The compatibility of ecumenical dialogues

A case study based on the dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht viewed from an Old Catholic perspective

Urs von Arx

1. Introduction

The Union of Utrecht was established in 1889 as a communion of episcopally and synodically organized churches, outside the obedience of the Pope, and rejecting the papal claims of universal jurisdiction and doctrinal infallibility made in 1870 at the First Vatican Council. From the outset, it has never ceased to seek communion with other churches which shared its proclaimed mission and identity: to be the Church of Christ living in recognizable continuity with the so-called Undivided Ancient Church of the first millennium. The features of this continuity were to be found firstly in the faith of the Ancient Church as set out in texts such as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed or the dogmatic decisions of the Ecumenical Synods; secondly in worship with the Eucharist as its focus; and thirdly in church order with episcopacy in apostolic succession, seen as an indispensable element of the overall apostolicity of the church.

The first response to this programmatic intention came from members of the Anglican Communion (Church of England, The Episcopal Church) and of Orthodox churches (Russian and other). It is remarkable that this response began to manifest itself even before the formal establishment of Old Catholic churches in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. The bishops of these Old Catholic churches were integrated into the Apostolic Succession thanks to the Church of Utrecht, which itself had been living in separation from Rome since the 1720s.

The Old Catholic intent of seeking rapprochement and finally ecclesial communion with Anglicans and Orthodox has over the years led to formal dialogues with these churches. The circumstances of the two dialogues and the subject matter they have treated may serve as an illustration of two distinct patterns of dialogue with Old Catholic participation. This presentation is meant to serve as a guide to characterise the position of the Old Catholic dialogue with the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in the context of these two patterns.

2. Old Catholic-Anglican dialogue

The history of Anglican-Old Catholic relations and occasional theological exchange dates back to the last third of the nineteenth century. Once the Dutch Old Catholics had officially accepted the validity of Anglican orders in 1925, these pre-existing contacts led to the decision to start a formal dialogue, and this was immediately articulated in a common statement of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference (IBC). In July 1931 there was an official Anglican-Old Catholic conference in Bonn, a location chosen in recognition of the unofficial Bonn Union Conferences of 1874/75, organized and moderated by Professor Döllinger, which were still remembered by Anglicans, Orthodox and Old Catholics. The conference of 1931 – which lasted just one day – produced the Bonn Agreement, with its well-known three-clause text:

1. Each communion recognises the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own.
2. Each communion agrees to admit members of the other communion to participate in the sacraments.
3. Intercommunion does not require from either communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith.[1]

The wording did not really correspond to what had been envisaged a year earlier in London during the 1930 Lambeth Conference, when Dutch Old Catholic bishops had met with Anglican and Orthodox representatives with the view of promoting rapprochement among the three traditions. Nor did the text correspond to the amendment proposed by the IBC after the Bonn meeting, which had to be withdrawn because the original version of the Bonn Agreement had already been widely circulated.[2] The Bonn

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[1] Harding Meyer/Lukas Vischer (eds), *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York: Paulist Press/Geneva: WCC, 1984), 37.

[2] Cf. Martien F. G. Parmentier, 'Evangelical Anglicans and Old Catholics in 1931', in: Coen van Kasteel et al. (eds), *Kracht in zwakheid van een kleine wereldkerk. De Oud-Katholieke Unie van Utrecht* (Amersfoort: Stichting Centraal Oud-Katholiek Boekhuis, 1982), 125–144; Urs von Arx, 'The Historical Background to the Bonn Agreement', unpublished paper of the Anglican – Old Catholic Theologians' Conference Leeds, 2005, 33–58 (on the "vision" of a tripartite Old Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox position in the ecumenical movement, dear to many Old Catholics of the last generations). See also Charlotte Methuen, 'The Bonn Agreement and the Cath-

Agreement marked the start of Old Catholic-Anglican intercommunion, or full communion, as it was later termed, in theory with all the member churches of the Anglican communion. I cannot go into details here of what has happily developed in terms of Anglican-Old Catholic communion, especially since the Second World War, although this communion is impaired in some areas because of the inner-Anglican dissension about female clergy and same sex relations (cf. the analogous process in the Union of Utrecht, leading to the "Union of Scranton"[3]). However, one weakness of the Bonn Agreement has never sufficiently been addressed: What are the essentials of the Christian faith, the fundamentals which we believe we are sharing? What does catholicity imply and signify? Much was left unsaid and not clarified in 1931.[4] This probably did not matter, because since the 1870s individual bishops, clergy and people of both churches had been maintaining friendly contacts, and many of the basic tenets of belief were simply deemed to be shared.

3. Old Catholic-Orthodox dialogue

There is an equally long history of Orthodox-Old Catholic relations. We may distinguish various periods of official theological dialogue. Before the First World War two commissions of the Russian Church and the Union of Utrecht, who actually never met, exchanged written statements on the *filioque* issue, the theory of transubstantiation and the status of the Old Catholic orders. In October 1931 there was a two-day conference, again at Bonn, with representatives of the majority of the autocephalous churches (except the Russians), the minutes of which witness to a broad theological agreement. A new phase after the Second World War eventually led to a carefully organized dialogue, now with pan-orthodox representation: from 1975 to 1987, the seven plenary sessions produced twenty-six consensus texts covering the fundamental areas of traditional theology such as trinitarian belief and Christology, with a particular stress

olicization of Anglicanism: Anglicans and Old Catholics in the Lang Papers and the Douglass Papers 1920–1939', *IKZ* 97 (2007) 1–22; Andrew Atherstone, 'Anglicans, Evangelicals, Old Catholics and the Bonn Agreement', *IKZ* 97 (2007) 23–47.

   [3] Cf. 'Kirchliche Chronik', *IKZ* 98 (2008) 242–247; 103 (2013) 233–236.

   [4] A first step to remedy this situation may be 'Belonging together in Europe. A Joint Statement on Aspects of Ecclesiology and Mission' presented by the Anglican – Old Catholic International Coordinating Council, *IKZ* 100 (2010) 140–158.

on ecclesiology, including the seven sacraments.[5] Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue has sought to explore how we perceive and understand the Church as a God-given spiritual reality, in which we seek to live as a worldwide family of local churches that are responsible for their unity and communion in historical continuity with the Apostolic foundation. The dialogue texts were to a large extent written in a somewhat scholastic terminology, which at that time was already being criticized and in decline. Nonetheless, they make clear that the ecclesiology shared by the two churches is an example of "liturgical" or "eucharistic" ecclesiology. It takes as its starting point the local church [the diocese], which has its focus in the Eucharist presided by the bishop; it then conceives the various extensions of regional and universal communion of local churches, seen as theologically identical entities and thus as realizations of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Triune God. In this view, the fundamental synodality between local churches is clearly expressed, whereas the particular form of synodality within the local church remains less developed.

