

THE OLD CATHOLIC COMMUNION history, witness and mission

Lecture on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its
full communion agreement with the Lusitanian Church of Portugal

Aartsbisschop Joris Vercammen

‘Since the Lusitanian in the last century, this is the first sign of a will to establish formal relations of full communion (...). (...) Therefore we are sending you this letter in order to supply some information we deem urgent and necessary. (...) We hope that your Graces and Lordships will be rewarded by the pleasure of verifying that in this country the Igreja Lusitana Católica apostólica eangélica, in spite of difficulties and temptations is a faithful expression of the Holy Catholic Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and, as such, worthy of your fatherly solicitude.’ We quote from the letter the bishop and synod of Lusitanian church wrote to both the Archbishops of Canterbury and Utrecht, dated on All Saints Day 1961. The church had been informed about the recognition by the American Church (PECUSA). This fact offers them the motivation to seek the same recognition both from the Anglican Communion as well as from the old catholic communion.

In the same letter the authors affirm their clear old catholic history as it was worded: ‘In the 19th century, when the Pope decided to make formal his claims to universal jurisdiction and infallibility, when the spiritual despotism of the ultramontane hierarchy became more and more unbearable for those whose mentality was inspired by liberal ideas, when the excesses of the popular Marianism started to become part of the official doctrine in the Roman church, when all the ideological political and ecclesiastical complex, which gave place to the Old-Catholic Movement in Europe, made its impact on Portugal – the Lusitanian Church was established.’

The reason of the coming into being of the Lusitanian church is the moral conflict of some priests and lay-people who found themselves forced to quit the Church of Rome, where they didn’t find room for their – at that time so called – ‘liberal ideas’. They were convinced they had to return to the faith of the ancient church and they wanted – as the same letter said: ‘to restore the ancient Christianity, maintaining the faith of the primitive Church (...)’

I feel very honored to be invited to speak to you today and I feel myself as a brother who shares with you the same history and background and the same conviction that is still of great importance for the Unity of the church and for the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s Europe.

Therefore I want to say something about this background in presenting you our churches and our communion. In a second point I will offer you some basics about our ecclesiological vision. Thirdly I will make an attempt to describe the practical spirituality in consequence of that vision on the church commenting on what I would call ‘an old catholic charism’. I will conclude with some thoughts on the perspectives for the relationship of the Lusitanian Church with the Union of Utrecht, being the communion of the old catholic churches.

The Union of Utrecht of Old-Catholic churches

Although the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands is much older, the name old catholic or ‘alt-katholisch’ appeared only during the 19th century within the movement of those catholic Christians in German speaking countries who protested against what they saw being unauthorized novelties into catholic ecclesiology. Those novelties, they believed, were initiated by the Roman Catholic Church herself and concern the dogma’s of the immaculate conception of Mary (1854) and the infallibility and the world-wide jurisdiction of the pope (first Vatican council – 1871).

The bishops who founded the Union of Utrecht met with that aim in 1889 in Utrecht. They agreed on a declaration, in which they laid down what they held in common and formulated criteria on how to deal

with one another. They also made a constitution for the Union of Utrecht, which in principle is thought to be an assembly of bishops to inform one another.

The Utrecht Bishops' Declaration

Let me mention the core-points of the bishops' declaration of 1889. The document takes the undivided Church of the first centuries as the foundation of the Old Catholic Churches. The old-Catholic churches are a post-tridentine phenomenon, and thus really to be distinguished from the churches of the Reformation. They join the orthodox family in their theological views and ecclesiological insights, as they are based on the faith and practices of the church of the first centuries.

On this basis the dogma of the papal infallibility and his universal jurisdiction were rejected. The pope is however recognized as the 'primus inter pares'. The importance of the Holy Eucharist for the church is stressed, concentrating on what is held in common and not on the differences. All contacts with dissidents and theologians of other confessions had to be truthfully dealt with. The unity of the church must be found again through exchange of thoughts, and through a real interest and participation in one another's context and genuine way of being a Christian. A strong priority is put on the ecumenical challenge that asks for a clear commitment.

