

Zeitschrift: Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie

Band: 96 (2006)

Heft: [4]: Towards further convergence : Anglican and Old Catholic ecclesiologies

Artikel: Episcopacy - conciliarity - collegiality - primacy : the theology and the task episcopacy from an Old Catholic perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-405019>

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Episcopacy – Conciliarity – Collegiality – Primacy: The Theology and the Task of Episcopacy from an Old Catholic Perspective

Günter Esser

1. An Ecclesiological Basic Decision

We have a riddle in German asking the question of priority as regards chronology or contents: ‘Which was first, the chicken or the egg?’ On closer examination, you will find that the riddle, applied to whatever problem, is not to be taken quite seriously. Is the riddle a rhetorical sophistry? Whether chicken or egg, what really matters is the result, i.e. a chicken-yard with lucky chickens, which once slipped out of the eggs and now support the subsistence of their owner.

It might be a bit bold to transfer this riddle to the ecclesiological question: ‘Which was first, the universal church or the local church?’ Would it lead us into a kind of ecclesiological hair-splitting? After all, the local church is not neglected in the ecclesiology that takes its starting point with the universal church (the ecclesiology preferred in the Roman Catholic church), and the universal church has its place in the ecclesiology that takes its starting point from the local church. Is the difference only dependent on how you set the ecclesiological accents when discussing the church of Jesus Christ?

Following the structures of the ancient church, the starting point of all Old Catholic ecclesiological considerations is the *ecclesia localis*, the local church, and that means always the diocese. The Statute of the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference (IBC) of 2000 defines the local church as a ‘communion of people, which by the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and by the outpouring and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit is constituted as a unity in a given place around a bishop with the eucharist as its center’. It ‘is a complete church that carries out its tasks autonomously in that given place’.¹ The local church is the ecclesiological starting point,

¹ ‘Statute of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Union of Utrecht’, A. ‘Preamble: The Ecclesiological Foundations of the Union of Utrecht’, para. 3.1. Cf. Urs von Arx, Maja Weyermann (eds.), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen*, Beiheft zu IKZ 91 (2001), pp. 28–29.

because here, in *leiturgia, martyria and diakonia* the concrete life of the church takes place.²

Therefore the local church is fully church, a realisation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in a definite place, with nothing missing except the communion with other local churches ‘in which it recognizes its own essence.’³ However, the local church is not a monad, but lives its catholicity and apostolicity in communion with other local churches. It is dependent on this communion. With this *communio ecclesiarum* the universality of the church also comes into focus, even if always starting from the fundamental point of departure which is the local church. Seen from the perspective of the ecclesiology of the local church, the universal church cannot have the shape of a ‘superdiocese’ or a ‘superchurch’, which consequently would have to have a ‘superbishop’ to lead it. The local church remains the fundamental ecclesiological entity. Thus the *communio ecclesiarum* is a community of equal local churches, because as regards their catholicity they are identical churches.⁴

Another but theologically no less important aspect was brought into the discussion by the late Old Catholic theologian Herwig Aldenhoven. Discussing the question of the priority of either the universal or the local church, he placed the local church ecclesiology into the context of trinitarian analogies.⁵ He transferred this conception of the trinitarian persons to the *ecclesia localis* and/or to the *communio ecclesiarum*. Starting with relations inside the Trinity, Aldenhoven gives the *communio ecclesiarum* something like a ‘quasi-personal character’, because it also realizes itself likewise substantially in communion.

Aldenhoven perceives a fundamental difference to the Roman Catholic ecclesiology in this view of communion. He refers to the Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf who draws attention to the fact that for Joseph Ratzinger the universal church is related to the local churches like the divine nature refers to the three persons inside the Trinity. As Volf wrote, such a view fits Ratzinger’s ecclesiology with its strong stress on the universal church which, although it exists in the local churches, is the start-

² Cf. ‘Statute’, p. 29, para. A.3.3.