For the Old Catholics the dialogue with the Orthodox has set a new standard for bilateral dialogues. A specific novelty lies in the fact that a consensus had to be – and was – found in an encounter between an Eastern and a Western expression of the common tradition of the so-called Undivided Church of the first millennium. This, of course, corresponded to what Old Catholic statements had always claimed to be their specific task and vocation.

Another new phenomenon was a concerted interior Old Catholic process: two sessions of the International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference engaged with the dialogue in 1976 and 1988; and between 1990 and 1998 all the synods or equivalent bodies of the member churches of the Union of Utrecht put the dialogue texts on their agenda and, with the exception of the German Old Catholic Church, which asked for a series of explicit corrections, affirmed their basic agreement to the texts and the goal of the dialogue while critically commenting on or raising questions about some assertions of the dialogue texts.[6]

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[5] Cf. Urs von Arx (ed.), *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis. Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-altkatholischen Dialogs 1975–1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung* (Beiheft zu IKZ 79; Bern: Stämpfli, 1989).

[6] Nothing of the kind happened or was deemed necessary regarding the Bonn Agreement of 1931.

I am not going to discuss the reasons why the Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue, which aims to recognise each other as being the Church of Christ and living in communion, has not so far been able to achieve these goals. I simply want to stress the fact that this dialogue has served as an exercise for clarifying the perspective of Old Catholic theology as it seeks to contribute to the search for the One Church according to the programmatic principles and intentions of the 1870s. This is so, as I understand it, irrespective of the inconclusive outcome of the dialogue and of the complex character of much of its phraseology.

4. Old Catholic-Roman Catholic dialogue

The impact of shared Eucharistic ecclesiology can be seen in two later bilateral dialogues of the Union of Utrecht: with the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and with the Church of Sweden on the other.

The Report of the International Roman Catholic-Old Catholic Dialogue Commission, "The Church and Ecclesial Communion", which concluded after eleven sessions (2004–2009), was published in 2009. The main body of the text produces a common vision of a Eucharistic ecclesiology, termed "Communion ecclesiology". It integrates earlier statements by national bilateral dialogues with regard to a shared understanding of the sacraments, and it deals with a number of still open issues such as the ordination of women, the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950, and the position of the universal primacy of the bishop of Rome within the framework of a worldwide communion of local churches. On this last point, the Report is analogous to the Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue texts from Munich 1982 to Chieti 2016. The broad consideration of other bilateral and multilateral documents is another characteristic of the Report, in contrast to the Orthodox-Old Catholic consensus texts, which include a rich tapestry of exclusively patristic citations. At the International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference in 2009, representatives from churches with which the Old Catholics are in communion or are seeking communion were invited to comment on the 2009 report.

Some of the open issues have been the object of a second mandate of the Commission. This has focused on deepening the study of the primatial position of the Pope in the context of the basic synodality of the communion of local Churches and on the nature of binding teaching and infalli-

bility in the Church.[7] So far no Old Catholic bodies such as pastoral conferences, diocesan synods or the International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference (including representatives from churches with which the Old Catholics are in communion or are seeking communion) have started a process of discernment and reception of the second report of 2016.

5.   Old Catholic dialogue with the Church of Sweden

The official dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden involved twelve sessions from 2005 to 2013. Its final report, "Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion", offers a similar outline of a Eucharistic ecclesiology.[8] It is therefore possible to make a comparison with the dialogues the Old Catholic Church undertook with the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches and to identify specific emphases or hidden inconsistencies.[9] The Utrecht-Uppsala Report has certain distinctive characteristics: two long, parallel sections present the history, the life and the ecumenical concerns of each church, provided for the readers in the two churches who know little of the other church. A concluding section identifies "[t]hemes for ongoing consideration following from the common [ecclesiological] vision"; these pertain to the significance of the seven Ecumenical Councils, the issue of the *filioque,* and the problems of transitivity, or rather of non-transitivity: the obvious case is the recognition that the Union of Utrecht does not intend to be in communion with the other Nordic and Baltic churches which together with the Church of Sweden and the Anglican churches of the British Isles make up the so-called Porvoo Communion. Likewise, the Union of

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[7]   The outcome of the entire dialogue has been published as *Kirche und Kirchengemeinschaft. Erster und Zweiter Bericht der Internationalen Römisch-Katholisch – Altkatholischen Dialogkommission 2009 und 2016* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2017).

[8]   Angela Berlis (ed.), *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion. Report from the official dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden (2013). With a revised translation "Utrecht und Uppsala auf dem Weg zu kirchlicher Gemeinschaft" (2018)* (Beiheft zu IKZ 108; Bern: Stämpfli, 2018). The translation into German by Joel Gerber was revised by Urs von Arx.

[9]   See Urs von Arx, 'Kirchliche Gemeinschaft auf der Basis einer eucharistischen Ortskirchentheologie – illustriert am [altkatholischen] Dialog mit der Orthodoxen Kirche, der Römisch-Katholischen Kirche und der Kirche von Schweden', *IKZ* 105 (2015) 259–287.

Utrecht does not see itself being in communion with other churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

The immediate goal of the Utrecht-Uppsala dialogue was achieved in November 2016, when the Archbishop of Uppsala and the Archbishop of Utrecht signed an agreement acknowledging the ecclesial communion of the two churches. The necessary preceding interior Old Catholic process of discernment and affirmation was, however, somewhat fragmented.[10]

6. Ecclesial communion by way of transitivity processes (i. e. without formal bilateral dialogue)

I address the case where a process of transitivity has led to ecclesial communion. The model for transitivity works like this: two churches (say A and B) are in communion with one another. If one of these churches (A) is in communion with a third church (C), we might expect that B should be in communion with C as well. This would be a process of transitivity. The obvious requirement, or at least the tacit assumption, is that the theological basis for communion is recognized and shared by the three churches.

The principle of transitivity came into play when in 1965 the IBC surprised the participants of the International Old Catholic Congress at Vienna with the statement that the Old Catholics were now in communion with the Philippine Independent Church (Iglesia Filipina Independiente [IFI]), on the one hand, and with the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church (Iglesia Española Reformada Episcopal [IERE]) and the Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Evangelical Church (Igreja Lusitana Católica Apostólica Evangélica [ILCAE]), on the other.[11] In these cases, the Old Catholic side

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[10] See Berlis (ed.), *Utrecht and Uppsala* (as note 8), 42–44.