The declaration ends with a christologically colored paragraph about, and I quote, 'the increasing contemporary indifference to faith'. Speaking in a European context, this can be seen as an appeal to get involved in moral and spiritual discussions of that moment. In fact the declaration witnesses to the church's openness to society and culture, to both moral and religious issues and her commitment to the evangelization of society.

The Declaration of Utrecht became the foundation of an increasing growing together, based on shared principles, while each church retained its own relative autonomy. The Union not only promoted the reciprocal integration and the forming of a shared identity of the Old Catholic Churches. In later time, it also proved to be of importance for the Old Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. It also became clear that only those Bishops, and the Churches they represented, who were admitted to the Union, could rightly call themselves Old Catholic.

The Members of the Union of Utrecht

From the moment of their foundation, three types of churches can be found within the Union of Utrecht.

The first type only has one representative within the communion. It is the Dutch church, arising from a conflict between the chapter of Utrecht and Rome about the appointment of a new archbishop of Utrecht at the beginning of the 18th century. As a matter of fact the church of Utrecht sees itself as the continuation of the mediaeval church that was founded by Saint Willibrord at the end of the 7th century. The Roman Catholic Church above the river Rhine also developed from that mediaeval church being the successor of that part that didn't share the point of view of the Utrecht chapter.

In a second group those churches can be clustered that issued from the protest-movement against the papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the pope. Especially in German speaking areas, a strong theological movement opposed the decisions made at the first Vatican council, because those new dogmas were seen as being in contradiction with the tradition. But this movement was not strong enough to influence the decision-making process at the council, although many scholars and clergy were involved. After the decisions were made this movement was expelled from the Roman Catholic church and had no other choice than founding 'emergency-dioceses'. Actually such was the case in Germany and Switzerland. Later on also churches in Austria, the Czech Republic and Croatia were founded.

The third type is represented by those churches that arose from an emancipation movement. That was the case among the Polish Migrants in the United States of America at the end of the 19th century. They felt they were not respected enough by the Roman Catholic Church and founded their own independent catholic church. The Polish Catholic Church in Poland was founded by that American church and is a member of the Union of Utrecht.

The sociological situation of the Old Catholic Churches

All of our churches are small and their total membership must be around 200.000. Concentrated in Western and central-western Europe there are about 230 parishes organised in 8 dioceses. We have a small international body with the International Old Catholic Bishops Conference as its central instance. Being the platform for the bishops, it doesn't have any jurisdiction in the dioceses that are autonomous. The Union of Utrecht is a communion of bishops and their churches and that means that bishops are committed to the guidelines they have made themselves in order to strengthen their catholic communion and that every bishop has a personal responsibility in both representing his or her own church in the Bishops Conference and representing the communion in his or her own diocese. In the context of the Bishops Conference the bishops consult one another and decide together on questions of doctrine and liturgy. The Conference takes the initiative to ecumenical dialogues and relationships and coordinates the international representation of the communion. The Union Utrecht is one of the small Christian World Communions recognised by the World Council of Churches.

The ecumenical involvement

The ecumenical involvement had concrete results for the communion of the Union of Utrecht as well. In 1931 an agreement of full communion was signed with the Anglican Churches with which we have enjoyed a very strong relationship until now. The permanent joint working party in which our two communions work together is the place where common projects are worked out. Since 1965 we also have intercommunion with the Spanish Reformed Church, the Lusitanian Church (Portugal) and the Iglesia Filippine Independiente (IFI).

With the orthodox churches, we have a very long tradition of dialogue, which even predates the signing of the Utrecht Declaration. As a result of that tradition, in 1987 consensus on all important theological matters was achieved. Unfortunately, it didn't lead to full communion. The main reason for that was the orthodox rejection of the ordination of women. As you may know, in 1996 the majority of the Old Catholic Churches decided to open up the threefold apostolic ministry to women. Nevertheless, with most orthodox churches, and especially with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, we continue to be involved in active processes of dialogue, finding out, at this moment, how our similar views on the most important aspects of the Christian faith could lead to more practical cooperation.

