been few news about the group, except for news about the death of Fr. Peter James in 2007, but at the time of writing (2017) Olszewski still lives in Bradford and the Holy Family Catholic Church is still there on Walker Avenue.

References

There are basically no previous studies on Chester Olszewski–Christen Elias–Peter II–Christen Elias and the church with its centre in Eddystone, Pennsylvania, which he led together with Anne Poore–Sister Della Maria Consolata. I wrote a briefer piece on the subject in my research report *Modern Alternative Popes* (2015), which is available on www.magnuslundberg.net. This article is a much revised and expanded version. Apart from my contribution, the

case is only briefly mentioned in overviews of “antipopes” found in print and online.

The most valuable source to this article is my correspondence with a person who for a long period was a member of the group around Olszewski and Poore in Eddystone. I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to this person for providing me with important information, and I respect that this person wants to remain anonymous.

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