



BRILL

Exchange 37 (2008) 466-477

EXCHANGE

www.brill.nl/exch

An Old Catholic Response to 'The Local and Universal Dimensions of the Church'*

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Abstract

This paper responds from an Old Catholic perspective to the report 'The Local and Universal Dimensions of the Church.' Specifically, it raises questions about the composition of the dialogue that produced the report and the potential of a Eucharistic ecclesiology for ecumenical rapprochement, and it offers further reflections on catholicity and apostolicity, as well as the episcopal ministry in a local and supra-local context from an Old Catholic point of view.

Keywords

Old Catholicism, Eucharistic ecclesiology, Catholicity, apostolicity, local church, Anglicanism, Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism, ecumenism

1. Introduction

Ecclesiology is at the heart of contemporary ecumenical dialogue and 'The Local and Universal Dimensions of the Church' (LUDC) is a welcome contribution to this field. This is the case especially because it seeks not only to overcome the "competition" between the local church and universal church as ecclesiological "poles," but also presents the "intermediate level" of communion as a place between grassroots ecumenism and ecumenism at the level of world Christian communities with much potential for ecumenism.¹

This contribution responds LUDC from an Old Catholic perspective and draws on a selection of the most comprehensive statements of Old Catholic

* The author is grateful to the Rev. Dr. Mattijs Ploeger, Egmond aan Zee (NL), for his critical observations on an earlier draft of this response and to Ms. Patricia Darlington, cand. med. for proofreading this paper.

¹ Cf. LUDC, § 55.

ecclesiological self-understanding, especially those originating at an “intermediate” or “supralocal” level. The response will follow the outline of LUDC.

2. The Ecumenical Context

Attempts to build bridges between the Churches that have grown apart since the Catholic and Protestant Reformations should be welcomed. However, from an Old Catholic perspective, attention should be drawn to the unusual composition and nomenclature of the “Reformation-Catholic Dialogue Commission.”

First, this dialogue took place with unusual partners for Old Catholics, given their historical and theological preference for Churches that are more easily recognized as sharing the same faith of the early Church, i.e. the Anglican and Orthodox Churches.² Therefore, the question must be asked whether it would not have been possible to pay at least more attention to the Anglican and Orthodox and their way of dealing with the question of the local and universal dimensions of the Church.

A second point is the nomenclature used for the commission, namely “Reformation-Catholic Dialogue Commission”: would not the Orthodox and Anglicans, whose presence in the Netherlands is on the increase, fit in under the term “Catholic” as well? As indicated, this view has considerable pedigree in Old Catholic ecumenism.

3. Eucharistic Ecclesiology and the Local and the Universal Church

LUDC is grounded in what could be called a “liturgical ecclesiology.” This becomes apparent in the document’s focus on the ministry as it functions in all traditions considered, and through its focus on the ministry of Word and Sacrament in order to develop its earlier insights when analyzing the (ordained) ministry³ between the local and universal dimensions of the Church (LUDC, § 15-34).

² Cf. Internationale Altkatholische Bischofskonferenz, ‘Communiqué der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK 1994),’ *IKZ* 84 (1994), 250-253 / Internationale Altkatholische Bischofskonferenz, ‘Communique of the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference (IBC) 1993,’ *IKZ* 84 (1994), 244-249.

³ It seems to be preferable to speak of one ministry in multiple forms as the preamble to the IBC statute does consistently; this is also the preferred way of the 1982 Lima-report, to which LUDC refers at this point. LUDC, § 26, speaks of a threefold pattern of ministries, however.

