

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

By Professor Dr. Urs von Arx, Bern

The Church has its source and foundation in God who is its future, presence, and past. It is not possible to fully expound this in a systematic way starting from the biblical message, the basic echo of the Christ event, with all the underlying and ensuing interpretations of God, world and humans. A short sketch must suffice. The Church is the manifestation of the reconciliation initiated by God, as it is in the Church that humans being justified as sinners recognize and accept each other as brothers and sisters. The Church is the communion of humans called to holiness; it is on a pilgrimage to the perfection that will include the entire creation when God is all in all. The Church is participation in the life of God and thus communion of the baptized with God, with other baptized, indeed with all creation. The reconciliation is grounded on God's mission of Jesus, Son and Logos of God, on his death and resurrection, and it is realized and recognized in the gifts of the Holy Spirit enabling humans to act as bearers of the love and knowledge of God and as his responsible partners.

The Church, then, has its foundation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, as the life giving mission of Christ is in the power of the Spirit and as the Spirit makes present this life in time and space, in a continuous process of inculturation. As Son and Spirit have their unity in God, the Church has its foundation in the triune God. „The reason why the Trinitarian foundation of the reality of the Church is important for the Old Catholic understanding of the Church is the fact, that it makes possible to understand the human communion in the Church as participation in the life of God being communion.“^[1]

Thus this ecclesiological approach starts from soteriological and Trinitarian premises, and it presupposes a sort of relational ontology for the understanding of reality as being God's creation. A human being is fundamentally a being in communion, not an isolated one for which to be in communion is a secondary state. This may be expressed by saying that a human being is a person, not an individual, and that the Church is thoroughly constituted by relations of personal beings “facing” others.^[2] The participation by grace in a reality that is basically outside the believers and yet becomes their inner reality may in various ways be reflected in the ecclesiological metaphors like People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit, etc. In this context mention must be made of the popular term *koinonia* or *communio*: it denotes a communion that is constituted through a common participation in an entity that the members of the communion are not themselves.^[3] The clearest expression of this fundamental aspect of the Church is the Eucharist, the ecclesiological relevance of which is not sufficiently recognized if it is simply seen as a sacrament among others.

The Church as vanguard and model of the renewed and redeemed humanity lives in a specific situation between the times: in anamnesis of what is their foundation in Christ and in the expectation of the perfection of God's love transforming the whole creation.

In this tension the Church has to recognize and fulfill its mission. The fundamental aspects of its life may be termed *martyria*, *doxologia*, and *diakonia*. *Martyria* includes the various acts of the proclamation of the Gospel, catechesis, the accounting for the hope and faith in all its dimensions, statements on social and political issues as far as they are inescapable consequences of the Gospel.

Doxologia includes worship of God, which manifests in a fundamental epicletic attitude that the Church dares to live on what is promised and given in word and sacrament. In *diakonia* the Church fulfills its mission of healing men and women in material and spiritual distress resolutely transcending its own institutional borders.

The Church thus being a divine-human communion is an entity whose institutional, structural aspects, however, can be fully described in sociological and other terms. It is this communion in radical ambiguity. This is so because the Church is a pilgrim community, and because of the sins of its members which obliterate and compromise its being a creation of God's love^[4], in the last analysis because of the incarnational „touch“ of God's acting in the world. Old Catholic theology takes for granted that human beings, even material elements, may be bearers of God's presence wherever the Holy Spirit –whether invoked in prayer or by its own initiative – makes use of them. Ambiguity affects the perception of the Church in all its utterances. A neutral perception of the God-giveness of the Church apart from faith seems impossible.^[5]

[1] Aldenhoven, H., 1980: 407.

[2] Cf. Stalder, K., 1984: 111 (he speaks of „Gegenüber-Verhältnisse“). For a similar approach see Zizioulas, John, *Being As Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, SVSP, Crestwood NY, 1993.

[3] Cf. Hainz, Josef, *KOINONIA. 'Kirche' als Gemeinschaft bei Paulus*, Pustet, Regensburg 1982.

[4] Cf. Küry, U., 269-278, who distinguishes the Church essential, deficient and coming to fulfilment.

[5] This has been stressed by Stalder in a course of lectures posthumously published; cf. Stalder, Kurt, *Sprache und Erkenntnis der Wirklichkeit Gottes. Texte zu einigen wissenschaftstheoretischen und systematischen Voraussetzungen für die exegetische und homiletische Arbeit*, ed. von Arx, U., Ökumenische Beihefte 38, Universitätsverlag, Freiburg Switzerland, 2000, 260-431.