[11] Since 1980, the two Iberian Churches have formally belonged to the Anglican Communion and are extra-provincial dioceses under the metropolitical authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury.
There were early Old Catholic contacts with breakaway movements within the Catholic Church in these (and other countries such as Haiti, Mexico), but the contact with and support from Irish, US American or Central American bishops of the Anglican Communion has been much more consistent: (a) In 1884 the Spanish Bishop Cabrera was consecrated by Benjamin, Lord Plunket, Bishop of Meath (the son of William Plunket, Archbishop of Dublin); and seventy years later, in 1954, Bishop Molina was consecrated by James McCann, also Bishop of Meath; (b) in 1958 the first Lusitanian bishop was consecrated by three Anglican bishops including the Bishop of Meath. Concerning the earlier contacts of the IFI and its organizer, Gregorio Aglipay, with Old Catholics, especially with the Swiss bishop, Eduard Herzog, cf. Peter-Ben Smit,

had not been engaged in any preceding bilateral dialogue. It trusted and embraced the respective concordats of the Episcopal Church in the USA[12] and of the Church of England, and it considered this a fully appropriate decision, all the more as in both cases the Anglican side was acting on the basis of the wording of the Bonn Agreement of 1931.[13]

7. Old Catholic dialogue with the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar

I now turn to the dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church (hereafter MTSC) and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht. The fact that both the Church of England and the Episcopal Church of the USA had entered into a relationship of full communion with the MTSC on the basis of the Bonn Agreement played an essential role when in the middle of the first decade of this (twenty-first) century the first contacts between the MTSC and the Union of Utrecht were established:

> The Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht are both in full communion with the Churches of the Anglican Communion. Therefore, the commission concentrated upon certain areas of discussion, either because these seemed potentially controversial, or because the commission hoped that a discussion would be particularly enriching. A systematic approach, however, which deals with all the aspects of the faith, seemed not necessary.[14]

Old Catholic and Philippine Independent Ecclesiologies in History. The Catholic Church in Every Place (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Wim H. de Boer/Peter-Ben Smit, *In necessariis unitas. Hintergründe zu den ökumenischen Beziehungen zwischen der* Iglesia Filipina Independiente, *den Kirchen der Anglikanischen Gemeinschaft und den altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union* (Frankfurt a. M.: P. Lang, 2012).

[12] In 1954 the IERE and 1961 the IFI were integrated into Apostolic Succession through the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA/PECUSA (since 2006 called The Episcopal Church/TEC).

[13] It might be added that the Church of Sweden has been in communion with the IFI since 1995 (by a concordat) and with the two Iberian Churches since 1998 (by an extension of Porvoo); cf. Christopher Meakin, 'Utrecht and Uppsala together', in: Berlis (ed.), *Utrecht and Uppsala* (as note 8), 47–58: 51.

[14] MS 5.1/DD 52. I give two sets of references respectively: (a) to the numbered sections of one of the three dialogue statements in English, i. e. the 'Santhigiri Statement' of 2011, published in: *IKZ* 102 (2012) 315–320 [hereafter SS]; the 'Hippolytus Statement' of 2012, *IKZ* 103 (2013) 324–331 [hereafter HS]; the 'Munnar Statement' of 2014, in: *IKZ* 105 (2015), 159–166 [hereafter MS]; (b) the page number of the complete edition (with a German translation and an introduction by Adrian Suter): *Alt-*

Considering the fact that the MTSC does not stand in a Latin Catholic tradition of the Church, shaped (or not) by various types of Reformation or by responses to the First Vatican Council, it is a notable and surprising achievement that the theological dialogue exploring the common basis for ecclesial communion between the MTSC and the Union of Utrecht appears to have been concluded in only three sessions in less than four years. An explanation is explicitly given in the Statements themselves: the Commission undertook its work in an atmosphere of growing mutual trust and understanding.

However important this particular point is, it cannot be adequately communicated to readers who were not included in the entire dialogue process, not least because the papers presented by the individual members of the Commission and the oral exchanges which ensued from them are inaccessible. Nor are any minutes available, nor are there any references to official documents exchanged and discussed between the member of the Commission (cf. SS 3/DD 19–20). Thus, the process of Receptive Ecumenism, which presumably took place in the course of the dialogue, cannot be adequately discerned and perceived by later readers of the document.[15]

I have read these documents with great sympathy, and yet I cannot disguise a certain disappointment and unease.[16] I regret that the Commission did not implement what at a certain moment it envisaged doing at a fourth meeting, producing a coherent theological statement, instead of leaving the three statements to stand alone. The result is a series of statements on individual topics, often with unavoidable repetition.

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katholische Kirchen der Utrechter Union – Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. Dokumentation der Dialogtexte (Bonn: [without publisher], 2015) [hereafter DD]. The last publication has no ISBN.

[15] See Douglas Pratt, 'Inter-(ecclesial-)cultural Learning as Receptive Ecumenism. Prospects for an Intra-Christian Dialogue', in this issue, 39–59.

[16] This has also to do with the observation that there are up to 69 occurrences of the phrase "both churches" and another 15 for "the two churches" in sentences asserting commonalities in different areas or drawing comparisons between the MTSC and Old Catholic Chruches. It is not always easy to see the justification for this or other assessment, either because I lack sufficient background knowledge or because an assertion is not (adequately) referenced. See also notes 25 (commonalities affirmed by way of jointly denying something) as well as 38 (assurance of not touching the fundamentals of the faith or sharing the underlying faith).

7.1 Christology

There are further, more specific reasons for my reaction. The first has to do with the two statements on Christology (SS 1.4/DD 17; HS 2/DD 28–32), a subject that is closely related both to the issues debated at the Ecumenical Councils held at the time of the Ancient Church (MS 1/DD 40–43) and to the understanding of the Mother of God, the blessed Virgin Mary (cf. SS 1.3/DD 16; HS 2.6/DD 32; HS 3.3.1/DD 34).

