The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The Union of Utrecht comprises eight or nine national Churches, i.e. Churches organized on an episcopal-synodal basis within the boundaries of a particular country and being autonomous in their internal administration, but having a central organ in the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference (IBC) with the first responsibility for its common witness and mission. Listed in the order of their becoming members of the Union they are the Old Catholic Churches in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, the United States of America and Canada, Croatia, Poland and (recently) Slovakia.

We may distinguish three groups as to the historical background of their coming into existence.

The Old Catholic Church in the Netherlands (Oud-Katholieke Kerk van Nederland) may regard itself being in historical continuity with the Church of Utrecht founded in the eighth century by St Willibrord and reorganized as an archdiocese in 1559. The Church, weakened by the Reformation and the Dutch war of independence against the Spanish rule, had to find a new (and often hidden) mode of life in the Calvinist republic. It became a matter of continual debate between Rome and Utrecht whether the Church of Utrecht nominally headed by an Apostolic Vicar was a missionary Church or a continuation of the ancient see in changed political circumstances. A highly complex development involving questions usually connected with the term Jansenism ended up in a breach between Rome and Utrecht when, after a long vacancy in the See, an archbishop (Cornelius van Steenoven) was elected by the local Church in 1723, consecrated by a
visiting titular bishop (Dominique Varlet) in 1724, and censured by Benedict XIII in 1725. The Church of Utrecht persevered for a long time in a Tridentine form of Catholicism and showed its reverence to Rome in its (never abolished) name: The Roman Catholic Church of the Old Episcopal Clergy. The sees of Utrecht, Haarlem and Deventer (the titular bishopric has been left vacant since 1982) may claim historical continuity over against the Roman hierarchy established in Holland by Pius IX in 1853. This cannot be said of the rest of the Old Catholic episcopate.

The Old Catholic Churches in Germany (Katholisches Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland), Switzerland (Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz) and Austria (Altkatholische Kirche Österreichs) go back to the refusal of liberal Catholics to accept the conception of the Church as it found its expression in the two decrees of the First Vatican Council in 1870 on the universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome and his infallibility as supreme teacher in matters of faith and morals. Being excommunicated they were to organize Churches that were no longer under the obedience of the pope. The protest has been linked from the very beginning with the intention of reform and reunion on the basis of the life and faith of the ancient undivided Church.

While in Germany and Switzerland the organization of the Church (ending in the setting up of a diocesan synod and the consecration of a bishop elected by the synod) was completed in 1871–4 and 1871–6 respectively, the Old Catholics in the Habsburg Empire were not allowed by the state authorities to have a bishop consecrated; so they had to be content with a diocesan administrator whose seat was in Vienna and (from 1897) at Varasdorf in Bohemia. After the collapse of the Habsburg Empire two autonomous Churches were established in Czechoslovakia and Austria with bishops being elected and consecrated in 1924 and 1925. The Church in Czechoslovakia was largely of German origin, and those members had to leave Bohemia in 1945. The remaining Czech-speaking Church (now Starokatolická Církev v české Republice) has its roots in an effort at the turn of the century to found a national church claiming to stand in the tradition of Cyril and Methodius and of John Huss.

The Old Catholic Churches of Slav origins do not owe their organization to the controversies over the first Vatican Council, but are the result of a deep wish to live a distinct ethnic identity within the Catholic Church which the Roman authorities were unwilling to concede. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of independent-minded communities emerged among Polish emigrants in the USA. A group in Chicago came into contact with the European Old Catholics, and in 1897 a bishop (Antony Kozlowski) elected by a synodal assembly was ordained at Berne and thereby — with his Church — admitted into the Union of Utrecht. In the same year another group at Scranton PA was organized by Franciszek Hodur, who managed to unite other independent Polish communities and who, after the death of Kozlowski, was consecrated a bishop at Utrecht in 1907. Today the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) has four dioceses in the USA and one in Canada.

After World War One the PNCC started a mission in Poland then enjoying a new national independence. The missionary diocese established in 1924 became an autonomous church in 1951. Today the Polish National Church (Kościół Polskokatolicki w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) comprises three dioceses.

In Yugoslavia an Old Catholic Church was organized among the Croats in 1923, and a bishop (Marko Kalogerica) was consecrated at Utrecht a year later. The Old Catholic Bishops, however, terminated communion with him in 1933, upon which a schism occurred, one part siding with the Union of Utrecht. The history of this Church with the two rival groups (1934–74) that had links with other Old Catholic bishops in Slovenia and Serbia (not belonging to the Union) is rather confusing and was a continual source of difficulties for the other bishops of the Union. Today the Croatian Catholic Church (Hrvatska Katolička Crkva) after having suffered severe losses during World War 2 has been without a bishop since 1974 and is limited to a few parishes.