From an Old Catholic perspective, such an approach should be welcomed. At the same time, the question may be asked whether it would not have been helpful precisely for LUDC's aim to transcend the opposition of ecclesiological models that take their point of departure in the local church or in the universal church, to go one step further and to embrace an expressly Eucharistic ecclesiology.⁴ Precisely in the context of the question of Old Catholic self-understanding as local churches oriented towards communion with other Churches, the "Eucharistic model" has become the Old Catholic model of choice and is shared by both Anglicans and Orthodox.⁵ Most comprehensively, this view was stated in the ecclesiological preamble to the 2001 Statute of the (Old Catholic) International Bishops' Conference (IBC):⁶

(...) [E]ach fellowship and communion of people, which by the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and by the outpouring and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit is constituted as a unity in a given place around a bishop with the Eucharist as its center, is a complete church that carries out its tasks autonomously in that given place. Each local church living the common faith and having its indispensable synodal structures, uniting the ordained ministry and the laity, which bring to bear her communion and unity, is a representation of the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church", as confessed by the ecumenical creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381). (IBC Statute, 3.1)

Recognizing the Eucharistic nature of the Church more explicitly, might serve as a basis for strengthening an emphasis that is rightly found in LUDC: that both the ordained ministry and the sacraments are rooted in the local Church but are directed towards the universal Church (LUDC, § 19, 34).

⁴ This option does not seem to have been considered in the discussions producing LUDC, neither of the two volumes of essays produced by the consultation contains a consideration of Eucharistic ecclesiology. Cf. Martien E. Brinkman/Henk Witte (eds.), *From Roots to Fruits. Protestants and Catholics Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1998), and Leo J. Koffeman/Henk Witte (eds.), *Of All Times and of All Places. Protestants and Catholics on the Church Local and Universal*, IIMO Research Publications 56, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001.

⁵ Cf. esp.: Mattijs Ploeger, *Celebrating Church: Ecumenical Contributions to a Liturgical Ecclesiology*, Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy 7, Groningen/Tilburg: Liturgisch Instituut, 2008, 25-71 (Orthodox), 161-233 (Old Catholic), 235-316 (Anglican), but see also his chapters on Roman Catholic (73-160) and Protestant (317-387) contributions.

⁶ Cf. Urs von Arx/Maja Weyermann (eds.), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen Beiheft IKZ 91* (2001).

4. Catholicity

LUDC reflects on “Catholicity as gift and assignment” under the title of “The universal dimension of the Church.” (LUDC, § 35ff.) The catholicity of the Church is naturally related to the question of the local and universal dimensions of the Church, given the fact that “catholic” itself also means “universal”. LUDC states that the catholicity of the Church “is revealed” in both the local and the universal dimensions of the Church (LUDC, § 35). The document then focuses on the contextuality of “catholicity” both in its local (LUDC, § 37-38) and universal dimensions (§ 39-41, cf. also § 44-53). What LUDC does not mention, however, is what “catholicity” means beyond being Church in a contextual and simultaneously local and universal way. In other words, LUDC focuses more strongly on the quantitative than on the qualitative aspects of catholicity. This particular focus does not make it clear why the catholicity of Churches brings them together at all. If, theological agreement permitting, a hypothetical Old Catholic addendum were to be included here, it might be similar to the following section from the IBC Statute, which gives a clearer idea of the qualitative aspect of catholicity:

Each of them (sc. the Churches of the Union of Utrecht, *pbs*) is “catholic” because on the one hand, it participates in the whole reality of salvation and truth that comprises God and humans, heaven and earth and finds therein its unity, and because on the other hand, it is linked in unity and communion with other local churches, in which it recognizes its own essence. Thus the catholicity of each local church becomes manifest in the unity and communion with other local churches perceived in faith as being identical in their foundation in the redemptive work of the Triune God. The unity and communion of local churches in their supra-diocesan link — i.e., usually in national churches, ecclesiastical provinces, patriarchates — is a representation of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” as well — however, not as a kind of super-diocese of supra-regional or even universal dimensions, but as a communion of episcopally and synodally organized local churches. It is in this perspective that the relationship between autonomy of the local church (as to the self-government in the broadest sense) and supra-local obligation of each local church (as to the communion of local churches) should be viewed. (IBC Statute, 3.2.).