Concerning Christology, it is well known that the question of the reception and non-reception of the definition of the Christological dogma at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 has been highlighted in many bilateral dialogues over the past five or six decades. To mention but a few:

1. the dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches 1985–1993,[17] which was preceded by a widely acclaimed series of unofficial consultations between theologians of these two families of Eastern churches, including two distinguished Indian theologians Prof V. C. Samuel (1912–1998) und Fr. Paul Verghese (later Paulus Mar Gregorios, 1922–1996), both of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church);[18]

2. various relevant statements and agreements from the dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church with individual Oriental Orthodox churches;[19]

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[17] Cf. the four statements in: Jeffrey Gros et al. (eds), *Growth in Agreement* [hereafter *GiA*] II (Geneva: WCC Publications/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000, 187–199; idem et al. (eds), *GiA* III (Geneva: WCC Publications/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 4–7. See also Thomas Bremer et al. (eds), *Orthodoxie im Dialog. Bilaterale Dialoge der orthodoxen und orientalisch-orthodoxen Kirchen 1945–1997. Eine Dokumentensammlung* (Trier: Paulinus, 1999); Thomas FitzGerald et al. (eds), *Restoring the Unity in Faith. The Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox Theological Dialogue. An Introduction with Texts* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press 2007).

[18] They were held at Aarhus 1964, Bristol 1967, Geneva 1970, and Addis Ababa 1971: cf. *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 10 (2/1964) 5–160; 13 (2/1968), 121–320; 16 (1–2/1971), 1–259.

[19] Cf. for instance *GiA* II (as note 17), 696–697; (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church), ibid., 694–695 (Coptic Orthodox Church); for a later document 'Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church. Report of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches', *ISPCU* 131 (1–2/2009) 13–22. In the earlier unofficial dialogue the "Stiftung Pro Oriente" (founded at Vienna in 1964) played a trailblazing role.

3. the Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East (1994);[20]
4. the Agreed Statement on Christology by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission (2002, revised 2014);[21]
5. the Driebergen Agreed Statement on Christology between the Reformed churches and the Oriental Orthodox churches (1994).[22]

In almost all these cases,[23] the dialogue partners take up phrases and technical terms from the Chalcedonian "Horos pisteōs", such as *physis, ousia, hypostasis* and the four adverbs concerning the two natures united in the one Jesus Christ (without confusion/*asynchutōs,* without change/*atreptōs,* without division/*adiairetōs,* without separation/*achōristōs*). With a clear reference to Cyril of Alexandria (μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη/one incarnate nature of the Word of God) and other fathers they explain these terms to one other in such a way that the centuries-old mutual accusations of heresy can no longer be seen as substantial and compelling. These statements have clarified many semantic and other misunderstandings of what the two principal adversaries (Eastern and Western Chalcedonians and Eastern Miaphysites) were trying to confess as the true understanding of the Nicene Symbol of Faith in the post-Chalcedonian controversies, when the discussion shifted from *physis* to *energeia* and *thelèma*.[24]

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[20] Cf. *GiA* II (as note 17), 711–712.

[21] Cf. *Christology: Agreed Statement on Christology by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission 2014,* London 2014; http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103502/anglican-oriental-orthodox-agreed-statement-on-christology-cairo-2014.pdf (accessed 25.04.2017); also in *IJSCC* 15 (2015) 159–163.

[22] Cf. *GiA* II (as note 17), 292–293. See also Geoffrey Rowell, 'Eastern Horizons: Anglicans and the Oriental Orthodox Churches', in: Nigel Aston (ed.), *Religious Change in Europe,* 1650–1914 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 381–397. See furthermore the recent Agreed Statement of the Anglican–Oriental Orthodox International Commission touching the filioque (2017) "The Procession and Work of the Holy Spirit", https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/312561/the-procession-and-work-of-the-holy-spirit-dublin-agreed-statement.pdf (accessed 23.01.2019).

[23] See also Paul Fries/Tiran Nersoyan (eds), *Christ in East and West* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987); Dietmar W. Winkler, 'Die altorientalischen Kirchen im ökumenischen Dialog der Gegenwart', in: Christian Lange/Karl Pinggéra (eds), *Die altorientalischen Kirchen. Glaube und Geschichte* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2010), 89–122.

[24] An example of an emergent agreement, received by various other churches as a starting point for further elaboration, is the so-called "Vienna Christological Formula" of the First Pro Oriente Consultation in 1971: "We believe that our Lord and

None of this kind of explicit theological exchange and reflection can be found in the Agreement on Christology between the Old Catholic Churches and the MTSC. There is a passing reference to the many ecumenical endeavours of re-reception of the Council of Chalcedon, but what in this context is actually substantiated is a quotation from a document of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Board for Mission and Unity of the Church of England of 1974, acknowledging "that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church's 'statement of understanding of the Nicene Creed has removed all suspicion of lingering Nestorianism' and that for the Church of England to take further action towards the Mar Thoma Syrian Church 'would have no implications for relations either with Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian Orthodox'" (HS 2.3.2/DD 30–31). Moreover, the statement observes: "The discussion [between MTSC and OCC] was also greatly helped by the recognition that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church was not involved in the Council of Chalcedon, nor took sides in the surrounding and ensuing debates" (HS 2.3.3/DD 31).

This conclusion helps the reader of the statement to understand the decision of the Commission to present as testimony of their joint reception of the faith of the Ancient Church the very short affirmation in HS 2.3.5/ DD 32:

> Thus, both churches can together receive the faith of the Ancient Church, *confessing the mystery of the one Lord Jesus Christ as being both fully divine and fully human. The Lord Jesus Christ is one, just as the work of redemption is one. At the same time, his divinity does not diminish his humanity, nor exists his humanity at the expense of his divinity.* [My italics.]

The italicized text looks like a sort of confession, thereby avoiding any explicit or recognizable reference to the Chalcedonian Christological formula. This no doubts reflects the intention of the Commission. However, from an Old Catholic perspective, the remark which concludes this paragraph is rather unfortunate: "Therefore, both churches reject one-sided Christologies that emphasize one of these two aspects of Christ to the

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Saviour, Jesus Christ, is God the Son Incarnate; perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. His divinity was not separated from his humanity for a single moment, not for the twinkling of an eye. His humanity is one with his divinity without commixtion, without confusion, without division, without separation. We in our common faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, regard his mystery inexhaustible and ineffable and for the human mind never fully comprehendible or expressible"; http://www.pro-oriente.at/?site=gl20050201095749 (accessed 23.04.2017).

