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The Churches of the Union of Utrecht in an Ecumenical Context

**Introduction to the Symposium for Ecumenical Guests
on Saturday, 20 September 2014**

Mattijs Ploeger

1. Introduction

This afternoon we will commemorate the 125th anniversary of the signing of the Utrecht Declaration of Bishops, which brought together Old Catholic bishops and their churches into the Union of Utrecht. This morning we would like to reflect on the meaning of the Union of Utrecht in an ecumenical context. How are the Old Catholic churches perceived by members of other churches? Are we perceived at all? And if so, what is our place within the community of Christian churches? Is there, in your opinion, a role for the Old Catholic churches? Do we make a contribution? And which are your criticisms towards us?

In order to be able to speak about the Union of Utrecht, we thought it would be wise to start with a brief outline of our history, the differences between the Old Catholic churches, and the structure of governance within our churches. Of course I confine myself to such remarks as, I hope, will be relevant to the ecumenical context in which we come together this morning.

2. The Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands

First of all, there is not *one* Old Catholic church. The meaning of the Utrecht Declaration was to bring into full communion three already existing churches. Contrary to popular belief, not every Old Catholic church originates from the reactions to the First Vatican Council. In 1870, the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands already existed one and a half centuries as an ecclesial body outside the Roman communion. As illustrated by this seventeenth-century “hidden church”, the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands is the continuation of a minority of parishes, chapters and dioceses of the Catholic church in the north of the Netherlands. It is a church that was never invented or established, a church with a tradition of many centuries, tangibly present in, for example, chalices and vestments

that had been in use in the main churches of Dutch cities before the Reformation. And although the ecumenical situation has rendered the “claims” of individual churches somewhat outdated, there is still some truth in our claim to be at least partly the continuation of the Catholic church in this country. The ministry of the Archbishop of Utrecht and the Bishop of Haarlem are historical and contemporary signs of this continuity.

The spirituality of the Dutch Old Catholic church bears the marks of this heritage. The spirituality of the northern part of the Netherlands in the later Middle Ages tended to be biblical and somewhat austere. Later, the spirituality of the so-called Jansenists in France reflected the same emphases. Up to this day, one can describe the Dutch Old Catholic spirituality as decidedly centred around the common celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist and Vespers, and as emphatically encouraging the personal responsibility of the faithful in the appropriation of the faith in thinking, praying and living. Interestingly, the emphasis on the personal responsibility of the faithful has resulted in a rather strict and austere spirituality in the past, whereas it has been transformed now into a rather contextual way of living the faith as members of contemporary society. This Dutch Old Catholic church is governed by the bishops of Utrecht and Haarlem, together with a representation of the clergy and the laity. The Synod has largely an advisory position.

3. The Old Catholic churches in the German-speaking and Czech countries

This is different in the other Old Catholic churches, and this difference reflects their different history. The German, Swiss, Austrian and now also Czech churches were established as independent ecclesiastical structures in reaction to the First Vatican Council of 1870. These churches took up already existing movements which emphasised the priority of the local church (that is, the diocese or the national church).

This nineteenth-century, mainly German-speaking “Old Catholic movement” had some characteristics that still mark today’s Old Catholic ethos. It was for example a “learned” movement, sometimes leading to the accusation that the Old Catholic church is “a Professors’ church”. Particularly the discipline of church history has played an important role in the genesis of the Old Catholic movement. Another characteristic is its interesting relationship to modernity and especially to various forms of liberalism – predominantly academic freedom in Germany and political liber-

alism in Switzerland. In addition to a specific form of traditionalism in the Dutch church, the nineteenth-century Old Catholic movement in the German-speaking countries had a broadening effect on Old Catholicism and contributed to its more positive view on contemporary society.

Unlike the Dutch church, which is an historic local church with ancient episcopal sees, the Old Catholic churches in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the Czech Republic are, technically speaking, “provisional churches” (German: “Notkirchen”), not claiming to replace the historic episcopal sees, but serving those whose conscience forbade them to continue in communion with Rome (that is, with the Rome of 1870). Of course, today the average understanding of churches is according to the denominational model: every church has its own existence and we don’t ask for their historic and theological legitimacy. Nevertheless, in theory the Old Catholic churches outside the Netherlands understand themselves as provisional churches on the way to restored catholicity and restored communion.

4. The Polish Catholic Church

In addition to the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands and the churches that sprang forth from the German-speaking Old Catholic movement, there is a third group of Old Catholic churches. They came into existence *after* the establishment of the Union of Utrecht. They mainly emerged because of their wish to live a locally inculturated spirituality. To this group belonged the Polish National Catholic Church in the United States of America, which planted a diocese in Poland. Tragically, the mother church in America is no longer a member of the Union of Utrecht, but its daughter church in Poland became independent as the Polish Catholic Church and is still a member of the Union today. Along this third line, other independent churches were, are or might be incorporated into the Union of Utrecht.