These observations also relate to the very first section of LUDC (LUDC, § 1), where much emphasis is placed on confessing the “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” and on the four *notae ecclesiae* as the basis of the shared beliefs about the Church. LUDC maintains that this belief is professed in worship services, that its meaning is discerned in catechesis, and that it is put into practice through diaconal service. These three aspects of the Church’s life also

appear in section 3.3. of the 2001 IBC Statute as “leitourgia,” “martyria,” and “diakonia”. However, there they are not so much placed in the context of doing something with a belief (celebrating or professing it) or on the basis of a belief (e.g. social action), but as part of the ongoing calling, authorization and sanctification of the faithful by the Spirit as members of the Body of Christ:

Each local church is the Body of Christ in which the members, baptized and confirmed in the name of the Holy Trinity and united in the Eucharist, are called, authorized, and sanctified by the various gifts of the Holy Spirit to live a multifaceted common life in martyrria, leitourgia, and diakonia. In communion with the other local churches they are the people of that God who has elected Israel to be a sign of salvation and has opened up the blessing promised to Abraham to all peoples in the power of the Gospel. Being the manifestation of the renewal of creation that has its origin in Jesus Christ, it is on the way to its fulfillment which all its members have to go in repentance and hope. (IBC Statute, 2001)

Thus, the Old Catholic statement puts somewhat more emphasis on the work of the Spirit than LUDC does at this place, but more importantly this quotation draws the attention to the fact that while LUDC stands in the service of the unity of the Church and reflects explicitly on its catholicity and apostolicity (cf. *infra*), the theme of ‘holiness’ does not appear as a separate heading. Therefore, only three out of the four marks of the Church receive due treatment.

5. Apostolicity

The general statement about what apostolicity entails, namely that “in order to be catholic the Church must be apostolic, that is to say: faithful to its apostolic origin” (LUDC, § 42), is fully to the point. However, in its explanation of how the various traditions understand remaining in the apostolic faith, LUDC overstates the Old Catholic position somewhat, by writing that

The Roman Catholic, Old Catholic and other churches with an episcopal structure firmly believe that the transmission of ministry is connected first and foremost with the office and authority of the bishop: it is the bishop who, in communion with the other bishops (and, Roman Catholics add, with the bishop of Rome) safeguards faithfulness to the faith of the apostles. (LUDC, § 43)

One ecumenically relevant nuance should be made here. Even though the notion that remaining in apostolic succession “includes preeminently the

passing on of the ordained ministry by prayer and the laying-on of hands" (IBC Statute, 3.4.) belongs to Old Catholic ecclesiology, the claim that the bishop "*safeguards* faithfulness to the faith of the apostles" (LUDC, § 43) appears not in this way in recent representative Old Catholic documents. The 2001 IBC Statute (4.1-4.2) only mentions that the ministry of bishops includes keeping the church in the faith, through the exercise of their personal and collegial *episkope*. The pertinent (and representative) Orthodox-Old Catholic agreed statement⁷ goes further, but not as far as LUDC goes. First, referring to the function that bishops fulfill in the Church's remaining in the apostolic tradition and the apostolic truth (Orthodox — Old Catholic agreed statement III/1), the German text calls the episcopate in apostolic succession a "Bürgerschaft" for remaining in the truth, the English translation uses the weaker "pledge," only the French translation uses the word "garante," but qualifies this by adding "en quelque sort" (Von Arx [ed.], *Koinonia*, 131). Thus, even though it is indeed the case in Old Catholic ecclesiology that it belongs to the ministry of the bishop to keep his or her church in the apostolic faith and truth, a bishop is only safeguarding this in a qualified sense.

While one cannot expect all ecumenical documents to agree with the letter of representative expressions of Old Catholic theology, it is important to present the Old Catholic theology of the episcopate accurately, not least because of the discussion about the personal episcopate as a possible ecclesiological option amongst non-episcopal protestant churches (such as those addressed by LUDC).

Similarly, the remark in brackets in the quotation from LUDC given above '(and, Roman Catholics add, with the bishop of Rome)' (LUDC, § 43) needs some further reflection from an Old Catholic perspective as well. Even though it is not the case for Old Catholics that communion with the bishop of Rome is a safeguard for retaining the faith of the apostles as such, it is not the case either that Old Catholics regard communion with the bishop of Rome as an *adiaphoron* either.⁸ As has become clear, at least since the 1970 IBC statement

⁷ Urs von Arx (ed.), *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis. Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-altkatholischen Dialogs 1975-1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung*, Beiheft IKZ 79 (1989).

