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Opening Address: 80 Years Bonn Agreement, 10 Years Charta Oecumenica

Joris A.O.L. Vercammen

Eighty years of the Bonn Agreement offer us the opportunity to reflect on our relationship. The Old Catholic – Anglican Theological Conference at Neustadt offered an excellent space for reflection on the way both communions of Churches will relate to one another in the future.

The Bonn Agreement has only three sentences. It is the shortest ecumenical agreement ever made, and some people are convinced that it has proven to be effective exactly for that reason. Nevertheless, the reality of the Anglican – Old Catholic relationship has shown that there is still a need to explore the content behind the short statement and to gain more in-depth knowledge about the ecclesiological convictions on which it is based, *and* to draw organizational consequences. Precisely on this point the work of the Anglican – Old Catholic International Coordinating Council (AOCICC) is extremely important.

But we do not only celebrate 80 years of the Bonn Agreement in 2011, we also celebrate ten years of the Charta Oecumenica.¹ Both the Church of England and the Churches of the Union of Utrecht have signed up to this major ecumenical declaration. None of us could think about our own vocation without taking into account the challenges of the Charta Oecumenica. On the point of the cooperation between churches, the Charta confronts us with some interesting questions and approved commitments.

The Charta states: ‘The most important task of the churches in Europe is the common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all.’ (chap. 2) It is appropriate, in my opinion, to emphasize the fact that only a *common* proclamation of the gospel will have that authority and that impact on society that we would all wish the gospel to have. The commitment that follows this conviction is to discuss all plans for evangelization with other churches.

And the Charta also states: ‘It is important to acknowledge the spiritual riches of the different Christian traditions, to learn from one another

¹ Conference of European Churches, *Charta Oecumenica. Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe*. (Strasbourg, 2001).

and so to receive these gifts.’ (chap. 3) It adds the commitment ‘to overcome the feeling of self-sufficiency within each church, and to eliminate prejudices; to seek mutual encounters and to be available to help one another.’

And in chapter 4 the signatories commit themselves ‘to act together at all levels of church life wherever conditions permit...’, and in chapter 6: ‘in the event of controversies, particularly when divisions threaten in questions of faith and ethics, to seek dialogue and discuss the issues together in the light of the Gospel.’ And a last example: the churches commit themselves ‘to seek agreement with one another on the substance and goals of our social responsibility, and to represent in concert, as far as possible, the concerns and visions of the churches vis-à-vis the secular European institutions.’ (chap. 7)

Against the background of these commitments we can conclude that on the one hand there has already been a lot achieved in the way of bilateral contacts and collaboration at grassroots level. On the other hand there are not that many joint projects where cooperation and joint responsibility have been formally organized. There are a few examples where a formal agreement offers a strong basis for real cooperation, and examples include the Anglican Parish in Prague, the Mission to Seafarers in Vlissingen and the joint Airport Ministry at Amsterdam Airport. But there could be more of them.

Even though I would like there to be more of them, these small projects offer us the opportunity to learn how to cooperate in an effective way. It is a matter of experience that within those small projects one is often confronted with questions and problems which one did not foresee. This shows that we need these projects as learning spaces. I am grateful for them and I hope that their number may grow. I think both the AOCICC as well as the different branches of the St. Willibrord Society can play a significant role in discovering new opportunities.

But there must be more! Recalling the last joint theological conference at Hinsley Hall in Leeds in 2005, it would be possible to mention its positive conclusions.²

But the conference also concluded that there still remain questions to be solved! One of the questions that was mentioned, for example, is how

² See *Towards further Convergence: Anglican and Old Catholic Ecclesiologies. The Papers of the Anglican – Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference*, ed. by URS VON ARX, PAUL AVIS and MATTIJS PLOEGER, Beiheft zu IKZ 96 (2006), 184 pages.

‘full communion’ relates to the goal of the ‘full visible unity’ of Christ’s church. Another important question is about the model we must look for which would enable us to be united but not absorbed. And there is also the question of whether the Anglican church would be really open to traditions that are not Anglican at all, and how a deeper unity between Anglicans and Old Catholics would affect our relationships with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Enough interesting questions not just for further conferences – although they will not be solved there. They will only be solved by courageous behaviour by bishops as well as by the whole church. But the Leeds Conference also concluded that Anglicans and Old Catholics are both willing and able to preach the gospel in a pluralistic and increasingly secular European society. This conclusion is more than a self-evident statement, because it implies an intention as well. Taking this seriously, both churches cannot do otherwise than work to develop their partnership. And when the conference stated that Anglicans and Old Catholics ought to work together more closely than they currently do, it listed some interesting practical ideas that still have to be worked out.³

I conclude in quoting Paul Avis in his lecture about the vocation of Anglicanism: ‘The grace to go the same way with one another without obstacles put by pressure or force, that is the vocation of Anglicanism.’⁴ I think that Anglicans and Old Catholics could meet one another on this spiritual level that has to do with grace, with the grace to be one. I am convinced that it is this oneness that is the significant contribution we are able to make to the evangelization of our continent.

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³ See JORIS VERCAMMEN, ‘Common Witness of Anglicans and Old-Catholics on the European Continent’. Address to the open meeting of Affirming Catholics in General Synod, July 9th, 2006.

⁴ DICK SCHOON, ‘Report of the Plenary Discussions’, *IKZ* 96 (2006), pp. 174–178.