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## **A Challenging Relationship**

### **The International Roman-Catholic – Old-Catholic Dialogue's Contribution to Ecumenism**

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#### **0. Introduction**

Ecclesiology is more than ever a key-question in the perspective of the growing unity among the churches. Churches can only be unified, in one or another way, if there is a consensus about what it means to be church. A lot of ecumenical dialogues have contributed to this question. The particular opinions of the large traditions have opened up themselves to ideas that until recently times were quite alien to their own context. It is the question how the old-catholic communion can contribute to those dialogues and to the unity of the churches in developing its ecclesiology. In its ambition to realize a catholicity as it existed in the church of the first millennium, it wants to contribute to the unity of the churches. This intention appears in several places of the Utrecht' Bishops Declaration of 1889.

I would like to present to you the churches of the Communion of the Union of Utrecht and tell you something about their ecclesiological approach. After I have done that, I will offer you a first introduction to the Roman-Catholic-Old-Catholic dialogue. I will focus on the document that was published in 2009 as a result of a newest phase of that dialogue, and identify the challenging questions we face.

#### **1. The Union of Utrecht of Old-Catholic churches**

Although the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands is much older, the name *old catholic* or 'altkatholisch' appeared only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century within the movement of those catholic Christians in German speaking countries who protested against what they saw being unauthorized novelties into catholic ecclesiology. Those novelties, they believed, were initiated by the Roman Catholic Church herself and concern the dogma's of the immaculate

conception of Mary (1854) and the infallibility and the world-wide jurisdiction of the pope (first Vatican council – 1871).

The bishops who founded the Union of Utrecht met with that aim in 1889 in Utrecht. They agreed on a declaration, in which they laid down what they held in common and formulated criteria on how to deal with one another. They also made a constitution for the Union of Utrecht, which in principle is thought to be an assembly of bishops to inform one another.

### *The Utrecht Bishops' Declaration*

Let me mention the core-points of the bishops' declaration of 1889. The document takes the undivided Church of the first centuries as the foundation of the Old Catholic Churches. The old-Catholic churches are a post-tridentine phenomenon, and thus really to be distinguished from the churches of the Reformation. They join the orthodox family in their theological views and ecclesiological insights, as they are based on the faith and practices of the church of the first centuries.

On this basis the dogma of the papal infallibility and his universal jurisdiction were rejected. The pope is however recognized as the 'primus inter pares'. The importance of the Holy Eucharist for the church is stressed, concentrating on what is held in common and not on the differences. All contacts with dissidents and theologians of other confessions had to be truthfully dealt with. The unity of the church must be found again through exchange of thoughts, and through a real interest and participation in one another's context and genuine way of being a Christian. A strong priority is put on the ecumenical challenge that asks for a clear commitment.

The declaration ends with a christologically colored paragraph about, and I quote, "the increasing contemporary indifference to faith". Speaking in a European context, this can be seen as an appeal to get involved in moral and spiritual discussions of that moment. In fact the declaration witnesses to the church's openness to society and culture, to both moral and religious issues and her commitment to the evangelization of society.

The Declaration of Utrecht became the foundation of an increasing growing together, based on shared principles, while each church retained its own relative autonomy. The Union not only promoted the reciprocal integration and the forming of a shared identity of the Old Catholic Churches. In later time, it also proved to be of importance for the Old Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. It also became clear that only those Bishops, and the Churches they represented, who were admitted to the Union, could rightly call themselves Old Catholic.

### *The Members of the Union of Utrecht*

From the moment of their foundation, three types of churches can be found within the Union of Utrecht.

The first type only has one representative within the communion. It is the Dutch church, arising from a conflict between the chapter of Utrecht and Rome about the appointment of a new archbishop of Utrecht at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact the church of Utrecht sees itself as the continuation of the mediaeval church that was founded by Saint Willibrord at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Roman Catholic Church above the river Rhine also developed from that mediaeval church being the successor of that part that didn't share the point of view of the Utrecht chapter.

In a second group those churches can be clustered that issued from the protest-movement against the papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the pope. Especially in German speaking areas, a strong theological movement opposed the decisions made at the first Vatican council, because those new dogmas were seen as being in contradiction with the tradition. But this movement was not strong enough to influence the decision-making process at the council, although many scholars and clergy were involved. After the decisions were made this movement was expelled from the Roman Catholic church and had no other choice than founding "emergency-dioceses". Actually such was the case in Germany and Switzerland. Later on also churches in Austria, the Czech Republic and Croatia were founded.

