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Sacramental Theology and the Church's Mission in Contemporary Culture

**Report on the Anglican Old Catholic Theologians' Conference,
28 August to 1 September 2023, Neustadt a.d. Weinstrasse,
Germany**

Edda Wolff

The conference engaged with sacramentality from a variety of perspectives, exploring its implications for communion and a renewed understanding of mission and ecclesiology in the twenty-first century. The topic was selected in order to reflect on the sacramental communion between both churches, but also as a reminder of the need for mission and evangelization to engage the Church with contemporary culture. The organizing committee consisted of the Revd Professor Paul Avis (Edinburgh), the Revd Professor Angela Berlis (Bern), Dr Theresa Hüther (Bonn), the Revd Canon Dr Jeremy Morris (London), the Revd Professor Peter-Ben Smit (Utrecht, Amsterdam), and the coordinators, the Revd Robert Frede (Haarlem) and Ruth Nientiedt (Bonn).

The conference took place at the guesthouse of Kloster Neustadt, a retreat centre of the Dehonians (Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart) in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse (Germany). It began on the evening of Monday, 28 August. After the opening and welcome, Angela Berlis gave a short introduction, summarizing the history of the Anglican Old Catholic Theologians' Conferences, which developed from the Anglican Old Catholic delegates' meetings. The first new-style Anglican Old Catholic Theologians' Conference took place in 2006; the conference has since taken place every five to six years, discussing issues relevant to both communions. Paul Avis also extended a short welcome and relayed apologies.

The conference proper began with reports from Archbishop Bernd Wallet (Union of Utrecht) and Bishop Robert Innes (Church of England, Diocese in Europe). The Archbishop of Utrecht, Bernd Wallet, summarised the challenges and highlights in the life of the Union of Utrecht. First, he mentioned the election and consecration of the first female Old Catholic Bishop, Maria Kubin, in Austria on 24 June 2023. In addition, four new bishops had been elected in the Polish Catholic Church after the

death of Prime Bishop W. Wysoczański. In the Czech Republic, the first two female deacons had been priested. In 2022, the synod of the Czech Church agreed to the blessing of couples who cannot get legally married but live together in love and faith. Archbishop Bernd emphasized the need to further elaborate on the theology of same-sex relationships and unions. He also reported on the discussions of the International Bishops' Conference relating to apostolic succession in the Porvoo statement. The Union of Utrecht is also considering signing the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). The Mar Toma Church will vote on full communion with the Union of Utrecht in early September 2023. The official Roman Catholic reaction to the report of the International Roman Catholic-Old Catholic Dialogue Commission had been received and a response was in preparation. Finally, Archbishop Bernd gave a brief account of the hospitality provided by the Karlsruhe Old Catholic parish during the Assembly of WCC in August 2023.

Robert Innes, Bishop of the Church of England Diocese in Europe, reported on developments in the Anglican Communion. He referred to the Diocese in Europe as a microcosm of the Anglican Communion. He presented five main points: 1. Nature of the Anglican Communion: The Anglican Communion is a federation of churches under four instruments of unity (The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates' Meeting). 2. Growth and decline: The Anglican Communion has doubled in size in the last fifty years while showing a significant shift from an Anglocentric to an indigenous Church. This growth is not uniform, and there is a plateau in some places and a significant decline in others. Most growth happens in Africa. 3. Lambeth Conference 2022: 650 bishops had attended the meeting at the University of Kent, Canterbury. The composition of the meeting reflected a shift of the Church towards the Global South. The Lambeth Conference is a conference, not a synod; as such, it carries a certain moral authority but no legal power. It did, however, issue several "calls" as outputs. 4. Homosexuality: Historically, the Lambeth Conference has often issued statements on human sexuality. In recent decades, however, there has been an increasing tension between churches in different countries. This has had a major impact on global Anglicanism in the past decades, and there is a certain danger that it could break the Anglican Communion. 5. Future: There are fundamental ecclesiological differences (evangelical vs. catholic) within the Anglican Communion. Bishop Robert asked whether a

stronger ecclesiology could help overcome the inner Anglican division and facilitate a distinctive Christian witness to the world.

