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Introducing and Dedicating the Piece of Art at the *French House*

Joris Vercammen

What a joy to be together here in this place of considerable historical significance for our Old Catholic community. It was in this house that five courageous men took a decision that changed some important details of the ecclesiastical landscape. Although it wasn't about another "ecclesiastical power" coming into being, what they did was undoubtedly historic. They saw themselves compelled to give ecclesiastical structure to a movement that otherwise would have been condemned to disappear. By doing that, they preserved its inspiration for the church. Those five bishops were convinced that the message of the Old Catholic movement was of importance for the future of the church and its unity. They didn't have any other aim than serving the proclamation of the gospel in the modern world, deeply believing that the truth of the gospel is able to offer the quality of life human beings are longing for.

This work of art that we shall bless today tells us about this truth, and about the relationship and solidarity as the concrete shape of it. This is what *catholicity*, in its deep theological and spiritual meaning, is about. Catholicity has to do with the global community of Christians, not as a kind of closed castle fighting for its own right, but as a network that promotes sister- and brotherhood among all human beings. But it is not me who has to explain what the artist did mean, she will do it herself in a moment.

But perhaps it is not even the most important thing to know what the artist has meant with the shape, lines, colours and materials of her work. Priority belongs to the fact that we can enjoy it ... and we are already enjoying it.

As we are enjoying this work of art, we are building on a relationship between two institutions representing two very different areas of our society: the business world and the church. That's the power of art: bringing people together and building bridges between them. Art is able to build bridges because of its capacity to go beyond instrumentality and interests of profit. Therefore, both of them, business and church, need art. Of course, the church can't survive without theology in order to guarantee the rationality of the faith. But we will never get into the lively dynamic of faith if

theology won't lead us to art. What theology is for the church, is economy for the business world. The role of the economy is to manage the scarcity of goods and the just division of them among people, but if the business interest of maximising profit is the ultimate goal of the economy, those goods will never bring the joy in human society they should bring. Business people need, aside from the efficiency of economy, also the generosity of art. Economy offers life a steady structure, art offers it air to breathe.

Church people and business people need one another in at least two ways. In the first place they need one another in the reflection about the ethical side of the economy. This is about justice and about sharing goods, about solidarity and caring for poor people. Christian ideals in this respect have to be translated into concrete economic strategies. In the second place it is about spirituality. The economic world tells us about the concreteness of life and bodily condition of human beings. There is no faith that can deny this crucial aspect of human life without taking the risk to alienate human beings from themselves. That's what the economy tells the church. The church, from its side, tells the economy that people are able to go beyond their own needs in order to care for one another and building community in which the ultimate drive isn't profit, but love.

Thanks to the unique history of this house, those two, the business world and the church, meet each other here today.

For this house once was a church house, a bishop's house, but it has been "converted" into a house that plays an important role in the business strategy of a multinational. Perhaps the people who will be hosted here may be 'converted' to relate to one another and to build a community beyond borders of cultures and nationalities. In doing so, they would be taking up a practical spirituality of relationship and community. We have to keep in mind that catholicity is about this spirituality. Catholicity is about relating beyond borders, even beyond the borders of human perception. That was what the historic moment on September 24, 1889, was about.

"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 ab omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum*). When the monk Vincent of Lérins wrote these sentences, he was not thinking about a truth that would come down to humanity as an overwhelming oracle that is robbing humanity of its freedom. On the contrary: he meant that the search for truth invites us to an attitude of dedication and a spirit of community.