UNITY, CATHOLICITY AND APOSTOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

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The only truly ecumenical symbol of faith, the so-called Nicene Creed, outlines the reality of the Church in four adjectives (the *notae ecclesiae*) pointing to aspects of its nature. The Church is one, holy, catholic, apostolic. This statement about the Church occurs in the short pneumatological section, and thus makes the Church an object of belief and confessing. The marks of the Church must be somehow – in all ambiguity – manifest and answered for by the members of the Church.

1. The *unity* of the Church has its source in the triune God. But how and where is this unity to be perceived? Old Catholic theology would give an answer in the framework of an ecclesiology taking as its basic entity the local Church. This ecclesiology is discernible without any systematic explication in some authors writing in the 1870es (e.g. J.H. Reinkens), but a certain consistency has been attained only later, not least because of a theological exchange with voices from the Orthodox and Anglican (also Lutheran) traditions, recently with Roman Catholic advocates of a communion ecclesiology, and generally with the work of the Faith and Order Movement / Commission.

The starting point is the Eucharistic community headed by a bishop; in what follows this is called the “local Church” (i.e. traditionally speaking a diocese). A few remarks will be appropriate. The Eucharist with all its constitutive elements is the primary representation and realization of the communion of God with humans constituted in the Christ event and opened up for continuous participation in the power of the Holy Spirit. The traditional term “bishop” designates the person who has the first responsibility for the local Church to preserve its unity, as well as its catholicity and apostolicity (see below). The bishop is, however, fully integrated in a network of distinct levels: on the one hand with the *college* of presbyters (usually called “priests”) and with the deacons, who together with the bishop assume the tasks of the ordained ministry, on the other hand with the non-ordained baptized, the laity, who share the responsibility for the local Church in various ways.^[1] The synodal integration of the bishop into the local Church and the participation of all ordained ministers and the laity in the responsibility for the local Church to remain the Church of God has been one of the principal concerns of Old Catholic reforms after 1870. Old Catholic theology will happily recognize a similar concern in the modern debate on *episkopé* and its personal, collegial and communal dimensions. It will interpret the personal dimension in terms of what may be called “monepiscopacy” (not to be confused with “monarchical episcopacy” and its modern associations).^[2]

A further explanation may be in place: why is it not the parish and its local congregation that serves as the ecclesiological starting point? This has to do with taking into account historical developments: e.g. the bishoprics consisting of a town and its immediate hinterland were soon superseded by bishoprics consisting of a region, the presbyters now assuming episcopal functions in the Eucharistic liturgy of the local congregations. But there are other considerations. The basic

unit (called local Church) ought to fulfill all its tasks as far as possible by its own capacity. For this a parish is very often too small. On the other hand there should be a limit to the circumscription of a local Church: the bishop ought to know in person those who assume responsibility in a local congregation, e.g. the ordained ministers and leading members of a parish council. If this is the case in Old Catholic dioceses that may even cover large areas it is because of their status as extreme minority Churches.[3]

Now the local Church is a representation and realization of the One Church confessed in the Nicene Symbol of Faith, and this in a particular “place”. The extent of the “place” is dependent on contingent factors (number of baptized, historical developments etc., see below).

2. The *catholicity* of the Church is to be determined in the context of the ecclesiological approach just presented. It is the local Church that carries the mark of catholicity inasmuch as it participates in God’s reality of salvation and truth encompassing heaven and earth and there finds its unifying center. The local Church, however, does not possess catholicity for itself, like a monad, but insofar as it is in communion with other local Churches, which are equally representations of the One Church in their respective “places”.

Thus the local Churches have a soteriological-Trinitarian identity – an identity, incidentally, that is to be distinguished from other identities that are marked by manifold sociocultural factors and are and should be diverse. This “theological” identity points to the real source of the unity of the local Churches, the triune God.

This unity is manifest in the form of a communion of local Churches (i.e. dioceses), not in the form of something like a super-diocese with the dioceses thus being deficient, somewhat incomplete parts of a larger whole.

There will be communions of local Churches in various geographical extensions, up to the universal communion of local Churches. They are all representations of the One Church, each in their “place”.

From all this follows that the catholicity of the Church is not simply identical with its (geographical) universality.

3. The *apostolicity* of the Church is also to be seen in the context of the local Church being in communion with other local Churches. It denotes the continuity of the Church in space and time with the mission of Christ and his apostles performed in the power of the Holy Spirit. This continuity is related to the entire witness of the Church in Word and Sacrament, although some constitutive elements can be singled out, but should not be seen in isolation. The passing on of the ordained ministry by prayer and the laying-on of hands is such an element of what is called “apostolic succession”, but it must be integrated into the ecclesial context of the co-responsibility of the local Church for its remaining true to the Gospel and in continuity with the Ancient Church. The apostolic succession is in the first and last analysis the process of the Church

remaining identical with the apostolic foundation in all forms of inculturation and *aggiornamento* that will necessarily create varying identities of another order.