⁸ Remarkable historical evidence is in this case the fact that until 1894, the (later) Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands always notified the bishop of Rome of the election of a new bishop, which was invariably met with a formal excommunication of the bishop-elect. After a pause in these notifications, the notification of Marinus Kok as coadjutor of the Archdiocese of Utrecht in 1969 was met with congratulations from the Vatican. Cf. Cf. s.a., 'Offizieller Briefwechsel zwischen Utrecht und Rom,' *IKZ* 60 (1970), 201-204.

on primacy in the Church,⁹ the ministry of the bishop of Rome in terms of exercising a universal primacy, which is needed for the full unfolding of the catholic faith (as it has not only a qualitative, but also a quantitative aspect), has received a very positive place in Old Catholic theological reflection. The question is not whether the bishop of Rome exercises a universal primacy, but rather how this primacy is given shape.

6. The Intermediate Level

As the LUDC notes itself (§ 84-86), its main innovation is its plea to strengthen the intermediate level of Church (LUDC, § 84-146), which in Old Catholic parlance comes closest to the notion of “supra-local” levels of being Church (cf. IBC Statute, 3.2 as quoted above).¹⁰ At the same time, however, it should be noted that Old Catholic ecclesiology seems to attribute a more prominent place to the intermediate, resp. supra-local/supra-diocesan level of being Church than LUDC that calls it ‘not theologically necessary’ but ‘theologically legitimate and desirable.’ (§ 85) As became clear in section 3.2 of the IBC Statute, being in communion with other churches and thus being church at an intermediate level is for Old Catholics closely connected to being a catholic church and thus certainly a necessity. As far as the ‘intermediate’ level as it is understood by LUDC is indeed the same as (or very similar to) the ‘supra-local’ communion of local churches, Old Catholics would stress its importance even more than LUDC. Some terminological considerations about ‘supra-local’ levels of the church (extending to the universal church) and ‘intermediate levels’ of being church (obviously not extending to the universal level) might be necessary, however.

In section 88 (cf. § 108), LUDC lists various ways in which the Churches to whom the document is addressed are engaged in being church at an intermediate level, which is helpful.¹¹ However, from an Old Catholic perspective, it

⁹ Internationale Altkatholische Bischofskonferenz, ‘Erklärung der Altkatholischen Bischöfe, zum 18. Juli 1970. Der Primat in der Kirche,’ *IKZ* 60 (1970), 57-59 (= ‘Declaration of the Old Catholic Bishops, 18th July 1970. Primacy in the Church,’ *One in Christ* 16 [1980], 377-379).

¹⁰ It may also be remarked in view of LUDC (cf. § 39, 41, 85) that even the geographic (“synchronic”) universality of the Church can be seen as an intermediate level in view of the diachronic universality of the Church, which, in traditional terminology would include the *ecclesia militans*, *expectans*, and *triumphans*. Old Catholic ecclesiology could agree with this.

¹¹ Section 88 also contains a statement about the roots of the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, by stating that it “is rooted in the division of the Utrecht church province into dioceses in 1559.” According to the preamble to the 2007 Statute of the Old Catholic Church

seems that the list that is presented for the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands does not do justice to an (Eucharistic) ecclesiology of the local Church (*qua* diocese) fully. It would probably be more correct to state that not just the international Old Catholic bodies (IBC, International Old Catholics' Congresses, Theologians' Conferences) constitute intermediate levels of being church, but that the intermediate level of being church in the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands also exists in the shape of the national Church, including its national synod and the so-called "collegiaal bestuur" ("executive board"). One could further think of Anglican — Old Catholic communion (Lambeth Conference, Anglican — Old Catholic International Coordinating Council, etc.) as an expression of being Church at an intermediate level.

