

The significance of the centenary of the Union of Utrecht for the members of the Polish National Catholic Church in America and Canada

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The Significance of the Centenary of the Union of Utrecht for the Members of the Polish National Catholic Church in America and Canada

The year, 1989, is, indeed, a most memorable one for Old Catholics. It marks the Centenary of the Utrecht Union of Old Catholic Churches. The Churches of the Utrecht Union in Europe and North America are commemorating this historical event with special observances and celebrations.

Apart from the principal observance to be held in Utrecht in September of this year, at which Old Catholics from every Church in the Union of Utrecht are to participate, it should be noted that the Polish National Catholic Church, the only North American Old Catholic body, officially recognized by Utrecht, is holding its own significant celebrations commemorating this Centenary.

Scranton, PA, Observance

In Scranton, PA, USA, a most inspiring service and celebration were held on Sunday, March 12, 1989. The Archbishop of Utrecht, the Most Reverend Antonius Glazemaker, along with the Prime Bishop of the Polish National Catholic Church, the Most Reverend John Swantek, presided at a concelebrated Mass in Saint Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Cathedral Church. The five diocesan Bishops of the Polish National Catholic Church in North America were also to be concelebrants.

This celebration coincided with the 92nd anniversary of the organization of the Polish National Catholic Church by Father Francis Hodur in Scranton, PA, in 1897.

A booklet entitled "Centenary Celebration of the Union of Utrecht,"¹ published by the Polish National Catholic Church for this

¹ A booklet entitled "Centenary Celebration of the Union of Utrecht." St. Stanislaus Cathedral Polish National Catholic Church, 529 E. Locust Street, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Concelebrated Holy Mass, 4:00 P.M., March 12, 1989. Liturgy provided by the National Liturgical Commission, Polish National Catholic Church and approved by Most Reverend John F. Swantek, Prime Bishop.

occasion, attests to this fact. On pages 12–13, (of this booklet)² the General Intercessions are of a special interest to us. Therein we read the following:

“Celebrant: As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Union of Utrecht and the 92nd anniversary of the organization of the Polish National Catholic Church, let us bring our intentions to God, our Almighty Father.

– For all the bishops of the Union of Utrecht, that they may continue to preach the Gospel and nourish us with sound doctrine, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

– For people of every nation and language, that they may find freedom and peace through the One whom God has raised on high as Lord and Savior, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

– For the Old Catholic Churches in Europe and North America, that God may continue to bless and strengthen us as we witness to the Catholic faith, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

– For the members of the Polish National Catholic Church, that we may follow in the footsteps of Prime Bishop Francis Hodur throughout our earthly pilgrimage, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

– For all of us, present in this holy house, that we may find grace and peace in this celebration, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

– For all the bishops, priests, and faithful of the Old Catholic Churches, who have gone before us, believing in Jesus’ holy and life-giving Resurrection, that they may be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, hear our prayer.

Celebrant: Father, source of truth and unity, hear the prayers of your people, celebrating their common communion in the Catholic faith. Grant that all people will come to your Church to rejoice in the truth. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”

The tenor of these petitions gives ample witness and proof that the members of the Polish National Catholic Church of North America

² Ibid., p. 12–13.

do not take lightly their membership and participation in the Union of Utrecht. Rather, it would seem that they proclaim this fact continually in their liturgy and teachings.

Following the impressive service in the historic Cathedral Church of Saint Stanislaus, which, incidentally, was filled to capacity with more than one thousand in attendance, a dinner and program were held in St. Stanislaus Cathedral Youth Center, during which the Archbishop of Utrecht delivered the main Address.

The April 15, 1989, issue of *God's Field – Rola Boża*, the official organ of the PNCC,³ published the Address of Archbishop Glazemaker in its entirety. Certain passages of this Address are quoted herein. He, in fact, said:

“As 1989 approached, I thought that this year I will have to travel less, since delegations of our Churches will come to Utrecht to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Utrecht Union. But ... I received invitations to be present at the celebration of this fact, like now in the PNCC. And because we, as Old Catholics, have turned away from the centralism which is so characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church, and honour the peculiar gift of the local church, I thought: It is part of our tradition to celebrate the centenary not only centrally but also in the local church. And that is why I am here – thanking you for your initiative and your invitation.

When I was preparing my visit to you, I saw the film “Good morning Babylon” ... It tells the story of an old family business of Italian cathedral builders. The business goes bankrupt, and therefore two of the seven sons decided to cross over to America and try their luck there...