In a Q&A session, both bishops reflected on the ongoing cooperation between the communions in Europe. They pointed out that communion is a matter of mission and spirituality, and thus closely related to the topic of this conference; they also acknowledged that on a practical level, language differences remain a major barrier to shared work and ministry.

Bishop Robert emphasized the importance of unity for the life of the Church and articulated his hope for a restored union over questions on human sexuality. The urgency of justice and a swift consideration of pastoral needs were also discussed. Archbishop Bernd pointed out the need to listen to each other and care for each other. Finally, the discussion touched on the complexity of theological discourse within the Global South.

The evening concluded with a tri-lingual Compline service inspired by the monastic tradition, which was organized and led by the Revd Florian Bosch (Dettighofen, Germany) and accompanied on the organ by the Revd Dr Mattijs Ploeger.

On Tuesday, 29 August, the morning began with a Eucharist in the Church of England tradition, marking the Beheading of John the Baptist. Bishop Robert Innes presided and preached, and Florian Bosch played the organ.

In the morning session, Peter-Ben Smit explored “Communion and its Sacramental Basis”. He focussed in particular on sacramentality and its implications for communion in general, considering the implications for communion between churches. He discussed the analeptic and proleptic aspects of sacraments as an eschatological prefiguration of the world to come. He concluded that these build a suitable catalyst for conversion and transformation for the Church. The discussion that followed was wide-ranging, considering topics such as the cooperate/political implications of the Church’s engagement with society and the limits of transformation and experimentation within the Church.

After the coffee break, the German Old Catholic Vicar General, Revd Anja Goller (Bonn), joined the group and extended greetings from Bishop Matthias Ring, who was unable to attend the conference, being involved with the preparations for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the establishing of the Old Catholic Church in Germany the following week-end.

Revd Dr Edda Wolff (Bern) offered a response to Peter-Ben Smit's paper. This focussed on notions of difference within sacramental communion and explored the implications for a vertical and horizontal understanding of communion. During the Q&A session, questions were raised concerning the connection to negative theology and the importance of distinguishing various types of difference and negativity.

In the afternoon session, the Revd Dr Jeremy Worthen (Ashford) presented a paper on the topic: "Can a missional ecclesiology be sacramental?" He pointed out that during the second half of the twentieth century the term "mission" had become a key concept in the self-understanding of the Church. Reflecting on his experiences as the Church of England's national ecumenical officer and as a parish priest, he asked how missional challenges of a post-Christian society can shape and form the Church. He related this discussion to the sacramental ministry of the Church, pointing out that the Church is simultaneously subject and object of evangelization. He argued against a reduction of the sacraments to a purely missionary function, although he recognised that "ecclesial form must always follow missionary function" and cautioned against an overemphasis on the formation of the Church through its participation in the *missio Dei*; the Church, he suggested offers a "foretaste of the divine-human communion". He outlined the possibility of a missional ecclesiology that oscillates between the poles of a purely missional and purely sacramental ecclesiology (catholicity and continuity vs. transformation and re-creation). He further emphasized the primacy of the sacramental action for the Church's being, presenting the Church as God's given means for mission through the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He argued that mission cannot be reduced to effectiveness but must emphasize the dignity of every person. He emphasized the importance of continuity that expresses the Church's sacramental character. In the discussion that followed, questions concerning churchpersonship and different approaches to the relationship between the sacramentality and mission were raised. Jeremy Worthen acknowledged some differences between church traditions but emphasised that a missional focus cannot be limited to an evangelical approach.