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detriment of the other, both in history and in ongoing contemporary theological reflection." What is a one-sided Christology? Have we to assume that the Chalcedonian definition falls under this verdict, so that an act of distancing suggests itself? If yes, this would be a novel assessment from the Old Catholic side.[25]

There may be compelling reasons unknown to me to write this way, but as an Old Catholic I find it difficult to recognize in the wording of the paragraph quoted above (HS 2.3.5/DD 32) a piece of evidence for the commonalities between the two Churches as set out in the previous paragraph (HS 2.3.4/DD 31), i. e. focussing "on the reception of the essence rather than the letter of conciliar decisions". Nor can I see in the chosen procedure a recognizable example of "a dynamic view of reception and a hermeneutical approach to the past".

The issue of Christology would have offered an excellent opportunity to demonstrate this kind of doing theology, had the Commission decided to engage in an enterprise similar to that tackled by the bilateral dialogues mentioned above. In taking such an approach, our two Churches could have made a small contribution to the process of healing of memories and reconciliation which is going on among Churches that are aware of having their theological and spiritual roots in the Ancient Church. The wounds of the Ancient Church are also our common heritage and so too is the task of healing.[26] If this is not the case, the common understanding of the church affirmed here as a communion transcending our notions of space and time is in my view jeopardized. Moreover, this approach would have placed the restricted aim of ecclesial communion between two churches in a broader context of seeking reconciliation: to promote the worldwide unity for which Jesus prayed in his Farewell Discourse (John 17, 20–23).

In this context I confess my further regret that the other dialogue processes in which the Old Catholic churches are or have been involved seem

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[25] Perhaps the criticized clause belongs to those assertions in the three dialogue texts which seem to raise the suspicion that the two parties are united in denying something because no positive common statement of exact equivalence was available, e. g. SS 1.3/DD 16: rejection of abuses with regard to the veneration of and prayer to saints; HS 2.3.6/DD 32: rejection of giving Mary an independent soteriological status; HS 3.3.4/DD 36–37: vehement rejection of any worship [sic] of saints or holy objects; HS 3.3.5/DD 37: rejection of seeing saints as additional mediators and of any practices or doctrines that would suggest this.

[26] Cf. Paulos Gregorios et al. (eds), *Does Chalcedon unite or divide? Towards convergence in Orthodox Christology* (Geneva: WCC, 1981).

not to have been considered at all.[27] The shared emphasis which the two sides place on being independent and autonomous churches and denominationally unique[28] cannot exempt them from being actively responsible for this wider unity and thus participating in a more obvious way in actual ecumenical networking.[29]

7.2 Councils and their reception

Such an exercise would also have been beneficial with regard to another issue which received the attention of the Commission: "Councils and their Reception in the Church" (MS 1/DD 40–43). This could have been particularly helpful in view of the fact that Mar Thoma Christians and Old Catholics differ in identifying those synods of the Ancient Church that may rightly be called ecumenical, that is, those which have a universally recognized authority. The MTSC (together with the Oriental Orthodox Churches) recognizes the Synods of Nicaea I (325), Constantinople I (391) and Ephesus (431), whereas the Old Catholics (with the Eastern Orthodox churches etc.) count seven Ecumenical Councils: these three, together with Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680/81) and Nicaea II (787).[30]

This observation also manifests a difference in determining the notion of what constitutes the "Ancient Church" (or the "Early Church"), which both churches claim to be their common dogmatic basis. This difference would have become obvious had the Commission reflected about the term "Undivided Ancient Church", dear to traditional Old Catholic theology and seen in connection with its notion of the seven Ecumenical Councils,

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[27] See the corresponding information in the dialogue between the Church of Sweden and the Union of Utrecht.

[28] The self-image of the MTSC includes the conviction of having been founded by the Apostle St Thomas, cf. the predicate "Mar Thoma" in the official title of every metropolitan (supreme head of the Church) from 1644 onwards as a reference to a special (monolinear) Apostolic succession process (analogous to the Petrine conception in Roman Catholic – and "Jacobite" Antiochene – theology).

[29] In contrast, see the detailed consideration of other ecumenical dialogues in the Report of the International Roman-Catholic – Old Catholic Dialogue Commission (2009).

[30] I cannot touch on the problems medieval westerners have had with the decisions of Nicaea II on the proper use of images and its philosophical presuppositions.

but of course in need of a differentiated conception when dealing with an "Oriental" church.

Moreover, this difference is unclear from a historical perspective, because the Nicene Creed, which both Churches officially confess, has come down to us not earlier than in the acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451, second session). There it is attributed to the 150 fathers of the Council of Constantinople (381), who modified the Nicene Creed of 325: in the acts of Chalcedon the version of 325 precedes the revised text.[31] The acts of the Council of Ephesus (431) still reproduce the earlier version (Third letter of Cyril to Nestorius; definition concerning the Nicene Faith).[32]

This issue has a special significance for the Old Catholics because they have with increasing insistence considered the (seven) Ecumenical Councils with their dogmatic decisions to belong to those identity markers which they need for their claim to be a representation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.[33] However, more important than the formal acceptance or rejection of particular councils among the seven is an effort to recognize the underlying concerns which gave rise to doctrinal affirmations and to re-receive them in the pursuit of reconciliation by actually rephrasing their teaching in a way similar to the bilateral dialogues mentioned above. These concerns are still mainly Christological. This

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[31] Is this an indication that the Nicene Creed was not generally known in 451?

[32] On this long silence cf. John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman, [3]1972), 322–331.

[33] The Declaration of Utrecht of 1889, a foundational text for the Union of Utrecht, does not determine which synods count as ecumenical, thereby following earlier statements such as the Old Catholic/Orthodox/Anglican "Principles of Reunion" of the Second International Old Catholic Congress at Cologne 1872. In 1930, at the meeting of an official Old Catholic and Orthodox Commission at Bonn, the Old Catholics declared they accepted all seven ecumenical synods, not only the first four, and they said they were ready to insert the number "seven" into the Declaration (cf. Urs Küry, *Die Altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, ihre Lehre, ihr Anliegen* [Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, [3]1982], 480); however, this was not implemented. The issue was definitely settled by the IBC in the so-called "Glaubensbrief" addressed to the ecumenical patriarch in 1970 (cf. *IKZ* 61 [1971] 65–68); see now also the Preamble of Statute of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Union of Utrecht (2000). The policy statement of the second Synod of the Swiss Old Catholic Church in 1876 explicitly speaks of seven ecumenical councils (or synods); Anglican reactions at that time challenged the ecumenical status of the second Council of Nicaea in 787. In the Utrecht-Uppsala dialogue document, the authority of the ecumenical councils and their number are included amongst the "themes for ongoing consideration following from the common vision", cf. Berlis (ed.), *Utrecht and Uppsala* (as note 8), 126–127.

brings me back to my regret that the Commission did not engage in such an attempt. They could have substantiated and corroborated their assertion that the two churches receive, through their respective traditions and histories (three and seven Ecumenical Councils), the same faith of the Early Church (MS 1.3.1/DD 43). It should not be an impossible task, for we are told that the MTSC "accepts the first three Ecumenical Councils and remembers them in its Eucharistic liturgy as affirmative of the faith of the Syriac tradition. At the same time, it had no part in the controversies leading to later ecumenical councils or in these councils themselves, *which it recognizes, but has not formally accepted.* This position does not imply rejection or disapproval of these later (four) Ecumenical Councils, but, on the contrary *respect and regard*" (MS 1.1/DD 41 – my italics).

