

## Thoughts about systematic theology in Old Catholic perspective

*Revd Dr Mattijs Ploeger,*

*Principal and Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Old Catholic Seminary, Utrecht University  
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### 1. 'Systematic' theology

The word 'systematic' in 'systematic theology' refers to its method (methodology). In theology, you can work for example with literary, historical and empirical methods. The systematic method implies a 'reasonable' and coherent presentation of, and reflection on, the Christian faith.

Systematic theology can be subdivided into three subjects. The core business of a Christian systematic theology is *dogmatics*. Dogmatics aims at a coherent presentation of the Christian faith. But before you can start with dogmatics, there are 'first questions' to be asked. This is done by the discipline called *fundamental theology* (or, *prolegomena*). And after the dogmatic presentation of the faith, there are consequences for the Christian life to be considered. This is done by *Christian ethics* (or, *theological ethics*).

### 2. Dogmatics

I start with dogmatics, because this is the best known area of systematic theology. Dogmatics is a coherent presentation of the Christian faith. Dogmatics is about the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the church, the sacrament, etcetera.

The word 'dogmatics' may ring a negative bell. Dogmatic seems to be a synonym for dull, unimaginative, or even strict. One Dutch dogmatist once wrote: Nowadays the word 'dogmatics' seem to refer to 'authoritarian statements, forced upon people, without a relation to reality'.<sup>1</sup> I will come back to this somewhat hilarious definition. Nevertheless, in theological jargon, the word 'dogmatics' has a neutral meaning: a presentation of the Christian faith.

#### 2.1. Scripture and the Early Church

In the Old Catholic tradition, dogmatists mainly work on the basis of the Bible and church history. You could nearly say that Old Catholic dogmatics is a kind of 'applied history of dogma'. An Old Catholic theologian does not theologize or philosophize from any starting point, but tries to stay close to the sources of Scripture and the tradition of the Early Church.

The two great twentieth-century Old Catholic dogmatic theologians, Dutch Archbishop Andreas Rinkel and Swiss Bishop Urs Küry, describe the task of an Old Catholic theologian as follows. For Rinkel, the Old Catholic theologian must base himself upon Scripture and upon the witness of the church through the centuries, but in a mutually corrective relationship with the voices of ancient and new, Eastern and Western, Roman and Protestant theologians. Out of this dialectic springs forth the Old Catholic theologian's own vision. For Rinkel, dogma is 'static', but dogmatics is 'always changing, in a process of growing, building up itself according to the need of the times'.<sup>2</sup> Küry gives the Old Catholic theologian a similar task. Dogmatic decisions of the Early Church have to be re-thought, so that new generations

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<sup>1</sup> H. BERKHOF, *Christelijk geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer*, Nijkerk 1979<sup>4</sup>, 33.

<sup>2</sup> A. RINKEL, 'Dogmatische theologie', stencilled edition 1956, vol. I, 8, 11.

can experience them. Later dogmatic statements have to be checked against the basic decisions of the Early Church.<sup>3</sup>

Rinkel and Kury thus present three starting points for Old Catholic dogmatics. Firstly, the firm basis of *Scripture and the Early Church*. Secondly, the *hermeneutic* way of dealing with these sources. The faith has to be made alive in every generation. Dogmatics is not a repetition of statements, but the re-thinking anew of the faith in new contexts. Thirdly, the *ecumenical* character of Old Catholic theology. Old Catholic dogmatics does not operate in isolation, but in the midst of the other churches it looks for a theology that is both rooted in tradition and speaking to contemporary people.

## 2.2. *Orthodox, not liberal*

But why should we do dogmatics in a church that is sometimes described as ‘non-dogmatic’?<sup>4</sup> Isn’t it true that ‘anything goes’ in the Old Catholic church? To study dogmatics seems to be redundant in such a church...