³ ‘Statute’, p. 29, para. A.3.2.

⁴ Cf. Urs von Arx, ‘Ein “Petrusamt” in der Communio der Kirchen. Erwägungen aus altkatholischer Perspektive’, *IKZ* 93 (2003), pp. 1–42, at p. 9.

⁵ Cf. Herwig Aldenhoven, ‘Trinitarische Analogien und Ortskirchenekklesiologie’, *IKZ* 92 (2002), pp. 65–75.

ing point of his whole thinking. Volf himself agrees with the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas in thinking that unity has its basis not in the divine nature as such, but in the person of the Father. The one divine nature does not possess an ontological priority to the trinitarian persons. God's essence coincides with his being persons, which is always realized in communion. This point of view results in regarding the relationship between the universal and local church in a completely different analogy than in the case of Ratzinger. Due to these considerations, according to Aldenhoven, the universal church does not exist as ontologically preceding the local churches, it rather exists as local churches.⁶

2. Local Church Ecclesiology and Episcopacy

This basic option for the local church ecclesiology has also a fundamental importance for the theology of the episcopacy, because it is clear that the bishops as religious leaders of their Catholic churches that are ecclesio-logically equal will take their responsibility – both inward and outward, i.e. within the responsibility for the *communio ecclesiarum* – in a different way than is possible according to the universal church model of Roman Catholic coining. Although Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* has discovered again the local church, and thus the college of bishops as leaders of their local churches has received a new (i.e. the ancient) status, the Council's being tied to the papal dogmas of 1870 naturally remained for Old Catholic churches (and not only for them) the crucial ecclesiological stumbling block, since this consistently manifests the *ecclesia universalis* as a 'superchurch' or 'superdiocese'. The statements of *Lumen Gentium* are clear. The Constitution on the Church speaks in para. 22 of the fact that the college of bishops has only authority in communion with the Bishop of Rome, without prejudice to his primatial authority over all 'shepherds and faithful'. And that means: ultimately the bishops cannot act without the pope, whereas the pope can act without the agreement of the college of bishops.

Werner Küppers, a former professor for Old Catholic theology in Bonn and an Old Catholic observer at some of the council's sessions, pointed out

⁶ Cf. Aldenhoven, 'Trinitarische Analogien', pp. 73–74; especially notes 10 and 11 with reference to Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

in his comment on *Lumen Gentium* that the broad universal solidarity of the *ecclesiae particulares* is substantially limited by the ‘watchtower-like’ clause ‘without prejudice to the primacy of the chair of Saint Peter, which presides the entire communion of love.’⁷ This restriction with respect to the bishops, who can act only with and never without the head of the college, is consistent with the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the universal church, not only from an ecclesiological, but above all from the juridically understood view of the Bishop of Rome as the guarantor of unity. The local church ecclesiology, to which the Old Catholic churches feel obliged, proceeds, as I said, from an equal grading of all local churches and therefore also from their bishops.

The responsibility of the bishop within the local church

The Statute of the IBC formulates: ‘Each [local church] is “catholic” because ... it participates in the whole reality of salvation and truth that comprises God and human beings, heaven and earth and finds therein its unity’.⁸ What does ‘catholicity’ mean? Catholicity means the church’s continuity in the tradition of faith, which connects it through all periods of her varied history with its origin, with the life, teaching and fate of Jesus Christ, as it was handed down in the apostolic preaching and later on laid down in the *symbola* of faith in a binding form. The IBC Statute speaks in this sense of ‘apostolic succession’, when it refers to this continuity of faith.

This continuity is deliberately conceived in a wide way and means ‘that whatever the church is doing in word and sacrament, doctrine and ministry, has and must have its origin, in space and time, in the mission of Jesus Christ and the apostles, operated by the Spirit. This includes pre-eminently the passing on of the ordained ministry by prayer and the laying-on of hands’, especially in the consecration of bishops.⁹ In a bishop’s consecration, which is usually done by at least three other catholic bishops, who represent the college of bishops, they confirm in the name of the *communio ecclesiarum* the candidate’s catholicity and that of the local church, which elected him for this special leadership.

