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Autor: Ploeger, Mattijs

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A confident ‘liberal catholic’ mission with modest ambitions

Suggestions for an Old Catholic understanding of mission

Mattijs Ploeger

1. Why is mission unpopular among Old Catholics?

1.1 Introduction

Some ten years ago, I was invited to advise the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference (IBC).¹ After I had given my piece of advice on a certain topic, I was asked to stay for the next session as well. The bishops discussed an ecumenical text on evangelisation. Archbishop Joris Ver-cammen, who chaired the meeting, went through the text, paragraph by paragraph. It was an evening session. I saw a bishop looking at his watch, I saw a bishop leaning back. It seemed as if all bishops were waiting for the session to be over and the bar open.

I was there as an adviser. I whispered to the Archbishop: “Perhaps you should ask them what they think about evangelisation.” When he did, it livened up the atmosphere quite a bit. One bishop exploded: “This is not for us. Evangelisation is something for evangelicals. The whole text is evangelical.” At the time, the IBC happened to have a moderately evangelical bishop as the standing Church of England representative. So I said, “Perhaps Bishop Jonathan can tell us whether this is an evangelical text?” Bishop Jonathan Gledhill (1949–2021) replied more or less like this: “For an evangelical, this text is far too long, and it lacks focus.”

1.2 The questions underlying this contribution

Among Old Catholics, mission in the sense of evangelisation is not very popular.² It would be interesting to conduct empirical research to explore

¹ Edited version of a paper given at the Anglican and Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference on ‘Sacramental theology and the church’s mission in contemporary culture’, 28 August – 1 September 2023, Neustadt/W. (Germany).

² Cf. Angela Berlis, ‘Das missionarische Potenzial der Liturgie’, in: Luca Baschera/Angela Berlis/Ralph Kunz (eds), *Gemeinsames Gebet. Form und Wirkung des Gottesdienstes* (Zürich: TVZ, 2014), 231–245: 239.

the reasons for this. By way of an ‘informed guess’, I suggest the following points.

- Mission is – as the above anecdote shows – often regarded as something which belongs to an evangelical type of Christianity and an evangelical style of church life. This should not, however, lead us to reject the idea of mission, but should rather encourage us to develop a catholic understanding of mission. (This theme will be treated in sections 2, 4 and 5.)
- Mission in the sense of evangelisation is sometimes associated with the saving of souls in the one-dimensional sense of saving them from damnation. Is it possible to start from a more positive incentive to mission? (This theme will be treated in sections 2.2 and 3.1.)
- Old Catholic Churches and their parishes are small. Is becoming more missional necessarily equivalent to adding yet another self-imposed task to our already overflowing to-do list? Or is there another, more integrated way of looking at the concept of mission? (This theme will be treated in section 3.)

I will now discuss these questions and suggest possible directions towards answers. For the sake of focus, I will understand mission as evangelisation and/or church growth,³ in the context of Western European Old Catholic Churches.

2. The goal and the means of mission in a catholic perspective

2.1 A catholic perspective

The history of the Old Catholic Churches does not include ‘going through the Reformation’. Unlike Anglicans, whose being ‘Catholic and Reformed’ has – in one way or another – long been part of their self-understanding,⁴ Old Catholics are catholic; an element of Protestantism is not part of their

³ The concept of mission is broader than that, but evangelisation is its core; cf. the Dutch protestant missiologist Stefan Paas, *Vreemdelingen en priesters. Christelijke missie in een postchristelijke omgeving* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2015), 29–34.

⁴ Cf. Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective*, revised and expanded edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

self-definition. As a consequence, for mission to become congenial to Old Catholics, mission has to be understood in a catholic way.⁵

This implies that mission cannot be limited to the verbal proclamation of a cognitive message. In a catholic understanding, mission is ultimately helping people to find their way into a sacramental community: baptism into the church and participation in the eucharist. To say it in a perhaps somewhat overstated way: mission is mystagogy. Evangelisation is not only telling people about the good news, but also showing them how the good news is embodied and personified, and letting them participate in this embodiment and personification of the good news.⁶ As a helpful phrase puts it: we not only need a “mission-shaped” church but also a “church-shaped” mission.⁷

2.2 *Mission is being drawn into the missio Dei*

It is both theologically important and practically helpful to realise that mission is not our work, but God’s work. God has a mission, the *missio Dei*, which spans from creation to its fulfilment. The church is part of God’s way with the world. To be a member of the church is to be drawn into God’s mission. We share in it and, by grace, we take up our part in it.⁸ No less and no more.