This film made me think of your ancestors, who founded the PNCC, and, as members of that Church, passed on the blessing from generation to generation. The Polish immigrants in America, too, have learned that history cannot be reversed, and that the national traditions and the native culture will have to take roots and adopt new forms in a different world.

One passage, in particular, made me think of you; the moment both brothers in America heard folk music from their native country, they opened their hearts completely. Then I remembered how, some years ago, at the International Bishops Conference in Florida, we sang Po-

³ *God's Field – Rola Boża*, Bi-weekly of the Polish National Catholic Church. Scranton, PA, USA, Volume 65, Number 8, April 15, 1989, pages 2, 3, 4.

lish hymns with the Polish bishops and members of the parish; there we were taken along in a flow of spiritual and cultural tradition, and while singing, ... the soul of a nation revealed itself.

The film, however, also showed something of our Utrecht Union, ... also then, as it were, we dealt with sons and daughters, who, out of necessity, abandoned the traditional Church of Rome to give shape to the old tradition in a new way. We may not have received the Holy Father's blessing, but we were allowed to pass the blessing of the old Christian Church on to each other, and to experience the bond of the Utrecht Union as a blessing.

...I read in my Lenten meditation:

'When people don't know how to cope with the church, let them consider that what matters in the church is that Jesus Christ is in the middle of life. Anyone who finds Him has new chances.'

I am grateful that the Churches of the Utrecht Union have ... this secret, and that I may serve the alliance of the bishops of the Utrecht Union as "primus inter pares," as first among equals. The blessing our ancestors have blessed us with, the blessing which has been passed on also through war crises and political contrast; may this tradition be continued in the Polish National Catholic Church in ... America and Canada."

The Cathedral Bulletin of St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Cathedral of the Polish National Catholic Church, Scranton, Pennsylvania,⁴ under the editorship of the Rt. Rev. Anthony M. Rysz, on the Feast of the Institution of the Polish National Catholic Church, March 12, 1989, (the same day in fact of the celebration of the Centenary of the Utrecht Union), contained an interesting commentary, entitled "*The Ninety-second Anniversary of the Institution of the Polish National Catholic Church.*" Therein, on pages 5–6, we read as follows:

"Today, Polish National Catholics commemorate the 92nd anniversary of that moment when Fr. Francis Hodur came to Scranton to assume the pastoral charge of the newly organized St. Stanislaus Parish. He came at the invitation of the people who became disenchanted with conditions in the Roman Catholic Church. These people sought nothing more than their rightful place in the Church as loyal churchmen. When they could not accomplish this through petition or protest,

⁴ *The Cathedral Bulletin*, St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Cathedral of the PNCC, Scranton, PA. Rt. Rev. Anthony M. Rysz, Editor. March 12, 1989, p. 5–6.

they left the Church, organized a new parish, based on the faith, practice, tradition and law of the undivided Christian Church, and gave birth to this institution which is known as the Polish National Catholic Church. They called upon Fr. Hodur to be their leader.

Fr. Hodur, understanding their faith and their attachment to the Church, left his pastorate in Holy Trinity Parish in Nanticoke, without the consent of his bishop, and came to lead this community of faith, knowing that the task was herculean, that persecution and excommunication would follow. However, this band of dedicated Christians, with Fr. Hodur as its spiritual leader, put more faith in God's love and Christ's compassion than they did in the anger of men.

Others followed them in various communities of Northeastern Pennsylvania, and in other communities where large numbers of Polish immigrants settled and who experienced similar conditions as those which prevailed in Scranton.

In 1904, the representatives of these parishes and organizations met in Scranton to form a unified program of work, and gave birth to the Polish National Catholic Church. They adopted a constitution by which they would be governed; they established a seminary for the training of priests; they resolved that the language of the people would be the language of the altar, and made a most important decision. They decided the Polish National Catholic Church would be Catholic in faith and order, electing Fr. Hodur as a bishop, and instructing him to seek consecration to the Apostolic Office of Bishop from a church with unquestioned Catholic Orders and historic connections with the undivided Church of Christ. In 1907, the Dutch Old Catholic Bishops consecrated Fr. Hodur as a Bishop for the Polish National Catholic Church. Since that time the Polish National Catholic Church is an integral part of the Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht. These churches, which are found in Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the United States, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, are churches which possess unquestioned Apostolic Succession and Catholic Faith. Although these churches recognize the special position of honor of the Bishop of Rome in the Christian Church, they do not accept the dogmas of Papal Infallibility, Universal Jurisdiction, and other papal pronouncements, which are contrary to the Scriptures and Faith and Tradition of the undivided Church of Christ. The faith of the churches of the Union of Utrecht is founded on the Ecumenical Councils of the undivided Church – the Church as it existed until the year 1054 AD, when the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope of Rome mutually