After noting some real issues among Old Catholics regarding the intermediate level in section 92, section 95 of the LUDC describes three understandings of ecumenical canon law. It notes the possibility for a church to have canon law pertaining to ecumenism (§ 95a), the existence of agreements between churches with canonical status (§ 95b), and the "transfer" of particular competences of churches to bodies at an intermediate level (§ 95c). The latter is formulated in terms of a proposal and invites a response from the perspective of the Old Catholic tradition of canon law. First, it should be retained that from an Old Catholic perspective no real "transfer" of any competences of the local church to any superordinated body is possible, because the local church always retains the rights it has; second, what is a possibility according to Old Catholic ecclesiology is that churches enter into voluntary mutual self-obligations regarding particular issues.¹² The acceptance of the IBC statute by the Old Catholic Bishops of the Union of Utrecht is an example of such a mutual self-obligation. For the sake of clarity it should be underlined here as well that such voluntary self-obligations are only voluntary in the sense that they cannot be forced upon a local church by any outside authority, they are not, however, merely a matter of good will of a local church. Quite on the

of the Netherlands, however, this Church is first of all rooted in St. Willibrord's missionary work in The Netherlands (cf. *Statuut voor de Oud-Katholieke Kerk van Nederland. Vijfde uitgave, 2007* [Amersfoort, 2007], 6). Even though an argument can be made that the roots of the Church in the Netherlands as such go back to St. Willibrord and that the current structure of the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands derives from the reorganization of 1559, it is nevertheless helpful to be precise here.

¹² Cf. Kurt Stalder, 'Die Einheit der Kirche in den Lokalkirchen. Zum 70. Geburtstag von W. Küppers,' (1976), *Ökumenische Rundschau* 25 (1976) 1-16, idem, 'Ekklesiologie und Rechtsstruktur der Utrechter Union der altkatholischen Bischöfe,' in: C. van Kasteel, P.J. Maan, M.F.G. Parmentier (eds.), *Kracht in Zwakheid van een kleine wereldkerk* (Amersfoort: Oud-Katholiek Boekencentrum, 1982), 107-123.

contrary: as it belongs to the catholicity of a local church to be in communion with other local churches (IBC Statute, 3.2), every local church has, according to this (Old Catholic, but widely shared) view of catholicity, the inherent obligation to seek communion with other churches and to enter, if necessary (and that is the case in most instances), into voluntary mutual self-obligations with a certain other local church (or with a group of other local churches).

Discussing the historical manifestations of the church at an intermediate level (§ 105-113), LUDC rightly lists the pentarchy as it existed in the early Church, but leaves out other examples, such as early synods (of bishops) that arose out of the need to be church at a supra-local level. As far as the Old Catholic Church is concerned, it is noticed that the IBC is comparable to a Roman Catholic bishops' conference. To this should be added, however, that already the episcopate of the Dutch Old Catholic Church itself *de facto* constitutes a bishops' conference at a national level (§ 108). The section also maintains that the reception of the IBC's decisions has been problematic. This is true, but LUDC does not clearly state that precisely this question has been addressed in the IBC Statute as well:

The reception by the church is a manifestation that the decisions of the bishops, prepared and taken in a comprehensive conciliar process, have been initiated by the Spirit of God and correspond to the will of God for the mission of his Church. Reception therefore includes the participation and joint responsibility of the baptized (clergy and laity) in this process both within each local or national church (synods or other responsible organs) and within the Union of Utrecht as a whole. But being a process led by the Spirit of God, it cannot comprehensively, let alone conclusively, be put into juridical terms or mechanical finalization. (IBC Statute, 4.2)

Also the other sections of the 2001 IBC Statute address the question of reception at great length; here it should be emphasized especially that reception, as it is described in the text just quoted, includes not only the reception of decisions of the IBC by the local churches, but also the process of (prior) consultation and discernment in the local churches themselves. Additionally, also LUDC, § 119 should be mentioned here, which references the inner-Old Catholic discussion about the possibility of a synod at the level of the Union of Utrecht. It may be noted that this discussion has to a large extent been decided with (again) the introduction of the IBC Statute:¹³ the existing synod, namely

¹³ Cf. Urs von Arx, 'Strukturreform der Utrechter Union — verschiedene Denkmodelle,' *IKZ* 87 (1997), 87-115, and idem, 'Der ekklesiologische Charakter der Utrechter Union,' *IKZ* 84 (1994), 20-61.

the IBC, which is a synod of bishops, remained, and rather than to introduce a different kind of synod, the decision was made to intensify the communication between the IBC and the churches of its members.

