The Old-Catholic Churches and the 'construction of Europe'

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by Joris Vercammen

Source:
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Joris Vercammen

PhD.
Archbishop of Utrecht, HOLLAND

Abstract:
The construction of a new Europe that is called to be a real home for many different people: that's right the challenge that our society is facing on this moment. It is my conviction that churches and their partner organizations do have a special responsibility on this point. And I can't see it otherwise than in building up this new Europe we are also partners of our creator who does not have any rest until all people receive the dignity they are – being creatures who live with His breath in their breast – called to (Genesis).

The Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic churches is the smallest acknowledged Christian World Communion and an almost European feature. Therefore the question of what Europe has to become, can not be taken away from our agenda.

In the following pages, I like to present – first of all – the phenomenon of the Old Catholic Churches and their international communion 'the Union of Utrecht'. Secondly I will reflect on the religious situation of Europe. In a third and a fourth point I will say something about the contribution both of the old-catholic churches in particular and the churches in general, to this 'new Europe'.

Keywords: Old Catholic and Europe

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1 H.E. Dr. Joris A.O.L. Vercammen is the Old-Catholic archbishop of Utrecht and the president of the International Old-Catholic Bishopsconference. He is also a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.
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1. The Union of Utrecht of Old-Catholic churches

Nevertheless the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands is much older, the name old catholic appeared only during the 19th century within the movement of those catholic Christians who protested against what they saw being unauthorized novelties into catholic ecclesiology. Those novelties 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). More recently the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin was added (1950).

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 go on 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 bishops’ declaration of 1889 states the undivided Church of the first centuries being the foundation of the Old Catholic Churches.

On this basis the dogma of the papal infallibility and his universal jurisdiction is rejected. The pope is however recognized as the ‘primus inter pares’ (the first among his equals, in other words: the bishop who has an honorary priority).

The importance of the Holy Eucharist for the church is concentrated on what one held in common and not on the difference.
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 ended with a christologically coloured paragraph about the increasing contemporary indifference in faith, what – speaking out of a European context – can be seen as an appeal to get involved in moral and spiritual discussion of that moment. In fact the declaration witnesses from 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 for an increasing growing together, based on the 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, but also proved to be of importance for the Old Catholic participation with the later ecumenical movement. It also became clear that only those Bishops, and Churches they represented, who were admitted to the Union could rightly call themselves Old Catholic.

*The Members of the Union of Utrecht*

From the point 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 that issued from a conflict between the chapter of Utrecht and Rome about the appointment of a new archbishop of Utrecht in the beginning of the 18th century. As a matter of fact the church of Utrecht is the continuation of the mediaeval church that was founded by Saint Willibrord at the end of the 7th century. The Roman Catholic Church developed itself also 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 type those churches can be clustered that issued form the protest-movement against the papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction of the pope. Those decisions were made at the first Vatican council. A strong movement opposed 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 church-men 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 issued 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 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 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 have intercommunion with the Spanish Reformed Church, the Lusitanian Church (Portugal) and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI).

We also have a very long tradition in a dialogue with the orthodox churches. As a result of that tradition of more than 100 years, in 1987 a consensus about all important theological matters was achieved. Unfortunately it didn't lead to full communion because of the orthodox rejection of the ordination of women that was initiated in 1996 in the majority of the Old Catholic Churches. Nevertheless also together with the objective to find out how our similar views on the most important aspects of the Christian faith can lead to more practical cooperation.

We also resumed the dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, that in fact began in the late sixties. All important questions that divide us form the church with which we have many things in common too, are on the agenda of a joint commission. This commission was a joint initiative of the president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and myself.
In the past several pastoral agreements were reached on the level of different local churches, although none of these agreements were ever accepted by the Vatican.

Last but not least, I can add that some Old Catholic theologians and theologians of the Church of Sweden have met one another in order to find out the possibilities for a formal theological dialogue.

2. Europe, a secularized continent

Diversity

Europe is like a big house, with many doors and rooms, in which everybody is now talking at the same time in fifty languages. Europe is a complex phenomenon and can’t be understood without taking into account the cultural, linguistic, religious and historical differences. It is a heavy task to describe European culture, and it is almost impossible to find out which are the big traces of what one might call a European culture. Sociological surveys show us the “patch-work pattern” of a religious and moral pluralism, which seems to be a main characteristic of European culture. The differences within Europe are enormous. A simple division into western, central, southern and eastern European countries is generally not very useful. There are indeed recognizable differences between East and West, but the differences within each of these groups are sometimes greater still. Whoever wants to build up European Unity has to take account of this diversity.