Nevertheless, everyone who has attended an Old Catholic liturgy knows that the Old Catholic church is not non-dogmatic or ‘liberal’ in its faith. The dogma’s, the foundations of the doctrine of the faith, definitely play a role in our church. But *in what way* do they play their role? It is my hypothesis, that Old Catholic theology is not a ‘liberal’ but an ‘orthodox’ type of theology, and that the somewhat latitudinarian character of the Old Catholic church not originates from a liberal theology, but from a hermeneutical approach to the orthodox faith. Although it may sound somewhat difficult, I think this is the only real explanation for the fact that the present-day Old Catholic Church is at it is.

With ‘liberal’ theology I mean the school of Christian theology that presupposes that the classical biblical and early Christian language and concepts of faith have become irredeemably irrelevant to contemporary people and that we should no longer try to make them relevant. All aspects of doctrine which are redundant and only work as a negative burden should be discarded.<sup>5</sup>

Such an openness in theology should be welcomed, but the method should be questioned. Because methodically this type of liberal theology takes for granted the contemporary way of life and the contemporary concepts of reality. Each aspect of the Christian tradition is judged by the question whether modern people find it still conceivable and relevant. This method may seem pastoral and it may seem neutral, but in reality this method surrenders to the momentary ‘status quo’: the view of the moment, on subjects like humanity, science and reality. This type of liberal theology adapts the Christian tradition to the philosophical, psychological and economic situation of the moment. In the eighteenth century it did so by working rationally, in the nineteenth century it did so by stressing religiosity and feeling, and in the twentieth century it did so by, for example, an accommodation to the theory that reality can be seen as a language act and that all religious traditions are metaphoric.<sup>6</sup>

An ‘orthodox’ approach to theology starts at the other end. Scripture and tradition have, of course, always been contextual, but never coincided with and accommodated to the thoughts of their time. Although Christians are always people of their time and place, they are also a ‘stranger’ and ‘sojourner’ in their time and culture. Not by a strict clinging to old

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<sup>3</sup> URS KÜRY, *Die altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, ihre Lehre, ihr Anliegen* (Die Kirchen der Welt 3), Stuttgart 1966, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the empirical research in JORIS VERCAMMEN, *Identiteit in beraad. Theorie en praktijk van het parochieel identiteitsberaad in vier oud-katholieke parochies* (Studies over kerkopbouwkunde 6), Baarn 1997, 260.

<sup>5</sup> In the Dutch context, cf. e.g. H.M. KUITERT, *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof. Een herziening*, Baarn 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. RICK BENJAMINS, *Een en ander. De traditie van de moderne theologie*, Kampen 2008.

traditions, but because their real character still lies in the future. It is not yet revealed what we shall be, but when it will be revealed, we (humanity and creation) will appear to be Christlike.

The prototype of humanity is Jesus Christ. We can call that a religious conviction, to be restricted to the area of private life behind our front door. We can compare its relevance to other private things, such as the food we like best or the sports we prefer. But then we have misunderstood the Christian faith and made it powerless and harmless. The Christian faith is not a private conviction in the soft sense of the word. The Christian faith is a vision of the world, God, humanity. The Christian faith is an *identity*. That Christ is the prototype of humanity is not a metaphor in the sense of a nice comparison, it is an ontological reality. The world was created by him and towards him and with him in view.<sup>7</sup>

The world as it really is, is being revealed in Scripture and tradition and is being made tangible in the liturgy. In the liturgy we, humans, are called to be what we are: people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Spirit. In the liturgy creation is celebrated as it is: a doxological community, that finds its highest calling in praising the Creator. We are too much used to see the liturgy as a somewhat boring ritual. We have lost the theological, ontological meaning of the liturgy. That secular outsiders view the liturgy as such, is understandable. But we as baptised community should know better. Liturgy is the celebration of the true reality.

We do not believe in a feeling, or in an ancient tradition that must be adapted to the present. We believe, like anyone else, in *reality*. But in our contemporary society we are not one in our interpretation of reality. In Christian perspective, we live in a world that comes forth from God and will return to God. We are people created as Adam and meant to become like the new Adam (Christ).

