

Address to the House of Bishops

Dear Brothers in the Episcopal Ministry,

Dear Sisters and brothers,

I would like to express my gratitude to His Grace the Obispo Maximo and to your house for inviting me to give this address. And I thank you all for the warm welcome you have given me. It is indeed a great joy for me to be among you and to have the opportunity to express our friendship and solidarity as brothers in the Episcopal ministry.

Dear Lord and Brother, I have read with satisfaction your article in 'The Independent' of 29 October 1903. May God be with your lordship and your church. You don't know perhaps that there are in Switzerland, Ger, many, Holland, Austria similar catholic national churches as you have organized so happily in your Islands. We hold catholic faith...sacraments...constitution but we are independent from the pope . I seems to me that those national churches should be in brotherly union to show the world that it is possible to be catholic everywhere without being submitted to Rome. As a sign of my brotherly feelings I send you the list of my clergy.¹

This quote from a letter of the first bishop of the old catholic church of Switzerland, Eduard Herzog, shows the interest with which the developments of the coming into being of the IFI were followed in Europe. At that time all over the world there were emancipation movements fighting for space and freedom to bridge the gap between the Christian faith and the cultural en political developments. Those developments were expressions of the growing awareness of people's self-confidence and the aspiration of people who are discovering themselves as 'full members' of the people of God.

1. Our calling

Your church is bearing the legacy of that history and of that movement, as we – being old-catholics – are heirs of a similar European movement. We all are catholic churches because of our solidarity both with our own people and with the people of God of all times and places. This reality of solidarity binds us together and opens up the way to the Lord, our God, who is the One in whom people of all times and places, of all colours and races, of all languages and cultures find their unity. Working for that unity is the calling we have in common. It may surprise you that we, who are seen sometimes as breaking-away movements, are campaigning for unity. Are we not those who have destroyed unity? I don't think so, because you cannot speak about unity if people are not accepted as equals. Let me put it this way: by us, a latent disunity was brought to light. Precisely this fact calls us to be workers for unity.

¹ Eleuterio Revelido: The ecclesiality and the episcopacy of the Iglesia Filippina Independiente: its continuing challenge to concordat churches in the era of Globalisaiton. N.p. paper p.3

Perhaps unity seems to be a simple idea, but it is not. Unity is hard labour and it is a Gift from God, who is the Unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is the unity that Jesus has shown us reaching out to all kind of different people who were excluded from the false but 'official unity' of his time in his country. This work of the living Lord is still continuing. To participate in it is be the core of our faith and our lives.

In this respect I was impressed by the statement of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his address to the assembly of World Council of Churches in 2006. Archbishop Rowan was saying that 'Christians don't have any founder' as i.e. Lutherans or Marxists or any other ecclesiastical or political organisation in the world. And Archbishop Rowan added: 'Christians don't look backwards, but they look to the future because of the Lord who wants to be present in this future'. We, Christians, are called by the name of Christ himself. 'Christ' is the title that was given to the Resurrected Lord by the first Christians. It means 'the anointed one', sent among us by the Father in order to realize salvation. We are called to take part in that work for salvation and therefore Christians want to be there where Christ wants to be. That means, in the first place, with the poor and the marginalized, but also, indeed, with all people, regardless of their background or religion, in order to love them in deed and word.

We don't have an absolute Truth in order to dominate people, but we are told to witness to God's love. To be a Christian hasn't got much to do with the adoption of a dogmatic system or a certain doctrine. The essence of being Christian is a commitment to a praxis, a way of life. The resurrected Lord is continuing his work among humankind, even more intense than during his life on earth. Our only concern has to be, how to participate in it...

2. Becoming more catholic!

We don't have an absolute Truth, neither do we have a kind of heroic person by whom we were founded. All we have is the Holy Spirit as a compass who shows us the way to those places where the presence of the resurrected Lord can be experienced, and the unity that is in God can become obvious. We think about those places in the world where friendship has to be brought and solidarity has to blossom.

