

Chester Olszewski – Chriszekiel Elias – Peter II
The Pope of Eddystone, Pennsylvania



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Introduction

In the decades following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), at least thirty men have claimed that they, not the much more recognized person in Rome, were the true leader of the Catholic Church. I refer to this group as alternative popes.¹ Most of them asserted to have been mystically elected through revelations to them or a person close to them. Often, they also experienced that Christ or another celestial being coronated them. Many maintained that according to prophecies, God chose them to become the pontiff of the end-times, when the normal process of the papal election became obsolete, as enemies of the true faith infested the church.

This gradual infiltration made the Catholic church change its teachings and rituals. Most critically, the traditional Order of the Mass, popularly known as the Tridentine Mass, was replaced with the Novus Ordo Mass in 1969. Moreover, the post-conciliar church endorsed ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and religious freedom, thus opposing traditional Catholic teachings on other religious groups. The alternative popes and many other traditionally-minded Catholics saw this development as a sign of severe crisis, which marked the beginning of the end-times.

Alternative popes claim to succeed the Roman pontiff, but in many cases, they announced that the Holy See at their election had moved from Rome to a new place—the place where they lived. In some instances, the church was re-named. Still, the institution was not seen as anything else than the true continuation of the One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church in a time of almost universal apostasy.²

One such alternative pope was Chester Olszewski (b. 1943), later known as Chriszekiel Elias, and Peter II, an Episcopal priest from Eddystone, Pennsylvania. He claimed the papacy in 1977. His transformation into the Vicar of Christ was fast, and an effect of his meeting a fifteen-year older nurse

¹ The concept was first used in Lundberg 2015.

² For further discussion, see Lundberg 2017 and Lundberg forthcoming.

Anne Poore (1927–1992), who owned a bleeding statue of Christ and claimed to receive divine messages and to have charismatic gifts such as the stigmata,

The case of Chester Olszewski, Anne Poore, and their church is little known. There are no scholarly studies. In fact, no detailed documentation of the group’s history exists.³ Part of the explanation for the lack of studies is that they had few adherents, produced little printed material (and the imprints are almost impossible to trace). Therefore, the primary sources for my investigation are press material, primarily from Philadelphia-based newspapers. Through searches in the database www.newspapers.com, I encountered more than 300 relevant pieces. While many are syndicated articles, there are about a hundred original contributions, though often with overlapping information. The textual corpus includes news and feature articles, including a detailed series. In some cases, the tone in the articles is rather descriptive. In others, the journalists are openly derisory, and scare quotes are abundant. Though there are earlier and later material, the bulk was written in 1977 and 1978, i.e., around the time of Olszewski’s papal claim.

A crucial source that completes the press material is my correspondence with a former adherent, which belonged to the small group around Olszewski and Poore from the 1970s through the 1990s. The adherent’s testimonies are particularly significant for the 1980s and 1990s, when the media interest was nonexistent. I have also had correspondence with a close relative of Anne Poore’s, which contributes to the investigation of the early period.

From Buffalo to Eddystone

Chester L. Olszewski, born in 1943, was a cradle Catholic raised in a Polish-American environment in Buffalo, New York State. The family was devout,

³ The only exception known to me is a brief note in Bouflet 2002: 242. This note, however, does only mention the bleeding statue and Anne Poore’s name in passing, not the later development, nor the role of Chester Olszewski.

and after studies at St. Adalbert Elementary School, aged thirteen, he was sent to St. Francis Minor Seminary. In 1963, his religious formation continued at St. Hyacinth Seminary in Granby, Massachusetts. However, shortly before taking his perpetual vows as a Conventual Franciscan in 1966, he left the order voluntarily. After departing the seminary, Olszewski joined the U.S. Marine Corps and served both in the home country and Vietnam. In 1969, towards the end of his period in the military, Olszewski married. With time he and his wife would have three children.⁴

In the early 1970s, Olszewski finished his B.A., intending to become a permanent deacon. During this period, he worked as a janitor and a security guard to make a living. The diaconate is generally a step towards priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, but Vatican II allowed married men to serve as permanent deacons. Still, for becoming admitted to the education program, Olszewski needed a letter of recommendation from a parish. Despite several attempts, he was not successful in getting one.