7.3 The Virgin Mary

A further point, happily connected in the dialogue texts with Christology, is the status of the Virgin Mary. I notice that the term *"theotokos"* (God-bearer), in English often rendered as "Mother of God", is not used when she is mentioned. This is a term that stands out as belonging particularly to the doctrinal content, which Church tradition attributes to the Council of Ephesus (431),[34] a council, which is formally recognized as ecumenical by both our two churches and which is remembered liturgically in the Holy Qurbana of the MTSC. Within the "Great Intercession" of the anaphora according to St James,[35] the Blessed Virgin Mary is called "the mother of our Lord" (cf. SS 1.3/DD 16; cf. HS 3.3.1/DD 34[36]; see also

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[34] Cf. the Second letter of Cyril to Nestorius 431 and the "Formula unionis" of 431 (*COeD* I 44; 70).

[35] They follow up the epiclesis in the Qurbana and include: the bishops/all our loved ones, present and absent/all who exercise authority in our country/"O Lord, we remember the mother of our Lord, The Blessed Virgin Mary, who is worthy to be blessed of all generation of the earth. We call to mind the holy prophets, the apostles, the preachers, the evangelists and the martyrs, the confessors and all the saints. Make us worthy, O Lord, to follow their footsteps./O Lord, we remember the three Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus and all the holy fathers who participated in them. Grant us grace that we may obey and follow their true doctrines./O Lord, in the last day when you raise and gather all the faithful who are departed and fallen asleep in true faith, grant that we also may be with them be counted worthy of remission of our sins and be gathered into your Heavenly Kingdom."

[36] These are quotations from the fourth part the Great Intercession of the (west Syrian) Order of Holy Qurbana according to St James (*MTSC Order of Worship,*

HS 2.3.6/DD 32). I wonder whether this could be the result of consciously avoiding a Malayalam term that is equivalent to the title *theotokos,* and this assumption has been confirmed by a recent Mar Thoma author.[37] What, therefore, is the significance of remembering the Council of Ephesus and affirming the faith of the West Syriac tradition (MS 1.1/DD 41)?

7.4 Differences: origin and weight

The background to this question lies in another issue addressed by the Commission twice in the course of their dialogue: the practice of offering intercessory prayer to God for the departed and veneration of and prayer to the saints asking their intercessory prayer for the Church militant (cf. the short remarks SS 1.3/DD 15–16) and the deeper preoccupation in the chapter "The Remembrance of the Departed and the Saints" (HS 3/DD 33–37). Here we are faced with a distinct difference in the liturgical practice between the two churches, fully admitted by the Commission: the Old Catholic churches, in contrast to the MTSC, include intercession for the departed both in their ordinary Sunday Mass and in special Masses for the deceased, considering this liturgical feature to be spiritually important for the faithful mourning the death of their loved ones. Moreover, they recognise requests to saints to pray for the church in this world.

The starting point of the Commission's rationale is the common view that the Church, the Communion of Saints, includes "the church on earth, the faithful departed, and the eschatological church ('church militant, church expectant, church triumphant')" (SS 1.3/DD 16; cf. HS 3.3.1/DD 34; 3.3.5/DD 37). This is indeed fundamental to the understanding of the Church as a unified communion of solidarity in Christ, transcending not only time and space but also the rifts caused by individual death. Whether the differences in the liturgy, having in mind that "liturgy is faith celebrated" (cf. MS 1.1/DD 41), can be so easily done away with as is suggested by the subtle explanation of the biblical term "remembrance"

Matins, Holy Qurbana and Hymns [Delhi, 2010], 68). The equivalent passage in the version of the Syro Malankara Catholic Church speaks of the "Mother of God" (cf. Johannes Madey/Georg Vavanikunnel, *Qurbana. Die Eucharistiefeier der Thomaschristen Indiens* [Paderborn: Ostkirchendienst, 1968], 179–180).

[37] Jameson K. Pallikunnil, *The Eucharistic Liturgy. A Liturgical Foundation for Mission in the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2017), 195–196.

(HS 3.3.2/DD 35), to the effect "that the difference does not touch the fundamentals of the faith" (ibid.), is for me an open question.[38]

By raising this issue, I do not intend to criticize the practice of the MTSC or to ask for a change. I respect this practice (similarly the MTSC evinces respect with regard to the Old Catholic use of images and icons, cf. MS 2.3.2/DD 45). My concern is that the differences passed over here actually betray the influence of the Reformation which in the complicated and dramatic history of the Mar Thoma Christians in Kerala took place in the nineteenth century. This led to a separation process within the Mar Thoma family of churches which were not in communion with Rome, that is, between, among others, the (autocephalous) Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church (autonomous in the Oriental Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch).[39] The influence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Church of England on the Mar Thoma Church, and thus of a western Protestant type of Reformation rooted in the sixteenth century is also apparent and made clear in the dialogue texts (cf. HS 1.1/DD 23–24; also SS 1.3/DD 16; MS 2.1/DD 43–44; MS 3.1/DD 46).

In hindsight I wonder whether my own preconception of what the MTSC stands for – a preconception shared with many others – had been nourished by a somewhat undifferentiated assumption that the MTSC is standing primarily in the Oriental (pp. HS 2.1/DD 28; MS 2.1/DD 43) or Syriac (HS 1.1/DD 24; HS 2.1/DD 28; MS 3.1/DD 46; MS 5.2–3/DD 52–53) tradition, and that it therefore has an ideology of being in continuity with the Ancient Church that is similar to what is advocated by the family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Armenian; Syrian, Malankara; Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean). After all the MTSC had long-standing links with the ancient churches in Persia and Syria: that is, with Asian and African churches, which from their beginnings (or in some cases from a later time)

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[38] Cf. the similar statements concerning the veneration of and the prayer to saints as well as the prayer for the departed (SS 1.3/DD 16 and HS 3.3.1/DD 34–35).