In 2000 a small Old Catholic body in Slovakia (Starokatolická Církev na Slovensku) has been recognized as a new member Church of the Union, although the consecration of the bishop elect has not been taken into consideration so far. As there have never been Old Catholic parishes in the Slovakian part of the Habsburg Empire or of Czechoslovakia, this Church may be reckoned to belong to the third group.

Other Old Catholic groups without synod or bishop in France and Italy, as well as in Sweden and Denmark, do not count as member Churches of the Utrecht Union. They are under the supervision of the IBC.
The Union of Utrecht came into existence on 24 September 1889, when the three Dutch bishops and the bishops of the Old Catholic Churches in Germany and Switzerland declared that 'the Churches headed and represented by them are in full ecclesial communion with each other'. This was the result of a development that started with the consecration of the first German bishop, Joseph Hubert Reinkens, by a Dutch bishop, but was seriously hampered by the further progress of the Old Catholic movement.

In the face of rather radical reforms in the Swiss Church – like the abolition of compulsory celibacy or the institution of a diocesan synod with a lay majority and strong democratic elements – the Dutch bishops refused to consecrate the first Swiss bishop Eduard Herzog; it was his German colleague who had to help out. After a certain consolidation of the German and Swiss Old Catholic Churches and a growing understanding of the Dutch theologians for the objectives of the Old Catholic policy as laid down in the fundamental decisions of the first three Old Catholic congresses (Munich 1871, Cologne 1872, Constance 1873) the will to a common witness became prevalent.

In 1890 the administrator of the Austrian diocese joined the Union, as later did the bishops of the third group.

The Union of Utrecht terminated ecclesial communion with two Churches and their bishops respectively: in 1910/13 with Arnold Mathew (consecrated at Utrecht in 1908) and in 1924 with the Polish Mariavite Church (the first bishop having been consecrated at Utrecht in 1909).

The setting up of the Union of Utrecht in 1889 united two of the groups mentioned above. It marked the beginning of a process of reception in which the Dutch Old Catholics gradually adopted the comparatively progressive and ecumenically minded position of Old Catholic theology set out by the first generation of German-speaking Old Catholic divines. It was completed by the mid-1920s and resulted in what I would call the Old Catholic mainstream theology manifesting a marked closeness to Anglican and Orthodox ecclesiology. The leading centres of theological reflection were the Old Catholic Faculty of Theology in the University of Bern and the seminaries at Amersfoort (later Utrecht) and Bonn.

The Old Catholic Churches of Slav origin have hardly participated in the formation of a distinct Old Catholic theology. In the PNCC (the numerically largest Church of the Union of Utrecht) there is a lively literary activity concerning the history of the 'Polonia' and the PNCC in North America (and Poland), occasionally the connection with the (European) Old Catholics in the Union of Utrecht, but virtually nothing like a theological exchange with West European Old Catholicism. This came conspicuously to the fore in the recent debate on the ordination of women to the priesthood: the hermeneutical and systematic considerations of the latter were implausible, if not incomprehensible to the representatives of the PNCC. This is not least due to a language problem: most of the relevant Old Catholic theological literature is still written in German (and to a lesser degree in Dutch). In this respect, the situation is better in Poland, because a considerable number of recent Old Catholic theological contributions have been translated into Polish and there are hopeful signs of a reception of the fundamentals of liturgical reform as elaborated in the framework of Old Catholic mainstream theology.

In the recent past, Old Catholic mainstream theology seemed to lose something of its formative vigour. This may be especially the case wherever clergy and even the younger active generation of entire parishes are recruited from former Roman Catholics (e.g. in Germany): Old Catholicism looks as if it has been redefined along the lines of ideas of Church reform that are deeply influenced by articulate opposition groups within the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, signs of flagging can also be discerned in the Swiss Church which has far fewer converts from other denominations.

What follows claims to stand in the line of what I term Old Catholic mainstream theology.

HOW THE OLD CATHOLICS SEE THEMSELVES AND OTHER CHURCHES

The way Old Catholics see themselves is fundamentally marked by the breach within the Catholic Church over the conception of the Church as it was dogmatically fixed in papalistic terms on the one hand and the necessity to organize, live and theologically justify a catholic Church separated from the greater part of the Roman communion on the other hand.1

Old Catholic theologians have repeatedly claimed that the Churches that had to be organized as Old Catholic Churches
there has been a special Old Catholic relationship with the Orthodox and Anglican traditions. The Old Catholics regard themselves as representing the One Church in a particular place, as the Orthodox and Anglican Churches represent the One Church in other places (for this see below).

