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Autor: Smit, Peter-Ben

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7. The Old Catholic Understanding of Catholicity

Peter-Ben Smit, Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht

The outline of the formal Old Catholic understanding of catholicity should take its starting point in the process of theological and ecclesiological reflection that took place within the Old Catholic Churches of Utrecht as a whole. This process finds its expression in various statements by the central and constitutive organ of the Union of Utrecht, the International Bishops' Conference (IBC), ranging from the 1889 Bishops' Declaration to the current 2000/2001 Statute of the IBC.¹ The clearest ecclesiological reflection within the 2000 IBC Statute appears in its preamble.

Catholicity in the IBC Statute of 2000

Introduction: Historical and Theological Contextualization

The ecclesiological preamble begins by defining the Union of Utrecht:

1. The "Union of Utrecht" is a union of churches and their bishops governing them who are determined to maintain and pass on the faith, worship, and essential structure of the undivided Church of the first millennium. On September 24, 1889, at Utrecht, this determination was recorded in three documents that form the "Convention of Utrecht": the "Declaration", the "Agreement", and the "Regulations". In uniting to form a Bishops' Conference, which other bishops joined later, the full communion of the Churches represented by them found its expression.
2. In the "Declaration of Utrecht", fundamental for Old Catholic doctrine, the communion of the Union of Utrecht, which came into existence in the context of the First Vatican Council, confesses the catholic faith as expressed in the Church in the east and west by the seven Ecumenical Councils. It approves of the historic precedence of the Bishop of Rome as *primus inter pares*, but rejects the papal dogmas of the said council and a number of other papal pronouncements as far as they are at variance with the doctrine of the Ancient Church. It affirms its faith in the essence and mystery of the Eucharist. Furthermore the Union of Utrecht shows its awareness of its obligation to do everything that will help to overcome the divisions in the Church, and, based on the faith of the undivided Church, to seek and declare unity and communion with other Churches.

¹ The statute is found in von Arx and Weyermann, 12–27 (German), 28–42 (English). For a comprehensive overview of the Old Catholic understanding of catholicity, see esp. von Arx, *Was macht*. See also, e.g., *Kirche*, esp. 13–26.

The Ecclesiology of the Old Catholic Tradition

The preamble to the 2000 IBC Statute then continues to recognize that the “Convention of Utrecht” implied a particular ecclesiology. In this context, the Old Catholic notion of catholicity is described as well. As will become clear, the Statute notes the qualitative, quantitative, and soteriological aspects of catholicity while subscribing to a pronounced ecclesiology of the local church, which in turn leads to an Old Catholic obligation of itself to ecumenism:

3. As has been recognized and expressed ever more clearly in the course of time, the Union of Utrecht and the Convention of Utrecht (whose parts “Agreement” and “Regulations” were revised twice in 1952 and 1974) imply a specific ecclesiology.
- 3.1 It [the Declaration] presupposes that each fellowship and communion of people, which by the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and by the outpouring and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit is constituted as a unity in a given place around a bishop with the Eucharist as its center, is a complete church that carries out its tasks autonomously in that given place. Each local church living the common faith and having its indispensable synodal structures, uniting the ordained ministry and the laity, which express her communion and unity, is a representation of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” as confessed by the ecumenical creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381).
- 3.2 Each of them is “catholic” because on the one hand it participates in the whole reality of salvation and truth that comprises God and human beings, heaven and earth, and finds therein its unity, and because, on the other hand, it is linked in unity and communion with other local churches, in which it recognizes its own essence. Thus the catholicity of each local church becomes manifest in the unity and communion with other local churches perceived in faith as being identical in their foundation in the redemptive work of the Triune God. The unity and communion of local churches in their supra-diocesan link – i.e., usually in national churches, ecclesiastical provinces, patriarchates – is a representation of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” as well – however, not as a kind of super-diocese of supra-regional or even universal dimensions, but as a communion of episcopally and synodally organized local churches. It is in this perspective that the relationship between autonomy of the local church (as to the self-government in the broadest sense) and supra-local obligation of each local church (as to the communion of local churches) should be viewed.

That this unity and communion has for a long time not existed universally among all the churches is a consequence of human shortcomings and sin, which eclipses the fact that in Jesus Christ God has reconciled and called to partnership all humans who hear his call. This entails the obligation for each church, in obedience to the will of God and in faithfulness to the common

tradition, to investigate whether existing separations must continue to be regarded as unavoidable or whether, on the contrary, its own catholicity should be recognized in a hitherto separated church.

- 3.3 Each local church is the Body of Christ in which the members, baptized and confirmed in the name of the Holy Trinity and united in the Eucharist, are called, authorized, and sanctified by the various gifts of the Holy Spirit to live a multifaceted common life in *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*. In communion with the other local churches they are the people of that God who has elected Israel to be a sign of salvation and has opened up the blessing promised to Abraham to all peoples in the power of the Gospel. Being the manifestation of the renewal of creation that has its origin in Jesus Christ, it is on the way to its fulfillment, a path which all its members have to walk in repentance and hope.
- 3.4 In continuity with its soteriological-trinitarian foundation, the catholicity of the Church is expressed by those elements and processes which are signified by the comprehensive term “apostolic succession.” This 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. The apostolic succession of the Church requires the full communion of the catholic churches that are headed by the bishops in unison with the college of presbyters and exhibit a synodal structure. It finds its particularly clear expression in the ordination of a locally elected bishop by the other bishops.

Consequences for the Life of the Union of Utrecht

Having outlined the understanding of catholicity and that of ecclesiality in general, the 2000 IBC statute also outlines what this understanding means practically for the life of the Union of Utrecht. The following sections of the statute’s preamble are of relevance:

4. Regarding the Union of Utrecht, all this means that it is primarily the task and service of the bishops to maintain the catholicity of the church in the unity of the tradition of faith, to respond to new problems as they arise, and to take decisions concerning the relationships to other churches. For they are at the intersection of primarily 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. The conciliar unity and committed communion of autonomous catholic churches – be they individual dioceses or national unions of dioceses – is expressed in the bishops’ synodal assemblies, i.e., the IBC meetings.

- 4.1 The reception by the church is a manifestation that the decisions of the bishops, prepared and taken in a comprehensive conciliar process, have been initiated by the Spirit of God and correspond to the will of God for the mission of his Church. Reception therefore includes the participation and joint responsibility of the baptized (clergy and laity) in this process both within each local or national church (synods or other responsible organs) and within the Union of Utrecht as a whole. But being a process led by the Spirit of God, it cannot comprehensively, let alone conclusively, be put into juridical terms or mechanical finalization.
5. Wherever, congruent with the ecumenical self-obligation of the Union of Utrecht, communion with churches outside the Union of Utrecht does exist or seems possible and necessary on account of theological clarifications, the bishops of the Union have to take care, in consequence of the explications above, that mutual consultations be initiated and maintained with these churches.
6. In order to maintain their communion and to fulfill common tasks, the bishops of the Union of Utrecht establish, in accordance with the foundations above, the following Order and thereafter the required Rules. By doing so they presuppose that they as well as all the faithful be led by that mind that has been expressed in the words of the holy bishops Cyprian of Carthage and Ignatius of Antioch: Do not decide without the counsel of the presbyterium and the consent of the people (*Ep.* 14:4); do nothing without the bishop (*Phld.* 7:2).

In this way the IBC Statute outlines the Old Catholic understanding of catholicity within the context of general Old Catholic self-understanding. Given that the IBC Statute is binding for the members of the IBC, its statute's outline of catholicity may be seen as representative for Old Catholic thought on this subject.