[39] Cf. the narrative, written from the perspective of the non-reformist, but also autonomy-claiming Orthodox Syrian Church, by Paul Verghese (ed.), *Die Syrischen Kirchen in Indien* (KW 13; Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1974), 54–59. Cf. also the contributions by the late MTSC Professor C. P. Mathew, 'Die Ankunft der kirchlichen Missionsgesellschaft und ihre "Hilfsmission"' and 'Ein neues Schisma und die Mar-Thoma-Kirche', in; *ibid.,* 85–114 and 115–128; see also C. P. Mathew/ M. M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2nd edn, 2006), 81–126, as well as the Appendix by M. J. Joseph, ibid., 179–201.

were living outside the Mediterranean world of the former Roman Empire with its dominant Hellenistic culture. Once I had read some additional Mar Thoma literature,[40] I began better to discern the intricacies of the specific character of the MTSC as a "hybrid" church combining (a) *Western* evangelical and reformed doctrines with (b) *Eastern* forms of worship and practices and (c) giving its mission-oriented witness in the specific sociocultural context of *India*. The straightforward judgement by Metropolitan Juhanon Mar Thoma (1947–1976) may for Western ears be too harsh: the MTSC is a "Protestant Church in an oriental garb".[41] However, it helped me as an outside reader of the three Statements to understand my own uncertainty and unease with regard to the degree of their compatibility with the other dialogue texts with Old Catholic participation. Certainly, well-informed and non-pedantic comments from representatives of the Old Catholics' other ecumenical partners, and especially the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, would be helpful in clarifying the issue of compatibility. Such responses would further the process of discernment of the way to a goal for which I have – as I have already indicated – great sympathy. Such an approach might lead to a systematically more satisfying final document, possibly taking as its framework what has supposedly been discovered and only cursorily described as an already shared Eucharistic ecclesiology (SS 11/DD 12–13).[42]

This is my wish for the future. And I add a further wish: since Mar Thoma and Old Catholic Christians hardly know each other, a mutual presentation of the churches would be certainly fitting. This should be comparable to the description which, in a similar, albeit less complicated situation, the Utrecht-Uppsala Report offered for the benefit of readers not familiar with the concrete background of the two churches. All this should be done before any official implementation of ecclesial communion with

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[40] Cf. Joseph Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis. A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (SIGC 159; Frankfurt a.M.: P. Lang, 2014); Pallikunnil, *Liturgy* (as note 37).

[41] Quoted in Pallikunnil, *Liturgy* (as note 37), 41. See also Metropolit Yuhanon Mar Thoma, 'Die syrische Mar-Thoma-Kirche', in: Verghese (ed.), *Kirchen* (as note 39), 129–137.

[42] Is the absence of such a comprehensive and integrating presentation due to the fact that, contrary to what one might expect from the concluding remark of the Santhigiri Statement (p. 21: "We hope to have assisted in paving the way for a formal dialogue between our churches"), there was – for whatever reason – some pressure to conclude the dialogue in the shortest time possible?

all its possible consequences and repercussions on other dialogues with the same goal of ecclesial communion.[43] Above all, ecclesial communion should presuppose a certain degree of being familiar with each other that exceeds the narrow circle of a few bishops and theologians.

7.5 Additional remarks

I have to omit other topics like the intricate question of transitivity, taking into account the various shades of ecclesial communion the MTSC is maintaining with "united churches" under a common Anglican umbrella such as the Church of South India (CSI 1947), the Church of North India (CNI 1970), but also the Malabar Independent Syrian Church (MISC)[44] and possibly other churches.[45] The MTSC has its own history and conception of ecumenical networking, which will probably not lead to automatic transitivity processes on the part of the Union of Utrecht.

I cannot, however, conclude my paper without making a final, fairly critical comment on the chapter on "Faith, Life, Practice and Ethics" (MS 2/DD 48–52). No specific urgent problem is mentioned as an example for the task of "discernment in ethical matters" (MS 2.3.3/DD 51).[46] From the list of suggested "areas for further discussion" in the Santhigiri Statement (SS 2/DD 17–19),[47] we may gather that the question of same-sex relationships has been addressed (SS 2c/DD 18), but to what extent is unclear.

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[43] What this implies for all the churches being partners in the official bilateral dialogues listed in 'Die ökumenische Aufgabe der Altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union heute – Eine Standortbestimmung der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK)', *IKZ* 102 (2012) 305–313, is unfortunately not made sufficiently clear.

[44] Cf. John R. K. Fenwick, *The Malabar Independent Syrian Church* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1992).

[45] This can be gathered from HS 3.3.3/DD 36; much more information is available in: Daniel, *Ecumenism* (see note 40). See also the co-operation at the inter-denominational "Union Christian College" (founded in 1921) in Aluva (Kerala).

[46] The attractively worded paragraph 3 cannot hide this weakness: "Both Churches use a very careful hermeneutical approach when it comes to discernment in ethical matters: the precise study of doctrine and the thorough interpretation of the Bible are combined with constructive cultural criticism and attention to the life enhancing aspects of ethical decisions."

[47] Another important item in the list, namely that of how the two churches understand the ordained ministry, a crucial issue for many ecumenical issues, has also not been addressed.

I assume that neither side will plead for punishing or inflicting therapeutic treatment on homosexuals. However, the public debate going on in some Old Catholic churches about the firm intention to use the term "marriage" and its conviction that some form of sacramental blessing should be available for those living in same-sex partnerships is a different thing. The Old Catholic churches need to act in full transparency and to inform the MTSC about their engagement with this question. It remains to be seen whether such an Old Catholic practice falls under the umbrella of "substantially the same (faith)",[48] which the Commission has discovered in the "potentially controversial areas" (MS 5.5/DD 54–55) it has selected.[49]

8. Conclusion

I hope I have made clear the general thrust of my paper. In no way does it consist in disapproving the ultimate goal of ecclesial communion between our two churches. It is rather a specific Old Catholic concern that has moved my response to the dialogue texts: since a coherent Old Catholic theology has increasingly been formed in the interaction of a deeply rooted programmatic orientation towards the theological principles of the

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[48] A similar expression is "the underlying faith being the same" notwithstanding "differences in practice and interpretation" (MS 5.5/DD 54).