A clear manifestation of the apostolicity of the Church may be seen in the consecration of a bishop: he or she is elected by the local Church, ordained by bishops of other local Churches in communion with it; and in what takes place in the Eucharistic context all baptized present share in the commitment of the Church to the passing on of the faith once and for all revealed and yet laid into the obedient responsibility of the Church. Two dimensions can be discerned in the event: the “horizontal” historical continuity within the supralocal communion and the “vertical” immediacy to God (made clear in the epicletic ordination prayer).

[1] Cf. Stalder, K., 1984: 110-125.

[2] Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111, WCC, Geneva, 1982, para. 26 (without the term *episkopé*); *The Nature and Purpose of the Church. A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper 181, WCC, Geneva, 1998, para 89-106. See further Bouteneff, Peter C. and Falconer, Alan D. (eds) *Episkopé and Episcopacy and the Quest for Visible Unity*. Two Consultations, Faith and Order Paper 183, WCC, Geneva, 1999.

[3] In Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Slovakia the single diocese covers the whole country.

MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP

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1. The Old Catholic Church holds to the threefold ordained ministry as it emerged in the second century and was virtually universally maintained up to the Reformation. In view of Protestant criticism levelled against the idea that Holy Scripture considers the threefold ministry, especially episcopacy, an institution necessary for salvation, Old Catholic authors have sometimes tried to give an exegetical answer to the contrary. But on the whole it is now accepted that this is not really possible, not least because of the divergent ecclesiological approaches in the New Testament mentioned above. As the basic appeal of Old Catholic theology is not so much to Holy Scripture (taken in isolation from the Church of sub-apostolic times) but to the Ancient Church, this does not seem to create grave problems.[1] The threefold ministry, the rule of faith, the canon of Scripture are taken as fundamental decisions of the early Church being in legitimate continuity with its apostolic origin.

In terms of systematic theology the following consideration may be worth mentioning. The ministry that is constitutive for the Church and its mission has its origin in the commissioning of the apostles by Christ. It carries on their service in those areas that are not limited to the historically unique and foundational aspects of their apostolate: the proclamation of the Gospel including its sacramental and pastoral dimension in a comprehensive sense. Now the one ministry is directed to the one local Church (of the earlier “urban” or the later “regional” type). This aspect is manifest in the oneness of the minister traditionally called “bishop”. But the one ministry also has a collegial dimension, and this is manifest in the college of collaborators, traditionally called presbyters (or “priests”). The aspects of oneness and plurality or collegiality of the ministry is equally necessary, thus the differentiation of the one ministry in episcopacy and presbyterate may be seen as making sense – perhaps even as a reflection of the unity and plurality of the triune God.[2]

It is more difficult to give a similar explanation for the diaconate as being part of the ordained ministry, or as a frequently used Old Catholic terminology would say, of the “apostolic ministry”. Incidentally, in some Old Catholic Churches there have been successful efforts to reintroduce a permanent diaconate with a larger pastoral responsibility than provided for the transitory diaconate of candidates to the priesthood.

2. The threefold “apostolic” ministry of the Church has to be seen in its connection with the non-ordained baptized. Ministry and laity are being distinguished, but they act in a communion being a network with different tasks, not with the separation of, say, a teaching and obeying Church. In earlier times the Old Catholic concern for the integration of the laity (and lower clergy) into the responsibility for the local Church and thus in its leadership was given expression with the problematic term of “democratization”. Today the relation of the ministry and the laity is rather seen in analogy to the Trinitarian model of the relation of Christ and Spirit. The ministry represents Christ and carries on his and the apostles’ mission, though not in an exclusive way; the laity represent the Holy Spirit – again not in an exclusive way – who helps them to recognize whether the ministry remains true to the Gospel of Christ (this would be a sort of a general “lay

ministry”). Both have a responsibility for the Church and its proclamation, which neither can cede to the other or arrogate from the other. In the case of conflict over fundamental questions – and this holds good for other confrontations than ministry / laity as well, like e.g. bishop / synod, bishop / presbyterate etc. – discussion must go on until a consensus is reached or the breach of ecclesial communion is unavoidable. In other words, there is no hierarchical or democratic mechanism *per se* in coming to a decision in the sense that it is the bishop, or the clergy, or the laity, or a mixed majority that has the final vote. This is a consequence of the ecclesiological approach outlined so far, and a lot of encouragement (and instruction) is needed to bring the members of the Church to live this “high” ecclesiology in terms of shared responsibility. Otherwise many dangers lurk.