⁷ Werner Küppers, ‘Das II. Vatikanische Konzil und die Lehre von der Kirche’, *IKZ* 55 (1965), pp. 69–101, at p. 95.

⁸ ‘Statute’, p. 29, para. A.3.2.

⁹ ‘Statute’, p. 30, para. A.3.4.

The bishop is the sign of unity in his church. The spiritual centre of this unity is the Eucharist, in which the bishop represents the crucified, risen and real present Christ in the congregation. He is the real leader of the Eucharist. The priests in the parishes actually celebrate ‘only’ being commissioned by the bishop and acting in his place. The bishop has the important task of the *episkopé* within his diocese, the supervision or the ‘first responsibility’, as Urs von Arx describes *episkopé*.¹⁰ But episcopacy is more than simply the carrier of this certainly necessary ‘responsibility’ and the task of taking care of the right order. I think that it is almost dangerous, if *episkopé* is only understood functionally; the bishop, then, is in danger of becoming a church functionary. Of course, the function of *episkopé* is necessary, but the spiritual dimension of episcopacy seems to me equally important. Such a spiritual dimension, for example, involves understanding the bishop as a ‘representative of Christ’, who, in the sense of the master of the church, accompanies the people of God entrusted to him on its pilgrimage through time, encouraging and strengthening it. That seems to me at least as important as the practice of *episkopé*. The bishop can only fulfil this leadership in his diocese, the episcopacy to which he is called by Christ, if also this spiritual dimension finds room for the episcopal service.¹¹

When Urs von Arx emphasises that the bishops are primarily responsible for testifying the unity and catholicity in their local churches, he, at the same time, refers to a special Old Catholic understanding of the bishop’s task: On the one hand the bishop is interlaced with the college of presbyters, who exercise at his commissioning and under his *episkopé* ‘quasi-episcopal’ functions in parishes as parts of the *ecclesia localis*, and who especially in the celebration of the eucharist take his place; on the other hand he is interlaced with the whole local church, which is represented by the synod.¹² When most of the Old Catholic churches speak about their ‘episcopal and synodical structures’ they want to express this cross-linking of the bishop, the college of presbyters and the synod. In the interpretation of Urs von Arx this ecclesiological ‘cross-linking’ also means the personal, collegial and communal dimension of *episkopé*. From

¹⁰ Von Arx, ‘Ein “Petrusamt”’, p. 10.

¹¹ Cf. Günter Esser, ‘Blick auf “Porvoo” aus alt-katholischer Sicht’, *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 61 (2003), pp. 8–10, at p. 9.

¹² Cf. von Arx, ‘Ein “Petrusamt”’, pp. 10–11.

an Old Catholic point of view, the bishop is neither a ‘monarch’ nor merely executing the orders of a synod.¹³

The responsibility of the bishop beyond the local church

The Old Catholic view of *communio ecclesiarum* as a communion of local catholic churches and, accordingly, the Old Catholic conception of the task of bishops correspond to the idea of the *collegium episcoporum*. This means: not only have the bishops the first responsibility for keeping unity and catholicity within their diocese, but they also have a responsibility for the universal church. The IBC Statute formulates such an *episkopé* like this: The bishops ‘are at the intersection of primary belonging, as individuals, to their local or national church on the one hand, and of taking, as a college, primary responsibility for the fellowship and communion of the local and national churches on the other hand’.¹⁴ *Collegium* means a body of leaders of local churches enjoying equal rights. Standing within a conciliar process, they discuss problems and look for solutions in questions of unity, faith or discipline which concern the communion. This conciliar decision-making is an important structural principle of the local church ecclesiology and expresses the fact that the bishops and their churches are conscious of their communion with each other. The consciousness of communion expresses itself in preaching the one catholic and apostolic faith, in defining it, in experiencing it concretely and, if necessary, in defending it. Conciliar decision-making also means to fight for the truth in the church and to fight for solutions in conflict situations. This can lead the communion sometimes to the painful experience of seemingly insurmountable barriers, as has become obvious in the Old Catholic discussion of women’s ordination.