A catholic picture of the *missio Dei*, and our part in it, will not be painted in black and white. The world is not only sinful, and the church is not always clothed in white. A sacramental understanding of ontology, soteriology and ecclesiology (as in ‘communion theology’)⁹ will think in

⁵ For mission in a catholic perspective by Anglican Catholic writers, cf. Susan Lucas (ed.), *God’s Church in the World: The Gift of Catholic Mission* (London: Canterbury Press, 2020), and earlier Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Evangelism: Affirming Catholicism and Sharing the Faith* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996).

⁶ Cf. also Peter-Ben Smit’s formulations “tradition as mission” and “mission (...) is tradition” in: Peter-Ben Smit, *Traditie als missie. 125 jaar Unie van Utrecht, 1275 jaar in de voetsporen van Sint Willibrord* (Amersfoort/Sliedrecht: Merweboek, 2015), 9 (translations mine, MP), cf. 11, 18.

⁷ Susan Lucas, ‘Introduction’, in: Lucas, *God’s Church in the World* (as note 5), ix–xviii: x.

⁸ Cf. Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 4–9.

⁹ Paul Avis offers a pastoral ‘communion theology’ under the name ‘wholeness paradigm’ in: Paul Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 19–27. For Old Catholic communion theology, cf. Peter-Ben Smit, ‘Old Catholic Theology: An Introduction’, *Theo-*

terms of multi-dimensional concentric circles around Jesus Christ rather than in terms of a one-dimensional ‘in or out’. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) suggests such thinking in concentric circles in its documents about ecumenical dialogue,¹⁰ interreligious dialogue,¹¹ the modern world,¹² and the missional task of the church.¹³

In these Roman Catholic documents, as in the thought of all other non-fundamentalist churches, including the Old Catholic Churches, one immediate incentive to mission is lacking: the one-dimensional conviction that Christians should evangelise everyone because otherwise they go to hell. As the Second Vatican Council’s documents show, believing that God’s view is broader than that, that humanity’s situation is more multi-dimensional than that, and that Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation and does not work *only* through the church,¹⁴ is not a matter of being liberal, or of being lukewarm about our own faith or our own church. It is perfectly possible to have an orthodox catholic theology in which the church plays its part in soteriology and eschatology, but not the final word.¹⁵

2.3 *The goal of mission*

A catholic understanding of mission has consequences for the *goal* of mission. The goal of mission is not simply someone’s individual conver-

logical Traditions 1.1 (2019) 1–139: 39–116. For an overview of different shapes of Roman Catholic communion ecclesiology, cf. Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). For some interesting points of criticism, cf. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25–51.

¹⁰ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, sections 3, 13, 20, 22.

¹¹ Cf. *Nostra Aetate, passim*.

¹² Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, sections 1–3, 21–22, 24, 32, 41, 58, 78, 92.

¹³ Cf. *Ad Gentes*, sections 1–9 (on the *missio Dei*), 11, 22.

¹⁴ Cf. for example the nuanced position on the necessity of baptism (namely: only from the human point of view) in the dogmatic handbook, largely written in the 1930s, by the Old Catholic theologian and Archbishop of Utrecht Andreas Rinkel, ‘Dogmatische theologie’ (stencilled edition 1956), volume III, 180, 243; volume IV, 17, 31.

¹⁵ Cf. Paas, *Vreemdelingen en priesters* (as note 3), 232–235; Mattijs Ploeger, ‘Jezus Christus, de kerk en de wereld. Oecumenisch-theologische beschouwingen over “kern” en “marge” in liturgie en ecclesiologie’, in: Louis van Tongeren (ed.), *Liturgie op maat. Vieren in het spanningsveld van eenheid en veelkleurigheid* (Heeswijk: Abdij van Berne, 2009), 195–211.

sion. Of course, faith is personal (though not individual)¹⁶ and involves an element of conversion – perhaps once, perhaps many times in a person’s life. But the goal of mission goes beyond this point. Mission is not turning people into Christians and then leaving them to it. Neither is it turning people into Christians who will convert other people in their turn.

The goal of mission is for this converted person to be received into, and to participate in, the body of Christ. The goal of mission is *life* in the *church in the world*. The goal of mission is the fulfilment of humanity and the world – growing into the likeness of Christ, participating in the divine life. The fact that mission is so all-encompassing is not surprising if we take seriously that the goal of mission is identical with the goal of the *missio Dei*.