It is the same compass that the churches can show how to get out of the present ecumenical deadlock. It shows us the way of what we call with a word of Robert Schreier 'the new catholicity'. In other words: the way out of the deadlock is to become more catholic!

The question about our catholicity is twofold: (1) how the church sees its relationship to the world as people's home (the 'oikos'); (2) how the church is committed to its assignment to proclaim the gospel in deed and word.

The first question refers directly to the universality of the Christian message. It starts with the belief that it is possible to integrate the Christian message in every human culture, and even above that there is the deep conviction the gospel is relevant to every human being

and every human culture. The message of the gospel for every culture is that human beings are entrusted to one another as a token of God's own devotion to humankind. It is a message of solidarity in order to make the world more viable and more human. Christianity has a fine nose for where in cultures and among humans love and friendship are awakening. We believe that those things are traces of the resurrected Lord among us.

The relationship of Christians with cultures is one of dialogue. Christianity does not only bring a message, it is ready to receive as well. Starting point is the acceptance of the otherness of the other. Remember Saint Paul on the Aeropagus in Athens or Jesus himself meeting the Samaritan women in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. In his discussion with that women, Jesus tells us 'to worship in spirit and truth'. In other words: we can worship with an heart that is open for the truth of the encounter with the resurrected Lord.

Concerning the second question, about how the church will proclaim the gospel, it is important to be aware that the centre of the Christian message is not a conviction, but historical events, that have really happened. It is about the historical event of the exodus, of the deportation of the People of God to Babylon, of the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Those historical events can direct our view on our own lives and on our world and the consequence will be that the meaning of the events we are involved in will become clear to us. To be a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It is to learn to see through the eyes of Jesus himself. Who is ready to take this attitude, will discover what the meaning of events is to be. It is far from a church who comments on events from a safe distance and pedantic height. You will only find out about the meaning of things if you are really involved in the struggle for human dignity. The story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus is an illustration for this. The disciples are talking to one another "about all these things that had happened". The Lord, who is going with them the same way, makes the connection of their experiences to the experiences of the people of God in telling them parts of the history of the people and the interpretations of it by the prophets. To believe in Jesus Christ is to believe – together with him – in the Kingdom of God.

3. The IFI and the Union of Utrecht 'in action'!

The letter I quoted in the introduction to this address, was written on December 1, 1903. It had taken another 62 years before the IFI and the Union of Utrecht entered into a concordat of full communion. It was on the 22 September 1965. The concordat acknowledges that we share the same faith as the two partners are a catholic church on the one side and a communion of catholic churches on the other side. Being a small world communion of catholic churches, we are proud about our connection to your church. We need you in order to be more catholic and perhaps we can offer you some support in cultivating your catholic identity. None of our churches can be catholic on its own, we need one another.

In his study about 'Old Catholic and Philippine Independent ecclesiologies in history', Professor Peter Ben Smit says that "the IFI appears as an 'ecclesiological extrovert' as it develops its theology with reference to its identity as an national church and the nation in which its exists; and the Union of Utrecht appears as an 'ecclesiological introvert' as it develops its theology mainly through interaction and exchange with other churches in ecumenical dialogue"² Both approaches need each another. An ecclesiology that is not rooted in a concrete cultural context denies the creativity of the Holy Spirit as it is expressed in it. It remains abstract and far from the reality of the people of God. On the other hand, an ecclesiology that would not take into account the developments in other cultures denies the fact that de Holy Spirit is not bound by our restrictions as human beings but goes beyond all kind of boundaries in order to create unity among all people.

Some of this was reflected on in the theological project that was set up by both the IFI and the Union of Utrecht, with the participation of the Episcopal Church and the Church of Sweden. This project on 'Catholicity and Globalisation' offered some of our theologians the opportunity to study the issue of globalization from a theological point of view. The combination of those two term 'Globalisation' and 'Catholicity' is challenging because they mean the same, the first in modern English, the latter in ancient Greek; the first being a term that is used in economics and politics, the last in the context of ecclesiology.