Relations with the Anglicans, i.e. primarily with the Church of England and the Episcopal Church in the USA, led to the Bonn Agreement in 1931 and consequently to what was then called an 'intercommunion' between the Anglican and the Old Catholic Communions; since 1958/61 the term 'full communion' has been used. It is worth noticing that a consistent theological dialogue has hardly ever been conducted since the Bonn Reunion Conferences of 1874/5. For the Old Catholics the way to ecclesial communion was open once the validity of Anglican orders, and thus the apostolic succession of the Anglican Church, was recognized. German-speaking Old Catholics had no problems in this respect, following their *spiritus rector* Ignaz von Döllinger, but the Dutch Old Catholics came to the same conclusion only in 1925 (after Orthodox precedents). Thus the Old Catholic Bishops' Conference could issue a formal declaration recognizing Anglican orders in the same year.

On the basis of the Bonn Agreement the Old Catholics entered into full communion with the Lusitanian Church of Portugal, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church (since 1980 independent dioceses within the Anglican Communion) and the Philippine Independent Church in 1965.

Intense theological dialogues, on the other hand, have repeatedly marked relations between the Orthodox and Old Catholics. Between 1975 and 1987 a dialogue with all the Orthodox Churches was successfully concluded: the joint commission published 26 common texts witnessing to a full consensus of Orthodox and Old Catholic teaching on the classical topics of theology. No progress towards ecclesial communion, the objective of the dialogue, has been made, however.

Now one of the reasons for this is the Old Catholics' full communion with the Anglican Church: the Orthodox feel unable to enter into a similar relationship with the Anglicans. This, however, ought to be possible if there is a common basis of belief on all sides. This is a double problem for Old Catholic theology as well, although at another level. Firstly many Old Catholic theologians have – rightly or wrongly – been assuming a deep
convergence of the basic experience and conception of the Church in the three traditions. In Old Catholic perception this was manifest in occasional trilateral efforts at seeking ecclesial communion among the Anglican, Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches (rudimentarily in the 1870s, more distinctly in the 1920s). The existence of a Catholic wing consisting of Orthodox, Anglicans and the numerically insignificant Old Catholics was also discerned in the early decades of the ecumenical movement. Consequently, Old Catholic ecumenists regarded the union among the three Churches of the Catholic type (to include Rome seemed inconceivable at that time) as the first ecumenical commitment of Old Catholicism. Moreover they have tended to take (non-Romanizing) Anglo-Catholicism as being representative of Anglicanism.

In the last decades, the entire constellation has changed, not least because of the full ecumenical engagement of the Roman Catholic Church. This brings me to the second point: parts of the Anglican Communion are involved in manifold dialogues and have entered bilateral commitments with other Churches—commitments that are not followed up by the Old Catholics. Do they or ought they affect the full communion between Anglican and Old Catholic Churches—and in what sense?

These questions are not resolved. Thus the persisting Old Catholic view of the Old Catholic, the Anglican and the Orthodox Churches as representative of the One Catholic Church in their particular places may look rather theoretical because it is not confirmed by visible ecclesial communion.

Relationships with the Churches that emerged from the Reformation, especially with the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, were for a long time marked by a common attitude of defence against ‘Rome’, which was a source of mutual friendliness. There were many contacts in practical matters, but as the relations were and still are varied in the individual Old Catholic Churches, no general statement is possible. There has never been an all-Old Catholic dialogue, i.e. one conducted by the Union of Utrecht, although such a dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation was suggested in recent times. ‘The issues that would have to be cleared in a dialogue concern especially the understanding of the Church, of its unity and its ministry, the sacramental theology, and the understanding of redemption and salvation.’ In this perspective the recent Anglican-Lutheran rapprochement as set out in the Porvoo Common Statement of 1992 or the agreement Called to Common Mission of 2000 in the USA are followed up with interest in the European Old Catholic Churches.

So, there is ample evidence that the Old Catholic Church recognizes the Eastern Orthodox (and probably the Eastern Oriental) and the Anglican Churches as representations of the Una Sancta and thus as true and Catholic Churches—in analogy to the Old Catholic self-understanding of representing the One Church. It is more difficult to make out a coherent evaluation of the Roman Catholic Church, and there is a certain reluctance to render a judgement on the Protestant Churches.

THE SOURCES OF OLD CATHOLIC ECCLESIOLOGY

The sources of Old Catholic ecclesiology are to be found in the Tradition as it has taken shape in the ancient undivided Church. The appeal to the entity ‘the ancient Church’ needs an explanation. This appeal, which is neither new nor specifically Old Catholic, does not imply an anachronistic restoration of past times. It denotes a basic, yet selective, point of reference for a theological reflection on the nature, mission and structure of the Church.