There are a number of tasks that are only fulfilled by lay baptized, in other cases like religious education, pastoral and social work an exclusive connection with the ministry or the laity does not make sense. The administration of sacraments is a responsibility of the ordained ministry.

3. The leadership in the local Church (or in the nation-wide communions of local Churches, i.e. the “national” Church) is assumed in a specific way in the co-operation of bishop and synod, and a sort of executive, often called synodal council. Diocesan or General Synods consist of lay delegates from the parishes and all or elected clergy (the majority must always be lay). The way how the common episcopal-synodal structure is working in details is rather different in the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht. To take an example, the institution called “synod” in the Dutch Old Catholic Church has – contrary to the synods in the other Old Catholic Churches – only an advisory responsibility, the decisions being taken by the bishops together with a small steering group of clergy and lay (the “collegial council”). Another difference is the frequency, with which synods are convened (1-5 years), what has repercussions on the allocation of responsibilities to either synod or synodal council.

Issues that concern the faith of the Church and thus its identity and its communion with other local or national Churches require a special awareness of ecclesial responsibility of the local Church and a common consultation beyond the local or national Church.

[1] Cf. Küry U., 134: developments „*praeter, sed non contra scripturam*“ are not rejected from the outset.

[2] Cf. Aldenhoven, Herwig, ‘Einheit und Verschiedenheit von Bischofs- und Priesteramt im Licht eines trinitarischen Kirchenverständnisses’, *IKZ* 72 (1982) 145-151.

SUPRALOCAL AND UNIVERSAL KOINONIA OF THE CHURCH

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1. In pursuance of the the approach outlined above (para. "Unity") I shall attempt to show how the supralocal koinonia of the Church may be conceived of in consequence of the basic data of Old Catholic ecclesiology.

Supralocal koinonia is always a communion of local Churches in a gradually increasing geographic extension up to the universal communion. Following ancient models the first stage could be designated as a Church Province. It may be a communion of local Churches of a particular country or of a part of it. Communion of local Churches for their part may form a communion, what might be called a patriarchate or whatever. The geographical limits or extensions will be dependent on contingent factors of history, culture, tradition. Finally there is the universal communion of communions of local Churches.

Each communion of local Churches in whatever extension is a representation and realization of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church being an object of faith and confessed in the Creed. The common element is their soteriological-Trinitarian identity by way of participation in God. Each type of communion has to manifest the unity of the Church in various ways.

In order to maintain the supralocal communion of Churches there will be appropriate forms of common consultation and decision-making and giving witness to the common faith in the Gospel. In this the bishops have a special responsibility, as they are at the interface of local Church and supralocal communion. As single bishops being integrated in a synodal network they are the personal focus of the unity of each particular local Church; as a group of bishops again integrated in a synodal network they are the collegial focus of unity of a particular communion of local Churches. Now the synod of bishops has a common responsibility to manifest the unity and communion of local Churches. One of the bishops, however, is supposed to have a special, the first responsibility for this. This bishop is a *primus inter pares*, who will not decide for himself nor will the other bishops (the *pares*) cede their co-responsibility to the primate. Consequently there is a co-operation between primate and synod within the common responsibility for manifesting the unity of the Church and giving a witness to the Gospel whenever such is necessary at this level.

A principal concern of this conception is, on the one hand, to have intermediate elements between the local and the universal dimension of unity and communion of the Church, which are all representations of the One Church in their "places". On the other hand the conception of primacy should be freed from the fixation on the universal primacy (usually seen in the light of the Roman primacy as defined in 1870) and be understood as an important element in the synodal structure constitutive for any form of communion of local Churches.[1]

The above view of the manifestation of unity of the supralocal koinonia of the Church is a consequence of the ecclesiological approach which takes the local Church as the primary place of the life of the Church in *martyria*, *doxologia* and *diakonia*, and therefore as the primary (though

always ambiguous) realization of the One Church confessed in the Creed. Consequently the synods of bishops represent the communion of the local Churches to which they belong in the first place and not an entity called the universal Church (or part of it) of which they would be the college. Accordingly measures (that cannot be specified here) are to be taken in order to safeguard that the bishops speak for their local Churches without, however, simply becoming their mouthpieces, for they carry the primary responsibility for the supralocal communion of the *local* Churches and may not cede it to supposedly superior instances. Lack of space does not allow us to discuss some difficult questions as to the details. Only one point must be mentioned: whereas on the local and the first supralocal (and national) level a regular convening is desirable, at geographically more extensive levels the assembling of synods is dependent on urgency. The Church as a universal communion of local Churches should never become something like a global bureaucratic machinery.