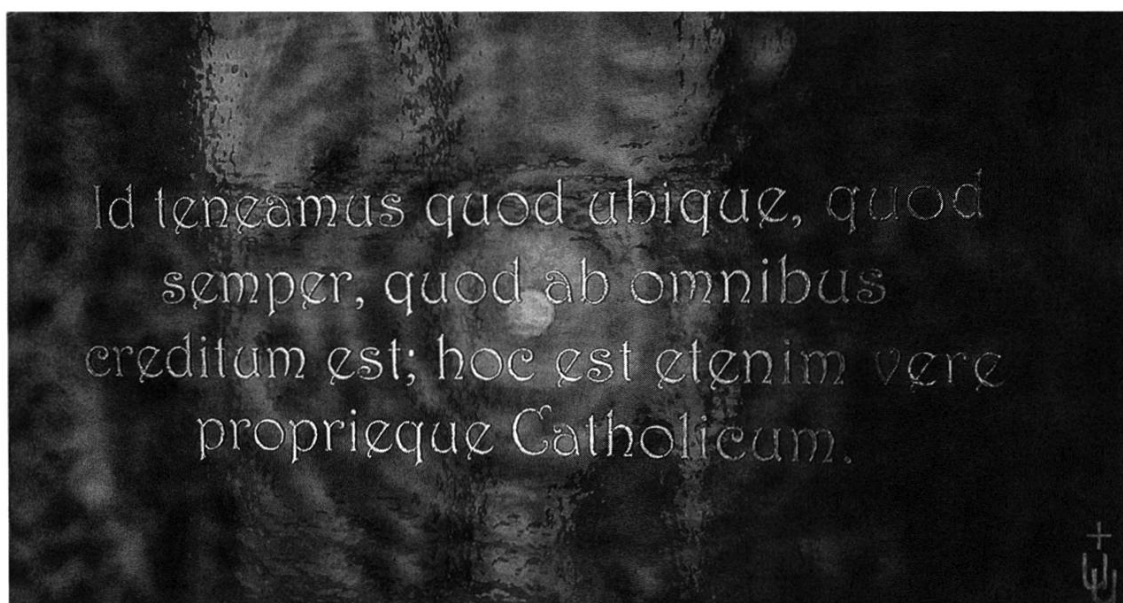
I want to conclude by reading a poem that is about dedication and community, and about the blessing of it. It is a poem from the Book of Psalms of the Bible, very concrete in using bodily images and very outspoken about God having to do with the unity among people. It is a little song that may lift up one's heart.

See how good and how pleasant it is
For brothers to live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
That ran down on the beard,
Even Aaron's beard;
That came down on the edge of his robes;
Like the dew of Hermon,
That comes down on the hills of Zion:
For there the Lord gives the blessing,
Even life for evermore (Psalm 133)

And now it is an honour for me to offer this piece of art to the owner of this house and to entrust it to his good caring. We hope you are ready to accept it as a sign of our solidarity, as neighbours and partners in being committed to the welfare of humanity. Let us pray to bless this piece of art.

Lord, our God, creator of heaven and earth,
we thank you and praise you for your love,
for your wisdom, for your kindness and mercy,
for your Spirit who opens the hearts and minds of people.
We thank you for those people who,
gifted with inspiration and creativity,
tell us in their art of the mystery of life.
We bless you for them
and for the work of their hands
that invoke in us freedom and friendship.
We thank you for the bishops
who signed in this house their pact of communion.
Remind us of their courage and integrity.
Make us instruments of love, peace, unity and harmony
between people, irrespective of race, colour and creed.
Help us to serve one another in humility, simplicity and joy.
Show us the way to your community beyond borders
in which the whole of humanity will be reconciled
and unified with one another and with you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
our one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Bless this piece of art, Lord, our God,
that it may remind people of your longing for them
as it invokes in them the attitude of freedom and friendship
with which you are looking for them.
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.



Die von der niederländischen Glaskünstlerin *Erna Bruinsma* (geb. 1953) geschaffene Glastafel gibt den Text des Hl. Vinzenz von Lérins (5. Jh.) wieder, der in der «Utrechter Erklärung» von 1889 mit seinen drei Kriterien zum Erkennen des katholischen Glaubens zitiert wird: «Id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum» (Das wollen wir festhalten, was überall, was immer, was von allen geglaubt wurde; denn das ist wahrhaft und eigentlich katholisch.)

Das obige Bild zeigt *nicht* das Original der Tafel, das im «Französischen Haus» in Utrecht, dem früheren Wohnsitz des Erzbischofs von Utrecht, enthüllt worden ist, sondern eine vereinfachte und stark verkleinerte Reproduktion, die den ökumenischen Gästen des Kongresses als Andenken an die 125-Jahr-Feier der Utrechter Union auf den Heimweg mitgegeben wurde.