In contrast to an ecclesiology stressing the jurisdiction and teaching authority of a single primate as the necessary and decisive agent of the universal Church, Old Catholic ecclesiology would stress the theological dignity of the local Church headed by a bishop as well as the fact that the bishop acts in a synodal network with the other bearers of the ordained ministry of the local Church and the laity. As baptized men and women, they all participate in the life of the Church according to their common and individual call and to their gifts discerned and recognized in an act of ecclesial commissioning. This view will determine the necessary elements of the conception of the unity of the Church. Thus the ecclesiological aspect is foremost in the appeal to the ancient Church, as the dominant concern of the Old Catholic movement is the ‘struggle for the nature of the Church’. 11

The entity ‘ancient Church’ contains all the sources one would expect: Holy Scripture, the ecclesial tradition, the ancient symbols of faith like the Nicene or the Apostles’ Creed, the dogmatic decisions of the (seven) Ecumenical Councils, and
hence the Trinitarian-Christological dogma. It may well be worth stressing that Old Catholic ecclesiology does not start from Scripture as a somewhat isolated source and principle, but from the 'ancient Church', where these elements are part of an indissoluble community context. Of course Holy Scripture is the fundamental and unique witness of revelation — understood as the self-revelation of the triune God — upon which rests the faith of the Church, however expressed. It is the witness of God's love and salvation destined for all humankind, the whole creation, which has its basis in the mission of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit that effect justification and reconciliation by which humans responding in faith find communion with God and in God communion with one another. This communion is the Church, i.e. the manifestation of the reality of reconciliation having its source in God.

It is well known that the New Testament has no single or unified ecclesiology. Its varied approaches seem to converge in the realization that the people touched by the gospel form a communion whose unity, expressed in visible forms, is an essential element. It is incomprehensible for Old Catholic theology to draw the conclusion from the New Testament data that there can be no binding ecclesial structures translating the spiritual experience of unity in God into stable and thus institutionalized forms visibly manifesting this unity. This is what happened in the sub-apostolic time of the ancient Church when it was consolidated and expanded in the oikumene. The Eucharist and episcopal ministry serve and manifest unity in the local Church, as do synodal networks.

While our ecclesiology is based on the ancient Church, its outworking depends on theological reflection and on the highly complex sociocultural context we live in, very different from the first millennium. The result will usually show elements of continuity and discontinuity, analogies and transmutations. To take an example: an Old Catholic diocesan synod with clergy and lay delegates from parishes is not an exact restoration of any of the types of synods found in the ancient Church or of Acts 15, but owes much to the parliamentary system in modern states.

Thus the Declaration of Utrecht, issued by the five Old Catholic bishops when realizing ecclesial communion of their Churches in the Union of Utrecht in 1889, is not to be seen as a 'confession', like those which established denominational identities in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The document (addressed 'to the Catholic Church' and actually sent to the heads of the Orthodox and the Anglican Churches in 1889) served as a summary of the principles according to which the bishops so far had administered their office. In the beginning they quote the much used rule of faith of St. Vincent of Lérins: 'Id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere propriisque catholicum' (i.e. that the test of catholicity is what has been held everywhere, always and by all), and they continue: 'Therefore we hold to the faith of the ancient Church, as it is formulated in the eumenaical symbols and in the universally accepted dogmatic decisions of the ecumenical synods held in the undivided Church of the first millennium.' Further the declaration approves of the historic primacy of the pope as primus inter pareres (first among equals), but rejects the papal decrees of 1870 and other papal statements held to contradict the teaching of the ancient Church. It confirms the belief in the reality and mystery of the Eucharist. It commits the Union of Utrecht to do whatever it can to overcome the divisions of the Churches and to find and establish unity with other Churches on the basis of the faith of the ancient Church.

Gradually the Declaration, which each new bishop has to sign on behalf of his Church, became something like a confession of faith, not least because the Old Catholics were being asked for such a text.

Another text, whose importance has until recently hardly been recognized, is the Agreement of Utrecht, also issued in 1889. It is the key to the underlying ecclesiology of the Union of Utrecht. There is a third text (the Regulations of Utrecht) which constitutes the standing orders of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference (IBC). The Agreement and the Regulations were revised in 1952, 1974 and 2000. They are now part of the new Statute of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Union of Utrecht, with a preamble outlining the ecclesiological principles of the Union. The Declaration, being a historic document, has never been revised.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

The Church has its source and foundation in God who is its future, present and past. It is not possible to expound this fully here; a short sketch must suffice. The Church is the manifestation of the reconciliation initiated by God, for it is in the Church that, as
justified sinners, we recognize and accept each other as brothers and sisters. The Church is the communion of humans called to holiness; it is on a pilgrimage to the perfection that will include the entire creation when God is all in all. The Church is participation in the life of God and thus communion of the baptized with God, with other baptized, indeed with all creation. The reconciliation is grounded on God’s mission of Jesus, Son and Logos of God, on his death and resurrection, and it is realized and recognized in the gifts of the Holy Spirit enabling humans to act as bearers of the love and knowledge of God and as his responsible partners.