Another constitutive element in the ecclesiology outlined is the process of reception: A decision of a synod of whatever geographical representativeness is and must be recognized as a true witness of faith and thus becoming an element of practical belief by the baptized in the local Churches. In this Spirit-guided process that cannot be steered by some canonical machinery the “infallibility” of the Church – if the term is to be preserved – has its proper place. It should be added that it is easier to recognize the non-reception of a synodal decision and witness than the reception as this is ultimately a never ending process.

2. This vision of the manifestation of unity of the local Churches may now be set in relation with the Old Catholic view of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. There are a number of official statements always acknowledging “the historic primacy which several ecumenical councils and Fathers of the Ancient Church have attributed to the Bishop of Rome by recognizing him as *primus inter pares*”.^[2] What is rejected is a primacy of (universal) jurisdiction that links the Pope in a unique way with what is called the universal Church and moreover implies a form of primacy without *pares* as he is an *unicus* and not a *primus* (*qua* patriarch of the West), i.e. a universal bishop in addition to the bishop of each local Church, whom as “the” head of the Church all owe obedience.

3. What is the ecclesiological status of the Union of Utrecht in the light of this conception? It serves as the primary Old Catholic framework to live and practice unity and communion on a supralocal level, but it was rather late that the ecclesiological implications were made an object of theological investigation, and certain insufficiencies were recognized.^[3] The Union of Utrecht ought to see itself as a representation of the One Church in its particular place and not simply as a loose association of individual national Churches.^[4] However, this view is not undisputed. This has to do with the fact that it seems impossible to see an exact analogy of the Union in a province or in a patriarchate: neither model really fits. There is also a certain Old Catholic temptation to see the autonomy of the national Church in a certain analogy to the sovereignty of the modern state.

[1] As a consequence of the inter-relation of synod and primate the traditional Old Catholic conception of placing the Ecumenical Synod/Council above the Pope is equally untenable as the opposite one to which it is a reaction.

[2] So e.g. the Declaration of Utrecht, para.2. Other statements include the fundamental programme of the Old Catholic movement issued by the Congress of Munich in 1871, the IBC-declaration of 1970 'The Primacy in the Church' (both in: Küry, U., 450-452; 458-460), and common texts agreed upon by the Joint Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission (in: *Koinonia*: 202-204) and the International Anglican-Old Catholic Theological Conference of 1985 (in: *IKZ* 80, 1990, 5-11).

[3] Cf. Papandreou, Damaskinos, 'La signification de l'Union d'Utrecht du point de vue orthodoxe', *Episkepsis* No 427 (October 15, 1989). The Union of Utrecht, its ecclesiological character and possible restructuration were made an object of two International Consultations of Old Catholic Theologians in 1993 (in: *IKZ* 84, 1994, 7-61; 92-127) and in 1996 (in: *IKZ* 87, 1997, 65-126).

[4] See the preamble of the new statute. There was an irregular situation insofar as the PNCC terminated ecclesial communion with those member Churches that introduced the ordination of women to the priesthood and , at the same time, insisted on belonging to the Union.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

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1. The soteriological-Trinitarian identity of each local Church and the more or less marked sociocultural plurality of them pose the problem of how this identity that constitutes their unity and communion can be recognized and become manifest in and through this plurality.

As fundamental criteria to recognize the identity may serve those elements which are repeatedly mentioned in the ecumenical debate as a prerequisite for the separated Churches to rediscover the lost unity:

- the fundamental faith of the Church as witnessed in the liturgy, in creeds or other common statements and finding a certain expression in the practical life of the baptized;

- the liturgy of the Church, especially the Eucharist structured around its poles *Word* and *Sacrament*,

- the ministry of the Church, especially the *episkopé* in its structural unfolding and integration in both the local Church and the communion of local Churches.

All these elements must show a sufficient degree of commonality which is an indication of the “theological” identity of the local Churches. To recognize and preserve what is common in all plurality, to make a difference between essentials and other elements, is a constant task of the local Church and the communion of local Churches. Again, it cannot be fulfilled from a neutral point of view, but only by way of a common discernment that verges on a decision of faith. These elements will usually have a greater degree of uniformity within a local Church or a national Church than in a communion of Churches transcending these circumscriptions.