In her response to Jeremy Worthen, Angela Berlis pointed out that from an Old Catholic perspective, Church is sacramental and needs to become aware of its missionary nature. Mission is embedded in Old Catholic ecclesiology, mostly through ecumenical relationships. It is primarily diaconically orientated: in the missionary awareness of the Old Catholic

Church, the Church bears witness to the Gospel through *leiturgia*, *diakonia*, and *martyria*, all of which include missional elements. She reflected on the WCC Faith and Order Paper “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” (TCTCV), which challenged the Old Catholic Church to widen its understanding of mission. She also pointed out the importance of learning from other contexts (e.g. the Philippines) and from other churches as signs and servants of God’s mission in the world. As a member of the WCC Faith and Order Commission, and specifically of the subgroup analyzing responses to TCTCV, she had seen an emerging consensus on the significance of sacraments for the proclamation of the Gospel. At the same time there had been criticism of the ecclesiology of TCTCV as too inward-looking and institutionally focused. Angela Berlis pointed out that the fourth chapter of TCTCV, which discusses “The Church: In and for the World”, had received a mixed reception, but most agreed that mission should be seen as part of the nature of the Church. For the Old Catholic Church, this means that sacramental theology is inherently missional. In the subsequent discussion, the two speakers reflected on the de-colonial implications of ecclesiological discussions (e.g. the understanding of church structures and apostolic succession). After a brief plenary discussion on the dangers of power structures in missionary contexts, small groups continued the conversation on questions of the missionary potential of sacramentality.

Evening Prayer was led by the Revd Elisabeth Dudley (Hannover), using a short liturgy based loosely on Evensong in the Book of Common Prayer.

After dinner, there were three short inputs. The Revd June Yañez (Antwerp) of the Philippine Independent Church presented “A Sharing on Seafarers’ Mission”. He talked about the practicalities and challenges of his ministry as a Port Chaplain. The Mission tries to provide practical help and assistance as well as spiritual support and make the presence of Christ known to this demographic. Their work ranges from celebrating services on board of ships to providing SIM cards and toiletries to seafarers. Christian “visibility” and organizational branding are less important in this type of ministry. He pointed out that seafarer culture is increasingly diverse and that seafarers are often very open-minded towards each other’s cultural and religious backgrounds (e.g. non-Christians celebrating Christmas). In order to maintain costly accommodation for seafarers, different churches come together in this task (“unity by necessity”). This work is incarnational, ecumenical, diaconal, and culturally sensitive (cf. Great

Commissioning); it complements the contribution of “land-based” missionaries.

The Revd Dr. Christopher Meakin (Church of Sweden, Växjö) considered: “Can diaconia be mission without ulterior motives?” He engaged with this question using examples from the Swedish context. In the 1960s, the Church’s diaconal work was criticized for having a foreign focus. Since then, the focus and methodology have changed from ideas of evangelization to international relief work. Some communities saw this as a loss of identity and a move away from “church work”, raising questions such as: What distinguishes the Church from other organizations? Can diaconia be an essential part of the Church’s life? Christopher Meakin pointed out that as a state – and latterly, since disestablishment, a folk – church, work is crucial to the Church of Sweden’s identity, providing visibility and a positive relationship to the people. Diaconia is a crucial part of the work of the local Church, where it is needs-orientated and without evangelizing motives. At the same time, engagement with the Church’s diaconal work can and does build and transmit faith. Diaconia is engagement with the “secular world” (in the two kingdom’s theology). Today, diaconal ministry is fully integrated into the ordained orders. Christopher Meakin described the task of diaconia as “making the world more human” and emphasizing the need of being Church for others. In this sense, diaconia is fruitful for understanding the sacramental “self-giving” nature of the Church, as a sign and manifestation of salvation.

Finally, the Revd Dr Jeremy Morris spoke about “Diaconia in Anglicanism – missionary imperative, ecclesiological conundrum”. He described how the term diaconia is rarely used in an English-speaking Anglican context and outlined the overlap between diaconate and diaconia. In the Anglican Church, the diaconate in the 19th century was reestablished mostly in a liturgical setting. At the same time, the Church of England has a long history of social theology and social welfare. He concluded that diaconia cannot be located in one set of activities but is situated in the idea of a church serving the whole of society. Through ecumenical work, the understanding of the diaconate was renewed and again related to serving the needs of the world and connecting them to the worship of the Church. This renewed understanding also extends the understanding of the ministry and mission of all people.