Secularization

Notwithstanding this diversity, all European societies seem to be going through a common process concerning their religious and moral consciousness. It is the process of secularization. However, this being a cultural issue, sociological research makes it obvious that growing economic welfare stimulates this process. This means that all European countries will be confronted with this challenge sooner or later, since economic growth is the evident ambition of all countries.

In essence, secularization is the confrontation between reason and belief. Developed during the Enlightenment, it carried the conviction of the autonomy of the individual, and this is great cultural progress. It makes it possible for people to choose the values which they want to practice and the religious framework they want to live in. In principle,
there is no opposition between the Christian faith and the ideal of the autonomy of *human beings*.

**De-institutionalization**

As the moral and religious attitude became a responsibility of the individual, it didn’t *necessarily become* a more rational *matter*. On the contrary, *experience shows us* that religion can have a very subjective and arbitrary character, based on instinct and emotion and therefore also tending *towards* violence.

The principle of separation of church and state, which was expressed by the French Revolution and which, to this day, is considered to be the core of modern Western civilisation, is based on the idea that religion is less a civilising than a potentially violent principle. From this point of view, the secularised society is seen as redeeming human beings from the authoritarianism and violence of religion. The Europe constructed since the late 1940s is an attempt to constrain violence through shared interest and concrete solidarity. The revolutionary spiritual discovery of the new Europe lies in its implicit awareness that it is arisen from the ruins of clusters of ideologies: fascism and anti-semitism, communism and anti-communism.

The inability of the *military* in charge to save peace and bring prosperity to a large number of people, shocked the Europe of the First World War. After World War II, Europe experienced a bankruptcy of all ideologies, confirmed by the implosion of European communism at the end of the 1980’s. There is no longer trust in ideologies, and even less trust in ideological institutions. These are seen as unreliable carriers of ideologies, from which one had to conclude that they were more interested in their own power than in the destiny of people. This is also the case with the church. In essence, this de-institutionalisation of religion is an attempt to exclude a dangerous source of violence from society. The former so-called Catholic countries, which experienced an acceleration of the secularisation process during the past decades, are examples of that evolution of de-institutionalisation. The strength of the past *has become* today’s weakness, namely strong hierarchy, including control over people’s lives, *no longer has* the supremacy *it once had.*
Loss of identity

All those transformations Europe has been involved in for over the last fifty years, have brought a sense of disorientation and uncertainty to a large part of the European population. This has lead to a clear demand for identity, a quest for symbols by which people can recognise themselves, and by a need for traditions which are shared and which will lead to sharing. Within this context, religion has appeared to many people to be an important reservoir of values which can help them to respond to this demand. Firstly, for a narrow elite, this has constituted an intense experience of being born again, experienced within the evangelical movement. But secondly, for the majority of Europeans, Christianity no longer has any influence on private life; it remains only as a strong point of attachment when religious symbols are needed for the expression of their cultural identity.

Religious awareness

In short: secularisation and the de-institutionalisation of religion seem to be experienced as liberation. This is, on the one hand, an opportunity for churches to purify their faith, to bear witness to their commitment to the humanisation of society, and to clarify their proclamation of the gospel. On the other hand, people do not want to be liberated from the church and religion, because they are sources of cultural identity.

Therefore, in any case, it is our experience that secularised and unchurched people are not necessarily non-religious people.

The religious alternatives to Christianity enter the European countries mainly as a consequence of the growing contacts with the rest of the world after medieval solidarity. Those alternatives, seen first as a missionary challenge, have become more and more partners with whom dialogue should be sought. It is the religious freedom, which is itself a fruit of secularisation, that has created the possibility of the enormous religious boom we are experiencing today.

In this connection, we should point to the overall success of the evangelical movement in Europe. This movement combines the accent on individual responsibility for one's own faith with the opportunity of a strong fellowship. And, over and above that, it seems to offer relatively easy answers to difficult questions and moral issues with which the
average European also feels him/herself confronted. The success of the evangelical movement coincides with its care for modern people who feel themselves over-burdened by the complexity of modern life. In my opinion, all religious movements which offer first of all safety and security have a lot of success because of the feelings of uncertainty secularised people have to live with.

These observations lead us to conclude that Christianity is on the way to becoming the “civil religion” of Europe. This civil religion is based on the traditional churches that have a cultural, ethical and political profile. These churches can present themselves as custodians of European memory and traditions. This situation offers churches important opportunities. (This doesn’t mean that Judaism hasn’t played any role in the construction of the European identity, neither does it ignore the fact that Islam may be destined to play a more or less important role in the future. But it is impossible to consider these questions at length in this brief presentation.)