Nevertheless, thoughts on priesthood seem to have remained with Olszewski. Through a friend, he came in touch with the Episcopalian Church and was accepted as a priest candidate by the bishop of Albany, Allen W. Brown (1908–1990). As a part of his preparation for ordination, in 1972, Olszewski attended Montreal Diocesan College, a part of McGill University. Though the college was considered conservative, he thought the education was too liberal and despised the environment.

Olszewski left Montreal Diocesan College one year into the three-year program. Later, faculty members wrote to the bishop stating that Olszewski was unsuited for the priesthood and showed little interest in and knowledge of Episcopalian theology. Still, Bishop Brown arranged another solution. Olszewski left his diocese to become a “special student” at Philadelphia Divinity School. After one year of studies there, in mid-1974, Olszewski became a deacon, and in June 1975, he was ordained to the priesthood by the

⁴ The description of Chester Olszewski’s biography is based on many media sources, but especially the detailed article series in *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 14, 15, 16, and 17, 1977, cf. my correspondence with a former adherent.

bishop of Pennsylvania, Lyman Ogilby (1922–1990). The bishop knew little about Olszewski but relied on the recommendation of his colleague in Albany.

Following ordination, Bishop Ogilby assigned him as pastor of St. Luke’s Church in Eddystone, a Philadelphia suburb. There, serious problems appeared within months. Olszewski introduced distinctly Roman Catholic uses and, not least, became convinced that a statue of the Sacred Heart of Christ, owned by a Roman Catholic woman, was miraculous; it was bleeding. This was the beginning of a development that had many unforeseen consequences.

The “Miracle” Unfolds

Anne Poore, the owner of the image of the Sacred Heart of Christ, was born in 1927 and lived in Linwood, a small blue-collar township in Boothwyn, some ten kilometres from Eddystone, close to the border with Delaware. As Chester Olszewski, she was of Polish extraction, and like him, she was a cradle Catholic. Poore was a registered nurse and a mother of five sons. Her husband worked at a factory and was a Protestant, raised as a Baptist.

Anne Poore belonged to the Catholic parish of the Immaculate Conception in Marcus Hook and was devoutly religious. Still, as she was divorced and remarried, by the mid-1970s, she had not been permitted to take communion for almost two decades. By that time, Poore transformed one of the rooms of her home into a chapel, filling it with religious images. Among them was a 65-centimeter-high statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, made by a company in New Jersey, and a recent gift from a friend.⁵

According to her later account, on April 4, 1975, Poore was on her knees praying before her statue of the Sacred Heart. Suddenly, she heard a voice

⁵ *Pennsylvania Daily News*, June 14, 1977. *The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, September 22, 1975. *The Morning News, Wilmington-Delaware*, November 28, 1977, and correspondence with a relative of Mrs. Poore.

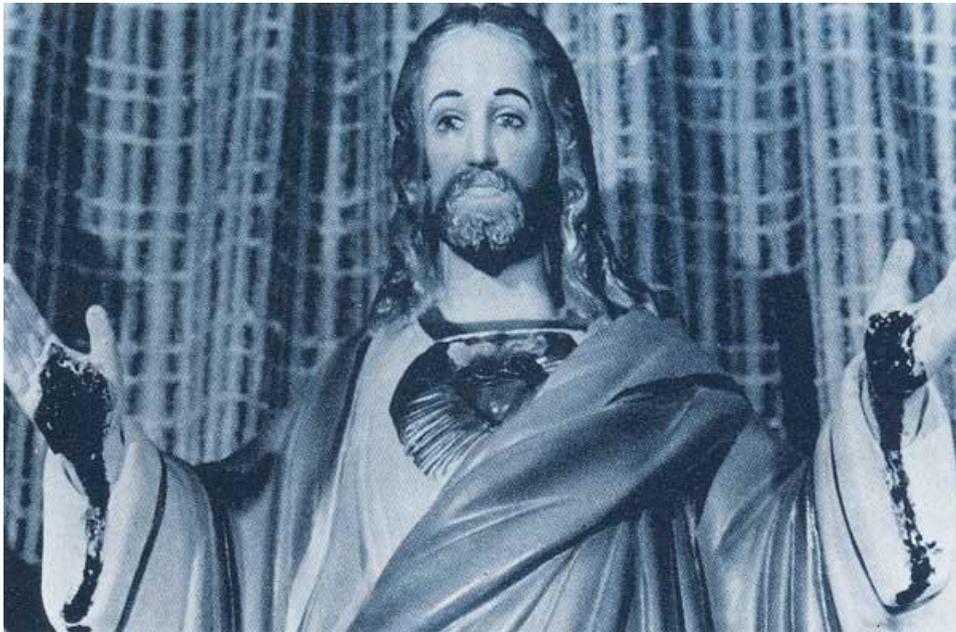
saying, “I will present myself to you, now present yourself to me.” When looking up at the statue, she saw drops of blood appearing on Christ’s hands. The miracle would repeat many times in the coming months, especially on Fridays and Holy Days. The news attracted many people, including persons in search of cures. On an ordinary Friday, at least a hundred persons gathered outside the tiny house, where the statue was put on the porch.