2. The Old Catholic belief of the Church is not articulated in a specific document but rather referred to as the Declaration of Utrecht points to the faith of the Ancient Church and to certain texts that serve as common elements of reference (like Holy Scripture, the creeds or dogmatic decisions of ecumenical synods). Formal declarations issued by the IBC (and received by the Church) will enjoy the status of authoritative clarifications in matters of belief. Other important statements showing common opinions in the Union of Utrecht may stem from institutions like the International Old Catholic Congress (since 1890, now meeting every four years) or the International Old Catholic Theological Conference (since 1950, usually meeting every year).

Apart from the liturgy of ordination^[1] the liturgical formularies are the concern of the particular Churches. The integration in the “Western” liturgical traditions and the modern liturgical renewal, however, guarantee a considerable degree of homogeneity.^[2]

The ministry is perceived as identical in all the member Churches of the Union, although a closer analysis would probably reveal differences in the self-understanding of the clergy and in their social status.

Canon law as another possible common element in the member Churches differs very much in the degree of its elaboration.

So it may be said in conclusion that there is a relatively large scope for diversity in the Churches constituting the Union of Utrecht.

3. A similar scope for diversity is explicitly provided for in the Anglican – Old Catholic Bonn Agreement of 1931: “Intercommunion does not require from either communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith”. The concluding text of the Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue (1975-1987) says: “The consequence and expression of reciprocally recognized fellowship in the faith is the full liturgical-canonical communion of Churches, the realization of organic unity in the one Body of Christ. The liturgical and canonical consequences, which result from ecclesial fellowship, will be elucidated and regulated by the Church on the basis of the tradition of the undivided Church. This fellowship does not signify uniformity in liturgical order and ecclesial practice, but rather embodies an expression of the fact that the historically legitimated development of the one faith of the ancient and undivided Church is preserved in each of the participating Churches. This fellowship also does not require the subjection of one Church with its tradition to the other Church, for this would contradict the reality of the fellowship.”^[3] It would be highly interesting, even ground-breaking, to see this task put into concrete action, but for various reasons this is not the case.

[1] The first common rite for the ordination of bishops, priests, deacons (and minor orders, now suppressed) was published in 1897/99. The IBC approved of a revised rite in 1985 which was prepared by the International Old Catholic Liturgical Commission (appointed in 1978). It does not seem to be used in all the member Churches.

[2] Cf. the Consensus of the International Old Catholic Theological Conference of 1979 on the structure and the theology of the Eucharistic prayer, *IKZ* 70 (1980) 226-229.

[3] Cf. *Koinonia*: 228.

THE ECUMENICAL MISSION OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCHES

The Ecclesiological Vision

The presetting of the Old or primitive Church constitutes the focus for the ecclesiological identity and theological agenda of the Old Catholic Church. In doing so the continuity with the apostolic beginning of the Church is aimed at. The role model of the Ancient Church is important on three levels: on the level of the local Church (which is understood here as a church which structure is Episcopal and synodical at the same time), the next level understood as the community of local churches within the Union of Utrecht and the external layer, comprising the relationships to other denominations with the goal of a universal community of churches.

According to Old Catholic ecclesiology the following elements are to be considered elementary for the Church:

a) The Church is a community of SALVATION and WHOLENESS because salvation – a gift from God towards humankind – is experienced there. Salvation has to be experienced in the real living conditions of people and is put into practice there – otherwise it is not to be called salvation. Therefore the Church is always a local church and a synodical community of local churches at the same time. And the Church is an universal community of local churches.

b) The faith community of baptized people finds its deepest source and expression in the EUCHARISTIC GATHERING, presided by the bishop, respectively by a presbyter/priest, charged by the bishop. The ordained ministry in which the bishop is to be seen as the first and foremost incumbent of the apostolic ministry, connects the local church with the origin and makes her a symbol of unity.

c) Being the Church means serving the MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION which God has established. This service is crucial for the mission of the Church in the Holy Spirit, because God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ.

Summarizing it can be said that the one global or universal Church of God is constituted as a community of local churches which are bound by the self-revelation of God in the sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This community realizes the components of martyrria, leitourgia and diakonia. By these components the mission of the community of all the baptized finds its expression. The local Church is the prominent place where all who hold the personal, collegial and common Episkope are responsible for carrying out those components in various forms. The local Church is the representation and realization of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that is quoted in the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, describing her as an entity of faith in a pneumatological context.

The IBC statute (charter) presupposes that the Union of Utrecht is a community of local churches where in which each church views herself as realization of the One Church of the creed in a special place and time. Looked upon by other churches to be a small global Christian community, the UU has the special task to spread and live out the catholicity of the Ancient or primitive Church Thus the UU wants to foster the unity of the churches and aims at the healing of the universal community of local churches.