2.4 The means of mission

A catholic understanding of mission, and of the goal of mission, has consequences for the *means* of mission. We have to accept that some missional strategies are not coherent with our interpretation of the Christian faith and church. For example, mission cannot have the ultimate aim of bringing people together in separate groups, perhaps according to age, or activities, or liturgical styles.¹⁷ It is a catholic conviction that Christian faith and Christian community find their centre in the “assembly” around “bath, word, and meal”.¹⁸ It is not fair to try and attract people to join separate ‘niche’ groups, when the actual agenda is to bring them together in the Sunday Eucharist. A catholic understanding of mission rather thinks the other way round: you can have all sorts of subgroups in a community which is clearly focused around its eucharistic centre.¹⁹ We should have a “strong center” as well as an “open door”.²⁰

¹⁶ Cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), chapter 1 (on trinitarian and human personhood) and chapter 3 (on Christ’s pneumatic, communal personhood).

¹⁷ Cf. Andrew Davison/Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM, 2010), 64–92.

¹⁸ Cf. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 15–83.

¹⁹ Cf. Davison/Milbank, *For the Parish* (as note 17), 165–167.

²⁰ Gordon W. Lathrop, ‘Strong Center, Open Door: A Vision of Continuing Liturgical Renewal’, *Worship* 75 (2001) 35–45.

3. The Old Catholic context (I): towards a confident mission with modest ambitions

3.1 *Helping people find their ecclesial home*

Why should Old Catholics become more missionally aware? Probably most practising Old Catholics feel at least one incentive for mission: the fact that they are happy with this interpretation of the catholic faith and church, and want to offer others the opportunity to experience it. This is not primarily in order to cause active members of other churches to drift away from their own church in order to join our church. (It seems unlikely to me that people will change churches if they are happy in their own church.) Rather it recognises that there are people who would simply be happier in our church than they could be in other churches. This has not necessarily to do with ‘truth’ or with ‘right or wrong’, but with the fact that our type of church can be more congenial, more fitting to some people, just like other types of church can be more fitting to other people.²¹

This could sound relativistic or individualistic, but it can also be seen as pastoral.²² It is a pastoral thing to do, to help people find their ecclesial home. One parish priest in the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, who started a church plant in her large parish territory, gave as a reason for her missionary activity: not because we are doing things *better* than other churches, but because we are doing things *differently*. “And for some people this difference can be better.” She also wrote: “If we think that the Old Catholic Church offers people a place where they can experience God’s presence, then it would be selfish to keep this place to ourselves and not to make it known.”²³

Becoming more missional in this pastoral sense requires that we are not relativist and not lukewarm about our own church and about our own ministry and vocation (lay or ordained). Without developing grandiose pretensions about our small church, we should be confident about our

²¹ Cf. the concept of ‘Stimmigkeit’ as proposed by Matthias Ring, ‘Ad pristinam normam patrum. Anmerkungen zum alt-katholischen Reformparadigma’, in: Angela Berlis/Klaus-Dieter Gerth (eds), *Christus Spes. Liturgie und Glaube im ökumenischen Kontext. Festschrift für Bischof Sigisbert Kraft* (Frankfurt/M: Lang, 1994), 255–264: 261–262.

²² Cf. Avis, *A Church Drawing Near* (as note 9), 180–200 (‘The Primacy of the Pastoral’).

²³ Annemieke Duurkoop, *Dromen, denken en doen. Een geloofsverhaal over kerkopbouw in Jorwert* (Sliedrecht: Merweboek, 2010), 17, 20 (translations mine, MP).

church. We have something to offer which is different from other churches and which has the potential to appeal to some people.²⁴

3.2 *Mission with limited means*

An obvious fact that limits Old Catholic missional practice is the smallness of the Old Catholic Churches and their parishes. This argument can be a bit tiresome; it does not stir the imagination; it can sound fatalistic. On the other hand, ignoring this obvious element of Old Catholic reality can lead to unrealistic expectations and to an increase of stress on active parishioners and clergy, who are already busy and bearing much responsibility. As Old Catholics we would do well to limit our ambitions, particularly when we do so in a confident and not self-deprecating mode: focus on the things you can do well and do them as well as you can.

3.3 *Everything we do as a church has missional potential*

This advice – becoming more missionally aware by doing things well which we already do – would be impossible if we considered mission as a separate activity in which the church has to engage. But mission is not one of many compartmentalised items on the church's to-do list. Rather, everything the church is and does has missional aspects to it. This is not surprising if we consider the church's mission as participation in the *missio Dei*. In Paul Avis's definition: "Mission is the whole church bringing the whole Christ to the whole world."²⁵ Becoming more missionally aware is not about doing more things or different things, but about focussing on the missional potential of the things we already do. In Peter-Ben Smit's words: "A community is always part of a tradition, but the question is whether it is always missional, that is: in accordance with the contents of its tradition".²⁶

3.4 *Discovering the missional edge of what we are already doing*

There are different things which an Old Catholic parish could be doing well and which could have a missional edge. If a parish runs a Kindergarten, as in Bonn (Germany), a connection can develop between the parish

²⁴ Cf. section 4 below.