Concerned by the widespread interest, by September 1975, the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Philadelphia established a committee of priests and a medical doctor to evaluate the alleged miracle but could not investigate the statue closely. Anne Poore claimed that the Virgin opposed such an inspection, at least at present. The committee’s conclusion was decidedly negative. They stated that they had “grave reservations about the authenticity of the alleged phenomenon.” However, they did not explicitly forbid Catholics from visiting the place. Such a combination of solid skepticism and a certain openness towards private cult was a standard solution. In short, the diocesan authorities hoped that the widespread interest would wane as soon as possible.

Anne Poore was unwilling to accept the committee’s verdict and disappointed that the local Roman Catholic parish was opposed to housing the statue. She had to seek support in other religious circles. In this period, her spokesperson was an independent Catholic priest, Henry Lovett.⁶ He had been ordained in the Roman Catholic Church, but left and joined the Renewed Church, led until his death in 1974 by French alternative pope Clement XV. It is not likely that Poore was much influenced by Pope Clement’s theology which from the mid-1960s onwards included beliefs in an intergalactic church, with extraterrestrials as clergy and church members. It was a critical missionary method of the Renewed Church to search unauthorized miracles, be it bleeding statues or cases of stigmata. Still, there is no indication that Lovett stayed for a long time.⁷

⁶ *The Catholic Advance*, November 20, 1975. *Courier-Post*, September 27, 1975 and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 4, 1975.

⁷ On Clément XV and the Renewed Church, see e.g. Delestre 1985.



The bleeding statue was only one part of what became known as “The Miracle.” In June 1975, Anne Poore claimed to receive so-called spiritual communions, i.e., that a eucharistic host miraculously appeared in her mouth. In her case, such communions were said to have begun in her parish church. At that time, her first husband had recently died, and she would be able to take communion for the first time since 1956. Still, she was not able to open her mouth. Instead, when the priest stopped in front of her, she made a loud hiccup sound, and when opening her mouth, she miraculously revealed a eucharistic host on her tongue.⁸

In late 1975 Poore began to develop the stigmata, and by November 1976, they were fully developed. According to her, the wounds constantly bled, but most profusely on Fridays. The severe pains that the stigmata caused transformed her into a victim soul, suffering vicariously for the sins of

⁸ *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 16, 1977.

humanity. Apart from the bleeding statue, the spiritual communions, and the stigmata, Poore claimed to receive frequent messages from the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.⁹ Miraculous statues, spiritual communions, and stigmata were common ingredients in the type of miracle-centered spirituality that grew stronger in twentieth-century popular Catholicism. In that sense, the case was typical.¹⁰

Chester Olszewski, the recently arrived Episcopalian priest, read about the bleeding statue in a local newspaper. He was interested in the story but skeptical and decided to go to Linwood to talk to Anne Poore and examine the purportedly miraculous statue. Their initial meeting, which took place in September 1975, had dramatic effects. Soon, Olszewski developed a strong belief in “The Miracle.” Later, Poore even claimed that when she was 15 years old, she had seen Olszewski before he was born and recognized him as soon as she met him for the first time. Referring to a message from the Holy Family, Poore chose him as her “spiritual adviser and confessor.”¹¹

Olszewski did not accept this commission directly but asked for “a sign.” A month later, Poore came to Olszewski with flowers that she said the Virgin Mary had given her to hand over to the priest. Poore conveyed the Virgin’s message to her: that he should smell them. Olszewski described the fragrance as mysterious and heavenly, and he interpreted it as the sign he had asked for. After this event, the two formed a closely-knitted team until Poore’s death seventeen years later. He was her spiritual advisor, and she conferred celestial messages to him.

