

THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH: A THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL VISION

The Church as Eucharistic Communion

With its particular view of the Church, Old Catholic theology joins those theologians who see the Eucharist as the core of being a Church. From that point the Church is a communion of believers. All are in communion with one another around the surrender of life by Jesus Christ, as the highest expression of the love of God. Therefore, in the celebration of the Eucharist, the faithful experience of how the Lord was defeated by the surrender of his life to sin. Sin is that power that divides life in all of its dimensions. The defeat of sin consists in bringing together that what is divided. Discrepancies between people are reconciled, what was dispersed brought together. As communion belongs to the core of human life, so we can see in the relation of Jesus with all men and women the restoration of human community. Therefore, the Eucharist can be seen as a symbol which prefigures the total restoration of all creation in a new covenant with God. It prefigures the reconciliation of all that and who have been broken in one or another way. “Church” means reconciliation. “Church” means the restoration of broken relations between God and men and men with each other. It is the leading to a new communion in which the old differences and discriminations between people are removed. Distinctions in position and places are there to manifest the unity in differences and reflect in that way the being of the triune God. Communion is not uniformity, but unity in diversity. Communion aims at personal human well being, so that reciprocally individual persons enrich the community at large. And what is said of believers is true for churches as well. Individual churches are too restraint to reflect the richness of God’s love, therefore it is necessary that they are also in communion with one another. It is the communion of churches that can reflect – unified as they are in diversity – the creativity of the Lord’s care about humanity.

This ecclesiological opinion, that can be carried back to orthodox theologians and to the Church fathers is recently more and more elaborated by Old Catholic theologians as the special mark of Old Catholic ecclesiology.

Apostolic Succession

Besides being Catholic in terms of Communion in space, one of the marks of the Church is its apostolicity as connectedness in time. In the Old Catholic belief this mark is guaranteed by the apostolic succession. What do Old Catholics understand as such? Not only the uninterrupted laying on of hands by bishops as such, making it seem as if the succession was merely dependent

on this consecration.

The apostolic succession contains more: it deals with the continuation of the whole life of the church community by word and sacrament through the years and ages. So, we consider apostolic succession as the process of the handing over of belief in which the whole Church is involved. In this process the ministry has a special responsibility and task, caring for the continuation in time of the mission of Jesus Christ and his Apostles.

What really matters is seen in the election and consecration of a new bishop for a widowed Church. In her own autonomy the communion elects a new candidate without interference of a so-called higher authority. But it is impossible to consecrate the candidate without the assistance of the sister churches. They are asked to consecrate the bishop-elect. And the consecration takes place after the elected has obligated himself to maintain the Catholic faith and to accept responsibility for the progress of the Gospel in connectedness with all the bishops. In this sense the episcopal ministry is an eminent ecumenical charge. It supports the unity of the local community and also represents, on a local level, the worldwide communion of the Church. This aspect of the apostolicity manifests itself within the Old Catholic Communion in the Bishops conferences. In this convention the Old Catholic bishops commit themselves to maintain the catholicity and apostolicity. To that they have to inform one another about the occurring spiritual, liturgical and sacramental life in their dioceses, take one's stand on how to deal with questions which arise in the progression of the tradition of faith, and to decide how to relate to other Churches and denominations. The ecumenical task emerges, to which the Old Catholics see themselves committed.

Conciliarity

In 1889 two of these newly established Old Catholic churches united with the church of Utrecht in the Union of Utrecht. The bishops published a declaration which begins with the motto of St. Vincent of Lérins. *"Id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum."* [Let us hold to what has been believed everywhere, always, by all; for this is truly and properly catholic.]

This motto proved itself immediately useful in the debates of the Reformation and the controversy around the First Vatican Council. It should be used not so much as a formal criterion of the truth (otherwise nothing can ever change in the church) but rather as an appeal to all Christians to hold the Catholic faith of all ages, in order that they may all be one in this faith. Until this unity has been achieved, no single church should make one-sided attempts to formulate new Christian dogmas.

The Old Catholic churches, from their diverse beginnings, have remained episcopally ordered churches. Most of the bishops are chosen in the churches, and the role of synods and laity is increasingly important for the very identity of these churches. The Polish National Catholic Church of the USA and Canada, which joined and left the Union of Utrecht in the 20th century, and the Polish Catholic Church in Poland, basically have the same episcopal-synodal structure.

Smaller Old Catholic communities in France, Sweden and Italy have their own priests but cooperate with neighboring countries that have a bishop. In all churches of the Old Catholic communion, clerical celibacy ceased to be an obligation. Recently, women have been admitted to the diaconate and most recently to the priesthood, which has led to a conflict and breaking off of communion by the North American Old Catholic churches. All the old Vincentian arguments against innovation figure again here, which shows, if anything, that his concept of Catholic tradition is today unhelpful to find new solutions to old problems.