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

Thus this ecclesiological approach starts from soteriological and trinitarian premises, and it presupposes a sort of relational ontology for the understanding of reality as being God’s creation. A human being is fundamentally a being in communion, not an isolated one for which to be in communion is a secondary state. This may be expressed by saying that a human being is a person, not an individual, and that the Church is thoroughly constituted by relations of personal beings face to face with others. The participation by grace in a reality that is basically outside the believers and yet becomes their inner reality may in various ways be reflected in ecclesiological metaphors like People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit, etc. In this context mention must be made of the popular term ‘koinonia or communion’; it denotes a communion that is constituted through a common participation in an entity that the members of the communion are not themselves.

The clearest expression of this fundamental aspect of the Church is the Eucharist, the ecclesiological relevance of which is not sufficiently recognized if it is seen as merely one sacrament among others.

The Church as vanguard and model of the renewed and redeemed humanity lives in a specific situation between the times: in anamnesis of their foundation in Christ and in the expectation of the perfection of God’s love transforming the whole creation. In this tension the Church has to recognize and fulfill its mission. The fundamental aspects of its life may be termed martysria, doxologia and diakonia. Martyria includes the various acts of proclamation of the gospel, catechesis, the accounting for the hope and faith in all its dimensions, statements on social and political issues as far as they are ineluctable consequences of the gospel. Doxologia includes worship of God, which manifests in a fundamental equitable attitude that the Church dares to live on what is promised and given in word and sacrament. In diakonia the Church fulfills its mission of healing men and women in material and spiritual distress, resolutely transcending its own institutional borders.

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

UNITY, CATHOLICITY AND APOSTOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

The only truly ecumenical symbol of faith, the so-called Nicene Creed, outlines the reality of the Church in four adjectives (the natae ecclesiae) pointing to aspects of its nature. The Church is one, holy, catholic, apostolic. This statement about the Church occurs in the short pneumatological section (that concerning the Holy Spirit), and thus makes the Church an object of belief and confession. The marks of the Church must be somehow — in all ambiguity — manifest and answered for by the members of the Church.
The unity of the Church has its source in the triune God. But how and where is this unity to be perceived? Old Catholic theology would give an answer in the framework of an ecclesiology taking as its basic entity the local Church. This ecclesiology is discernible without any systematic explication in some authors writing in the 1870s (e.g. J. H. Reikens), but a certain consistency has been attained only later, not least because of a theological exchange with voices from the Orthodox and Anglican (also Lutheran) traditions, recently with Roman Catholic advocates of a communion ecclesiology, and generally with the work of the Faith and Order Movement/Commission.

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

A further explanation may be needed: why is it not the parish and its local congregation that serves as the ecclesiological starting point? Historically, bishoprics consisting of a town and its immediate hinterland were soon superseded by bishoprics consisting of a region, in which the presbyters assumed episcopal functions in the eucharistic liturgy of the local congregations. But there are other considerations. The basic unit (called local Church) ought as far as possible to fulfill all its tasks itself. For this a parish is very often too small. On the other hand there should be a limit to the circumscription of a local Church: the bishop ought to know in person those who assume responsibility in a local congregation, e.g. the ordained ministers and leading members of a parish council. If this is the case in Old Catholic dioceses, even though they may cover large areas, it is because they are extreme minority Churches.

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

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

Thus the local Churches have a soteriological-trinitarian identity—an identity, incidentally, that is to be distinguished from other identities that are marked by manifold sociocultural factors and are and should be diverse. This ‘theological’ identity points to the real source of the unity of the local Churches, the triune God. This unity is manifest in the form of a communion of local Churches (i.e. dioceses), not in the form of something like a super-diocese in which the dioceses are deficient, somewhat incomplete parts of a larger whole.

There will be communions of local Churches in various geographical extensions, up to the universal communion of local Churches. They are all representations of the One Church, each in their place. From all this follows that the catholicity of the Church is not simply identical with its (geographical) universality.

The apostolicity of the Church is also to be seen in the context of the local Church being in communion with other local Churches.
It denotes the continuity of the Church in space and time with the mission of Christ and his apostles performed in the power of the Holy Spirit. This continuity is related to the entire witness of the Church in Word and Sacrament; some constitutive elements can be singled out, but they should not be seen in isolation. The passing on of the ordained ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands is such an element of what is called apostolic succession, but it must be integrated into the ecclesial context of the co-responsibility of the local Church for remaining true to the gospel and in continuity with the ancient Church. The apostolic succession is in the first and last analysis the process of the Church remaining identical with the apostolic foundation in all forms of inculturation and aggiornamento (bringing up to date) that will necessarily create varying identities of another order.

The apostolicity of the Church is clearly seen in the consecration of a bishop: he or she is elected by the local Church, ordained by bishops of other local Churches in communion with it. The ordination takes place in the context of the Eucharist: all baptized people who are present share in the commitment of the Church to passing on the faith once and for all revealed and yet laid upon the obedient responsibility of the Church. Two dimensions can be discerned in the event: the horizontal historical continuity within the supralocal communion and the vertical immediacy to God (made clear in the epiclesis ordination prayer).

MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP IN THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

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

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

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

The threefold apostolic ministry of the Church has to be seen in its connection with the non-ordained baptized. Ministry and laity are being distinguished, but they act in a communion, being a network with different tasks, not with the separation of, say, a teaching and obeying Church. In earlier times the Old Catholic concern for the integration of the laity (and lower clergy) into the responsibility for the local Church and thus in its leadership was given expression with the problematic term democratization.

Today the relation of the ministry and the laity is rather seen as analogous to the trinitarian model of the relation of Christ and Spirit. The ministry represents Christ and carries on his and the apostles' mission, though not in an exclusive way; the laity represent the Holy Spirit—again not in an exclusive way—who helps them to recognize whether the ministry remains true to the gospel of Christ (this would be a sort of general lay ministry).
Each has a responsibility for the Church and its proclamation and cannot give it up to or take it over from the other. In the case of conflict over fundamental questions – and this holds good not just for the ministry/laité divide but for bishop/synod, bishop/presbyterate, etc. – discussion must go on until a consensus is reached or a breach of ecclesial communion is unavoidable. In other words, there is no fixed procedure for coming to a decision in the sense that it is the bishop, or the clergy, or the laity, or a mixed majority that has the final vote. This is a consequence of the ecclesiological approach outlined so far, and a lot of encouragement (and instruction) is needed to bring the members of the Church to live this 'high' ecclesiology in terms of shared responsibility. Otherwise many dangers lurk.

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

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

Issues that concern the faith of the Church and thus its identity and its communion with other local or national Churches require a special awareness of ecclesial responsibility of the local Church and a common consultation beyond the local or national Church. It is here that in the Union of Utrecht the International Bishops' Conference (IBC) comes into play.

**SUPRALOCAL AND UNIVERSAL KOINONIA OF THE CHURCH**

How can we understand the supralocal *koinonia* of the Church in the light of Old Catholic ecclesiology? It is always a communion of local Churches reaching wider and wider up to the universal communion. Following ancient models the first stage could be designated as a Church Province. It may be a communion of local Churches of a particular country or of a part of it. Communions of local Churches for their part may form a communion, which might be called a patriarchate or whatever. The geographical limit will depend on history, culture and tradition. Finally there is the universal communion of communions of local Churches.

Each communion of local Churches, however wide, is a representation and realization of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church being an object of faith and confessed in the Creed. The common element is their soteriological-trinitarian identity as they participate in God. Each type of communion has to manifest the unity of the Church in various ways.

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

A principal concern of this concept is, on the one hand, to have intermediate elements between the local and the universal dimensions of unity and communion of the Church, which are all representations of the One Church in their places. On the other hand the concept of primacy should be freed from the fixation on
the universal primacy (usually seen in the light of the Roman primacy as defined in 1870) and be understood as an important element in the synodal structure of any communion of local Churches.\footnote{24}

The above view of the manifestation of unity of the supralocal koinonia of the Church arises from taking the local Church as the primary place of the life of the Church in martyrria, doxologia and diakonia, and therefore as the primary (though always ambiguous) realization of the One Church confessed in the Creed. Consequently the synods of bishops represent the communion of the local Churches to which they belong in the first place and not an entity called the universal Church (or part of it) of which they would be the college. Measures are taken to ensure that the bishops speak for their local Churches without simply becoming their mouthpieces, for they carry the primary responsibility for the supralocal communion of the local Churches and may not cede it to supposedly superior instances. At the local and the first supralocal (and national) levels, regular meeting is desirable, but at geographically more extensive levels the frequency of synods depends on urgency. The Church as a universal communion of local Churches should never become a global bureaucracic machine.

Another element in this kind of ecclesiology is the process of reception. A decision of a synod must be recognized as a true witness of faith and become an element of the belief of baptized members of the local Churches. This process is guided by the Spirit and cannot be steered by canonical machinery. The infallibility of the Church still has its proper place, but the process of reception is a continuing one and we may be more likely to notice when a synodal decision is rejected.

This vision of unity among local Churches may now be compared with the Old Catholic view of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. A number of official statements acknowledge 'the historic primacy which several ecumenical councils and Fathers of the Ancient Church have attributed to the Bishop of Rome by recognizing him as primus inter pares'.\footnote{25} What is rejected is a primacy of universal jurisdiction that links the Pope in a unique way with the universal Church and moreover implicates a form of primacy without pares as he is a unicus and not a primus (qua patriarch of the West), i.e. a universal bishop in addition to the bishop of each local Church, to whom as head of the Church all owe obedience.