Wednesday, 30 August, began with a sung Morning Prayer led by the Revd Johnson John (Göttingen) from the Mar Thoma Church.

In the morning session, Mattijs Ploeger explored the theme “A confident ‘liberal catholic’ mission with modest suggestions for an Old Catholic understanding of Mission”. He pointed out that mission is an unpopular topic among Old Catholics, but argued that instead of leaving ideas of “evangelization” to Evangelical churches, it is necessary to integrate the concepts from a catholic perspective. He suggested an approach to mission as *mystagogy*, an embodied “church-shaped” approach. The goal of mission is not personal conversion but for people to participate in the Church’s life and, ultimately, in the Divine life. In this sense, the goal of mission is to help people find a church home in which they can best realize this participation. This approach requires a certain confidence in one’s own church and its appeal. Mattijs Ploeger acknowledged the practical limitations of mission dictated by limitations of resources and argued that combining resources would open new possibilities for a shared diaconal enterprise. He suggested that the liberal catholic character of the Old Catholic Church has a unique missional potential. Thus, a deepened understanding and well-applied celebration of liturgical and sacramental identity could make the liturgy more missional. He also elaborated on the missional value of public theology, i.e., the engagement of theology with society: this can provide a bridge between a language of faith and a discourse on social issues. In the discussion, Mattijs Ploeger further expanded on the difference between public theology, apologetics, and mission. He pointed out that the task of public theology is not to convert people but to contribute a living discourse to the public debate. He also acknowledged that for some people and in some contexts, this specific combination of catholicity and liberalism would not work.

Paul Avis then presented a paper on “Liturgy and Proclamation”. He referred to 1 Peter 2:9 to argue that proclamation is the main calling of the Church. He suggested that proclamation happens through the preaching and proclamation, liturgy and pastoral/diaconal acts. Through the act of proclamation, Christ is lifted up, and the Word of God is spoken into creation. Paul Avis argued that the Word of God has a threefold form: The Incarnate Word of God in Jesus Christ, the Word of Scriptures, and the proclamation of the Church. The proclamation of the Church, in this sense, is the Word of God spoken into the world. Christ is the focal point of the proclamation in speech and scriptures. Proclamation cannot be limited to formal proclamation (e.g. in preaching). He suggested that liturgy defines us as Christians and asked how the Church can help people appreciate worship and understand its value for their lives. Worship acknowledges

the excellence of God and proclaims love and trust. Scripted/orderly worship in liturgy, as work of the people, reveals the nature of the Church. He talked about the event character of liturgy. He elaborated on worship as an embodied social event (action and discourse) but also an ecclesial event, in which the mystical body of Christ is convened. He argued that liturgy is also a dialogue between God and humans, concluding that as a public event, it is celebrated before God but also for the world. In discussion, Paul Avis clarified that the Church needs to embrace the world in its liturgy and proclaim the unity of the body of Christ. He talked about the need to engage on a low-key level with people who use the church building for personal prayer to build on their curiosity. He emphasized the importance of considering formal proclamation in preaching as Gestalt of the Word of God. Finally, he reflected on the objection that the liturgy can be unhelpful in certain contexts by clarifying that the liturgy could be adapted, for instance to take into account experiences of abuse and its use of the language of power.

In the afternoon, an excursion to Bad Dürkheim and to the ruins of Limburg monastery was organized by Theresa Hüther (Bonn). A tour of the monastic ruins introduced participants to the monastery's history, including its connection to Eduard Jost (1837–1902), an early supporter of the Old Catholic movement and the composer of the Pfälzerlied or Palatinate Anthem. The group dined at the Klosterrestaurant Konrad 2 before returning to Neustadt.