Around the turn of the year 1975/1976, Olszewski decided to move the image of the Sacred Heart to the parish church. It was kept in the attic for some time, but then he decided to place it high over the altar of St. Luke church, where it was said to bleed every Friday.¹²

⁹ *The Morning News, Wilmington-Delaware*, November 28, 1977.

¹⁰ See e.g., Bouflet 2002.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Daily News*, June 14, 1977, cf. *Courier-Press*, September 27, 1975.

¹² *Pennsylvania Daily News*, June 14, 1977.



This chain of events, including the pastor's decision to include a new central devotion in the church, had a bewildering effect on the Episcopalian congregation and the diocesan leadership. Many of the parishioners were critical or, at the very least skeptical. Still, news about the miracles spread in broader circles. The accounts attracted locals and people from other parts of the United States. There were even pilgrims from Europe and Asia; news about miracles traveled fast. There were stories about healings connected to the bleeding statue, including cures from blindness and lameness. However, the new devotions estranged a significant part of the old Episcopalian parishioners, who began to frequent other churches, while many outsiders

came to St. Luke. The old Episcopalian congregation numbered about 50 families, and in the beginning, the new group was at least equally big.¹³

By that time, Olszewski and Poore were confident that they had been divinely chosen to restore the traditional Catholic faith. Through “The Miracle” beginning in 1975, God had converted them to an authentic, unaltered Catholicism that was not tainted by the decisions of Vatican II and the general apostasy that had followed in its wake. They should restore the Tridentine Mass.¹⁴

To Catholic traditionalists, the new Mass order, the *Novus Ordo*, established in 1969, was an especially appalling result of the council. Hand communion was often regarded as a sign of irreverence, if not an abomination. Many also found the decreasing focus on traditional devotions such as novenas catastrophic. Olszewski, therefore, began to say Mass in Latin and only distribute communion on the tongue. Some of the uses were highly questionable in the 1970s Roman Catholic Church and, of course, even more so in an Episcopalian Church such as St. Luke in Eddystone. Though not stated explicitly, by 1977, Olszewski and Poore had probably assumed a *sedevacantist* position, i.e., they believed that there was no true pope in Rome any longer. And if the thought that Paul VI was the pontiff, he would soon have to leave the papacy for another person, as he held heretical views.

Chester Olszewski thought he needed to become a validly consecrated bishop to re-establish the One True Catholic Church. After a while, he encountered a person willing to provide him with the much sought-after apostolic succession. In May 1977, he was conditionally ordained to the priesthood and then consecrated by Edward Michael Stehlik (1943–1985) from Wisconsin, a former Carmelite who had become bishop of the Old Catholic Church of America. Later, for a few years, he was an archbishop of

¹³ *Pennsylvania Daily News*, June 13, 1977.

¹⁴ *The Morning News, Wilmington-Delaware*, November 27, 1977.

the North American Old Roman Catholic Church, Ultrajectine, and leader of the controversial shrine of Necedah.¹⁵

Nevertheless, according to Olszewski and Poore, what Bishop Stehlik did was just an “outward consecration.” In November 1976, Christ had mystically consecrated him, conferring the name Bishop Chriszekiel Elias and the title Vicar of Christ. The names were a combination of Christ and the prophets Ezekiel and Elias. Ezekiel was the prophet who “announced the restoration of the liturgy in the temple” after “the desecration and abomination.” In his view, the abomination was the New Mass Order. The title “Vicar of Christ” is normally used by the pope.¹⁶