What is the ecclesiological status of the Union of Utrecht in this scheme? It serves as the primary Old Catholic framework for living and practising unity and communion at a supralocal level, but it was rather late that the ecclesiological implications were made an object of theological investigation, and certain inadequacies were recognized.\footnote{26} The Union of Utrecht ought to see itself as a representation of the One Church in its particular place and not simply as a loose association of individual national Churches.\footnote{27} However, this view is not undisputed. It seems impossible to see an exact analogy of the Union in a province or in a patriarchate: neither model really fits. There is also a certain Old Catholic temptation to see the autonomy of the national Church as analogous to the sovereignty of the modern state.

**UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

Each local church has its own theological identity and can be very different from others in sociocultural terms. How can we recognize their unity through this plurality? Let us consider some elements which are often mentioned in ecumenical debate as necessary if separated Churches are to rediscover their lost unity:

- The fundamental faith of the Church as witnessed in the liturgy, in creeds or other common statements and expressed to some extent in the practical life of the baptized.
- The liturgy of the Church, especially the Eucharist structured around the two poles of Word and Sacrament.
- The ministry of the Church, especially the episkope (pastoral oversight) as it relates to both the local Church and the communion of local Churches.

All these elements must have enough in common to show the theological identity of the local Churches. To recognize and preserve what is common in all plurality, to make a difference between essentials and other elements, is a constant task of the local Church and the communion of local Churches. Again, it cannot be fulfilled from a neutral point of view, but only by way of a common discernment that verges on a decision of faith. These elements will usually have a greater degree of uniformity within a local Church or a national Church than in a wider communion of Churches.
The Old Catholic Church is not articulated in a specific document but the Declaration of Utrecht points to the faith of the ancient Church and certain texts that serve as common elements of reference (like Holy Scripture, the creeds or dogmatic decisions of Ecumenical Councils). Formal declarations issued by the IBC (and received by the Church) will enjoy the status of authoritative clarifications in matters of belief. Other important statements showing common opinions in the Union of Utrecht may stem from institutions like the International Old Catholic Congress (beginning in 1890, and now meeting every four years) or the International Old Catholic Theological Conference (beginning in 1950, and usually meeting every year).

Apart from the liturgy of ordination, the liturgical formularies are the concern of individual Churches. The integration in the Western liturgical traditions and the modern liturgical renewal, however, guarantee a considerable degree of homogeneity.

The ministry is perceived as identical in all the member Churches of the Union, although a closer analysis would probably reveal differences in the self-understanding of the clergy and in their social status. However, the ordination of women to the priesthood – performed in the West European Old Catholic Churches – has become a divisive factor for the PNCC, whereas for the European Churches their ordination or non-ordination (as in the Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland and Slovakia) seems to belong to the realm of acceptable diversity.

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

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

A similar scope for diversity is explicitly provided for in the Anglican-Old Catholic Bonn Agreement of 1931:

Intercommunion does not require from either communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith.

The concluding text of the Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue (1975–87) says:

The consequence and expression of reciprocally recognized fellowship in the faith is the full liturgical-canonical communion of Churches, the realization of organic unity in the one Body of Christ. The liturgical and canonical consequences, which result from ecclesial fellowship, will be elucidated and regulated by the Church on the basis of the tradition of the undivided Church. This fellowship does not signify uniformity in liturgical order and ecclesial practice, but rather embodies an expression of the fact that the historically legitimated development of the one faith of the ancient and undivided Church is preserved in each of the participating Churches. This fellowship also does not require the subject of one Church with its tradition to the other Church, for this would contradict the reality of the fellowship.

It would be highly interesting, even ground-breaking, to see this task put into concrete action, but for various reasons this has not been done.

A VISION OF THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE

In Old Catholic theology there are now hardly any detailed expectations of the future united Church transcending the remaining divisions. In earlier decades a somewhat vague two-stage model was held. A constant Old Catholic factor in the vision of the future united Church is the continuity of faith, worship and order with the ancient Church.

Concerning the way to seek the future united Church, mainstream Old Catholic ecclesiology would hold the view that two separated Churches entering into a sacramental, eucharistic communion should have explicitly recognized each other as identical (true, Catholic, etc.) Churches in the sense outlined above, and this on the basis of a degree of unity in faith, worship and order deemed as sufficient on both sides. It sees eucharistic and ecclesial communion in an indissoluble connection. Thus it is cautious about eucharistic hospitality, which two Churches may agree on while yet remaining separated, although it does accept that individual members of other Churches are given communion at the Lord's Supper. There are other tendencies in recent Old Catholicism, however, that advocate the model of growing together in
stages, so that a eucharistic sharing is possible even if the identity of the ministry or the catholicity of the Churches involved are not mutually recognized.  