excommunicated one another, and thus divided the Church of Christ. Realizing the gravity of the sin which had divided the Body of Christ, modern Christians of all persuasions are holding dialogue with one another to gradually mend the “garment” of Christ and to bring about that unity for which Christ prayed. The Polish National Catholic Church, along with the sister churches of the Union of Utrecht, is an active participant in this work.”

Symposium

April 11–13, 1989, the National Liturgical Commission of the Polish National Catholic Church sponsored a “Symposium: Celebrating the Centenary of the Utrecht Union of Old Catholic Churches.”⁵ The Symposium was held in the Bon Secours Spiritual Center, Marriotsville, Maryland. The “Introduction”, announcing the Symposium, stated its purpose as follows:

The Churches of the Utrecht Union are celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Old Catholic Bishops Conference and the Declaration of Utrecht. The Polish National Catholic Church, a member of the Union of Utrecht, is commemorating this event by sponsoring this Symposium through her National Liturgical Commission.

The topic for this gathering is, *Trends and Developments in Modern Western European Old Catholic Liturgy, with Reference to the Future of Old Catholicism within the Christian Community*. This will provide us with the opportunity to examine the liturgical life of the Old Catholic Church and her role in ecumenical relations, as well as the future witness of the Old Catholic Churches in the world.

We are greatly blessed to have with us the bishop of the Swiss Old Catholic Church, His Excellency, the Right Reverend Hans Gerny, and the Reverend Father Urs von Arx. Both Bishop Gerny and Dr. von Arx are highly regarded nationally and internationally in the theological community. We are sure that their presentations will enlighten and offer us great insight of the topic.

⁵ A brochure entitled “Symposium Celebrating the Centenary of the Utrecht Union of Old Catholic Churches”, sponsored by the National Liturgical Commission, PNCC, April 11–13, 1989, Bon Secours Spiritual Center, Marriotsville, Maryland.

You are cordially welcome to participate in this centenary event. May the Lord Jesus bless us in our efforts.

The Very Reverend Sigmund Peplowski, Chairman, National Liturgical Commission, Polish National Catholic Church.

Session Topics:

Session I: “Western European Old Catholicism, with a Focus on the Swiss Church and Its Liturgy”;

Session II: “Western European Old Catholic Ecumenical Relations: Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant Bodies”;

Session III: Panel Discussion with Questions from the Floor;

Session IV: “The Future of Old Catholicism: Evangelization Internal Unity.”

Session Structure:

Sessions I, II, and IV: (two hours each)

Moderator’s Remarks (brief); Presentation by Presentor, thirty minutes; Break, ten minutes; Commentator’s Response and Questions, thirty minutes, Questions from the Floor, fifty minutes.

Session III: (one hour and thirty minutes)

Opening Statements by Panel Members, five minutes each.

Panel: Both Presentors; The Commentator; The Moderator. Questions and answers follow from the Floor.

The Participants:

Presentors: His Excellency, the Right Reverend Hans Gerny, The Reverend Father Urs von Arx,

Moderator: The Reverend Father Jonathan Trela,

Commentator: Mr. Laurence Orzell.

Laurence Orzell, the Commentator, prepared four very interesting papers entitled as follows: (1) Some Comments on “Trends and Developments in Modern Western European Old Catholic Liturgy,” (2) Old Catholic Ecumenism: An American Perspective, (3) Old Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy: A Brief Comment, and (4) Contemporary Old Catholicism: Problems and Prospects. However, in his Notes,⁶ following each paper, he was careful to write that these papers

⁶ Laurence J. Orzell, Church Doctrine Commission, PNCC; *Draft/Brouillon/Konzept*, Contemporary Old Catholicism: Problems and Prospects. *Notes*. p. 11.

were “presented at the Symposium Celebrating the Centenary of the Utrecht Union of Old Catholic Churches, sponsored by the PNCC’s National Liturgical Commission, at the Bon Secours Spiritual Center, Marriotsville, MD, 11–13 April 1989. The interpretations and conclusions ... are the author’s alone and should not necessarily be construed as an official expression of opinion by either the PNCC or its Church Doctrine Commission.”