At this point it seems necessary to have a look at the legal structure of the Union of Utrecht which is different from the ecclesiological structure of the ancient church, because a union of independent (in the sense of autonomous) local churches never existed in the ancient church. So the question is: What is the ecclesiological meaning of the Union of Utrecht, and what legal status has its Bishops’ Conference, the IBC? In the last decades we have had a lot of discussion about this legal aspect, usually released by

¹³ Cf. von Arx, ‘Ein “Petrusamt”’, p. 11.

¹⁴ ‘Statute’, p. 30, para. A.4.

conflicts of local churches with the Union. You often could hear the key word of the 'autonomous local church', which regulates its affairs alone and independently. Nobody from outside is allowed to influence it.

Without any doubts, the Union of Utrecht was not established as a juridical communion at the bishops' meeting in 1889; it does not have a jurisdictional authority over the member churches. The Union of Utrecht, therefore, is not a church province in the classical sense, nor a metropolitan federation of dioceses as for example Canterbury or York. You can call the Archbishop of Utrecht *primus inter pares*, but 'only' because he has the function of a chairman of the IBC. And if Old Catholics grant the rank of an 'honorary primate' to him, then only because the Archbishop of Utrecht represents the church going back to St Willibrord, which has continuously maintained the catholic and apostolic tradition and has directly or indirectly passed on the historic episcopate to all other Old Catholic churches. What the bishops determined in Utrecht 1889 was an agreement in most of the important questions of faith, including the questions which concerned the Eucharist. By this agreement the bishops tightened at the same time the fundamental catholic unity among themselves. More was not possible because of the different backgrounds of the churches which were represented at Utrecht. Each of them brought her own history, theology and spirituality into the new Union. So the Declaration of Utrecht needs to be understood as an agreement only about the fundamental catholic unity by the involved bishops and the manner of putting it into practice.

Kurt Stalder, a former Old Catholic professor in Bern, was right in his conclusion that this agreement had a different meaning for the German Old Catholic bishop Josef Hubert Reinkens, for Eduard Herzog, the Swiss Christ-Catholic bishop, and for the Dutch bishops. Especially, the Dutch bishops were conscious that the church unity could not be made or negotiated, but only declared if it was really given. And at the same time they saw a very special responsibility for upholding the inheritance of the church. This attitude was surely shaped by their antagonized history with the Roman Catholic church and, as a result, by their ecclesial isolation. They would have felt guilty if they had taken up or maintained communion with ecclesial groups which changed the catholic faith. Therefore, they had to discuss all statements and actions of the German and Swiss Old Catholics which caused their misgivings and examine whether unity could still be ascertained. Herzog and Reinkens, on the other hand, had to find out whether their attempts to refer to older traditions by building up a modern form of the church would be accepted by the Dutch bishops. But

both sides – the Dutch bishops on the one hand and Herzog and Reinkens on the other – presupposed a fundamental agreement in faith despite of all their questions. They only had to check whether this presupposition was justified or not.¹⁵ Thus the Union of Utrecht was not founded as a formal communion of churches in the sense that this union would have a special authority inward or outward, but in the sense of recognizing the existing unity in faith and the wish to live this communion of faith in the best possible way.

If the conciliar decision-making, especially that of the *collegium episcoporum*, belongs to the main principles of local church ecclesiology to which the Old Catholic churches refer, the question must be raised, how such a decision-making takes place and how there can be a legally binding decision for the member churches of the Union. In other words: how strong is the autonomy of the local and/or national churches in their relation to the Union as such?