²⁵ Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (as note 8), 1 (emphasis omitted).

²⁶ Smit, *Traditie als missie* (as note 6), 35 (translation mine, MP).

and the children and their parents. If a parish finds itself embedded in the traditional community life of a village, as in Egmond aan Zee (the Netherlands) or the villages of the Fricktal (Switzerland), the possibilities of “common religion” and of “belonging before believing” can be explored, as well as the pastoral and missional opportunities relating to the “rites of passage”.²⁷ One can also think of parishes with church buildings in streets frequented by shoppers or tourists.

Most Old Catholic parishes, however, will not be in such missionally privileged positions. They may just be a congregation, gathering from large distances into a place of worship. They may not have the human or financial resources to do missional, diaconal or social work. Most members of the congregation may have no connection to the neighbourhood where their church happens to be situated. In such a case, a parish can take part in some kind of missional, diaconal or social work by becoming involved in a local ecumenical initiative, or in a (not necessarily church-based) partnership for local community work.²⁸ This can, however, easily be seen as the individual hobby of one parishioner or priest. Therefore, the connection between this kind of work and the congregation as a whole should be made explicit on a regular basis.

4. The Old Catholic context (II): the ‘liberal catholic’ identity of Old Catholicism

4.1 Old Catholic identity: the combination of a certain catholicity and a certain liberalism

What the Old Catholic Churches have to offer in and to a Western European context is the combination of being ‘catholic’ (not ‘protestant’) and at the same time being relatively ‘liberal’ (not ‘conservative’). I am aware that these terms are controversial; their meaning as well as the relevance of their use can be contested. Nevertheless, I am going to use the words ‘catholic’ and ‘liberal’, because I do not want to surrender to a type of

²⁷ Avis, *A Church Drawing Near* (as note 9), 109–130 (common religion), 130–154 (rites of passage), 180–200 (belonging).

²⁸ For a postliberal interpretation of Community Organising, including academic theological reflection informed by years of practical experience as a parish priest and community organiser in East London, cf. Angus Ritchie, *Inclusive Populism: Creating Citizens in the Global Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

theology which is not able or not willing to say anything anymore because of the methodological difficulty of our concepts.²⁹ In the context of Anglicans and Old Catholics, I take it for granted that the concept of ‘Liberal Catholicism’ is both sufficiently familiar and sufficiently theologically researched to be used here.³⁰

4.2 *The liberal side of Old Catholic identity*

Historically, the German, Swiss and Austrian Old Catholic Churches have had their share of the liberalisms of the time and places of their origin. This was, however, not necessarily the same sort of liberalism which we would mean when we call *present* Old Catholic churches relatively liberal. Like Anglican ‘Liberal Catholicism’ in the nineteenth century, the historical liberalism of Old Catholicism had to do with ecclesiastical and political independence from Rome and with a relative openness towards academic freedom, particularly in the field of historical and literary criticism.³¹

In the ecumenism of the twentieth century, Old Catholic identity was ‘liberal catholic’ in this older sense of the word. *Liberal* in its independence from Rome and in its openness towards academic thought. But twentieth-century Old Catholic identity was first of all *catholic* in its approach to the theology of church, sacraments and ministry. The Old Catholic Church fitted extremely well into the ecumenical theology of the

²⁹ Of course, we must acknowledge some level of deconstruction to which our concepts can be subjected. Therefore, we must be careful to define our words and to circumscribe the use we make of them. But we must not let deconstruction determine our speech and its contents to a level at which we do not dare to make “first order statements” at all, because the “second order statements” of our methodologies and definitions take all our time and attention. Cf. David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6–7.

³⁰ Cf. Paul Avis, *Gore: Construction and Conflict: Published to Mark the Centenary of the Appearance of Lux Mundi* (Worthing: Churchman, 1988); Mattijs Ploeger, *High Church Varieties: Three Essays on Continuity and Discontinuity in Nineteenth-Century Anglican Catholic Thought* (Amersfoort/Sliedrecht: Merweboek 2001), 73–105 (also available at anglicanhistory.org).

³¹ Cf. Urs Küry, *Die Altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, ihre Lehre, ihr Anliegen*, ed. by Christian Oeyen (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1978), 46–48, 76–77, 80–87; Angela Berlis, *Frauen im Prozess der Kirchwerdung. Eine historisch-theologische Studie zur Anfangsphase des deutschen Altkatholizismus (1850–1890)* (Frankfurt/M: Lang, 1998), 28–60; Christian Halama, *Altkatholiken in Österreich. Geschichte und Bestandsaufnahme* (Wien: Böhlau, 2004), 44–45, 51–52.

twentieth century. One could say that one of the methodological pillars of Old Catholic theology was to be in a positive relationship with the theological line of thought of *Faith and Order*,³² not least because the theological line of *Faith and Order* was so conveniently in a positive relationship with Old Catholic theological thought.