Morning prayer on Thursday, 31 August, came from the (American) Episcopal tradition, led by the Revd Dorothee Hahn (Vienna). Ruth Nientiedt then introduced the five workshop leaders and their topics. In the morning, three interactive workshops were held. All workshops were given twice, so that participants could attend two of them.

Dr David Grumett (Edinburgh) spoke (via Zoom) on "The Equality of Word and Sacrament as Modes of Christ's Eucharistic Presence". He outlined how the French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac is well known for his corpus mysticum theology of the Church as Christ's body, according to which, through the Church's collective eucharistic celebration, Christ incorporates himself into the Church. He explained how de Lubac's work on Origen, which has been relatively neglected by de Lubac scholars, shows that both view the unity of Church and Scripture as just as real as the unity of the Church and the Eucharist. He concluded that Scripture, just as much as the eucharistic host, makes the Church and is the body of

Christ. In the following discussion, participants highlighted the danger of reducing the First Testament to a typological meaning and falling into anti-Jewish thought patterns.

The Revd Dorothee Hahn (Vienna) introduced the topic of “Eco-Spirituality. Living with God in Creation”. She gave examples of how resourcefulness and creative engagement with nature inspire her own spirituality (e.g. drying leaves for tea and making seasonal decorations from flowers and leaves). She then invited participants to use provided materials, such as reeds and recycled cloths, to create something while praying and reflecting on the abundance of creation.

The Revd Lenz Kirchhofer (Aarau) ran a workshop on the topic of “What if the Word was not made flesh but a reel? Producing the Church’s message in up-to-date media”. He invited participants to record 30-second videos and give a short message on a Bible text. The participants then shared their videos and discussed the process of making their recordings.

In the afternoon, two further workshops took place:

The Revd Professor Charlotte Methuen (Glasgow) spoke on “Baptism and confirmation: A comparative Anglican perspective”. The workshop drew on history and canon law to explore the relationship between baptism and confirmation in the Church of England, The Episcopal Church (USA), and the Scottish Episcopal Church. It focused on the concept of baptism as complete sacramental initiation (BACSI) and the extent to which this has been adopted in these three Anglican churches. Charlotte Methuen pointed out that in recent years, confirmation has in some Anglican churches ceased to be understood as a necessary precursor to admission to Communion. Confirmation continues to be a requirement for candidates for ordination. However, different practices, particularly around the admission of children to Communion, have given rise to some potentially complex pastoral situations. The Anglican requirement that confirmation be conducted by a bishop has also led to some anomalies in ecumenical agreements; under the Porvoo Agreement, for example, ordination is recognized while confirmation is not.

The Revd Dr Ruth Tuschling (Berlin) introduced the topic “Liturgical peculiarity, spiritual diversity. The daily office in our two traditions”. She compared the requirements of canon law regarding the saying of a daily office: while it is required in the Church of England, it is only one among a number of options for daily prayer in the German Old Catholic Church. As a next step, she looked at the structures of evening prayer and vespers, firstly in the Church of England from Thomas Cranmer to the present day,

and secondly in the German Old Catholic prayer book. The workshop concluded with an open discussion of questions such as: What is the purpose of a daily office? Is it for clergy or laypeople? Should it be regular or occasional? Participants shared their experience of Swiss, Dutch, and German Old Catholic liturgies and American, Scottish, and English Anglican liturgies. They also touched on the opportunities offered by praying together online.

In the evening, a group of participants gathered in the church to sing together, as has become the tradition during Old Catholic Theological Conferences. At this conference, the music included Maria motets by Vitoria and Stravinsky.

On the morning of Friday, 1 September, Archbishop Bernd Wallet presided at the closing Eucharist of the conference, assisted by the Revd Rudolf Scheltinga and Maartje Groeneweg as acolyte. The liturgy was based on the resources "Let Justice and Peace Flow" provided for the 2023 Season of Creation.