Both Kurt Stalder¹⁶ and Urs von Arx¹⁷ have convincingly stated that the Union of Utrecht is not only a loose Union of independent local churches based on the same catholic faith and similar ecclesial structures but actually also a juridical communion, and this for ecclesiological reasons. Because each (local) church is fully *the* church, the mutual identity must be confirmed by the way churches which have established a contact among themselves, deal with one another, i.e. by means of mutual sharing of whatever is deemed necessary. For the same reason each bishop as leader of ‘his’ church is also responsible for every other church. In other words: Whenever the bishops assume their responsibility for the *communio ecclesiarum* in a collegial manner, this does not imply a non-committal declaration of intent, but an ecclesiological commitment. ‘[E]verything a bishop does as a bishop’, within his own local church or with a view of the *communio ecclesiarum*, always has ‘in some sense a juridical character’.¹⁸ And Urs von Arx explains that according to the ‘Agreement of Utrecht’,

¹⁵ Cf. Kurt Stalder, ‘Der ekklesiologische und kirchenrechtliche Gehalt der Utrechter Union der altkatholischen Kirchen’, in: Kurt Stalder, *Die Wirklichkeit Christi erfahren. Ekklesiologische Untersuchungen und ihre Bedeutung für die Existenz von Kirche heute* (Zürich: Benziger, 1984), pp. 193–227, at pp. 198–199.

¹⁶ See previous note.

¹⁷ Cf. Urs von Arx, ‘Der ekklesiologische Charakter der Utrechter Union’, *IKZ* 84 (1994), pp. 20–61.

¹⁸ Stalder, ‘Der ekklesiologische und kirchenrechtliche Gehalt’, p. 203.

the Union is first of all a communion of bishops, but as they act as a body of leaders who represent their local churches, it is legitimate to see the Union of Utrecht also as a communion of churches.¹⁹

The place where the Old Catholic bishops take their collegial responsibility, is the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference (IBC). 'The conciliar unity and committed communion of autonomous catholic churches – be they individual dioceses or national unions of dioceses – is expressed in the bishops' synodical assemblies, i.e. the IBC meetings.'²⁰ Thus the IBC has the highest authority within the Union of Utrecht in all questions which concern 'the maintenance of communion'. It also has the task of responding 'to controversial matters of faith and the ensuing morality as well as to matters of order'. Accordingly it can issue 'declarations of faith and principle on behalf of the Union, if inquiries or the circumstances so require'. In the ecumenical context the IBC has to regulate 'relationships to other churches and religious bodies', as far as it concerns the Union. And finally 'it decides about the reception of a bishop into the IBC' or 'the admission of a church to the Union of Utrecht'.²¹ The IBC has also the duty of surveillance: 'it ascertains whether a bishop has gravely harmed the confession of the "Declaration of Utrecht", the catholicity of ministry, doctrine, and worship, or this "Statute", or has seriously violated the moral order, and determines whether he ought to be deprived of membership in the IBC'. And it is its obligation to initiate, 'whenever possible, a process of discussion ... in universal Old Catholic discussion forums' to start the conciliar decision-making process within the Union if urgent questions for the life or the existence of the church communion are to be solved.²²

Does this ecclesiological position of the IBC rule out the conciliar decision-making within the local churches? Beyond all polemics which were manifest in conflict situations again and again – often the IBC was called an 'enemy' of the local churches – it honestly must be said: The opposite is the case. Only the IBC decisions can enable common responsibility within the local churches. This responsibility within the local churches

¹⁹ Von Arx, 'Der ekklesiologische Charakter', p. 23. Cf. Urs von Arx's synopsis of the 1889, 1952 and 1974 texts of the *Vereinbarung* (Agreement) of the Utrecht Convention, in: von Arx, 'Der ekklesiologische Charakter', p. 50.

²⁰ 'Statute', p. 30, para. A.4.

²¹ Cf. 'Statute', p. 32, paras B.3.a–f.