A lot of reflection has been done on the issue of globalization. Ecumenical organizations and some churches have already published a lot of material about the dangers and the opportunities of a global economy. A lot has been said about the role of multi-nationals and their exclusive emphasis on profit, about international economic relationships and international politics, or about environmental issues and the development of poor countries. But there is a clear lack of theological reflection in depth on these phenomena's. This was the reason why we invited theologians to meet in order to organize a joint reflection on these important and sometimes life-threatening issues. They met three times during a three years period. The results of their reflections were published both in scientific form and a small booklet for larger public. Those publications received a warm welcome in a diversity of circles of church people being involved in the same matters. As I presented it to those responsible for the social issues within the World Council of Churches, they were very enthusiastic about the work that has been done.

It motivates us to continue this way because we are the only ones within the ecumenical context who are studying those theological questions. Therefore as a follow-up to the work that has been done already, we are proposing a new international conference on Globalization and Catholicity. It would be appropriate to focus now on the marks of the church, as professed in the Nicene Creed, in the context of globalization. What does it mean to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in a continuing globalizing world? This further ecumenical reflection raises ecclesiological and related theological questions in the face of

² Peter Ben Smit p. 477

the challenges of the globalization of the economy. The aim of the conference could be to see how in the face of globalization the churches could discover a shared understanding of catholicity. It will make us together to witnesses of the catholicity of the church that will be liberating and generating solidarity.

Speaking about this project with other partners, including the WCC and the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian unity, they assured me of their readiness to collaborate. We will try to initiate this project as one of the initiatives handling the results of the 10th general assembly of the WCC, to be held next year. The theme of the assembly is “God of life, lead us to justice and peace” and the question of ‘Globalisation and Catholicity’ fits in as it focus on the church becoming an agent of unity among people. We hope that this initiative may have the full support of your House.

And there is more to work on together. Within the Central Committee of the WCC we are trying to set up the collaboration both with the IFI and the Mar Thoma Church of India. Both churches are in full communion with the Anglican communion, but are not member of it. Both churches are catholic in their own way, but do not have any larger community of churches to be a member of. Actually we are in the same situation, except for the fact we are a small Christian world communion of churches. Precisely this situation offers us the opportunity to invite those churches to collaborate with the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches in order to deepen the catholic identity we have in common. To undergird this process we started a bilateral dialogue with the Mar Thoma Church, because until now we aren’t in full communion with them.

In the same respect of promoting collaboration among those catholic churches that are not part of the Roman Catholic or any other Communion, we invited some bishops of this house to meet with bishops of the Mar Thoma Church and the European Old Catholic Bishops for a study conference on ecclesiology. This conference, that took place two years ago, was needed in order to learn to know one another’s realities and ecclesiological particularities. The participants were enthusiastic about the results of it. We are planning a follow-up of this conference in 2014, in connection with the Old Catholic Congress in September of that year. There, we will celebrate the 125th anniversary of the coming into being of the Old Catholic Community of the Union of Utrecht. I hope that some members of this House will be able to attend this conference.

There would be still more to say about all kinds of collaboration between the IFI and our communion, i.e., the exchange of lecturers on which we are working, some of your social and ecclesiastical projects for which Partner-Sein and the Mission Saint Paul provides some financial means, the Filipino parish the diocese of Amsterdam-Haarlem has set up responding to a demand of some dozens of people living in the Amsterdam area, the publication of the small booklet remembering Bishop Ramento (the French translation is to be published within some months), etc. There is still more to say, more to dream and more to plan because our relationship has to offer us still much more than it has done until now.

Concluding this address, I want to witness of the fact that I experience our solidarity as a gift from God with which God is enriching our lives and our world. The longing to be more catholic has separated both of us from Rome, but none of our churches have had the ambition to be 'Rome free', in the sense that it would be a central point in our self-understanding.³ We have the calling to show that being catholic is about living in solidarity, with our people, with our world, with history and tradition, with the whole the creation, as our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is in solidarity with his world. That we all may become one, as God is one (John 17,11).

³ Peter Ben Smit 485