The Vicar of Christ

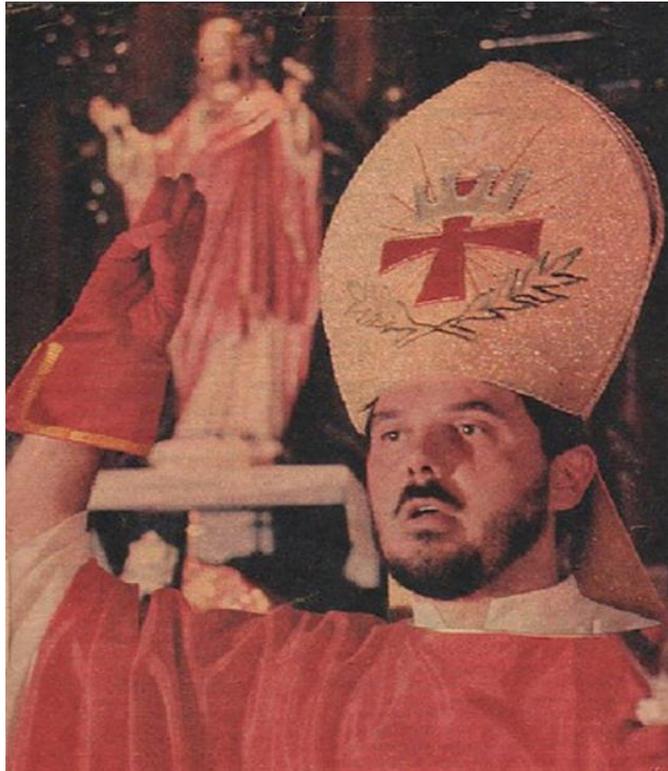
On May 31, 1977, Chester Olszewski publically proclaimed himself Chriszekiel Elias the only Vicar of Christ at a three-hour ceremony in St. Lukes’s Episcopal Church in Eddystone. About seventy people had gathered for the occasion. Though most of the faithful were probably not aware of it, the event had been planned for a long time. The elaborate ecclesiastical vestments had been ordered already the year before.

In no uncertain terms, Olszewski stated, “I am the Lord’s choice. I have been chosen by God to walk in the shoes of the fisherman. I am the only Vicar of Christ on Earth.” However, he did not want to call himself the pope, as he claimed that the era of the Roman papacy was over, and the end-times had begun. It was only a few years left. Still, he had replaced the pope and was nothing less than the leader of the One True Catholic Church, the Vicar of Christ on earth. To further strengthen the claims, he stated that a bloody

¹⁵ *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 13, 1977. On Stehlik, see also *Capital Times* (Madison, Wisconsin), July 6, 1985.

¹⁶ *The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, June 13, 1977, *The Morning News (Wilmington-Delaware)*, November 27, 1977.

cross had appeared on a host when offering his first Mass. It also had a “hole about the place where Our Lord’s Heart would be.”¹⁷



The ceremony immediately became public news. 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.” Few people had heard about modern alternative popes, and he was the first publically known papal claimant in the United States. Bishop Edward Michael Stehlik, who consecrated Olszewski one week before the ceremony in Eddystone, was upset, felt betrayed, and commented upon these unexpected events: “I made a horrible mistake in judgement. It’s something I have to live with the rest

¹⁷ *The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, June 13, 1977.

of my life ... I hope that any Catholic or Orthodox stays as far away from that church as possible".¹⁸

Inevitably, Olszewski's liturgical activities in St. Luke, the episcopal consecration, and finally, the public papal proclamation caused reactions from the church that had ordained him in the first place. Still, as seen, the Episcopal church leaders received worrying reports about Olszewski's ministry almost from when he arrived in Eddystone.¹⁹ Still, in 1977, the situation had become impossible, and the church took decisive action against the unorthodox pastor in Eddystone. First, in March, before the consecration, Bishop Ogilby of the Episcopal diocese of Philadelphia revoked his license to function as a priest and cut the funding.²⁰ Secondly, a few months later, Olszewski was temporarily suspended—inhibited—by the bishop of Albany, Wilbur Hogg (1916–1986).

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.)²¹

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, Bishop Hogg defrocked him on January 1, 1978. When the suspension from

¹⁸ *The Hartford Courant*, January 8, 1978.

¹⁹ *The Morning News (Wilmington-Delaware)*, March 26, 1977, *Philadelphia Daily News*, July 7, 1977.

²⁰ *The Morning News (Wilmington-Delaware)*, March 26, 1977.