I gave you this sketch of three different strands of Old Catholic churches not just out of historical interest, but because it is important to realise that the Union of Utrecht unites churches in the plural. Churches with their own historical, spiritual, liturgical and structural emphases.

5. Old Catholic theology: emphasis on ecclesiology

We are not united by a particular doctrine, a particular confession. Our founding document – the Bishops’ Declaration, signed here in Utrecht 125 years ago – points to the ancient creeds of the Early Church as our common confession. Our common doctrine is mainly determined by a common ecclesiology – a Catholic ecclesiology of the local church, a “communion ecclesiology”, based on Early Church examples. Even this ecclesiology is not strictly Old Catholic; it is mainly shared with Anglicans and Orthodox. It is also near to one school of Roman Catholic thought – not the majority school, but a minority school of communion ecclesiology with a local church emphasis. And let us not forget that Protestantism has its catholicity, too. Especially some ecumenically involved Protestants develop views on church, sacraments and ministry close to our school of thought. Moreover, Old Catholic theology shows important similarities to the ecumenical ecclesiology of the Faith & Order line of thought, as we confirmed again last week, as we affirmed to a large extent Faith & Order’s most recent document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

There is, however, a danger in pointing to ecclesiology as the core business of Old Catholic theology. The danger is that ecclesiology might be seen as a separate subject, independent of the main Christian thinking on God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. If we look at ecclesiology this way, it becomes a superfluous addition, an *ad libitum* appendix to theology, only for those who want to be “High Church”. In reality, our view on the church, on the sacraments, on the ordained ministry, flows from our understanding of the trinitarian God, flows from our understanding of who Jesus Christ really is (as a person in communion), and flows from our understanding of the nature and operation of the Holy Spirit. For example, if “participation” is essential to the way God is, and to the way we are being saved, then the church is the natural embodiment of the way we live the Christian faith and life.

The Union of Utrecht is a communion of churches, in which the diocese is regarded as the basic entity of the church. In our ecclesiology, the term “local church” refers to the diocese. In our view, a bishop is always a diocesan bishop: that is, the main pastor of the church in a certain area, the main proclaimer of the gospel, the main presider at the eucharist. Therefore, in our view a diocese should have a manageable size, enabling the local church to know its bishop and vice versa. If our ecclesiology may appear somewhat episcopocentric, it should always be understood that we

have in mind a diocese of limited dimensions and a bishop embedded in the college of priests, the deacons, and representatives of the laity.

6. Aspects of our organisation

The bishop of Utrecht is called an archbishop because he is the metropolitan of the historic province of the northern Netherlands: the ecclesiastical province of Utrecht, which nowadays consists of the dioceses of Utrecht and Haarlem. Technically, the Archbishop of Utrecht is not the archbishop of the Old Catholic churches, although he is often regarded as such. The Archbishop of Utrecht is the chairman of the International Bishops' Conference and has, as such, in fact a leading role that involves taking initiatives and co-ordinating processes.

The International Bishops' Conference has technically no jurisdiction. Its decisions are made by the bishops as representatives of their local churches. Decisions have to go through a process of "reception" in the local churches.

Every Old Catholic church has an organisational form that is both episcopal and synodal. The membership of synods and the responsibilities of synods vary from country to country.

7. An Old Catholic ecumenical self-understanding

I would like to conclude this introduction by a reference to the Old Catholic ecumenical self-understanding. It should be remembered that in the late 19th century our original ecumenical aim was to bring together the non-Roman, but Catholic churches, namely the Orthodox, the Anglicans and the Old Catholics. This early dialogue resulted in the Bonn Agreement of 1931, which has subsequently brought into full communion the churches of the Anglican Communion and those of the Union of Utrecht. Like the Anglicans, we are also in communion with the Philippine Independent Church, with the Reformed Episcopal Church in Spain and with the Lusitanian Church in Portugal. The dialogue with the Orthodox was restarted in 1975 and resulted in a full theological consensus in 1987. Due to more than one difference of opinion, this full theological consensus has not been followed yet by the restoration of communion. Nevertheless, we are still in contact with the Orthodox churches, for example through our working group with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Relations with the Roman Catholic Church have improved, so that a dialogue document – *Church*

and Ecclesial Communion – could be published in 2009. Official dialogues are also going on with the Church of Sweden and with the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in India.

In Old Catholic theology we have the conviction that unity between churches cannot be “made” but only “discovered” and subsequently confirmed. Therefore, the predominant way in which we conduct our dialogues is not a tactic of compromise, but an attempt to get to know the other, so that in the end we might conclude that the *other* has the *same* catholicity as we think *we* have. According to this method of ecumenical conversation, the way to communion is the patient way of learning about the other, until one recognises in the other church the same catholicity as in one’s own church.

8. Conclusion

This morning we will ask you to share with us how you see our role and task in the ecumenical world. What are we able to offer and what can we learn from others? I hope my introduction into some aspects of the Union of Utrecht may provide a background to our discussions.

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