The Ecumenical Self-Understanding of the Union of Utrecht

To be engaged in ecumenical dialogues is one of the earliest and characteristic features of Old Catholicism. One can find proof for that in the above mentioned “Muenchner Programm” (Declaration of Munich) 1871 in the wake of the earliest Old Catholic protest against the papal dogmas of 1870. The Union Conferences in Bonn 1874 and 1875 are to be seen as an early fruit of those ecumenically oriented initiatives on the basis of the old and early Church.

During those conferences Orthodox, Anglican and Old Catholic theologians were able to reach a consent on certain disputed viewpoints – sadly with no direct consequences for the various church bodies. Furthermore the constitution of the Union of Utrecht in 1889 (The Declaration of Utrecht) contains in No.7 a passage which describes the ecumenical task of the UU. The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht since then have taken their ecumenical duties not lightly which is shown by their engagement in the World Council of Churches, its preparatory conferences, especially furthermore by the different bilateral dialogues. With the Orthodox Churches an extended dialogue took place between 1975-1987, culminating in 26 text documents that showed a far reaching consensus in questions of faith and ecclesiology. Another proof for the ecumenical engagement can be found in the Bonn Agreement (1931) which resulted in a full communion with the Anglican churches and on this same ground from 1965 onwards the full communion with the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, with the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and with the Lusitanian Catholic Church in Portugal, being fruits of the ecumenical work of the Union of Utrecht.

An ecumenical engagement based on the ecclesiological principles of the Old or primitive Church is to be considered the common strain of all the ecumenical initiatives of the UU. Most clearly this can be shown by the relationship toward Anglican and Orthodox churches. Every member church of the UU is beyond that called to control if other existing divisions are to be justified in their classification as inevitable any longer (IBC statute, preamble No.3.2). Therefore it is as well an obligation for the UU to develop new initiatives within the frame of her principles without endangering the already achieved ones. New ecumenical initiatives as well as the improvement of communication opportunities between countries and continents have a lot to offer in this respect. Yet decisions to follow some new initiatives should be foremost based on theological reasons.

For the ecumenical mission of the Union of Utrecht it is crucial that relationships on the level of parishes are fostered between different denominational communities. These intertwined bindings of parishes are of great help in the bilateral church dialogue.

Fundamental Principles

The faith of the Ancient Church is the directive groundwork to search and create unity and community with other churches. In the Declaration of Utrecht (1889) it is said that this faith is verbalized by “the ecumenical creeds and by the commonly acknowledged dogmatic decisions of the ecumenical synods of the undivided Church in the first millennium” (No.1). The Lima-Text (1982) on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry – a consensus document of the Faith-and-Order-Commission of the World Council of Churches – serves as orientation mark for the UU in so far as the common heritage of the churches is described. In this it helps fulfilling the task of searching and discovering unity and community with other churches.

The shared celebration of the Eucharist finds its appropriate place in the context of a full church communion. In 1992 a IBC-text mentions the giving of communion towards members of churches not in communion with the UU. This text aims at the special situation of individual persons, not at a general guideline or an agreed upon regulation between churches.

Old Catholic ecclesiology, informed by the model of the Ancient Church, entrusts the bishops with a special role in maintaining the “communio” and the unity. This is true as well in respect to the own local church as in respect to the communion/community of local churches. The bishop has the first and foremost responsibility for the maintenance of and unity and catholicity. This responsibility in oversight (episkopé in Greek) implies a personal, a collegial and a communal dimension. For Old Catholic ecclesiology the order of bishops, the episcopate, is necessary for an all-embracing catholicity.

In regard to the Union of Utrecht the bishops share their responsibility and oversight in their function as members of the IBC (International Bishops Conference). The IBC is the synodical instrument of the Old Catholic church communion where the bishops serve the inner unity of the Union of Utrecht in their function of oversight. One of the tasks towards the “outside” of the IBC is the fostering of ecumenism, especially the dialogue on questions of faith and order. Those questions effect the UU as a whole, therefore the bishops of the IBC look after national ecumenical dialogues and their implications for the IBC (cf. IBC statute, preamble No.4; Inner Order No.3 and 11). Decisions which concern the question how the unity of the Union of Utrecht is kept, are brought into an inner process in which the local church is involved and therefore the conclusions can be received by the Church as a whole (cf. IBC statute, preamble No.4.1; Inner Order No.6).