### 2.3. *Hermeneutic, not fundamentalist*

Thus, the Old Catholic Church is orthodox. But why, then, does it look so liberal? Because it approaches the orthodox faith in a hermeneutic way. Hermeneutics is the art of translating. Not accommodating and adapting, but translating, re-telling. Classical doctrines are not adapted to modern times, but the classical doctrines are proclaimed in and for this time.

The opposite of a hermeneutical approach is a fundamentalist one. Fundamentalism is a 'modern' invention. Fundamentalism treats the classical doctrines in the manner of rationalism. That is why it puts creationism and the theory of evolution over against each other. Or that is why it puts so-called literary biblical passages over against a contemporary way of living a homosexual life. Fundamentalism is modern rationalism disguised as quasi-biblical and quasi-traditional words and ideas. This way of 'literal' Bible reading is not orthodox and has never (and certainly not exclusively) been applied in the Christian tradition before the modern era.<sup>8</sup>

Old Catholic theology is not liberal but orthodox and at the same time not fundamentalist but hermeneutic. It is important to be hermeneutic in such a way, that hermeneutics is not the back door through which we at last still end up in liberal theology. An example. Theologizing about the ordination of women, you can lay the emphasis on societal changes or a changed interpretation of the ordained ministry. I think the Old Catholic way of theologizing would rather explain the ordination of women from within the context of classical theology. To me, the soundest explanation starts from the fact that the incarnation did not imply God becoming 'male' but 'human', and from the fact that Christ-likeness is sacramentally conveyed by baptism and chrismation to both men and women. If the most fundamental Christ-likeness, the *soteriological* meaning of the incarnation does not limit itself to men, how could ordination to

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kolossenzen 1,16.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. ERIK BORGMAN, *Wortelen in vaste grond. Een cultuurtheologisch essay*, Zoetermeer 2009, 55.

the ministry within this soteriological reality (the church) be confined to men?<sup>9</sup> The Christian tradition is rich and multi-faceted enough to be interpreted creatively in and for the present time. This creative re-telling (hermeneutics) of the classical faith (orthodoxy) is the relevance and challenge of doing Old Catholic theology.

#### 2.4. Does an 'Old Catholic theology' exist?

But let us step back for a moment and ask ourselves whether an 'Old Catholic theology' actually exists. Sometimes it is said that there is no special Old Catholic *theology*, only an Old Catholic *theological approach*.<sup>10</sup> What is meant by such a statement is that there is not a specifically Old Catholic contents of dogmatics. God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church and the sacraments are not denominationally confined to Old Catholicism. And Old Catholics are not the only ones who want to root their faith in Scripture and the Early Church. What is Old Catholic is not the doctrine itself, but the approach to doctrine. As said above: the doctrine is orthodox, but the approach is hermeneutic. The Old Catholic element is in the hermeneutic translation and the synodical embedding. Old Catholic churches have a doctrine, but it is not imposed top-down, rather is it celebrated, experienced and discussed in ('synodical') communion with one another.

It is interesting that the same question plays a role in Anglican theology. Paul Avis calls it the 'no special doctrines' theory: the theory that the Anglican churches don't have a specific doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Avis says: Of course this is true up to a certain degree. (As it is in Old Catholic theology.) Namely, in so far as Anglican (and Old Catholic) theology does not have any other basis than Scripture and the doctrinal basis decisions of the Early Church regarding the Trinity and christology. The Anglican church (like the Old Catholic church) does not want to be anything else than 'just' the Christian church. But, Avis continues, this 'no special doctrines' theory is not correct, if only for the fact that there simply *is* such a thing as an Anglican church. If the Anglican church would really have no particular theological teaching of its own, the existence of this church could only be explained out of sin against the unity of the church or out of the laziness of retaining a separate church life. Because there is an Anglican church, there must be an Anglican theology. For Avis, the specifically Anglican aspect of theology is of an *ecclesiological* nature, and within ecclesiology it is primarily the question of how *authority* is perceived and exercised. In Avis's description, authority is in the Anglican context always characterized by 'checks and balances': Scripture, tradition and reason; Catholic and Reformed; bishop and synod; unity of faith and liturgy but at the same time local contextuality and inculturation; ecumenical openness and yet an unmistakably recognizable Anglican character.