²² 'Statute', p. 32, paras B.3.g–h.

becomes effective in the process of reception. Accordingly the IBC statute formulates: 'The reception by the church is a manifestation that the decisions of the bishops, prepared and taken in a comprehensive conciliar process, have been initiated by the Spirit of God and correspond to the will of God for the mission of his Church. Reception therefore includes the participation and joint responsibility of the baptized (clergy and laity) in this process both within each local or national church (synods or other responsible organs) and within the Union of Utrecht as a whole. But being a process led by the Spirit of God, it cannot comprehensively, let alone conclusively, be put in juridical terms'.²³

The end of this quotation shows the limits of this kind of conciliar decision-making. When the reception of such a resolution would not take place, whatever the reasons may be, this process of common truth- or decision-finding would have to start again, perhaps under consideration of the criteria which led to the non-acceptance of such a resolution. Admittedly an arduous and time-consuming procedure. But it corresponds to our ecclesiological understanding of local church theology. Certainly it can also occur that the reception does not take place in only one local or national church. Then the fundamental question must be allowed, and I agree with Urs von Arx, whether in such a case, in which a church places itself in opposition to the other churches of the communion, continued membership of the Union is possible or whether it would be much more honest to suspend it at least for a certain period.²⁴

Looking at the Union of Utrecht as a whole and its ecclesiological structures, I agree with Urs von Arx who says about possible or, in the view of some Old Catholics, desirable structural changes: 'Where conflicts emerge, hierarchical (a superimposed IBC institution over against a member church) or democratic (a majority of bishops over against a minority) mechanisms of decision-making would probably destroy the ... ecclesial character of the Union of Utrecht and thus the Old Catholic witness to what the church is.'²⁵

²³ 'Statute', p. 30–31, para. A.4.1.

²⁴ Cf. von Arx, 'Der ekklesiologische Charakter', p. 35.

²⁵ Von Arx, 'Der ekklesiologische Charakter', p. 36.

3. Local Church Ecclesiology and Primacy

Finally, there remains the necessity of giving an account of the Old Catholic understanding of the relationship between the local church, episcopacy and primacy. The 'Declaration of Utrecht' (1889) had formulated: We 'reject as contradicting the faith of the ancient Church and destroying her constitution, the Vatican decrees, promulgated July 18, 1870, concerning the infallibility and the universal episcopate or ecclesiastical plenitude of power of the Roman Pope. This, however, does not prevent us from acknowledging the historic primacy which several ecumenical councils and the Fathers of the ancient Church with the assent of the whole Church have attributed to the Bishop of Rome by recognizing him as *primus inter pares* [first among equals].'²⁶

However, the bishops, who were assembled in Utrecht, did not articulate how they understood this 'historic primacy' of the Roman bishop, which the first ecumenical council had treated and which was confirmed again by the first council of Constantinople in connection with the promotion of the bishop of Constantinople. Nevertheless, there was never a uniform opinion of understanding this 'priority' of the Roman bishop in the ancient church. And the more the bishops of Rome tried to develop and strengthen their special position hierarchically and juridically, the more the protest and the refusal of such a tendency increased. Also the separation of the church in East and West in 1054, which brought to an end a longer process of alienation, without any doubts had one of its main causes in the Roman bishops' claims for universal juridical primacy.

But how could a primacy be understood, which is acceptable even to the Old Catholics? First of all we have to realise that there were such 'primatial structures' even in the church of the earliest time: metropolitan federations and patriarchates. In these structures also the bishop of Rome had such a primatial function as 'Patriarch of the West', without prejudice to larger Roman claims and later dogmatic definitions. But from the Old Catholic point of view, all these primatial functions are only acceptable when conceived from the perspective of the local church as being the fundamental ecclesial entity in the universal communion of churches. This applies to each *primus inter pares*, accordingly also to the function of the Roman bishop in a universal context.

²⁶ 'Statute', Appendix: 'The Declaration of Utrecht', p. 40, nr. 2.

