

Anglican – Old Catholic relations with regard to Church unity and some current associated issues.

An Old Catholic view 2015 for discussion by Bishop Harald Rein, Switzerland.

The Old Catholic and Anglican understanding of unity

When the Old Catholic Churches came into being in the context of the turmoil surrounding the First Vatican Council 1869/70, the founders had no desire to establish a new church, nor to leave the former church, but wished to remain faithful to the existing faith. For 125 years, this has been the creed of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, which see themselves primarily as an ecumenical movement, working unceasingly for the unity of the Church.

This has been done mainly through bilateral dialogues at a global level. In 1931 the Churches entered into communion with the worldwide Anglican Church; and in 1965 with the Philippine Independent Church, the Spanish Episcopal Reformed Church and the Lusitanian Catholic Apostolic Church in Portugal. Similar results are being sought through intensive dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Sweden, the Syrian Malankara Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Church of the Mariavites in Poland. Consequently, the 2014 joint pastoral letter of the Bishops of the Union of Utrecht on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Union was entitled "Building Bridges"

Why did we start with these particular churches? Largely because these churches share our particular understanding of Church unity - one that I would like to call "Early Church". Different ways of viewing 'Church unity' have arisen from different interpretations of the Bible; there are three main strands / opinions / doctrines:

- Most churches of the Reformation, and the free churches stemming from them, assume that structural Church unity will only come into being after the Last Day. Meanwhile the unity of the Church will remain invisible, expressed ideally in mutual recognition (including Baptism, Holy Communion and Ministry) or as "reconciled diversity". Different churches implement this in different ways.
- The Roman Catholic Church sees the visible unity of the church as involving structural unity under the primacy of papal jurisdiction (appointment of bishops) and papal infallibility in matters of faith and ethics.
- Other churches — especially those from the Orthodox, Anglican and Old Catholic traditions — prefer the model of visible church unity implicit in what is known as the "Early Church", the Church of the first seven centuries after Christ. Such a model could be described as a "local church ecclesiology". At the local level this means: in any one specific geographical area, all Christians in all their diversity (such as, cultural, linguistic, regional traditions) form a church with one bishop and one synod. At the global level it means: the bishops of these local churches meet for regular exchanges on various occasions and within the context of the

consecration of new bishops. But each local church is fully Church and autonomous. A special gathering, such as an Ecumenical Council, would be required only where differences arose on key issues of faith.

Within the ecumenical movement today, in addition to these three types, significant advances have been made in terms of consensus. This is particularly evident from the recent working document of the World Council of Churches in Geneva *"The Church. On the way to a common vision. Study of the Commission on Faith and Order Paper No. 214, Geneva 2012."*

Current issues in continental Europe

If, after proper dialogue, churches agree to “church communion” on the Early Church model, it follows that they have an obligation to think through and negotiate the “structural consequences” where the churches overlap territorially. In such a case, two synods and two bishops are one too many; even though plurality can be permissible at the parish level, for example with regard to language and worship styles.

In real terms today, this model for unity presents challenges to the following churches in continental Europe:

- Firstly, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, the Church of England with their Anglican Diocese in Europe, and the Episcopal Church in the USA (The Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe).
- Secondly, there are the two autonomous indigenous churches one in Spain and one in Portugal. These come under the direct jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury (but NOT under the jurisdiction of the Anglican Diocese in Europe). Both are in (full) communion with the Union of Utrecht.
- Thirdly, there are the migrant churches: the Philippine Independent Church, and the Indian Mar Thoma Christians; both of these are already in communion with the Anglican Church.
- For the moment, I would like to exclude the Church of Sweden, otherwise things will become too complicated. However, it can be assumed that if unity is achieved within the first group (Union of Utrecht, the Anglican Diocese in Europe, the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe), then the others could integrate without any problem.

This commitment to visible structural unity does not arise for financial reasons, nor for reasons of politics and power, nor in order to find better solution to our problems, but because Christ wills it, and because it will lend greater credibility to his message in the world. The credibility of Jesus’ mission, according to the Gospel of John (17.23), depends specifically on the unity of Christians, "*so that the world may know*". And it is in the world that Christianity is also struggling for its own credibility. The division of the Church into many churches is a major obstacle to their mission of proclamation, and also to their social work in the world.

For a long time, the emergence and the existence of "overlapping jurisdictions" was disregarded; this was due largely to a misreading of historical developments. Originally, with the establishment of the Old Catholic Churches, the Old Catholics, Orthodox and Anglicans had assumed, that under the Early Church model the Anglicans would be the ‘Catholic Church’ in England and the Anglo-Saxon world, the Old Catholics in Western Europe, and the Orthodox in Eastern Europe and the Orient, so there would be no overlap of jurisdictions! At that time the world-wide Anglican "chaplaincies" for business people, the military, diplomats, sailors and retirees were regarded as temporary exceptions / outposts / English clubs. This was in fact the case until 1918!