²¹ *The Living Church*, September 18, 1977.

priesthood became known, Olszewski said that he did not care about it: “It doesn’t matter. It is a miracle. I am a priest.”²²

The group around Chriszekiel Elias and Anne Poore was rapidly decreasing. Press sources say that no less than 50 families composed the congregation initially. 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 was “mostly blue-collar, reformed alcoholics, former drug-users, and those with a deep religious faith considered to be middle class.”²³ 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. It is not known if and to what extent these plans were realised.²⁴

Despite being expelled by the Episcopalian bishop, Olszewski refused to leave St. Luke’s church and the rectory. He managed to remain on the premises for a few years, despite the understandable opposition of the Episcopalian church. Tridentine rite Masses were said three times a day, and Olszewski started to form a clergy. First, he envisioned a group of twelve priests, just like the apostles, but in the end, he came to ordain three men to the priesthood, all of whom also became Franciscan religious.²⁵

Anne Poore became a nun, first known as Sister Adele and then as Sister Della Maria Consolata, a member of the Order of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Family, founded in late 1977. The order never had more than a handful of members. She claimed an increasing number of charismatic gifts. Her spiritual communions took place in the presence of the faithful either at

²² *Philadelphia Daily News*, January 8, 1978.

²³ Correspondence with a former adherent, 2016.

²⁴ *The Gettysburg Times*, January 6, 1978.

²⁵ Correspondence with a former adherent, 2016, cf. *The Morning News (Wilmington-Delaware)*, November 28, 1977.

the moment of consecration or at the subsequent elevation of the host. Sometimes when she received spiritual communions, she shared them with the Vicar of Christ. Nevertheless, as she was a woman, she could not touch the sacred host but used “a mouth-to-mouth ritual.” On 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 precisely the same time. While Sister Della was the charismatic center in the True Catholic Church in the sense that she was the speech box for the celestial messages and was the unquestionable formal leader of the church. Still, Olszewski claimed charismatic gifts, too, e.g., to be able to read hearts and bilocate.²⁶

By late 1979, Chester Olszewski started to use Peter II as his papal name, claiming that he would be the last Vicar of Christ (he still seems to have asserted that the era of the papacy was over).²⁷ Peter II was Petrus Romanus, named in the papal lists in the so-called Prophecy of the Popes, attributed to Saint Malachy, an essential source in Catholic traditionalist circles.

At the same time, by late 1979, an unexpected thing occurred in the church. It was connected to the end-time events, too. Peter II stated that God had commanded him to smash the Sacred Heart of Jesus statue, the devotional focus during the last four years. Now, it had served its purpose. After saying Mass with thirty people present, he wrapped the image in an altar cloth and threw it on the floor, where it broke into pieces. He said that the crushing of the statue “heralds an apocalyptic earthquake in 1980 that will shake you all out of your couches.” He proclaimed that he should bury the pieces in an undisclosed place within the church compound.²⁸ Still, the hands of the statue continued to ooze blood. Therefore, this was looked upon

²⁶ Correspondence with a former adherent, 2016, cf. *Philadelphia Daily News*, June 14, 15, 16, and 17, 1977.

²⁷ Correspondence with a former adherent, 2016.

²⁸ *Philadelphia Daily News*, November 19, 1979. Correspondence with a close relative of Mrs. Poore’s.

as a sign, and at least part of the pieces was kept and integrated into another image.²⁹

Despite being suspended and defrocked by the Episcopalian church Olszewski and his followers stayed at St. Luke. Eventually, a county judge ordered him to leave the church building and the rectory as they were the property of the Episcopalian church, and he was no longer employed or even a priest at all. The court ruled that he would have to leave within three months. Otherwise, he would be ejected. That would not be the case, but Olszewski and the Diocese of Philadelphia agreed after lengthy deliberations. The diocese said that they had wanted to refrain from a forceful eviction for concern of Olszewski's wife and children. After celebrating the Easter Liturgy in 1980, Peter II, his family, and the congregation finally left the St. Luke church premises, handed it over to the Episcopalian Church. However, before leaving, he crashed a stained church window.³⁰

The Church in the Monastery

After leaving St. Luke church in April 1980 onwards, the group around Peter II and Sister Della went below the media radar screen. Most people thought that Chester Olszewski did not claim to be the pope anymore and that the group had been shattered. Though he held a low profile, he, and the small group around him, still believed that he was the Vicar of Christ on earth. The number of faithful remained stable at around fifteen to twenty people; almost nobody joined 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.³¹ In 1982, the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X took

²⁹ Correspondence with a close relative of Mrs. Poore's.

³⁰ *Philadelphia Daily New*, April 5, 1980, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 7, 1980.