Section 121 of LUDC states the following: "Local churches are (...) challenged to take more seriously their involvement with other local churches" and thus reaches a significant agreement with the results of the 2007 International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference that made a similar appeal.¹⁴ For this reason, sections 123-129 of LUDC, which are concerned with the "design" of intermediate levels of being church, and sections 130-136, which deal with specific challenges for the churches addressed by LUDC, are especially relevant for Old Catholics. One of these challenges for Old Catholics, namely the formulation of a confession of faith (LUDC, § 131.136), however, might be in need of further specification. First, it may be asked to what extent a 'denominational' confession of faith that goes beyond the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils would be true to Old Catholic principles — the return *ad pristinam normam patrum* of the Old Catholic movement was precisely intended to get over such 'denominational' confessions of faith. Second, it should be maintained that historically, the formation of Old Catholic "confessional" documents at the level of the Union of Utrecht has taken place in ecumenical exchange; the agreed statements of the Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue are the most comprehensive example of this.¹⁵ To develop a confession of faith practically introspectively and not in dialogue with a certain partner might not be fruitful;¹⁶ therefore, it will be interesting to see what comes out of current Old Catholic dialogues, such as those with the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Sweden, and to consider to what extent these provide a basis for rapprochement with others in turn. From this part of LUDC, however, the recommendation to undertake a study to find ways of giving expression to the real but incomplete communion with other churches in the Eucharistic liturgy, should be highlighted (LUDC, § 126) — could the prayer cycle of the Anglican Communion be a model?

The final part of LUDC is concerned with "the intermediate level as ecumenical breathing space" (§ 137-146). Various (positive) examples of ecumenical

¹⁴ Cf. „Communiqué der 39. Internationalen Altkatholischen Theologenkonferenz," *Christkatholisches Kirchenblatt* 130:19 (2007), 6.

¹⁵ Cf. Von Arx (ed.), *Koinonia*.

¹⁶ Unless there is a specific impetus/crisis, such as was the case when the current IBC Statute was developed, cf. Urs von Arx, 'Vorwort,' in: idem/Maja Weyermann (eds.), *Statut*, 3-11.

progress at an intermediate level are noted here; one could add further Old Catholic examples, such as the joint Anglican/Old Catholic episcopal oversight over the Anglican chaplaincy in Prague or the recent joint assignment of a(n Old Catholic) priest to be in charge both of the Old Catholic mission in Zeeland and the Mission to Seafarers in Flushing (Vlissingen). Finally, concerning the final section of LUDC that describes what the various institutional and organizational counterparts of the Roman Catholic Church and (then) the Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands are at a national level, one may ask where the corresponding Old Catholic bodies and institutions (i.e. diocesan and provincial synods of the clergy, the bishops as they are united in a provincial conference “collegiaal bestuur,” and the national synod) would fit in, as these are not mentioned here and might provide a *via media* between the Roman Catholic and (then) Uniting Protestant bodies.

7. Concluding Observations

Concluding on the above considerations, the following may be maintained. First, LUDC does ecumenism an important service by bringing together unusual partners and reflecting on an ecumenically central and controversial theme, while doing so in an innovative way. Second, some questions and hesitations have been described above. These pertained either to ecumenical strategy, to the (mainstream) Old Catholic Eucharistic ecclesiology, or to the precise notions of catholicity and apostolicity as they were presented in LUDC and as they are present in contemporary Old Catholic ecclesiology. Returning to the beginning of LUDC, and the aspects of the church that were described there (*leitourgia*, *martyria*, and *diakonia*) it may be retained here that in all its recommendations, LUDC only touches upon the first two of these aspects, and not on the third, even though significant rapprochement could be possible at this level (cf. e.g. the joint Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Old Catholic charity appeal during Lent in Switzerland). In general, however, LUDC is well in line with Old Catholic mainstream ecclesiology and its impetus should be welcomed, especially when considering the conclusions of the 2007 International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference, recommending ecumenical cooperation at levels below the dialogue between world Christian communities as a way of living out the agreements reached on an international level.

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