The third type is represented by those churches that arose from an emancipation movement. That was the case among the Polish Migrants in the United States of America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They felt they were not respected enough by the Roman Catholic Church and founded their own independent catholic church. The Polish Catholic Church in Poland was founded by that American church and is a member of the Union of Utrecht.

### *The ecumenical involvement*

The ecumenical involvement had concrete results for the communion of the Union of Utrecht as well. In 1931 an agreement of full communion was signed with the Anglican Churches with which we have enjoyed a very strong relationship until now. The permanent joint working party in which our two communions work together is the place where common projects are worked out. Since 1965 we also have intercommunion with the Spanish

Reformed Church, the Lusitanian Church (Portugal) and the Iglesia Filippine Independiente (IFI).

With the orthodox churches, we have a very long tradition of dialogue, which even predates the signing of the Utrecht Declaration. As a result of that tradition, in 1987 consensus on all important theological matters was achieved. Unfortunately, it didn't lead to full communion. The main reason for that was the orthodox rejection of the ordination of women. As you may know, in 1996 the majority of the Old Catholic Churches decided to open up the threefold apostolic ministry to women. Nevertheless, with most orthodox churches, and especially with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we continue to be involved in active processes of dialogue, finding out, at this moment, how our similar views on the most important aspects of the Christian faith could lead to more practical cooperation.

In the late nineteen sixties, we started the dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, which in more recent time has been resumed. I can add that an in-depth dialogue with the Church of Sweden resulted in a theological document that we are studying right now. Last but not least I have to mention a theological dialogue with the Mar Thoma Church of Malabar, South India.

## **2. Ecclesiological approach**

Ecumenism is at the heart of the Union of Utrecht. We inherited this from the Old Catholic movement, which was an ecumenical movement even before the word was invented. Within the Old Catholic movement you find one of the very first attempts to think about transgressing confessional borders in order to restore the unity of the church. This drive for restoring the unity among Christians was related to the need for Christians to open themselves to modernity. Openness to modern developments wasn't seen as a threat to the Christian faith. On the contrary, it was seen as a challenge to discover God's creativity, without being so naïve as to become blind for the evil side of modernity.

But the nineteenth-century Old Catholic movement is not the only legacy we try to take care of. There's also the spiritual heritage of the Dutch church. Our church can't be understood without taking into account the context of the Counter-Reformation. Those leading church-people of the eighteenth century had the deep desire to give shape to a church that would be a real Dutch catholic church, rooted in the Dutch spiritual tradition of devotion and prayer as it was expressed in so-called Jansenism.

From both sources we inherited the reference to the "ecclesia primitiva", that witnesses to a catholicity understood as the commitment of a local church to live in solidarity with the Universal Church and global Christianity. The example of the Early Church tells us that this is possible without neglecting the own particular context in which the gospel is lived in the first

place. That's the tangible location where the reconciliation, proclaimed by the gospel, must become real and communion must be realised. Catholicity is about communion among Christians as they participate in the communion of the Trinity. Catholicity tells us that the church is both a human and a divine reality, an incarnated reality. It finds its expression in our faith in the sacraments as the real presence of the Lord in the context of a community of faithful. It is our conviction that ministry is given as a symbol of unity. In the centre of the church is the Eucharist in which communion among faithful and with the Trinity comes into being and is celebrated in thankfulness and praise. This Catholicity is at the heart of the church and therefore it will play a dominant role in its future. This is the catholicity we are called to serve, because of our commitment to proclaim the gospel and to promote unity among Christians

### **3. The Roman Catholic Old Catholic dialogue**

#### *The history of the Roman-Catholic-Old-Catholic dialogue*

The invitation to appoint an observer to the second Vatican Council was accepted by the bishops of the Union of Utrecht as a sign Rome was looking for the reconciliation with the dissident Catholics of the Churches of the Union of Utrecht. As a result of the acceptance and the positive experience of the second Vatican council, the Roman Catholic Church decided on withdrawing all existing preliminary conditions for dialogue. Those conditions were about the condemnation of Jansenius and Jansenism, questions that played a crucial role in the conflict between the Vatican and the Chapter of Utrecht in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In consequence joint working groups were organised in the Netherlands as well as in Switzerland. Because of the need on the old catholic side to coordinate things, the old catholic members of both national dialogue groups met in Zürich in 1968. A couple of weeks after this meeting also the Roman Catholic members of both groups came to Zürich for a similar meeting. Both meetings made obvious the churches of the Union of Utrecht could have the same status as the orthodox churches and that means that a 'communio in sacris' would be possible. A concept of a document on a 'communio in sacris' was composed and is known as the 'Zürcher Nota'. This paper was approved in 1970 both by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the International Bishops Conference of the Union of Utrecht. The paper was also approved by the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith in 1972. That meant the negotiations in order to realise the 'communio in sacris' in the concrete life of the churches in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands could start.