The following aspects are to be taken into account when ecumenical engagement is concerned:

- a) Concerning the UNIVERSAL REACH OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE, where the implementation is possible in general for all cultures in their various forms, the model of the Ancient Church as a “communio” of local churches offers a unique possibility to experience unity in the fundamentals while allowing manifold forms in the realization of the life of the Church.
- b) To ACCEPT THAT OTHERS AND THEIR CULTURE ARE DIFFERENT is a basic requirement that the “communio” of the Church can serve as a community of solidarity and for experiencing reconciliation, wholeness and salvation.

c) The ecumenical process asks for a building up of relations where equality, open communication and mutual sharing are crucial for an improved understanding of the own cultural and religious context.

The present regular connections to other Churches and the future engagement of the Union of Utrecht for the next years

The Anglican churches and churches with which there is church communion on the basis of the Bonn Agreement (1931):

a) Based on the Bonn Agreement the exchange with the Anglican Communion is presently most probably the most intensive one. This work is coordinated by the Anglican – Old Catholic International Coordinating Council (=AOCICC). The various sections of the Willibrord Society help to foster inter-church bindings. The Archbishop of Canterbury as well as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA both have a delegate to function as a permanent observer in the International Bishops Conference.

b) The cooperation with the Philippine Independent Church (Iglesia Filipina Independiente) is maintained by various exchange programs, in study projects and in actions of solidarity.

c) The bishops of the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and the Lusitanian-Catholic Church in Portugal have been invited from 2005 on to observe the IBC sessions.

The Orthodox Churches:

The current Old Catholic policy to cherish the church community with the Orthodox Churches among the first and outstanding goals, is still valid and serves as a landmark. That this direction of the theological dialogue, containing 26 text documents of a reached consensus (cf. Koinonia on the grounds of the Ancient Church), was approved meanwhile by all synods of Old Catholic Churches, gives this dialogue a prominent stress and authority in an Old Catholic perspective. Since 2004 a mixed group of delegates from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and from the Union of Utrecht sets its effort into a vision of a common way into the future in spite of old and new points of difference which obviously stand in the way of church community.

The Roman Catholic Church:

While the Roman Catholic Church the Union of Utrecht entered into a theological dialogue on the question of the universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome during these last years. This dialogue came to an end with the final report “Church and church community” in 2009. The question of church community which is not to be understood as a kind of “homecoming Ecumenism” has been openly dealt with in those talks. Now the stage of the reception process has begun and it is looked into possibilities of further dialogue.

The Old Catholic Church of the Mariavites in Poland:

The church of the Mariavites has again asked the International Bishops Conference to be included into the Union of Utrecht once more. Already between 1909 to 1924 their bishops have been

members of the IBC, so the talks focus on the issue of an Old Catholic identity on the side of the Mariavites which is compatible with the other churches of the Union of Utrecht. Points of ecclesiology as well as dogmatic questions are touched. It is the goal of the IBC to engage in a bilateral dialogue within the next years to clarify all those topics in order to be able to reach a definitive conclusion on the readmission. At present the Presiding Bishop of the Mariavites is a guest in the IBC gatherings.

The Church of Sweden:

Since 2005 consultations exist between the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden to explore possibilities of church communion. This could become a signal that the Union of Utrecht can overcome the gap between her and a church of the Continental Reformation, provided that the episcopate of the Ancient Church has been maintained. (The Union of Utrecht has been in full communion with the Church of Sweden since 2016 and is a full member of the Union of Utrecht.)

The Syrian Mar Thoma Church in India:

Contact to the Mar Thoma Church has been established in recent years. In 2008 a delegation of the IBC visited this church in India and was impressed by the spiritual richness. The Mar Thoma Church is from her origin an Oriental Church, specifically shaped by Anglicanism. Since the IBC has discovered a theological closeness to the spirit of Old Catholicism, talks of preparation will be held to explore a possible official dialogue.

A special project:

In the framework of the above mentioned relationship of the Union of Utrecht to other churches, the IBC considers it to be her special project to join together with bishops of smaller churches into a reflection process exploring the meaning and practical implications of a commonly lived out “Catholicism informed by the Ancient Church”. A successful meeting took place already in 2010 with a smaller number of bishops from the Philippine Independent Church, the Mar Thoma Church, the Mariavites, and bishops from the Union of Utrecht. It was resolved then to pursue this road. The goal of those meetings is clearly to encourage bishops in their own commitment for the catholicity of their own church and beyond (cf. above No. 4.7).

The local realization of the UU ‘s ecumenical mission in dioceses and parishes:

Relations with other churches are able to be a sign of the ecumenical mandate of the Old Catholic churches when local parishes take part in initiatives and such are able to bring forth impulses. This is true as well for those long existing relations as for newly initiated ones.

Amersfoort/Bern, December 2011. Translation: Pfr. Holger Laske / Pfr. Daniel Conklin

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