To be credible in this context, the traditional churches must fulfil three conditions. The first consists of achieving a sufficient level of unity among themselves. The second is to keep open the dialogue with a culture of lay and secular inspiration, with its values of equality and democracy and the role played by the sciences and technical development; However, within this so-called “secular culture” all kinds of religious phenomena are more alive than ever. Therefore the third condition for being taken seriously as a contributor to the humanisation of European society is to show the ability and readiness to participate in the multi-religious dialogue that must guarantee peace and solidarity to all Europeans, including the “new” ones.

We can conclude that the majority of Europeans still have a high expectation of the church, and it should be understood on this point that the future of religion, Christianity and the church will be decided by the degree to which their representatives succeed in weaving themselves creatively into the culture-creating process, and participating in it significantly. The difficulty seems to be that churches don’t always understand, or even don’t like, the kind of expectations experienced and expressed by the majority of Europeans. European churches have a “confessional” problem. They take their own identity as absolute, and are
not always ready to enter into real communion with other churches. Among a majority of churches, their own autonomy seems to be even more sacred than the gospel. How can the attempt to found communities of their own, right across Europe — as for example the East European Orthodox churches do — be otherwise explained?

The principle of the universal church, which in one way or another all churches acknowledge, should lead to the creation, at all geographical levels, of those shared ecumenical structures which make the proclamation of the gospel most effective in word and deed. However, among the majority of Orthodox and Protestant churches, the “autonomy (the “autocephaly” or the “sovereignty” of their own national, state or free church) plays such a major role that trans-confessional and trans-national ecumenical bodies are regarded only as service organisations for safeguarding their own interests (not by ecumenists, but by many officials and also church people).

As the ecumenical charter (the joint declaration of the Conference of European Churches and the European conference of Roman Catholic bishops’ conferences) puts it, the most important task for the churches in Europe is to proclaim the gospel, and in doing so they can support the integration of the European continent. The Charta Oecumenica says: “The churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe. On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail. We likewise insist on the reverence for life, the value of marriage and the family, the preferential option for the poor, the readiness to forgive, and in all things compassion.” (no.?)

3. Contributing to the local church

I want to focus now on the concept of the “local church”, not only because it is a central idea in our ecclesiology but because it offers a concrete perspective for the contribution of the Union of Utrecht to the ecumenical movement in Europe in general as it is for our collaboration with the Anglicans in particular as well. The concept of the “local
church" will enable the development of the missionary dynamic Europe needs. Small churches and partner organisations – in establishing an extended cooperation with one another – do have opportunities in order to give shape to a model of a local church.

The "local church" we have in mind is broader than the single parish or congregation. It is the local church as was meant in the early church: the grouping of parishes or congregations in a region or country around a bishop, who is the living sign of unity and a spiritual leader. It has to be the collaboration of all Christians in a same place. From this point of view, the local church is the spiritual inn, where everyone with a longing for the Lord is welcomed, and it is the spiritual space in which God's calling can be heard. All the faithful who know themselves called by God to give the best of their efforts for the well-being of others are united within the local church, which becomes – because of the witness of its membership – a token of hope at a concrete spot in the world. Nobody else and no other church can have that meaning for that concrete context, which the local church has.

As people are first and foremost determined by their cultural context, so regarding their Christian faith it is important that the Christian message is placed within that context. Thus the best way for Christianity to be integrated into a cultural context, is for it to take the form of the local church, in which fellow human-beings of the same culture will understand and interpret the biblical message in terms and metaphors, in ideas and prayers, in great art and other creative expressions that are compatible with that specific culture.

Since the Reformation, the reality of the local church being the Christian centre in a concrete social and cultural context, disappeared in a sea of confessions. Restoration of the local church as a centre of unity – together with establishing the world-wide conciliar fellowship of local churches – is, in my view, the most important ecumenical task we, Anglicans and Old-Catholics, have. And immediately I want to become practical, and want to go to mainland Europe, with Old-Catholic and Anglican congregations and churches, as the Spanish Reformed Church, spread all over the continent. What would be the right yet achievable strategy we would be able to develop together? We have to be realistic. Old-Catholics and the others I mentioned, and their partners, are
minorities on the European continent. But that does not mean the concept of the “local church” would not be a challenge for us! Maybe we can only realise the perspective of the local church on a very basic level, but by doing so we could give an important witness, and in fact emphasise the question of visible unity among churches as the ecumenical charter asks us to do.

If we were to succeed in overcoming our common “confessional problem” by committing ourselves to initiate some steps on the way to giving shape to what at least may be called a core of a local church in all the countries in which we have parishes, it would be an important contribution to the ecumenical goal. We have to be realistic: perhaps we cannot give shape to more than a “scale-model” of whatever a local church should be. But creating those small beginnings can be of great interest. As we said, without Unity among the churches, Christianity can’t play the role it has to play in Europe and those small beginnings could have that magic that is needed to encourage larger developments. Small churches must take the lead in collaborating with one another, and all interested Christians. Small must show that unity is possible.