Laurence Orzell is a member of the PNCC Church Doctrine Commission. He is known from his articles, which regularly appear in the *Straż – The Guard*. In the first issue (1980) of “PNCC Studies – A publication of studies devoted to the Polish National Catholic Church,”⁷ he was the author of a paper entitled, “Franciszek Hodur and the Old Catholics – 1899–1908.” In the Introduction to this issue, we are informed that Laurence J. Orzell, M. A., is a Ph. D. candidate at Pennsylvania State University.⁸

Visitation of Parishes by Bishop Gerny

While he was in the United States of America, Bishop Hans Gerny, presently Secretary of the International Bishops Conference of the Churches of the Union of Utrecht (IBC), had an excellent opportunity to visit a few parishes of the PNCC in the USA, namely, in this order; West Paterson, Scranton, Hazleton and Chicago. He then flew to Toronto, Ontario, Canada, where he was greeted by Bishop Joseph Nieminski, Ordinary of the PNCC of Canada. He participated in a concelebrated Mass in Saint John’s Cathedral Church on April 23, 1989, and also was the homilist. A few days later, he and his wife, Marianne, who accompanied him during the trip to USA and Canada, flew home from Toronto to Switzerland.

Following the Mass, a dinner and reception were held in the parish hall. It was there that Bishop Gerny had an opportunity, in an informal manner, to reflect upon his first visit to the USA and Canada, and, in particular, upon his initial impressions of the PNCC. He frankly told those present that his original preconception of the PNCC had, indeed, undergone major changes during the course of the past

⁷ PNCC Studies, A publication of studies devoted to the Polish National Catholic Church 1980. Cover page.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

two weeks. He stated that he had expected to see a predominantly ethnic church, but, to his surprise he found a Church, both American and Canadian, with vibrant parishes and varied activities. The hitherto intransigent ethnic character of the original PNCC had undergone some modicum of transformation. Even though the PNCC has retained the essential characteristics of its ethnic beginnings, he observed, it has gradually adapted itself to its environment as a church truly involved in the community and nation.

He concluded his talk with a suggestion and invitation to the Toronto parishioners. Next year, 1990, he related that the next Old Catholic Congress will be held in Geneva, Switzerland, and the Christ Catholic Church of Switzerland, of which he is the Bishop-Ordinary, would be the host. He then suggested to those present that they make plans to organize a group to participate in this 1990 Congress. He felt that such representation from Canada would be a great step forward towards bringing the PNCC of Canada closer to the Old Catholic Churches of Europe.

His suggestion and invitation were well received by those present and were approved in large measure. The Toronto Parish Committee is already exploring the possibility of having such an excursion from Toronto via Swiss Air to Geneva.

1889–1989 Anniversary Pilgrimage to Poland and Holland September 11–26, 1989

On September 11, 1989, a large group of Polish National Catholics from the USA will depart from New York City on a fifteen day “Anniversary Pilgrimage to Poland and Holland” under the spiritual leadership of the Most Reverend John F. Swantek, Prime Bishop of the PNCC. The pilgrimage cosponsored by the Polish National Catholic Church and the Polish National Union of America of Scranton, PA, a fraternal organization organized in 1908 by the First Bishop of the PNCC, the Most Reverend Francis Hodur.

In the brochure,⁹ outlining the pilgrimage, Prime Bishop Swantek writes the following:

“This year, 1989, is a very important year for the Old Catholic Churches, because we are commemorating the centennial of the Un-

⁹ A brochure entitled “Anniversary Pilgrimage to Poland and Holland – September 11–26, 1989”, p.2.

ion of Utrecht, of which the Polish National Catholic Church has been a member since 1907.

In order to celebrate this milestone, the Polish National Catholic Church and the Polish National Union have jointly planned a tour to both Poland and Holland. We will spend ten days in Poland, the country to which many of us trace our ethnic roots; and we will spend four days in Holland at the Old Catholic celebrations, because it is through the Old Catholic Church in the Netherlands that we trace our Catholic roots and Succession. It was here in St. Gertrude's Cathedral in Utrecht, Holland, in 1907, that Prime Bishop Francis Hodur was consecrated a bishop of the Holy Catholic Church by three Dutch Old Catholic Bishops.