[49] A further criticism concerns the discussion in the chapter on "Symbols[/Signs], Images, and Icons in the Life of the Church" (MS 2/DD 43–45), which (perhaps due to lack of time) is not sufficiently thoroughgoing. I wonder why symbols/signs (hardly specified), which are quite commonly used in both churches (richly so in the MTSC Qurbana) and are uncontroversial, have been associated with images and icons (hardly differentiated), without addressing any possible theological rationale for their specific status in relation to "the central and foundational symbol within the Christian tradition [that] is God in Jesus Christ himself". What is said about the Old Catholic use of images and icons has a somewhat minimising character (in the service of being near to the strict reform position of the MTSC?).
On the other hand, an important commonality between the two Churches has been missed by the Commission: the analogous structure of the Old Catholic Eucharistic prayers (as far as they correspond to the so-called "Consensus" of the International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference in 1979) and the equivalent in Holy Qurbana of the MTSC (cf. the Delhi edition, p. 63–64) – both representing the West-Syrian family of anaphoras with the sequence *verba testamenti,* (short) anamnesis, epiclesis – should have been mentioned. Another partial commonality is the close link between baptism and confirmation [Chrismation] – a common ancient tradition and now an Eastern feature –, which corresponds to the reformed Swiss Old Catholic conception and practice.

Early Church with arising bilateral dialogues aiming at discovering the potential of these principles for reconciliation and healing the wounded Church of God, I plead for a joint theological statement whose coverage transcends the limited, minimal range of joint affirmations deemed necessary for ecclesial communion.

Urs von Arx (* 1943 Solothurn CH), Prof. emer. Dr. theol. 1964-71 theological studies at Bern, Paris and Oxford. Dr. theol. 1985 Bern. 1971-86 vicar of the Old Catholic parish of Wegenstetten-Hellikon-Zuzgen AG. 1986 associate and (since 1993) full professor of New Testament, Homiletics and (since 1994) History of Old Catholicism at the Faculty (later Department) of Old Catholic Theology in the University of Berne. Retired 2008/09. 1973-2017 he served as a member of national and international bilateral dialogue commissions. 2000-15 editor-in-chief of the 'Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift'. He holds honorary degrees from the Christian Theological Academy, Warsaw (1996), the General Theological Seminary, New York (2008) and the 'Andrei Şaguna' Orthodox Theological Faculty of the 'Lucian Blaga' University, Sibiu (2014).

Address: Neuhausweg 53, CH-3097 Liebefeld, Switzerland
E-Mail: u.vonarx@theol.unibe.ch

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag ist ein Kommentar zu den drei Erklärungen, die von 2011 bis 2014 in einer gemeinsamen Konsultation von Theologen der Syrischen Mar-Thoma-Kirche (MTSC) und der Altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union mit dem Ziel entstanden sind, die Möglichkeit einer Kirchengemeinschaft zwischen den beiden Kirchen zu erkunden. Der Verfasser geht so vor, dass dieser Dialog in den weiteren Kontext der bisher von der Altkatholischen Kirche geführten Dialoge bzw. der von ihr mit anderen Kirchen vereinbarten Kirchengemeinschaften gestellt wird; damit ist eine altkatholische Perspektive gegeben.
Die frühesten Dialogpartner der Utrechter Union auf der Suche, die Einheit der Kirche in altkirchlicher Orientierung wiederherzustellen, waren einerseits Anglikaner, andererseits Orthodoxe. Mit den Anglikanern kam 1931 auf einer eintägigen Sitzung die sogenannte Bonner Vereinbarung zustande, die den Boden bereitete für eine kirchliche Gemeinschaft mit der weltweiten Anglican Communion, aber nicht artikulierte, was das gemeinsame Wesentliche des Glaubens als Grund der bestehenden kirchlichen Gemeinschaft ist. Mit den Orthodoxen konnte in den 1970er- und 1980er-Jahren ein theologisch ausführlicher und anspruchsvoller Dialog abgeschlossen werden, aber die angestrebte kirchliche Gemeinschaft liess sich nicht verwirklichen. Die beiden Dialoge stecken gleichsam das Feld möglicher ökumenischer Arbeit mit altkatholischer Beteiligung ab.

Die bilateralen Dialoge mit der römisch-katholischen Kirche einerseits und mit der Kirche von Schweden andererseits gleichen hinsichtlich des differenzierenden theologischen Aufwands viel mehr dem Dialog mit der Orthodoxie (wobei die angestrebte kirchliche Gemeinschaft mit der Kirche von Schweden 2016 zustande kam). Noch ohne theologischen Dialog kam es 1965 zur kirchlichen Gemeinschaft mit der Unabhängigen Philippinischen Kirche sowie mit der Spanisch-Reformierten Episkopalkirche und der Lusitanisch-Katholischen Kirche Portugals, und zwar aufgrund dessen, was Transitivität genannt wird: Da diese drei Kirchen wie auch die Utrechter Union je mit Kirchen der Anglican Communion in Gemeinschaft stehen, sollte diese auf alle beteiligten Kirchen ausgedehnt werden.

Dass im Fall des bilateralen Dialogs zwischen Utrechter Union und der MTSC, die ja beide ebenfalls je in kirchlicher Gemeinschaft mit Kirchen der Anglican Communion stehen, nicht gleich verfahren wurde, hat mit dem durch die anderen neueren Dialoge geschärften altkatholischen Bewusstsein zu tun, dass jeder neue Dialog theologisch mit den älteren im Wesentlichen kompatibel sein muss. Da die MTSC durch eine Verschmelzung altorientalischer Traditionen mit einer vom «evangelikalen» Anglikanismus des 19. Jahrhunderts inspirierten Reformbewegung gekennzeichnet ist, liegt diesbezüglich eine besondere Herausforderung vor. Dies zeigt sich einerseits beim Thema der Christologie (unter Einschluss der Stellung Marias), insofern diese ihre grundlegenden Aussagen den sieben Ökumenischen Konzilen der Alten Kirche verdankt, welch Letztere aber von den beiden Kirchen in unterschiedlicher Weise anerkannt werden, andererseits in Fragen der Heiligenverehrung und des Gebets für die Verstorbenen. Der Beitrag versucht, in den drei Dokumenten einige problematische Aspekte und verpasste Chancen zu identifizieren – dies in der Hoffnung, dass die Kommission bald einen überarbeiteten und zudem kohärenteren Gesamttext vorlegen wird.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Old Catholic ecumenism – Ecumenical Councils – Christology – Compatibility of bilateral dialogues – Mar Thoma Syrian Church