The ecclesiology outlined above when dealing with the supralocal and universal communion of local Churches has deliberately not taken account of the actual state of divisions in Christendom. Now, for the vision of the united future Church this situation must be faced. It can be done by asking the question: what is the status of the denominational Churches in their relationships to each other? Could they see themselves as local Churches – or communion of local Churches – which may recognize each other as identical on the basis of the identity markers deemed as a sufficient manifestation of it? Old Catholic theology has done this regarding the Anglican (and Orthodox) Churches. It assumed that the Old Catholic and Anglican (Orthodox) communion of local Churches live in their distinct places, in distinct territories.  

So these communions, having recognized their theological identity, could more or less continue to live as denominational Churches as before.

It was in this sense that the Anglican–Old Catholic intercommunion or full communion was conceived. It is a consequence of the adopted ecclesiology that there was no organic merger of the two communions which would have resulted in the absorption of the Old Catholics in the much larger Anglican Church. A problem, however, was perhaps an insufficiently developed mode of regular mutual consultation, which may be remedied in the transformation of the former International Anglican–Old Catholic Theological Conferences (since 1957) into the Anglican–Old Catholic International Co-ordinating Council in 1998.

Now the presupposition of distinct places did not apply to North America, where accordingly the Bonn Concordat of 1931 was realized in special agreements between the PNCC and the Episcopal Church in the USA (1940/47) and the Anglican Church of Canada (1955/58) respectively, which were terminated in 1976/78 by the PNCC on account of the Anglican ordination of women. But the presupposition was not accurate in the European context either, where there have always been overlapping Old Catholic and Anglican jurisdictions.

This is the normal situation in the relationships of denominational Churches in modern societies marked by an ever increasing mobility and migration: they live their witness in the same place.

How, then, is unity and communion of denominational Churches to be lived and manifested in the horizon of the ecclesiology set out here? Of the well-known conceptual models of the ecumenical movement, ‘reconciled diversity’ seems to imply a continuation of Churches which remain separated, even though they may recognize each other as true Churches. More appropriate seems a model of ‘organic unity’, in that the Church in a particular place is a eucharistic community sharing the same personal, collegial and communal episcopa and where denominational differences no longer divide the Church (which presupposes the mutual recognition of the theological identity as intimated above). But what is the status of these denominational/social/ethnic identities? How can they be expressed as an element of desired diversity in the one local Church? How is the new loyalty to the one local Church and the communion of local Churches to be combined with the ancient loyalty to the denominational family of the Christian world communion?

Questions like these make us realize how much serious ecclesiological work is still ahead of us on the ecumenical agenda.

**FURTHER READING**

1. General works:

Still indispensable in English is:


See also:


In German:


Continuous information about the Old Catholic Church and theology is accessible in the quarterly being published in Berne since 1893: *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift (IKZ)*, before 1911: *Revue Internationale de Théologie (RITH)*.

2. *A few repeatedly quoted ecclesiological titles:*


**NOTES**


2. Cf. e.g. (the former archbishop) Rinkel, Andreas, 'Die Lehre von der Kirche nach der alttholischen Auffassung von der Kirche', *IKZ* 39 (1949), pp. 1–15.

3. It was due to the remonstrances of people like Christopher Wordsworth, the eminent Bishop of Lincoln, that the Old Catholics had given up this position by 1872 – a possible exception being when they had to negotiate with state authorities about Church property.

21. In Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, and Slovakia the single diocese covers the whole country.
24. As a consequence of the interrelation of synod and primacy the traditional Old Catholic conception of placing the Ecumenical Synod/Council above the Pope is just as untenable as the opposition to which it is a reaction.
25. So e.g. the Declaration of Utrecht, para. 2. Other statements include the fundamental programme of the Old Catholic movement issued by the Congress of Munich in 1871, the IBC declaration of 1970 ‘The Primacy in the Church’ (both in Küry, U., pp. 450–2; 458–60), and common texts agreed upon by the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission (in: Koinonia, pp. 202–4) and the International Anglican–Old Catholic Theological Conference of 1985 (in IKZ 80 (1990), pp. 5–11).
27. See the preamble of the new statute referred to in note 13. There is an irregular situation insofar as the PNCC terminates ecclai al communion with those member Churches that introduced the ordination of women to the priesthood and, at the same time, insists on belonging to the Union.
28. The first common rite for the ordination of bishops, priests, deacons (and minor orders, now suppressed) was published in 1897/99. The IBC approved of a revised rite in 1985 which was prepared by the International Old Catholic Liturgical Commission (appointed in 1978). It does not seem to be used in all the member Churches.
32. See note 8.
34. Cf. e.g. the Eucharistic Agreement between the Old Catholic and the Evangelical Church in Germany in 1985. The way this agreement came about was criticized by the IBC and led to an unprecedented major crisis in the Union in the 1990s.
36. The full membership offered to a number of Old Catholic bishops in the Lambeth Conference (who, however, refrain from voting) is in my view an ecclesiologically inappropriate solution, but has to be accepted for practical reasons.
37. There were many more issues submitted by Canterbury to the IBC for comment than the other way round!