In the ecumenism of the twenty-first century, however, frontiers have changed.³³ Issues perceived as church-dividing now belong less to the field of ecclesiology and sacramental theology and more to the field of theological anthropology and moral theology. In this new ecumenical constellation, Western European Old Catholic Churches are regarded to be unambiguously on the liberal side. Married priests, female priests, and the blessing of homosexual relationships all seem to position Old Catholicism clearly on the liberal side of current church-dividing questions. To those who make such classifications, it seems to be irrelevant that Old Catholics adhere to an orthodox trinitarian and christocentric faith, that we uphold the threefold apostolic ministry in the apostolic succession (even in the rather traditional sense of the concept), and that we have an ecclesial life heavily focused on baptism and the eucharist. Irrelevant, too, seems the fact that we try to give orthodox theological reasoning for seemingly liberal decisions.³⁴

I deplore the fact that we are perceived in this unequivocally liberal way, because in my definition, the identity of Old Catholicism consists precisely in its multi-layered, perhaps somewhat quasi-paradoxical character. The Old Catholic Church – including its theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, spirituality – would look very different if we were an unequivocally liberal church. It is my conviction that we are *not* like that, and that we should not *become* like that. Our ‘unique selling point’ and our most significant contribution to contemporary people is precisely that we offer the possibility of a ‘liberal catholic’ identity, with emphasis on both elements of that phrase.

³² Cf. Smit, ‘Old Catholic Theology’ (as note 9), 36, 98–104.

³³ Cf. Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 158–184 (‘Ethics and Communion: The New Frontier in Ecumenism’).

³⁴ A good example is the ‘traditional’ reasoning in favour of the ordination of women by Old Catholic theologian Herwig Aldenhoven, ‘Presidency at the Eucharist in the Context of the Theology of Icons: Questions about the Ecclesial Representation of Christ by the Priesthood’, *Anglican Theological Review* 84 (2002) 703–712. Cf. Smit, ‘Old Catholic Theology’ (as note 9), 29–35.

4.3 The catholic side of Old Catholic identity: ‘High Church’ or ‘open minded’?

Therefore, it is important – both for our self-understanding and for our missional potential – that Old Catholics should not only emphasise the liberal side of our identity, but also continue to claim or reclaim the catholic character of our church. The meaning of the word ‘catholic’ has, however, become somewhat blurred in recent Old Catholic theology because of the use of two interpretations, which are not mutually exclusive, but should nevertheless be distinguished.

In traditional Old Catholic self-understanding, the word ‘catholic’ has always stood for things which could rhetorically be called ‘High Church’.³⁵ Old Catholic theologians are used to interpret the word ‘catholic’ only secondarily in its quantitative, geographical sense, and primarily in its qualitative, theological sense.³⁶ ‘Catholics’ are those who adhere to, for example, the points listed in the Anglican Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: the canon and contents of Scripture, the ancient creeds (implying trinitarian and christological orthodoxy), baptism and the eucharist (referring to an ecclesial life which is lived from and towards liturgy and the sacraments), and episcopal church order.³⁷

The other interpretation of the word ‘catholic’ could rhetorically be called ‘open minded’. In this understanding, ‘catholic’ is more or less synonymous with ‘ecumenical’. The aim is to engage with other churches and with society, with an emphasis on inculturation.³⁸ Consistent with this interpretation, catholic theology stands largely for ‘public theology’, which

³⁵ The term ‘High Church’ is used here in a rhetorical and colloquial way. For the complexity of its meaning in Anglican history, cf. Peter Benedict Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760–1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jeremy Morris, *The High Church Revival in the Church of England: Arguments and Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–38; Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (as note 4); Ploeger, *High Church Varieties* (as note 30), 11–44.

³⁶ Cf. Smit, ‘Old Catholic Theology’ (as note 9), 65.

³⁷ Cf. J. Robert Wright (ed.), *Quadrilateral at One Hundred: Essays on the Centenary of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral 1886/88–1986/88* (Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 1988).