It was at that level that several difficulties appeared. Roman Catholic bishops had some objections about the old catholic churches sharing the status of the orthodox, the administration of the sacraments and the acceptance of former Roman Catholic priests into the

old catholic churches. Cardinal Willibrands, the president of the secretariat for promoting Christian unity from 1969 until 1989, made huge efforts to solve the problems, but even he did not succeed to full extent.

In the 1990s, some other problems appeared. For the Roman Catholic side these were the main problems: the joint declaration of the Evangelical Church and the old catholic church in Germany about Eucharistic hospitality, the amount of former Roman Catholic priests joining Old Catholic Churches was still growing in all the churches of the Union of Utrecht and the discussion about women's ordination had started. Cardinal Cassidy, the successor of Cardinal Willibrands, took the lead in conceiving some guidelines for the transfer of former roman catholic priests. The concept of this paper was ready in 1996 and was accepted by the Pontifical Council and the IBC, but was not approved by the local roman catholic bishops conferences, not because they were against the guidelines as such, but because they wanted in some cases to insert the obligation to consult the congregation for the clergy before a priest would be accepted. As soon as it seemed possible to solve that problem, within the majority of the old catholic churches women's ordination was accepted. That meant an even more complicated problem. Despite this, Cardinal Kasper and Archbishop Glazemaker took the initiative in the early days of the year 2000, while celebrating the opening of the Holy Year, to start a new phase in the ongoing process of the dialogue. After some preparation work had been done, the group started in 2003 and produced the very interesting document 'Church and ecclesiastical communion', which has been published in 2009 and can be consulted on the website of the Pontifical Council.

### *On the way to full ecclesial communion?*

Before describing some of the results of that new phase in the dialogue, I want to emphasise the following points.

To Rome, there has been no doubt about the old catholic churches being churches and not ecclesial communities. It has been obvious that the sacraments and the ministry are understood in a true catholic way. It has been expressed in that way ultimately by the congregation of the Doctrine in 1987, but was already affirmed by the Roman-Catholic delegates in national Old-Catholic-Roman-Catholic dialogue commissions in 1967 in Zurich. As also the new document states: the conflict between RC and OC is to be seen as an inner-catholic question and as a conflict within the catholic family. But that doesn't make things necessarily easier... There had a lot to be done in order to heal the memories and to install a hermeneutic of trust. One cannot simply neglect one or even two centuries of division in which both parties have hurt one another.

The second Vatican Council is crucial in creating the opportunities for the dialogue. As it affirmed the communion-ecclesiology and it agreed to accept the reference to the ecclesiological principles as criterion as it is the case in the church of the east, the dialogue could turn out to be fruitful. Even the perspective of a possible ecclesial communion appeared on the horizon.

The concept of the recent dialogue was shaped with the more recent principles of 'ecumenical hermeneutics'. "These principles are founded on the recognition that the sought-for unity in the faith does not mean uniformity, but rather a diversity in which any remaining differences beyond the fundamental consensus are not accorded church-dividing force. Accordingly the goal of dialogue is not doctrinal consensus in the form of congruence, but a differentiated consensus (...)" (Church and ecclesial communion' number 34) This implies two components that are interrelated: consensus in fundamental and essential content of a previously controversial doctrine; and a declaration that remaining doctrinal differences, clearly named, can be considered admissible.

*What are the fundamental points of agreement?*

In general we can conclude that there is a basic common opinion on the next points.

The fundamental understanding of the church and the understanding that there are ministries and offices that bear the responsibility for the realisation of the basic activities of the church via *martyria*, *leiturgia* and *diakonia* with the Eucharist at its heart.

Consensus exists also on the importance of the local church, led by one bishop and on the shaping of the episcopate-responsibility in a personal, collegial and communal way. In addition the report has concluded that if the pope is not isolated and set apart from the communion-structure of the church, the conflict of 1870 does not have that weight anymore. (numbers 36-39)

It is important to point out that these conclusions have an important ecumenical meaning. Let me mention some of them a little bit more in detail. The common emphasis on the sacramental identity of the church as the body of Christ in the world constituted by the Holy Spirit, is the point of orientation we have to bring in into the ecumenical reflection about the church. The same is the case with the conclusions about ministry and about the personal, collegial and communal aspects of it. Synodality and conciliarity are key-words for shaping both the local and the universal church. Apostolicity as the process of connecting the church with the time of the apostles and their proclamation of the Gospel, needs to be a continuing and conscious process of being ready to reflect on our own reality through their eyes and to remain in their truth. Also this last point is a responsibility that cannot be entrusted to the

magisterium only because the whole church must be involved in it. Even about the functioning of the petrine office there are some crucial points Roman Catholic and Old Catholic ecclesiology have in common, because both are convinced of the need of a global primacy.