Modern studies of the Commission on Faith and Order called “Councils, conciliarity and a genuinely universal Council” and “Councils and the Ecumenical Movement”, coined the concept of “conciliarity” and drew attention to the process of reception of a council by subsequent councils and distinguish between different stages of that process before, during and after the conciliar event. Thus, this process of reception is of supreme ecclesial importance, as it formally receives a council as ecumenical, or rejects it as such. But only the successive acceptance of councils makes them unquestionably ecumenical.

What are the criteria to determine catholicity then? If we go back to Vincent of Lérins, the fifth century church father, we find it expressed in a succinct way. The truth of the catholic faith, he says, is identified by the authority of Scripture and Tradition. Here the famous Vincentian “canon” appears: “...in the Catholic Church... all possible care should be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all”; because different heretics explain Scripture differently, universality, antiquity and consent are three further rules that are needed. Universal is the one faith that is confessed throughout the world; antiquity is a criterion which current ecumenical discussion would call apostolicity; consent must be established through consultation and collation of “the opinions of the early church”.

However, there are three problems connected with this argument. First, the criteria of universality, assumes that there once was an undivided, united Church. Nowadays church-historians show us how complex and how “divided” the reality of the early church was. Secondly, the criteria of antiquity as used by Vincent are problematic too because it can only recognize the negative aspects of innovation and renewal. Moreover the concept of “renewal” in Vincent’s work is totally different from this in modern theology.

At the third place there are the criteria of consent. This requires a body of “acknowledged and approved authorities” before it can be applied and it presupposes the possibility of recognizing, explaining and confessing the one faith in different times and places. This in itself implies consent on form and content of orthodoxy and heresy.

Modern studies of the history of dogma however show that this early consent is due to a specific concept of orthodoxy and heresy, which is more or less the opposite of the present method of convergence. The early Church reached its consensus and unity always on the basis of excluding extreme opinions; present day convergence falls short of consensus but keeps the debate going until the sharp edges of everyone’s own formulation have been bent towards that of the others. Thus the prime ecumenical question is no longer: how can our doctrinal statement be formulated as sharp and precise as possible, with the exclusion of all other alternative formulations, but: how can we avoid condemning other people’s statements all over again when we continue to disagree? And here much depends on listening carefully to each other, for: how do we know the same

thing is not being expressed in different words and different things are expressed in the same words? But this only goes when we do not use a hermeneutics of suspicion (“The other person is trying to trick us with words”) but a hermeneutics of trust (“The other person is helping us to find the right words”).

The Ideal of the Early and Undivided Church

Thus linguistically, the name “Old Catholic” refers to a movement within the Church (issuing from the parting of the ways in 1870, opposing the dogma of papal infallibility), a group of churches (the different Old Catholic churches as they exist today) or indeed one of these churches on its own. All three unite around the conviction that the Roman Catholic Church has departed from the old and trusted ways of the Catholic Church. However, since the beginning of this debate the appreciation of renewal in doctrine has changed drastically in the Catholic Church. Vincent, the propugnator of the model of the early, undivided Church quotes an enigmatic phrase by Pope Stephen I (c. 254 A.D.), “*Nihil novandum nisi quod traditum est*,” “Nothing should be renewed except what has been handed down”; this shows the ambiguity or preliminary of the Church between Pentecost and the eschaton. Old Catholic history is full of eschatological expectations: of the early, undivided Church being realized today, of a genuinely conciliar pope, of a harmonious decision making of local Churches. The different national Old Catholic Churches regard themselves as emergent dioceses, with the exception of the archdiocese of Utrecht and the diocese of Haarlem, which go back to the late medieval organization of the hierarchy in the Netherlands. With this largely provisional structure there can be great openness for the idea that such terms as apostolicity concern future tasks and hopes rather than facts of the past. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ideals of the ecumenical movement were received with such enthusiasm in the OCC. This kindred spirit may well have contributed not a little to the benevolence with which Faith and Order projects were and are supported by the OCC, such as Apostolic Faith Today (1985) and Confessing the One Faith (1991), The Nature and Purpose of the Church (1998) and, of course, the Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982), which aroused great interest among the member churches of the WCC.

A Way to Church Unity.

The fundamentals for Church unity and restoration of communion are for the Old Catholics the Church which has not fallen apart in confessional denominations. In short, ‘the Church of the first ten centuries with her structures to maintain unity and communion’. In that sense the maxim of St. Vincent of Lérins remains a guiding principle. This principle does not imply the imitation of the early church or to return to historical forms that are seen as unchangeable. There is a preference for the characteristic form of life of the undivided Church seen as a point of reference to uphold the communion and the Church-unity. That form of life encompasses special structures to serve the Church community such as the Eucharist and the Episcopal Ministry, functioning on different synodal and conciliar levels to uphold Church unity. It also involves the results of the

synodal processes, as the decisions of faith and the theological basic assumptions especially the Trinitarian and Christological dogmata's and the canon of the Holy Bible. This does not mean the pure conservation of invariable quantities, but rather the way in which the early Church succeeded in maintaining unity in multiformity and in handing over the tradition of faith. On this foundation the restoration of Church communion who in due course was split up in denominations should be possible.