³⁸ Cf. Joris Vercammen, *Om de menswording. Praktisch-theologische bijdragen aan het oud-katholieke denken over de kerk* (Amersfoort/Sliedrecht: Merweboek, 2022), 208–211; cf. 124, 129, 253, 269.

tries to translate the meaning of catholicity into contemporary understandings of living together in terms of, for instance, politics and morals.³⁹

Of course, these two interpretations can be combined.⁴⁰ But it is also possible to detect a development within Old Catholicism, in which the two interpretations of catholicity grow apart, and in which the newer view on catholicity merges with the newer view on liberalism. When this happens, ‘catholic’ loses its quality as an identity marker: it no longer stands for orthodox theology, catholic liturgy, sacramental spirituality, episcopal church order. At the same time ‘liberal’ becomes synonymous with the relatively recent developments, mainly related to gender and sexuality, within Old Catholicism. In this scenario, the multi-layered, quasi-paradoxical identity of the Old Catholic Churches gives way to an unequivocally ‘liberal’ identity, in which the remaining ‘catholic’ elements become more outward and less intrinsic.⁴¹

It is important that we as Old Catholics should learn from Anglican Catholics not to be afraid of the catholic patrimony. Being ‘High Church’ is nothing to be ashamed of. The quasi-paradoxical combination of a thoroughly catholic identity with modern decisions, and a nuanced theology moderating between the two, is our primary missionary asset. This is why I plead for a vigorous ‘Liberal Catholicism’, including a deeper engagement with the meaning of both words of this phrase.

5. The catholicity of mission (I): a sacramental church: liturgy as a form of mission

5.1 *The missional character of the Sunday Eucharist*

In accordance with our catholic identity, one of the main activities in an Old Catholic parish will be the Sunday Eucharist. The emphasis on the Sunday Eucharist should lead us to the awareness that our liturgy has (or should have) missional potential. This does not arise from limiting its

³⁹ Cf. Smit, ‘Old Catholic Theology’ (as note 9), 93–96.

⁴⁰ As, for example, in Vercammen, *Om de menswording* (as note 38).

⁴¹ Cf. the insightful comments on using selected elements of catholic liturgy outside the context of catholic liturgy and catholic church life, in: Davison/Milbank, *For the Parish* (as note 17), 109–111. See also the important chapter on ‘The Union of Form and Content’ (1–27).

catholic character, but through embracing the catholic character of the Eucharist and allowing it to display its missional potential.⁴²

This is not self-evident. Old Catholics may like their liturgy, but at the same time they are susceptible to an understanding of liturgy as something inward looking, not as something that could have deep meaning (and therefore missional potential) for other people. The catholicity of our liturgy sometimes appears to us as a hindrance rather than as an opportunity. However, this attitude is only possible if we understand liturgy as an isolated ritual moment, as a sort of catering for personal spiritual or aesthetic preferences.⁴³ There is nothing wrong with ritual moments, nor with spiritual and aesthetic preferences, as long as they are part of a broader and deeper understanding of liturgy.

Contrary to popular belief, however, an attractive church need not be easily ‘accessible’ in its forms, language and contents.⁴⁴ It is perfectly possible that people feel attracted to a rather traditional catholic liturgy.⁴⁵ How can we enhance this missional potential of the liturgy?

5.2 *Improving our liturgical and sacramental sensibility*

If we want to continue in the catholic liturgical tradition, we would do well to concentrate on two things. Firstly, as Old Catholics – both lay and ordained – we have to deepen our theological and spiritual understanding of the fundamental importance of sacramentality and liturgy. We have to go beyond an individual aesthetic preference for a certain liturgical style. Why is it important to gather for the Eucharist on a Sunday? Why is not every concept of liturgy consistent with a catholic, sacramental understanding of God, humanity and the world? Our liturgical identity is not an optional extra on top of the contents of our faith. Rather, liturgy in a broadly sacramental sense *is* part of the contents of our faith. The international and ecumenically widespread approach of ‘liturgical theology’ (in Ger-

⁴² Cf. Jeffrey John, *Going for Growth: A Strategy for Incumbents of Smaller Parishes in the Central and Catholic Traditions* (London: Affirming Catholicism, 2001).

⁴³ Cf. Joris Vercammen, *Identiteit in beraad. Theorie en praktijk van het parochieel identiteitsberaad in vier oud-katholieke parochies* (Baarn: Gooi en Sticht, 1997), 25, 287, 301, 303, 336.

⁴⁴ Cf. Paas, *Vreemdelingen en priesters* (as note 3), 164–165; Smit, *Traditie als missie* (as note 6), 38.

⁴⁵ Cf. Berlis, ‘Das missionarische Potential der Liturgie’ (as note 2).

man sometimes called ‘systematische Liturgiewissenschaft’) can help us discover the deeper layers of what is already ours in the liturgy.⁴⁶ It will end our self-deprecating attitude towards our liturgy and will make us more confident about our church.