In the late nineteen sixties, we started the dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, which in more recent time has been resumed. I can add that an in-depth dialogue with the Church of Sweden resulted in a theological document that we are studying right now. Last but not least I have to mention a theological dialogue with the Mar Thoma Church of Malabar, South India.

Ecclesiological approach

Ecumenism is at the heart of the Union of Utrecht. We inherited this from the Old Catholic movement, which was an ecumenical movement even before the word was invented. Within the Old Catholic movement you find one of the very first attempts to think about transgressing confessional borders in order to restore the unity of the church. This drive for restoring the unity among Christians was related to the need for Christians to open themselves to modernity. Openness to modern developments wasn't seen as a threat to the Christian faith. On the contrary, it was seen as a challenge to discover God's creativity, without being so naïve as to become blind for the evil side of modernity.

But the nineteenth-century Old Catholic movement is not the only legacy we try to take care of. There's also the spiritual heritage of the Dutch church. Our church can't be understood without taking into account the context of the Counter-Reformation. Those leading church-people of the eighteenth century had the deep desire to give shape to a church that would be a real Dutch catholic church, rooted in the Dutch spiritual tradition of devotion and prayer as it was expressed in so-called Jansenism.

From both sources we inherited the reference to the 'ecclesia primitiva', that witnesses to a catholicity understood as the commitment of a local church to live in solidarity with the Universal Church and global Christianity. The example of the Early Church tells us that this is possible without neglecting the own particular context in which the gospel is lived in the first place. That's the tangible location where the reconciliation, proclaimed by the gospel, must become real and communion must be realised. Catholicity is

about communion among Christians as they participate in the communion of the Trinity. Catholicity tells us that the church is both a human and a divine reality, an incarnated reality. It finds its expression in our faith in the sacraments as the real presence of the Lord in the context of a community of faithful. It is our conviction that ministry is given as a symbol of unity. In the centre of the church is the Eucharist in which communion among faithful and with the Trinity comes into being and is celebrated in thankfulness and praise. This Catholicity is at the heart of the church and therefore it will play a dominant role in its future. This is the catholicity we are called to serve, because of our commitment to proclaim the gospel and to promote unity among Christians

From tradition to spirituality

Ecumenism, devotion and catholicity are the three fundamental aspects of the Old Catholic contribution to the church. They can be translated into a way of living and believing that is characterised by a great involvement both with humankind and with God's interests. Therefore the Old Catholic tradition provides us with the guidelines we need to venture into life and into the world. Our tradition invites us to take other people and the world itself as seriously as God takes them. The Old Catholic way of being Christian can be characterised by another three themes: open-mindedness, commitment and participation. Those three are the translation of the three fundamental aspects I mentioned – ecumenism, devotion and catholicity - into a concrete faithful attitude.

Open-mindedness or susceptibility means the readiness to be open to all people and all kind of worldly developments that crosses one's path. It is the art to confront yourself and the church with those developments in the spirit of what we read in the first letter to the Christians of Tessaioniki: 'Test everything; hold fast to what is good' (1 Thess. 5, 21). On the other hand, open-mindedness means at the same time to be susceptible for the Word of the Lord. In order to discover what is really good, one will need God's Word, that is the guarantee for human dignity and respect for creation.

Commitment means that one is ready to get involved in a solidarity that will lead to communion. Christians don't run away from the need of the other, neither from the questions posed by cultural and social developments. On the contrary, Christians are available for the work of discernment that must be done. Solidarity with people and their issues has priority. This solidarity must lead to building communion, to which all human beings are called. In Jesus we have seen how the Lord himself lived in solidarity with people and their issues and how he wants to build on the communion with them. Therefore it is in the communion among humans that we may discover the image of the Risen One. Yes, we believe, we will meet the Lord on the way to communion.

Participation is the third theme. Faith is actually nothing but 'co-operating with God'. God is commitment in himself. Believing means answering the invitation to participate in this commitment. Participating in God's life-in-commitment: that is faith. To participate in this divine commitment is pure grace: it is a gift, a gift for life! The church is an expression of this life-in-commitment. And as we are all invited to participate in God's life, we will collaborate with one another on an equal basis. God counts on all of us and respects all of us. That reality has consequences for the life and the structure of the communion of Christians, the church.