### *The open questions*

#### *The ecclesiological questions:*

The ecclesiological placing of the pope and the consequences of it on the universal church as the communion of local churches. In this respect also the notions of juridical and doctrinal primacy need more clarification as well as 'primus inter pares'. Old Catholics have some difficulties with seeing the pope in a 'petrine office' or in a 'petrine ministry' with the concept that it could be directly derived from the New Testament.

Another question is that of the autonomy of the local churches in realising their mission and in the election of their bishops. How this autonomy would be related to the pope who possesses, following the Roman view, the full, highest and universal power in the church. A question, related to this, is how to conceive the synodality of the bishops. (numbers 41-47)

#### *The questions on the marial dogmas of 1854 and 1950*

Another point of difference in dogma consists in the Old Catholic rejection of the papally-defined dogmas of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (1854) and the Bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven (1950). Because the content of these dogmas do not have a clear biblical basis and because neither can be based on apostolic witness, it is impossible for the pope to declare them to be essential for the Christian faith and, in consequence, for the redemption of people. Despite this, the old catholic tradition has a positive view on the place of Mary within the faith. (Numbers 48-55)

#### *The question of the ordination of women to priestly ministry*

It was only after a long period of reflection that in 1996 the IBC opened the way to the ordination of women to the threefold ministry. It was declared a matter of discipline and left to the churches to take the decision whether or not would accept women priests. In consequence most of the churches, but not all, did introduce the ordination of women to the diaconate and the priesthood. The question was defined as a cultural issue and the fact that the ancient church did not know this practise was seen as a matter of dependence on the ancient cultural context in which it was unthinkable women would fulfil the role of being president of the Eucharistic assembly. The Union of Utrecht is aware of the fact this decision is "an innovation in their otherwise ancient church orientation in church discipline" (56). The

churches of the Union of Utrecht want to make clear they did not change the understanding of the three-fold ministry as the sacramental ordo of the church as they share it with the Roman Catholic Church. (numbers 56-73)

*Open questions involving canon law from a Roman Catholic perspective*

Those questions are about the fact the old catholic churches know the practice of priests and bishops being married and about the transfer of formerly Roman Catholic clergy and Roman Catholic lay-people into one of the old catholic churches. Canon lawyers are not pessimistic about finding constructive solutions for those points, that are surely no reason to impede ecclesial communion. Another question is again the functioning of ordained women in the case of an ecclesial communion which would give access to Roman Catholic faithful to the sacraments ministered by Old Catholic clergy. Would it be appropriate to exclude women priests from spending the sacraments in that case? (numbers 74-82)

#### **4. Some critical notes about ecumenism**

Having given a short overview of what Old Catholic Churches are about and of the process and the contents of the RC-OC dialogue, I would like to offer some critical remarks about the direction our ecumenical efforts in my view have to take.

The crisis in ecumenism is essentially a crisis of the church. The essence of the crisis is the fact that the bearers of the traditions identify themselves with the tradition itself. Openness to one another has clearly grown but the sociological law and order remain that institutes make themselves into absolute facts. And beyond that fact the churches are thinking that the way in which they have interpreted the tradition is absolute. And they are taking the shape of the tradition that was the product of their efforts, as the tradition itself. They have become less aware of the fact that 'tradition' is in fact a living and dynamic event, a process that 'happens' within a context of a community. Gods message of salvation has to be related to and confronted with today's life of the people who live in a determined context and historical period. Christians do not have a kind of Truth that would be unchangeable and that would only have to be handed over without any contribution of your own.

All we have are Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit as a compass that shows us the way to those places where the presence of the resurrected Lord is to be experienced. It is the same compass that the churches could show how to get out of the ecumenical deadlock because it shows the way to 'catholicity'! In other words: the way out of the deadlock is to become more catholic!

Ignace of Antioch defined 'catholicity' in a twofold way: it is about orthodoxy and about orthopraxis. I want to translate those terms into two questions that are to ask about 'catholicity': (1) how the church sees its relationship to the world as a place where all people can find a 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 — the deep conviction that the gospel is relevant to every human being and to every human culture. In addition we may know that the relationship of Christians with cultures is a dialogical one. 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.