Secondly, after this strengthening of our catholic, sacramental, liturgical faith, we have to apply our deeper understanding of it to the way in which we celebrate the liturgy. Celebrating the liturgy is not something which can be done without training. Celebrating the liturgy is an ‘art’: the *ars celebrandi*.⁴⁷ This applies both to those who preside over the celebration and to those who celebrate in the congregation. An improved way of celebrating will increase our own level of experience of the liturgy, and it will make our liturgy more missional at the same time.

6. The catholicity of mission (II): a sacramental world: public theology as a form of mission

6.1 Public theology

After having given the liturgy as an example of the so-called High Church version of catholicity, I will now give ‘public theology’ as an example of the so-called open minded version of catholicity. Public theology can be defined as “the church reflectively engaging with those within and outside its institutions on issues of common interest and for the common good.”⁴⁸ One way of describing public theology is by referring to David Tracy’s indication of the three ‘publics’ of theology: the church, the academy, and society.⁴⁹ Public theology is the mode of theology which engages with

⁴⁶ Cf., for example, Lathrop, *Holy Things* (as note 18); David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2004); Helmut Hoping/Birgit Jeggle-Merz (eds), *Liturgische Theologie. Aufgaben systematischer Liturgiewissenschaft* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004).

⁴⁷ Cf. from an Old Catholic background: Urs von Arx, ‘Überlegungen zum Vollzug des Eucharistiegebetes’, in: Angela Berlis/Matthias Ring (eds), *Im Himmel Anker werfen. Vermutungen über Kirche in der Zukunft. Festschrift für Bischof Joachim Vobbe* (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2007), 82–95; Angela Berlis, ‘Liturgische Kompetenz aus christkatholischer Perspektive’, in: Angela Berlis/David Plüss/Christian Walti (eds), *GottesdienstKunst* (Zürich: TVZ, 2012), 177–180.

⁴⁸ Katie Day/Sebastian Kim, ‘Introduction’, in: Sebastian Kim/Katie Day (eds), *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1–21, here 2.

⁴⁹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3–46 (‘A Social Portrait of the Theo-

society. This has consequences for the themes and the language of this mode of theology.⁵⁰

An example of public theology is the publication of articles in newspapers, shedding light on issues of the day by relating them to elements of the Christian tradition. The same can be done by taking part in cultural or political events or by writing books, provided the envisaged ‘public’ is not the church or the academy alone, but rather the general public. Within public theology, different positions can be held as to its relation to political theology and political action.⁵¹

In the introduction to his volume of articles on public theology, Rowan Williams describes his enterprise as the search for a “theory about faith and the social order.”⁵² On the one hand, Williams acknowledges that a theologian engaging with so-called secular themes “will be told that he has no particular expertise in sociology or economics or international affairs.” On the other hand, according to Williams, the Christian faith is not just a “vague philosophy” but it has something to say “about how we think about [the] world and about human life.”⁵³ Sacramental theology has an impact on ecology, Christian ethics has an impact on economics.⁵⁴ If religious thought no longer contributes to public debates on these and other matters, Williams suggests, “this ‘thins out’ the fabric of public debate and of moral passion.”⁵⁵

6.2 *The missional quality of public theology*

When I introduced two interpretations of catholicity – the ‘High Church’ and the ‘open minded’ options⁵⁶ –, I indicated that these options can either be combined or be seen as alternatives or even opposites. The same applies to public theology. Is public theology seen as the *only* relevant way of

logian: The Three Publics of Theology: Society, Academy, Church’).

⁵⁰ Day/Kim, ‘Introduction’ (as note 48), 3.

⁵¹ Cf. Ruth Nientiedt, ‘Einleitung. Zum Stand der Diskussion um das Verhältnis von Kirche und Politik im Katholischen Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland’, in: Andreas Krebs/Ruth Nientiedt (eds), *Freiheit und Nachfolge. Alt-katholische Beiträge zu Kirche und Politik* (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2023), 9–30.

⁵² Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 2.

⁵³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (as note 52), 1.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (as note 52), 5.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (as note 52), 3.

⁵⁶ Cf. section 4.3 above.

doing theology in a secular context, or is public theology *one mode* of doing theology, which still includes other modes, such as dogmatics?