President Edmund Godek (President of the Polish National Union of America) and I invite you to join our tour to Poland and Holland, two countries which play a very important role in the lives of Polish National Catholics."

Among others, the tour itinerary includes the following cities in Poland: Warsaw, Krakow, Oswiecim – the Martyrdom Museum of the former Nazi Auschwitz Concentration Camp, Moczydle-Zarki – the birthplace of Bishop Hodur, Zakopane, Czestochowa, Plock, and Zelazowa Wola – birthplace of the Polish composer, F. Chopin.

On Wednesday, September 13th, the day following arrival in Warsaw, Poland, the group will participate in the morning Mass in the Holy Spirit Cathedral Church of the Polish Catholic Church of Poland. The Polish part of the tour will conclude with an evening farewell dinner hosted by the Prime Bishop of the PCC of Poland, the Most Reverend Tadeusz Majewski.

On Friday, September 22nd, the group will depart for Amsterdam/Utrecht, Holland, to participate in the Centenary Celebrations of the Union of Utrecht. It is expected that Prime Bishop Swantek will celebrate Mass in the old Cathedral Church of St. Gertrude (where Fr. Francis Hodur was consecrated in 1909).

Essay Contest

In the June 1, 1989 issue of *Straz – The Guard*,¹⁰ an article appeared concerning the possibility of winning a free trip to Poland and Holland, in conjunction with the centenary celebrations of the Union of

¹⁰ *Straz – The Guard*, June 1, 1989; p.2.

Utrecht. The article was directed to the attention of high school and college students. The Essay Contest is sponsored by the Central Diocese of the PNCC. The article states:

“While in Holland, the essay winner shall attend the international celebrations commemorating the centenary as well as a special International Old Catholic Youth Conference. The trip shall be both historic and pleasurable, a great learning experience for all those who attend.

The qualifications are:

- the applicant must be a member of the PNCC and a member of a parish within the Central Diocese;
- the applicant must currently be a high school or college student;
- minors must have parental consent to participate;
- the applicant must submit an essay, about 1,000 words, typewritten and double spaced;
- the appropriate application form must be submitted along with the essay.

All essays must be submitted prior to July 15th, 1989.

All essays submitted become the property of the Central Diocese. The winner shall be announced at the Central Diocese Youth Retreat, July 28, 1989. The winner shall receive free passage on the Anniversary Pilgrimage with terms subject to those listed in the travel brochure...

The winner will be asked to speak of his/her experience at a future diocesan gathering. All decisions are final and are the prerogative of diocesan officials under the leadership of Bishop Anthony Rysz.

Essay Question: This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Utrecht, a document which is a testimony of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith of the undivided Church. Our first Prime Bishop, the Most Reverend Francis Hodur, signed the Declaration prior to his consecration and thereby united the PNCC with the Old Catholic Churches of Europe.

The first point of this Declaration states:

‘We adhere faithfully to the Rule of Faith laid down by Saint Vincent of Lerins in these terms: ‘Id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est; Hoc est etenim vere proprieque Catholicum.’ (Let us hold as truly and properly Catholic that which was believed everywhere, by everyone, always.) For this reason we persevere in professing the faith of the primitive Church, as formulated in the ecumenical symbols and specified precisely by the unani-

mously accepted decisions of the Ecumenical Councils held in the undivided Church of the first thousand years.'

In your own words discuss this statement and briefly address the following points in your essay:

- what is the faith of the primitive Church;
- what major doctrines were addressed at the first seven ecumenical councils;
- what makes the PNCC and all Old Catholic Churches 'Catholic';
- and, in closing, why do you want to be present for the international celebrations of the centenary of Utrecht?"

Conclusion

Given the above information concerning the involvement of the PNCC in Old Catholic activities, one would have to admit that the members of the PNCC in the USA and Canada are aware of their Old Catholic roots and proud of the fact that they are members of a fairly large family of local/national/autonomous churches in Europe and North America.

In conclusion, it must be stated that this paper is *not* a theological treatise, nor was it ever meant to be. Rather, its purpose was to present an overview of how Polish National Catholics comprehend Old Catholicism, and how they relate to the Old Catholic Churches in Europe, in the light of the Centenary celebrations of the Union of Utrecht.

Toronto/Ontario (Canada)

Rt. Rev. Dr. *Joseph Nieminski*