The concluding discussion, led by Peter-Ben Smit, invited participants to reflect on own experiences and summarise their take-aways from the conference.

During the first phase of the discussion, participants reflected on their most important theological take-away from the conference in small groups. Some of the key points were: 1. Mission as a way to live into communion; 2. The gift of hospitality and its biblical roots; 3. An unease about a high ecclesiology (equation of proclamation with the Word of God) and potential abuse of power; 4. The need to have low-key approaches to mission (e.g. open churches); 5. The importance of personal relationships built during the conference; 6. The need to listen to less powerful voices (including a strong critique of the very male-centred palette of plenary speakers during the conference); 7. The need to link theological reflection to local work in parishes; 8. A recognition of the complexity of the challenge of mission; 9. The chance to learn from each other about different forms of mission; 10. The question of whether focusing on "crisis" and practical need might have provided a more appropriate starting point for reflecting on mission and sacramentality; 11. The inspiration of the liturgy and the importance of such opportunities to get to know each other on a different level.

Participants were then invited to share critical reflection anonymously in writing with the organizing committee. The points shared publicly in-

cluded the need to plan further in advance so that a variety of voices can be included even if preferred speakers are not able to accept the invitation (all the main speakers had been white men). The hope was expressed that future conferences might have a stronger Anglican presence; increased presence of theological students and ordinands at the conference would also be desirable. Additionally, the desire was expressed to centre topics of physicality within sacramentality. Some practical points were raised regarding seating arrangements, the need for nametags, and the desirability of making handouts available in advance, especially for non-native speakers of English.

Finally, the participants were invited to pick one word that described the conference for them.

The final session discussed the communiqué which had been prepared by Angela Berlis and Paul Avis, accepting it unanimously. Finally, thanks were expressed to the organizing committee.

The conference brought together a wide range of approaches to the topic of mission and sacramentality. It provided inspiring points of connection and provoked discussion of the different contexts and concerns of the churches represented. It was recognised that the term “mission” is used more widely by English-speaking theologians, while most continental European theologians are more cautious, recognising its potentially encroaching connotations. Participants were eager to learn from each other’s experiences, to discuss which aspects of mission can be applied and explored in new contexts and to explore how understandings of mission might deepen the communion between the Anglicans and Old Catholics. There was a general desire among the participants to build theologically and practically on the dynamic and power of a sacramental understanding of Church in mission and diaconia. At the same time, participants and speakers pointed out the risks of a hierarchical and centralized understanding of sacramentality and ecclesiology, which carries a danger for abuse of power. The opportunity to celebrate, experience, and discuss liturgies from a different range of traditions enriched the conference, allowing participants to experience Communion on a liturgical level and live into a sense of *koinonia*.

*Edda Wolff (*1986 Stuttgart, Germany), Dr theol., 2006–2012 studies of theology and philosophy in Tübingen, Rome, and Freiburg i. Br., 2013–2015 work at the Chaplaincy of the University of Reading (UK), 2015–2018 seminary training at Westcott House Cambridge (UK), 2015–2018 doctorate at the Catholic Centre of the University of Durham (UK), 2018–2020 work as Interim Minister at the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Frankfurt a. M. and Paris, 2021–2023 DAAD postdoc scholarship (Canada / United States), since 2023 Postdoc for Liturgical Studies at the Institute of Old Catholic Theology in Bern.*

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Zusammenfassung

Die Anglikanisch/Altkatholische Theolog*innenkonferenz 2023 fand vom 28. August bis zum 1. September in Neustadt a. d. Weinstrasse statt. Das Konferenzthema war «Sakramentales Leben und das Zeugnis der Kirchen in der heutigen Kultur». Die Konferenzbeiträge reichten mit einer Vielzahl von Fragestellungen von der Bedeutung der Sakramententheologie für die Kirchengemeinschaft zu den Chancen und Risiken eines modernen Missionsverständnisses.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Conference report – Anglican – Old Catholic – sacramental theology – mission of the church