4. The mission of the local church

Some concrete objectives I have 5 points to make on the mission of the church in our secularized society.

a. Churches are there in order to proclaim the gospel. The example is Saint Paul in front of the Aeropagus, moving around in the deep religious landscape he discovered in Athens and arguing on the marketplace about people’s beliefs. He tells the Athenians about what they suspect but not dare to believe: that there is a living God, who is Lord of Heaven and Earth and who does not live in shrines made by human hands. (Acts 17) Saint Paul is using a lot of Greek wisdom in the sermon he preached. Another example of how to evangelize is Philip with an Ethiopian who is on his way on a wilderness road. The Ethiopian is a seeker and a thinker. He reads the prophet Isaiah but it seems to be difficult to understand for him. This own process of seeking truth of the Ethiopian is starting point to tell him about Jesus and to witness of his salvation for everyone.
Our liturgy plays an important role in the mission of the church, not because it is a tool for mission but because it is the heart of the life of the church. Showing that heart in a way that its warmth and its holiness can be felt, makes the church attractive. I think the same is true for the ecclesiastical ministry. People are looking around for some good spiritual leaders: if the ministers of the church know the art of listening both to the modern world with its modern people and to the Gospel, they will be those leaders with whom people want to share their deepest longings and questions.

b. Churches are there in order to create ‘sacred spots’ in secularized societies. Churches should have knowledge about the religious needs of people although those needs do not lead automatically to being a Christian. But those ‘sacred places’ that I mean are places for quietness and meditation, places of rest and ‘inefficiency’ that people need in order not to collapse living in this complex and demanding society. Offering our churches to people as welcoming and open areas in cities e.g. and spiritual spaces is a service that contribute to the quality of life within the society. It is about the church being ‘an inn’ in the society, an inn where people are welcomed with their spiritual and existential needs.

c. Churches shall collaborate with others of other faith and non-believers in order to build a culture of wisdom, reflection and spirituality. Together we have to work on a culture where no human question is condemned to remain a taboo subject. The church shall know that also the church itself has not always answers to the questions that human life pose, but the church may collaborate in solidarity with all those people who do their best in order to develop answers, motivated as they are by their respect for their fellow-human beings.

d. Churches are critical partners for societies, who will focus on the humanity of culture. Churches are there in order to comment on developments and policies from the perspective of the Life and the abundance that is promised by the Lord in the Gospel. Churches can offer societies the key for reconciliation and can help to build peace. Churches are therefore loyal partners of and collaborators on all kind of pluralistic groups and events that aim at promoting human dignity and authentic quality of life. It is about the prophetic solidarity of the church with societies and with humanity. Churches must be involved in social work
and must build up solidarity with the poor. Deeds of justice and friendship are needed in order to ban poverty in our societies. A church that is not at all involved in this diagonal aspect will lose its integrity as community of Christians, as the apostle James teaches us.

e. Living in a multi-cultural and multi-faith society, churches have to come to terms with other religions. The history of religion is too much a history of violence. Religions feared for one another and experienced one another as threat. It is about the complex question of claiming the truth and at the same time often being used by those who are in power. The moment for sincere exchange of insights has come. If religions can build up peace among one another, peace within societies will draw nearer as well. It is the moral responsibility of churches to be involved in interreligious dialogue, on all levels and in many aspects.

5. Conclusion

Europe is an amazing building. It houses so many differences together with a deep longing for reconciliation. Jacques Delors, the former President of the European Commission, spoke of the need to offer Europe a soul. Well, I think the soul of Europe is that longing. Being Christians, we believe reconciliation is possible, since it can be found in the Triune God. The answer the soul of Europe is looking for can be found in the existence of the eternal and merciful God and in the salvation God brought us in Jesus Christ. That is the reason why the expectation towards the churches is so high, even when secularised people don’t like to be a member of one of them. Perhaps people feel that churches foster a knowing that they need too.

The first step in a missionary strategy is to support that longing for reconciliation, because that longing is the backbone of both religion and being human. Churches are thus called to play a crucial role within society. But without reconciling themselves with one another, churches can’t play that role. On the contrary, they often become a source of hostility. That’s the deepest motivation to work on ecumenical challenges in general, and the collaboration between the Anglican, the spanisch reformed and the Old Catholic churches in particular. Coming from a similar inspiration, it is my belief that both our traditions can play an
interesting role on the European continent, if we are ready to instigate
intensive collaboration with one another.

To conclude:

Jesus Christ, the Lord of the one Church, is our greatest hope of
reconciliation and peace. In His name we intend to continue on our
common path in Europe. We pray for God’s guidance through the power
of the Holy Spirit. (Charta Oecumenica)

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