Concerning the second question, about how the church will proclaim the gospel, it is important to be aware that the centre of the Biblical and Christian message are not a conviction, but historical events, that has really happened. It about the historical event of the exodus, of the deportation of the People of God to Babylon, of the death on the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. Those stories may direct our view on our own lives and on our world. The consequence will be that the meaning of the events we are involved in will become clear to us. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus Christ; it is to learn to see through the eyes of Jesus himself. Who is ready to take that attitude, will discover what the meaning of events could be. We will be far removed from a church that comments on events from a safe distance and a pedantic height. You will only find out about the meaning of things if you are really involved in the struggle for human dignity.

I am convinced that churches and confessions have to be less concerned about themselves and should cultivate a more open mind for the gospel and show more concern about what is happening in the world in general and cultures in particular. To me, those three conditions seem to enable fresh and vital missionary dynamics. It is an Old Catholic Conviction that the way forward is the way back to the model of the early church, in which it was possible for churches to differ from one another because of cultural reasons while remaining in the same fellowship of faith.

This kind of fellowship is the spiritual network we want to work on. In the centre of the fellowship is the twofold question about the catholicity of the church and the missionary dynamic they express. All those churches and groupings that find themselves challenged by those questions and that missionary dynamic should be brought together in a fellowship, global and local. This is what ecumenism has to be about!

## 5. Conclusion

I repeat: it is important work that has been done. Also against this this background of a critical view on the ecumenical commission of the churches, one can conclude that Roman Catholics and Old Catholics together have said some very fundamental things about the church and its mission.

Now it would be appropriate to work on the operationalization of these reflections starting from the questions that were mentioned in the section above and to work out the solidarity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Old-Catholic Churches in a more concrete way.

In other words: what does the document "Church and ecclesial communion" offer in the context of the two questions in respect to 'catholicity'. Does it help us to be involved in the dialogue with the world and its cultures? Does it help us in the enthusiastic proclaiming of the gospel in word and deed in that same world? What we have in common has to be seen in the light of that challenge to 'catholicity'. That means that our reflections about the church, the sacraments and ministry must become 'operationalized' in that light. But also the questions on which we did not find a common answer until now, must be seen in that missionary light. I am convinced that they will be posed in another way.

Therefore it is also the question if Roman-Catholics and Old-Catholics accept one another as partners in defending the catholic quality of the church as it is meant above. If we are both convinced that this catholicity can really open up a future of a new ecumenical zeal ('élan'), then the question arises how RC and OC will witness to their solidarity at this point. If the RC would be able to accept the Old Catholic Churches have a special calling in this, the Old Catholic Churches would have the opportunity to make an even better contribution to it. It would imply the RCC accepts developments within the Old Catholic Churches, as i.e. the ordination of women, not as the way they would have to follow themselves but as the conscious decision it has been and for the reasons this decision was taken.

Those two questions on the catholicity of the church are key-questions for catholic ecclesiology. It is necessary to take them with us as we are in the next phase of our dialogue. It shall surely make some more room for diversity within the catholic thinking about the church. Because there is no way a 'back to Rome' approach could function in a constructive way, it is our sincere hope that the RCC would recognise the diversity within Christianity and value it as the expression of the creativity of the Holy Spirit, if there is reason to do so. This kind of open-mindedness would open up the way to a renewed and concrete shaping of the universal church as the organised expression of global Christianity.

Diversity is of all times. Perhaps you know that the Declaration of Utrecht takes the quote of Saint Vincent of Lérin as its point of orientation in order to defend its own existence and calling. “We hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all; that is truly and properly catholic.” (*Id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ad omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum*). It is important to remember that Vincent's counsel encourages us to continue to build bridges and to seek communion. The monk of Lérins was seeking a way out for the widely diversified Christianity of his day, which was threatening to fall into total chaos. In our time, too, there is great diversity within Christianity. This is certainly an opportunity, but also a threat. It is essential to be clearly connected to each other in our diversity, so that discord and strife do not get the upper hand. This same challenge has to be faced by the world. The situation of Christianity hardly differs on this point from the position of the world in which it exists. For this reason, God calls Christians, ever more clearly, to point the way to the reconciliation, unity and communion the world so badly needs.

It is our sincere hope to receive the grace to contribute to this witness of the Church.

Documents

*The Declaration of Utrecht.* [www.utrechterunion.com](http://www.utrechterunion.com)

Church and Ecclesial Communion. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)