Avis's view on the specific character of Anglican church and theology applies to Old Catholic church and theology as well. Some of us claim a 'no special doctrines' theory, but our church must (like the Anglican church) derive its *raison d'être* from a certain 'proprium'. This specific Old Catholic aspect of theology is (like in Anglican theology) of an ecclesiological nature and is related to the question of authority. The Bishop of Rome has a

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. HERWIG ALDENHOVEN, 'Der Vorsitz bei der Eucharistie im Kontext der Bildtheologie. Fragen zur ekklesialen Christusrepräsentation durch das Priestertum', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 88 (1998), 301-311.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. URS VON ARX, 'Bilanz und Perspektiven. 100 Jahre Alt-Katholisches Seminar der Universität Bonn', *Christen heute. Zeitschrift der Alt-Katholiken für Christen heute* 47 (2003), 30-31; JAN VISSER, 'Vom Mäntelchen und dem Wind. Zur Frage einer altkatholischen Theologie', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 95 (2005), 73-94.

<sup>11</sup> PAUL AVIS, *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology*, London 2007, 39-57. The term 'no special doctrines' is derived from the Anglican theologian and bishop Stephen Sykes, whose view is endorsed by Avis (vgl. AVIS, *The Identity of Anglicanism*, 40).

primate of honour but no worldwide jurisdiction; bishop and synod; unity of faith and liturgy but openness towards contemporary ways of living and thinking.

The question ‘Does an Old Catholic theology exist’ can be answered negatively when the question is about the fundamental articles of faith, related to Scripture and the ancient creeds. But when the question is taken wider, we have to admit: Yes, there is an Old Catholic theological approach, which starts at matters of ecclesiology and authority, but which has an effect on other theological matters too, because doctrine is connected to life. A particular theological school or approach is not only characterized by its sources, but also by the way it uses those sources (see 2.3 above).

### *2.5. Is there an Old Catholic theological ‘common ground’?*

There is yet another way in which the existence of an Old Catholic theology can be questioned. That is the rather empirical level. In the last few decennia there has appeared an increasing diversity (including theological diversity) within the Old Catholic church. Is there still a theological method and contents which is recognized by a significant part of the Old Catholic church? In my opinion, the search for such a ‘common ground’ increases over the last few years. There is no want for dogmatic limitations as such, but there is a need for theological structure, interpretation, direction. It would be a service to Old Catholic church and theology if we could rediscover a common ground, a ‘middle’, from which the legitimate diversity can receive its coherence.

## **3. Fundamental theology**

Prior to dogmatics, there is an area of systematic theology that deals with ‘first questions’. How can we speak about God at all? What do we mean by faith? Such questions have to be tackled before you can talk about Christian doctrine in the context of contemporary society. In the Catholic tradition this subject is called ‘fundamental theology’, while the Protestant name is ‘prolegomena’: those things that should be said first.

### *3.1. No natural theology but theology of creation*

The tricky thing about fundamental theology is that you cannot do it without finding yourself in the middle of dogmatics. The suggestion that you could design a general philosophy which would lead you to the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, is regarded by most Old Catholic theologians as an illusion. Rinkel: ‘One should never forget that in fundamental theology one does not find oneself in a separate building, but already on the fundament of the dogmatic building, which is not erected upon reason, but upon the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ already being its corner stone’.<sup>12</sup>

There are schools, for example in Roman Catholic theology, which presume that there is a fundamental theology in the sense of a kind of philosophy that leads towards Christian theology. In its old-fashioned, neo-scholastic form this school of thought presents itself as a kind of philosophy of nature, leading in a seemingly logical way towards the concept of God that is then ‘filled’ with contents by dogmatics. In more modern form, this view presents itself as an anthropology seemingly leading to dogmatics: the searching human being becomes the prototype of the Christian faithful.