In the first instance, public theology effectively becomes a post-Christian theology: it does not emerge from a living faith in an actual ecclesial community, but it treats remnants of an allegedly past tradition as analogies to current issues (football as religion; new rituals as supposedly analogical to a bygone liturgical tradition).⁵⁷ This is the sort of public theology in which secularisation is interpreted as an ongoing incarnation, with the result that, in this discourse, a term such as ‘incarnation’ ends up having little to do with the Christian meaning of the incarnation.⁵⁸ This interpretation of public theology has little missional value. In an effort to regain ‘relevance’,⁵⁹ this type of public theology does not point towards the Christian faith and church: ‘religion’ can mean anything.⁶⁰

There is, however, a second interpretation of public theology, which does have a missional edge. If the three ‘publics’ of theology are kept together (church, academy, and society), the part of theology that is directed towards society (public theology) can become a bridge between the language of faith and the language of a public debate about the common good, and vice versa. Public theology does not directly aim at either the conversion of people by proclaiming the Christian faith to them, or the growth of the church. However, public theology is missional in the sense that it takes part in the church’s task to help people ‘decipher’ the meaning of the world, the meaning of life.⁶¹ In the largely secular context in which most Old Catholic Churches find themselves, this way of engaging in public discourse can convey a sense of the Christian faith and church in a way that is different from the usual, often negative way in which churches figure in news headlines.

Not unlike the reason given above for church planting, the reason for engaging in public theology can just be this: Why should we keep this

⁵⁷ Cf. Stephan van Erp, ‘Tussen traditie en situatie. Edward Schillebeeckx voor een volgende generatie’, in: Stephan van Erp (ed.), *Trouw aan Gods toekomst. De blijvende betekenis van Edward Schillebeeckx* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010), 6–26: 21.

⁵⁸ As Graham Ward writes about the theology of Thomas Altizer, cf. Graham Ward, ‘Postmodern Theology’, in: David Ford/Rachel Muers (eds), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 322–338: 328.

⁵⁹ Vgl. Paas, *Vreemdelingen en priesters* (as note 3), 92–93, 98, 118, 228.

⁶⁰ Paas, *Vreemdelingen en priesters* (as note 3), 67–68.

⁶¹ Cf. Vercammen, *Om de menswording* (as note 38), 61–62.

wisdom to ourselves? This is not an attempt to impose Christian teaching on other people, but to offer them perspectives which are derived from Christian teaching. As such, it has missional relevance.

7. Conclusion

In this contribution, I have given some suggestions for an Old Catholic understanding of mission. I have articulated the importance of developing a catholic understanding of mission, its goal, and its means. I have identified the quasi-paradoxical ‘liberal catholic’ character of the Old Catholic Churches as their most important missional asset in a contemporary Western European context. Therefore, I have emphasised the importance of not only becoming more and more liberal, but at the same time regaining and reclaiming a thoroughly catholic identity. I have distinguished two interpretations of the concept of catholicity, in a simplified way described as ‘High Church’ and ‘open minded’. Finally, I have given two examples – liturgy and public theology – as missional fields consistent with an Old Catholic identity.

Mattijs Ploeger (1970 Westervoort NL), Dr theol., studied 1989–1998 theology at the University of Leiden, the Old Catholic Seminary at Utrecht University and the Anglican theological college ‘Westcott House’ in Cambridge. Doctoral diss. in 2006 at Utrecht University. He is a priest of the Diocese of Haarlem within the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands. After having been a parish priest in Krommenie, Egmond and Haarlem, he is dean of the Old Catholic Seminary at Utrecht University (since 2009) where he is also lecturer in systematic theology (since 2008) and liturgical studies (since 2016).*

*Address: Jacob van Strijplein 1, NL-1816 NV Alkmaar
E-mail: m.ploeger@uu.nl*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich aus theologischer Perspektive mit der Frage, wie alt-katholische Kirchengemeinden ein ausgeprägteres missionarisches Bewusstsein entwickeln könnten. Dazu sollte erstens der Begriff «Mission» in einer Weise aufgefasst werden, dass er mit einem katholischen Verständnis von Glauben und Kirche kompatibel ist. Zweitens wird die These vertreten, dass die sowohl «liberale» als auch «katholische» Identität der altkatholischen Kirchen ihr wichtigstes missionarisches Potenzial ist. Dabei sollte der liberale Aspekt seine ursprüngliche Bedeutung behalten: Im Altkatholizismus bedeutete er neben der Unabhängigkeit von Rom auch Offenheit für (geschichtliche und literarische) Wissenschaft und Kultur. Der katholische Aspekt sollte sowohl in der klassischen Bedeutung von «hochkirchlich» verstanden werden, mit der katholischen Liturgie als wichtigstem Beispiel, als auch in der heutigen Bedeutung von ökumenisch und gesellschaftlich ausgerichtet, wie er zum Beispiel in Ansätzen der *public theology* zum Ausdruck kommt.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Mission – catholicity – liberalism – Old Catholicism