Perhaps this particular Old Catholic calling can be expressed as a specific charism. Should one want to name an 'Old Catholic charism', then it would be that faith always means heart and soul commitment to humankind and creation, because God enters into the same deep commitment to the salvation of both humanity and creation. This is the essence of a spirituality of open-mindedness, commitment and participation.

Contributing to the Church with our own charism

It is with this charism and spirituality that Old Catholics are called to contribute to the Universal Church. This is the way we want to see ourselves: as a particular church with a particular calling with which we may help to build the future of the Church and its visible unity as the global communion of all Christians. This spirituality is meant to be a contribution to the unity and catholicity of the church. Let me summarize it in this one-liner: Old Catholics exist so that the Church may be more 'catholic'. Catholic, that is, better founded both on earth and in heaven.

We are happy to experience how this spirituality of open-mindedness, commitment and participation connects our churches with other churches. With the sister churches of the Union of Utrecht, but also with the Anglican and Orthodox Churches and with the Philippine Independent Church. It also strengthens our involvement in our dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Mariavite Old Catholic Church, the Mar Thoma Church in India and the Church of Sweden.

One senses that this way of treating the world and the church is appreciated by other Christians. This is a sign that Old Catholic churches are called to play this role in the Universal Church. This means that it is not only our co-operation within the Union of Utrecht is important, but also our joint ecumenical work. Our charism will lead us again to a role of a bridge-builder.

In our time, in which the Christian world is divided by many moral questions, it is also vital to build a bridge between the so-called 'liberals' and 'conservatives'. It would be short-sighted to commit ourselves to one of the two directions, in theology as well as in ethics. Instead, we should strive to bring both parties closer to each other, and thus help to provide opportunities for exploring all points of view.

This task also calls us to the role of a 'summoner', or 'convener', someone who invites others to dialogue on the way to which we are called.

'That which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all ...'

Vincent's counsel encourages us to continue building bridges and seeking communion. The monk of Lérins was seeking a way out for the widely diversified Christianity of his day, which was threatening to fall into total chaos. In our time, too, there is great diversity within Christianity. This is certainly an opportunity, but also a threat. It is essential to be clearly connected to each other in our diversity, so that discord and strife do not win the upper hand. This same challenge has to be faced by the world. The situation of Christianity hardly differs on this point from the position of the world in which it exists. For this reason, God calls Christians, ever more clearly, to point the way to reconciliation, unity and communion, so badly needed by the world. It is our sincere hope to receive the grace to contribute to this witness of the Church.

Concluding

It may have become clear that it is not only on the basis of the agreement of Full communion of 1965 that our churches are connected to one another, but even more on the same ecclesiological principles and commitment to the church. Although the Lusitanian Church must acknowledge the Irish and American Church in particular and the Anglican communion in general for the support it received and still receives, it belongs to the old catholic tradition. That is right the reason that the Lusitanian bishop as well as other representatives of the church were invited to participate in some international old catholic events. The bishop receives an invitation to attend the international bishops conference every year. There is a clear collaboration among the Lusitanian Church with the Union of Utrecht in the context of the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European churches.

But I still wonder if not more could be done in order to make clear that the Lusitanian Church actually belongs to the Old Catholic Movement. The Old Catholic Movement is broader than the Union of Utrecht and tries to be the platform for all churches who share with one another the emphasis on ecumenism, devotion and catholicity in a spirituality of susceptibility, solidarity and participation. To that movement belong also the Spanish reformed church as well as the Filippino Independent Church. Can we see our own existence, issuing from being marginalised, as a contribution to the Universal Church? We are not only there for our own sake, we have a message to bring to the Universal Church and even to our societies. Therefore we need one another in order to make the movement stronger and larger. It is my personal opinion that it would be worthwhile to invest in it. That investment will not only bear fruits in a stronger international presence, but also in a deeper self-consciousness in our parishes and dioceses. It will be a question of undertaking common social and theological projects. We have to think about those and we have to do it now.

I pray that the Holy Spirit, who has entrusted us and our churches to one another, will guide us in order to give the witness to which we are called.