I rather follow the mainstream of Old Catholic theology, that is sceptical to such a general philosophy, or general anthropology, which assumes to be leading up to Christian

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<sup>12</sup> RINKEL, ‘Dogmatische theologie’, vol. I, 9-10.

theology. I think that such a philosophy and such an anthropology are already Christian from the start and do not only become Christian when the border between fundamental theology and dogmatics is passed.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing wrong with ‘natural theology’, as long as one realizes that it is about ‘theology of creation’. And there is nothing wrong with a start in anthropology, as long as one realizes that it is already a *Christian* view on humanity, created in the image of God and destined for growing into the likeness of Christ.

### 3.2. A Christian interpretation of reality

At this point I take up the hilarious saying (see the start of chapter 2 above) about dogmatics as ‘authoritarian statements, forced upon people, without a relation to reality’. We have already talked about the authority aspect (see 2.4). Now I want to say something about the assumption that dogmatics has no relationship to ‘reality’. It belongs to the task of fundamental theology to ask the painful question, whether theology is really about anything at all. Or has theology become a jargon for insiders and the Christian faith an illusion for the last group clinging to it?

Different theological schools give different answers to that question. There are theologians who interpret the whole contents of the faith as symbolic, as a literary product. In this respect it is interesting to find theology in bookshops under the heading ‘non-fiction’. A whole school of theological thought thinks differently! It regards the Christian faith as akin to literature, poetry, the arts. And that is called ‘fiction’ in the bookshops. Perhaps it is right, after centuries of rather dull statements and ‘truths’, to rediscover faith as the ultimate form of literature, poetry, art. The ancient adage that the liturgy informs the contents of the faith (*lex orandi lex credendi*) points in the same direction. Celebrating, singing, practicing rituals, we are engaged in the act of believing.

I would prefer to say it differently, though. I would not say that dogmas do not relate to ‘reality’, but rather that they unveil true reality for us. I would not say that during the liturgy we temporarily retire from ‘reality’, but rather that the liturgy leads us into reality as it really is. I would not say that the Christian faith is only ‘symbolic’, but that those things which our society and culture takes for granted (true, objective, neutral) are in reality deeply manipulated and serving aims that we often do not perceive and cannot direct. Faith opens our eyes for true reality: the world as seen through God’s eyes, the world critically compared to God’s intentions.

Old Catholic theologians have not engaged very much with the fundamental theological part of systematic theology. We should do that a bit more. Because as churches, as Christians, we cannot permit ourselves to let our visions be put away outside reality. Christian theology is a way of describing reality. Long ago there has been introduced a distinction between philosophy and theology. But as Christians we cannot agree with this distinction. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy was the theology of Mount Olympus and of the Roman Empire. Doing systematic theology is doing philosophy: developing a vision of reality, of the world and all that has to do with it.<sup>14</sup>

## 4. Theological ethics

The third area of systematic theology is theological ethics (moral theology, Christian ethics). I use the term ‘theological ethics’ to indicate that it is a theological, reflective discipline, that thinks systematically about Christian living. If fundamental theology can be said to prepare

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. ROBERT W. JENSON, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God*, Oxford etc. 1997, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. JENSON, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 9-10.

the way for dogmatics, theological ethics can be said to draw the consequences from dogmatics.

#### 4.1. *Old Catholic reticence towards moral theology*

Old Catholics seem afraid of moral theology. In Rinkel's dogmatics the fundamental theological 'first questions' do appear, but the ethical 'consequences' do not. The same applies to Küry's handbook. Also in more recent descriptions of Old Catholic faith, questions of personal or social moral behaviour do not appear.<sup>15</sup> For Old Catholics, everything seems to be about history, doctrine, liturgy, church structures and ecumenism. But that the faith has its effects on our daily do's and don'ts, is assumed but not reflected upon. It seems as if we have more to say about God's three persons and Christ's two natures than about our calling as humans personally and in society...