³¹ With few exceptions, this part of the study, covering the years from 1980 through 1997, is based on my correspondence with a former adherent of the group.

over St. Luke from the Episcopalians. It is still used by them, now known as St. Jude.³²

In 1983, Olszewski purchased a corner row home 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 storefront, transformed into a thrift shop. A former church member said 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 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 many apparitions from the Virgin Mary and Christ, angels, and saints. The apparitions to her had great importance in the group's life and the organization of the true church. Christ elected the pope in an apparition to her, Christ himself demanded the exclusive use of the Tridentine rite in another apparition, and the Virgin dictated a new version of the Ave Maria prayer:

³² *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 7, 1982, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 28, 1986.

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 add 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. Regarding modern Marian apparitions and devotions, Peter II decided that the cases of Fatima and other older ecclesiastically recognised apparitions were true, as were the famous apparitions at Spanish Garabandal in 1961–1965, popular among Catholic traditionalists. Still, other recent and controversial cases like Bayside and Medjugorje were explicitly banned, and much-debated Necedah was never mentioned.

Two people with very far-reaching spiritual authority and power, presiding over such a small group of people, pose apparent 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 indeed had detailed knowledge of, and control over, all parts of the faithful’s life. Their 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 visionary meant a significant setback for the church, not least for Peter II. The 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 the chapel. The only other person he canonised was Padre Pio (1887–1968), the famous Italian stigmatic. One in the tandem leadership, Sister Della 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.

**PRAYER TO
ST. DELLA MARIA CONSOLATA**

May 5, 1927 – September 29, 1992

*Oh God, our refuge and our strength,
look down upon us, Thy children who
cry to Thee; and through the interces-
sion of the glorious and immaculate
Virgin Mary, Mother of God, St.*

*Joseph, her spouse, of the blessed
apostles, Peter and Paul, of St. Della
Maria Consolata, and of all the angels
and saints, in Thy mercy and goodness,
hear our prayers for the conversion of
sinners, and for the freedom and
exaltation of our Holy Mother, the
Catholic Church. Through the same
Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

St. Della Maria Consolata pray for us.

After Eddystone

In 1997, Chester Olszewski suddenly left Eddystone for Bradford, Pennsylvania. His group 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, with very few exceptions—one of the priests—they did not follow him to Bradford. Olszewski soon began to offer the traditional Mass for a new small community, and his old followers did not feel at home there.

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

On January 8, 1997, *The Buffalo News* reported large groups of pilgrims coming to the Holy Family Church in the last couple of days. The significant influx of people caused severe 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.³³

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, he, the church organist, and her son had seen miraculous holy images on the church wall after hearing footsteps in the church and going there to check. *The Buffalo News* interviewed several visitors belonging to various denominations, and some of them claimed that they, too, had seen images on the wall. The journalist summarised: "Visitors to the church Wednesday said they saw various 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

³³ *The Buffalo News*, January 8, 1997.

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.³⁴



On May 21, 1997, *The Buffalo News* printed an update on the events. They interviewed Bishop Nicholas Careone of the Western Orthodox Church of America. He 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. Careone also said that James was

³⁴ *The Buffalo News*, January 8, 1997.

subject to Archbishop Charles David Luther of Altoona, Pennsylvania, presiding bishop of the Western Orthodox Church of America, which had its roots in the Catholic Apostolic Church of Brazil.³⁵

Still, without the knowledge of Bishop Careone, Father James had already left the mission. He transferred the responsibility for the Holy Family Church to another priest: Chester Olszewski, formerly known as Chriszekiel Elias and Peter II. In Bradford, Olszewski most often appeared as Christen Elias, stating that he was a Franciscan. At least at an early stage, he used the title Catholic Archbishop of Bradford. At least publically, he did not claim to be Petrus Romanus, the last pope in history anymore.

In Bradford, Olszewski 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, whom he had ordained in 1980. The three made up a community connected to the church known as Holy Family Catholic Church.³⁶

According to observations made around 2005, the Holy Family Catholic Church used the Tridentine Mass liturgy. Still, there were some critical 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 residents but traveled long distances to get there.³⁷ The Holy Family Catholic Church is still there on Walker Avenue, but it is unknown if there is any religious activities anymore.

³⁵ *The Buffalo News*, May 21, 1997. On the Western Orthodox Church of America, see Melton 2009.

³⁶ *The Buffalo News*, May 21, 1997, cf. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 19, 1997.

³⁷ Email correspondece with observer.

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