Here we must look again at the elements which are fundamental for the ecclesiology of the local church: collegiality of the bishops and conciliar decision-making. In consequence of this ecclesiology of the local church, the carrier of a primatial function or the *primus inter pares* on every level of communion(s) of local churches has the task of initiating the synodical process of ecclesial decision-making and keeping it going. Urs von Arx is right when he writes that 'primacy has a serving function for the synodical process of the church, whereby church is understood as a structured totality of communions of local churches.'²⁷ Applied to the Roman bishop: On the one hand he is *primus inter pares* in the *collegium episcoporum* into which he is synodically integrated; on the other hand, looking at the structure of the ancient church, he is *primus inter pares* among other church leaders of communions of local churches, i.e. patriarchs or metropolitans. This synodical and collegial aspect remains fundamental and crucial for the acknowledgement of a bishop with primatial functions at the universal church level as well as at the level of smaller communions of local churches. A ministry of leading the church which is performed by a single person standing above the collegial and conciliar network of the local churches, is not acceptable to the Old Catholic churches and their ecclesiology.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Ausgangspunkt der altkatholischen Ekklesiologie ist seit je die Ortskirche, d.h. das Bistum. Sie ist eine Vergegenwärtigung der Einen heiligen, katholischen und apostolischen Kirche des Glaubenssymbols, wie die Präambel des Statuts der in der Utrechter Union vereinigten altkatholischen Bischöfe aus dem Jahr 2000 zeigt. Die Ortskirche ist im vollen Sinn Kirche, was sich in ihrer Vernetzung mit anderen Ortskirchen als *communio ecclesiarum* erweist. Die Universalkirche, verstanden als universale *communio ecclesiarum*, existiert nicht anders als in der Gemeinschaft der Ortskirchen.

Im Schnittpunkt von Ortskirche und Gemeinschaft von Ortskirchen steht der Bischof. Innerhalb der Ortskirche nimmt er zusammen mit den Priestern und der Synode die *Episkopē*, die Verantwortung für die Einheit und das Bleiben in der Wahrheit, wahr, er ist aber auch und mit Nachdruck als Repräsentant Christi und daher als geistlicher Hirte der Gläubigen seiner Kirche zu sehen.

Jeder Bischof trägt aber auch Verantwortung für die Gemeinschaft von Ortskirchen, im altkatholischen Kontext zunächst für die Utrechter Union. Dabei wird klar, dass der Rechtscharakter der Utrechter Union nicht darin liegt, dass die Bischofskonferenz eine jurisdiktionelle Vollmacht gegenüber einem einzelnen Bischof oder einer Mitglieds-

²⁷ Von Arx, 'Ein "Petrusamt"', p. 14.

kirche innehätte, wohl aber darin, dass das Kollegium der Bischöfe in verbindlicher Weise für die Union als Ganzes und so auch wieder für jede einzelne Ortskirche eine Mitverantwortung hat. Wie dies bei Entscheidungsfindungen unter Miteinbezug der ortskirchlichen Organe vor sich geht, umschreibt das Statut, das im weiteren Zusammenhang auch den Prozess der Rezeption von Entscheidungen anspricht.

Im Kontext derartiger konziliarer Bezeugungen der Wahrheit und Entscheidungsfindungen der Bischöfe wäre auch der Primat des römischen Bischofs zu situieren, dessen altkirchliche Gestalt (was immer das heisst) die Altkatholiken stets anerkannt haben. Auf allen Ebenen von Gemeinschaften von Ortskirchen ist die Aufgabe eines Trägers eines Primats, den synodalen Prozess in Gang und zum Abschluss zu bringen. Entscheidend – und das gilt auch für eine Anerkennung des römischen Primats auf universaler Ebene – ist die klare ekklesiologische und rechtliche Integration des Primats in das Geschehen von Synodalität, in dem die Ortskirchen ihre Gemeinschaft zum Ausdruck bringen.