But the situation changed completely due to the following factors:

- The population shifts following the First and the Second World Wars.
- The creation of additional Anglican chaplaincies for British and American soldiers posted to Germany after the Second World War.
- The sharp rise in the number of Anglicans in continental Europe following the creation of the European Economic zone and of the EU. This prompted significant growth and consequent changes in the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe: former "chaplaincies", established before the creation of the Old Catholic Churches, became permanent parishes and new congregations were formed.

The sad fact is that, although there has been talk of closer cooperation for decades, so far almost nothing has been done!

Every year the Bishops of the Union of Utrecht, Spain, Portugal, the Anglican Diocese in Europe and the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe meet in conference. In addition, particularly since 1998, there is also the Anglican / Old Catholic International Co-ordinating Council (AOCICC).

In my opinion, the very slow pace of progress is largely due to the following:

- Differences in language and culture of the churches that exist side by side.
- Ecclesiology and theology: The Anglicans regards the Old Catholics as too "high church" or too "liberal", while the Old Catholics regard the Anglicans as too "low church" or too "evangelical". I see this as a rather superficial excuse, based on mutual prejudices.
- In the past, church leaders have been disinclined to raise this issue among their respective parishes and congregations. I am pleased that this attitude has now changed.

Current issues in the USA

At the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht (IBC) in 2014, the bishops issued the following statement:

“The IBC furthermore decided to discontinue all activities with regard to those groups in the USA that call themselves 'Old Catholic' and have repeatedly sought contact with the Union of Utrecht. Enquiries will now be forwarded to the Episcopal Church, which is in communion with the Union of Utrecht, or to the responsible bishop, W. Michie Klusmeyer. The churches of the Union of Utrecht have no intention to establish jurisdictions in the USA.”

According to this statement, the matter is, in theory, already settled: The Union of Utrecht regards the Episcopal Church as the sole Anglican / Old Catholic Church - or Catholic Church in “Early Church” terms - in the United States. The Union of Utrecht is the Old Catholic / Anglican Church - or Catholic Church in “Early Church” terms - in continental Europe. That is the model in place today in the United States and perhaps tomorrow in continental Europe.

Nevertheless Bishop M. Klusmeyer has quite rightly asked to speak to this topic with regard to the situation in the United States, because in practice it is still troublesome and an ongoing issue for the Episcopal Church.

The causes are, unfortunate...

“Unfortunate”, means that self-opinionated minorities hoping to become majorities, in order to “grow” or “increase membership” tend to enter into euphoric alliances which, with hindsight, prove to be mistaken.

- In 1907, the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) was received into the Union of Utrecht. The Episcopal Church was in agreement with this for cultural and linguistic reasons. Today, the PNCC is no longer a member of the Union of Utrecht, the separation was due to the question of women's ordination. They now claim to be the "Union of Utrecht without women's ordination" and have established jurisdictions everywhere, even in Europe. They also maintain contact with the two other groups of the same name. But this is actually a side issue. In my opinion the PNCC has, for various reasons, no future and they have expressed the desire to have nothing further to do with the Episcopal Church or the Union of Utrecht.
- The Old Catholic "episcopi vagantes" resulting from the Matthew affair in England do not belong to the Union of Utrecht, but they and their "Old Catholic Church" are widespread particularly in the United States; they represent the real problem! They often claim to belong to the Union of Utrecht and some seek contact with the Union of Utrecht. The current policy of the Bishops of the Union of Utrecht is basically to refuse such contacts and to refer the individuals and churches to the Episcopal Church. Unfortunately, there are individual Old Catholics in Europe, who maintain private contact with these groups (Bishop Robert Fuentes) and thereby give the impression of some sort of official Old Catholic activity by the Utrecht Union in the United States. What is more, members of these "Old Catholic

Churches" in the United States register for events held by the Union of Utrecht in Europe where they then claim to be American Old Catholics in communion with the Union of Utrecht. This happened for example at the last International Old Catholic Congress held in 2014 in Utrecht. The registration process for such large events makes it impossible to weed out these uninvited/unwelcome participants.

- Former Roman Catholic parishes in the USA, which have broken with their bishop and with Rome, would like to be received into the Union of Utrecht on the grounds that the Episcopal Church is too Protestant. The most recent case was, to my knowledge, the parish of St. Stanislaus, with The Revd Marek Bozek. This involved the Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses of Missouri. My final email contact with Father Marek closed with words to this effect: *The IBK had decided that all activities of the Union of Utrecht in the USA would stop forthwith. There were two main reasons for this: 1) The Episcopal Church is our sister church, we are in communion and respect each other's territory. 2) It would not be possible to take on such a responsibility from Europe. And finally, any further matters should be referred to Bishop Mike Klusmeyer.* This response expresses our position now and in future.

To prevent further complications, the Bishops of Union of Utrecht will effectively avoid any misleading contact with these groups and refer such groups directly to the Episcopal Church.

It would perhaps also be helpful to have an official joint statement, which could be published on our websites?