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Old Catholic Charism

Conclusion of the Symposium for Ecumenical Guests on Saturday, 20 September 2014

Joris Vercammen

1. The Old Catholic Tradition

Ecumenism is at the heart of the Union of Utrecht. We inherited it from the Old Catholic movement that was an ecumenical movement before even the word was invented. Within this movement one finds one of the very first attempts to think about breaking through confessional borders in order to restore the unity of the church. This drive for restoring the unity among Christians was related to the need for Christians to open themselves to modernity. Openness to modern developments wasn't seen as a threat to the Christian faith. On the contrary, it was seen as a challenge to discover God's creativity in modernity, without being that naive to become blind for the evil side.

But that is not the only legacy we try to take care of. There is also the spiritual heritage of the Dutch church. Our church cannot be understood without taking into account the context of the Counter-Reformation. Leading church people of the eighteenth century had the deep desire to give shape to a church that would be a real Dutch catholic church, rooted in the Dutch spiritual tradition of devotion and prayer as it was expressed in Jansenism.

From both sources we earn the reference to the *ecclesia primitiva*, witnessing to a catholicity understood as the commitment of a local church to live the solidarity with the Universal Church and global Christianity. The example of the Early Church tells us that this is possible without neglecting the particular context in which the gospel is lived in the first place. The local church is the concrete spot in which the reconciliation that is proclaimed by the gospel must become real and communion must be realised.

Catholicity is about communion among Christians as they participate in the communion of the Trinity. Catholicity tells us that the church is both a human and divine reality, an incarnated reality. It finds its expression in our faith in the sacraments being the real presence of the Lord in the con-

text of a community of faithful, in our conviction that ministry is given as a symbol of unity and with the eucharist in which communion among faithful and with the Trinity comes into being and is celebrated in thankfulness and praise. This catholicity is at the heart of the church and therefore it will play a dominant role in its future. This is the catholicity we are called to serve, because of our commitment to proclaim the gospel and to promote unity among Christians.

2. From Tradition to Spirituality

Ecumenism, devotion and catholicity are the three fundamental aspects of the Old Catholic contribution to the church. They can be translated into a way of living and believing that is characterised by a great involvement both with humankind and with God's interests. Therefore, the Old Catholic tradition provides us with the guidelines we need to venture into life and into the world. Our tradition invites us to take other people and the world itself as seriously as God takes them. The Old Catholic way of being Christian can be characterised by three themes: open-mindedness, commitment and participation. These three are the translation of the quoted fundamental aspects into a concrete faithful attitude.

Open-mindedness or susceptibility means the readiness to be open to all people and all kind of worldly developments that cross one's path. It is the art to confront yourself and the church with them in the spirit of what we read in the first letter to the Christians of Thessaloniki: "Test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1. Thess. 5,21). On the other hand it means to be susceptible to the Word of the Lord. In order to discover what is really good, one will need God's Word that is the guarantee for human dignity and respect for creation.

Commitment means that one is ready to get involved in a solidarity that will lead to communion. Christians don't run away from the need of the other, nor from the questions cultural and social developments bring with them. On the contrary, they are available for the work of discernment that must be done. Solidarity with people and their issues has priority. This solidarity must lead to building communion, to which all human beings are called. In Jesus we have seen how the Lord himself lived the solidarity with people and their issues and how he wants to build on the communion with them. Therefore, it is in the communion among humans that we may discover the image of the resurrected One. We believe that we will meet the Lord on the way to communion.

Participation is the third theme. Faith is actually nothing but “co-operating with God”. God is commitment in himself. Believing means answering the invitation to participate in this commitment. Participating in God’s life-in-commitment: that is faith. To participate in this divine commitment is pure grace: it is a gift, a gift for life. The church is an expression of this life-in-commitment. And as we all are invited to participate in God’s life, we will collaborate with one another on an equal basis. God counts on all of us and considers all of us. That reality has some interesting consequences for the life and the structure of the communion of Christians, the church.

Perhaps this Old Catholic calling can be expressed as a specific charism. Should one want to name an “Old Catholic charism”, then it would be that faith always means heart and soul commitment to humankind and creation, because God enters into the same deep commitment to the salvation of both humanity and creation. This is the essence of the spirituality of the “trinity” of open-mindedness, commitment and participation.

3. Contributing to the Church with our own Charism

It is with this charism and spirituality that Old Catholics are called to contribute to the Universal Church. This is the way we want to see ourselves: as a particular church with a particular calling, with which we may help to build the future of the church and its visible unity. This spirituality is meant to be a contribution to the unity and catholicity of the church. Let me summarise in this one-liner: Old Catholics exist so that the church might be more “catholic”: that is, better founded both on earth and in heaven.

We are happy to experience how this spirituality of open-mindedness, commitment and participation connects our churches with other churches: with the sister churches within the Union of Utrecht, but also with the Anglican and Orthodox Churches and with the Philippine Independent Church; it also strengthens our involvement in our dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Mariavite Old Catholic Church, the Mar Thoma Church in India and the Church of Sweden.

One senses that this way of treating the world and the church is appreciated by other Christians. This is a sign that Old Catholic churches are called to play this role in the Universal Church. This means that it is not only our co-operation within the Union of Utrecht that is important, but

also our joint ecumenical work. Our charism will lead us again to a role of a bridge-builder.

In our time, in which the Christian world is divided by many moral questions, it is also vital to build a bridge between the so-called “liberals” and “conservatives”. It would be short-sighted to commit ourselves to one of the two directions, both in theology and in ethics. Instead, we should strive to bring both parties closer to each other, and thus help to provide opportunities for exploring all points of view. This task also calls us to the role of the “summoner”, or “convener”, the one who invites others to dialogue on the way to which we are called.

4. “That which has been believed everywhere, always and by all . . .”

Vincent’s counsel encourages us to continue building bridges and seeking communion. The monk of Lérins was seeking a way out for the widely diversified Christianity of his day, which was threatening to fall into total chaos. In our time, too, there is great diversity within Christianity. This is certainly an opportunity, but also a threat. The task is to be clearly connected to each other in our diversity, so that discord and strife do not get the upper hand. The same challenge has to be faced by the world. On this point, the situation of Christianity hardly differs from the position of the world in which it exists. For this reason, God calls Christians, ever more clearly, to point the way to reconciliation, unity and communion, so badly needed by the world. It is our sincere hope to receive the grace to contribute to this witness of the church.

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