However, this lack of theological ethics is not only a mistake or a failure. For many Old Catholics there is an important motive behind it: the Old Catholic emphasis on personal responsibility. This emphasis may be traced back to the Jansenist emphasis on the personal intention, true repentance, a faith learned (biblically/theologically informed) and lived (ethically). But the remarkable fact should be noticed, that the emphasis on personal responsibility lead the Jansenists to an amount of strictness and austerity, whereas it has lead contemporary Old Catholics to a nearly limitless 'individual freedom'.

#### 4.2. *Theological ethics as consequence of theological principles*

I doubt whether this barely hidden individualism and lack of commitment is consistent with the most important notions of Old Catholic theology, such as *communio* theology. The basic vision of the Old Catholic church takes communion/community as its starting point: trinitarian, ecclesial and eucharistic communion.<sup>16</sup> It would be consistent with this, also to take communion as a leading concept for the 'theology of practice'. Communion as a context in which the otherness of every person takes its legitimate place. Communion is not the same as collective. A collective consists of 'individuals', who can easily live separated from each other. Communion consists of 'persons', related to each other through the dynamics of belonging together and being different persons.<sup>17</sup>

It is understandable that Old Catholics have reservations with moral theology. It is a witness to their love of the church that they know as loving, merciful, welcoming and not restricting. But as it comes to theological ethics we do not necessarily have to think about a system of rules that primarily apply to the bedroom. In a church that bases itself upon a *communio* theology, theological ethics will probably be more concerned with our responsibility in society (and *as* society) than with micro-ethics.

On the other hand, we should not be surprised, if our faith would sometimes have a consequence that we experience as unsettling or unwelcome. Trying to be biblical and patristic will have this consequence – being critical towards everything that is taken for granted by the *status quo* of the moment, and also the *status quo* of our own life. Like fundamental theology, which asks questions about the leading concepts of reality, theological

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. D.J. SCHOON, *De Oud-Katholieke Kerk* (Serie Wegwijs), Kampen 1999; ANGELA BERLIS E.A., *De Oud-Katholieke Kerk van Nederland. Leer en leven*, Zoetermeer 2000. Critical about this shortcoming: JAN VISSER, 'De geloofsleer', in: Berlis e.a., *De Oud-Katholieke Kerk*, 163-191, hier: 189-190.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. URS VON ARX, MAJA WEYERMANN (red.), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen* (Beiheft zu IKZ 91), Bern 2001, 12-15.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. JOHN D. ZIZIOLAS, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, edited by Paul McPartlan, London/New York 2006.

ethics asks questions about leading concepts of personal and societal behaviour, for example regarding our consumerist attitudes and economic structures.

Franz Segbers, for example, rethinks social-ethical questions from the perspective of Old Catholic ecclesiological concepts.<sup>18</sup> In my dissertation about eucharistic ecclesiology I have tried to draw some lines towards 'eucharistic ethics' and a 'doxological attitude'.<sup>19</sup> Our way of living together is already contained within the eucharist, and a personal attitude towards life, marked by gratitude and joy, is already contained within the thanksgiving that is central to the liturgy. Theological ethics is the subject that tries to make these lines of thought tangible.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. FRANZ SEGBERS, 'Diakonische Spiritualität und die Liebe zur Gerechtigkeit in Zeiten des Marktes', in: Angela Berlis, Matthias Ring (red.), *Im Himmel Anker werfen. Vermutungen über Kirche in der Zukunft. Festschrift für Bischof Joachim Vobbe*, Bonn 2007, 25-39; FRANZ SEGBERS, 'A Transformative Eucharistic Vision for the Entire Oikoumene', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9 (2009), 138-150.

<sup>19</sup> MATTIJS PLOEGER, *Celebrating Church: Ecumenical Contributions to a Liturgical Ecclesiology*, Groningen/Tilburg 2008.