The Ecumenical Mission of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht: A present-day position-fixing.

(I) Introduction

1. The ecumenical concern is a recurrent theme in the history of the Union of Utrecht (UU) and its membership churches. Before the UU was established, the Munich Congress (1871) combined the key note of Old Catholicism – which is to cling to the faith, the rite and the constitution of the ancient or primitive Church – with the new task for a reunification of the Church and inner reform. This tradition is mirrored by the preamble of the new charter of the International Old Catholic Bishops Conference (IBK) in 2000 where among the basics of an ecclesiological identity of the UU these points are outlined: No. 1) the UU is a “communion of churches and their leading bishops who are determined to maintain and promote the faith, the rite and the essential structure of the undivided Church of the first millennium”. In No. 3+4) of the charter the ecumenical commitment of the UU is derived from the Old Catholic understanding of being the Church (ecclesiology). As a consequence in No. 5 is said: “When communion does exist with churches outside the UU or where such a communion due to theological clarification seems to be desirable and responsible in accord with the ecumenical commitment of the UU, it is the task of the bishops of the UU to stay with these churches in a mutual consultation process.”

2. Since 2005 there has been a new reflection within the UU how this task is to be put into standards or routine under present circumstances. The International Old Catholic Theologians Conference in 2007 also focused on this question. The deliberations thereby have been in connection with initiatives concerning dialogue and/or cooperation with other churches, sometimes developed by the Internationals Bishop’s Conference or member churches of the UU in recent years. The primary target in this has been to describe as practical as possible the pending charging, especially in view of an Old Catholic vision of ecclesiology that has been developed in the last decades by Old Catholic theology.

3. The most important landmarks of the Old Catholic vision of ecclesiology you will find on the following pages, paragraph (II) starting with the preamble of the charter of the International Old Catholic Bishops Conference (IBK). How the IBK looks upon the charging and mission of the Union of Utrecht will be outlined in (III). A listing of first principles follows this section in (IV). The last paragraph deals with the relationship with other churches that are already existing and describes practical tasks and initiatives which the bishops are going to undertake in the next years (V). A list with the most important publications which set the tone for the deliberations of the bishops throughout the process is to be found at the back in the appendix.

(II) The Ecclesiological Vision

4. The presetting of the Old or primitive Church constitutes the focus for the ecclesiological identity and theological agenda of the Old Catholic Church. In doing so the continuity with the apostolic beginning of the Church is aimed at. The role model
of the Ancient Church is important on three levels: on the level of the local Church (which is understood here as a church which structure is Episcopal and synodical at the same time), the next level understood as the community of local churches within the Union of Utrecht and the external layer, comprizing the relationships to other denominations with the goal of a universal community of churches.

5. According to Old Catholic ecclesiology the following elements are to be considered elementary for the Church:

A) The Church is a community of SALVATION and WHOLENESS because salvation – a gift from God towards humankind – is experienced there. Salvation has to be experienced in the real living conditions of people and is put into practice there – otherwise it is not to be called salvation. Therefore the Church is always a local church and a synodical community of local churches at the same time. And the Church is an universal community of local churches.

B) The faith community of baptized people finds its deepest source and expression in the EUCHARISTIC GATHERING, presided by the bishop, respectively by a presbyter/priest, charged by the bishop. The ordained ministry in which the bishop is to be seen as the first and foremost incumbent of the apostolic ministry, connects the local church with the origin and makes her a symbol of unity.

C) Being the Church means serving the MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION which God has established. This service is crucial for the mission of the Church in the Holy Spirit, because God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ.

6. Summarizing it can be said that the one global or universal Church of God is constituted as a community of local churches which are bound by the self-revelation of God in the sending of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This community realizes the components of martyria, leitourgia and diakonia. By these components the mission of the community of all the baptized finds its expression. The local Church is the prominent place where all who hold the personal, collegial and common Episkope are responsible for carrying out those components in various forms. The local Church is the representation and realization of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that is quoted in the creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, describing her as an entity of faith in a pneumatological context.

7. The IBC statute (charter) presupposes that the Union of Utrecht is a community of local churches where in which each church views herself as realization of the One Church of the creed in a special place and time. Looked upon by other churches to be a small global Christian community, the UU has the special task to spread and live out the catholicity of the Ancient or primitive Church Thus the UU wants to foster the unity of the churches and aims at the healing of the universal community of local churches.

(III) The Ecumenical Self-Understanding of the Union of Utrecht

8. To be engaged in ecumenical dialogues is one of the earliest and characteristic features of Old Catholicism. One can find proof for that in the above mentioned “Muenchner Programm” (Declaration of Munich) 1871 in the wake of the earliest Old
Catholic protest against the papal dogmas of 1870. The Union Conferences in Bonn 1874 and 1875 are to be seen as an early fruit of those ecumenically oriented initiatives on the basis of the old and early Church. During those conferences Orthodox, Anglican and Old Catholic theologians were able to reach a consent on certain disputed viewpoints – sadly with no direct consequences for the various church bodies. Furthermore the constitution of the Union of Utrecht in 1889 (The Declaration of Utrecht) contains in No.7 a passage which describes the ecumenical task of the UU. The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht since then have taken their ecumenical duties not lightly which is shown by their engagement in the World Council of Churches, its preparatory conferences, especially furthermore by the different bilateral dialogues. With the Orthodox Churches an extended dialogue took place between 1975-1987, culminating in 26 textdocuments that showed a far reaching consensus in questions of faith and ecclesiology. Another proof for the ecumenical engagement can be found in the Bonn Agreement (1931) which resulted in a full communion with the Anglican churches and on this same ground from 1965 onwards the full communion with the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, with the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and with the Lusitanian Catholic Church in Portugal, being fruits of the ecumenical work of the Union of Utrecht.

9. An ecumenical engagement based on the ecclesiological principles of the Old or primitive Church is to be considered the common strain of all the ecumenical initiatives of the UU. Most clearly this can be shown by the relationship toward Anglican and Orthodox churches. Every member church of the UU is beyond that called to control if other existing divisions are to be justified in their classification as inevitable any longer (IBC statute, preamble No.3.2). Therefore it is as well an obligation for the UU to develop new initiatives within the frame of her principles without endangering the already achieved ones. New ecumenical initiatives as well as the improvement of communication opportunities between countries and continents have a lot to offer in this respect. Yet decisions to follow some new initiatives should be foremost based on theological reasons.

10. For the ecumenical mission of the Union of Utrecht it is crucial that relationships on the level of parishes are fostered between different denominational communities. These intertwined bindings of parishes are of great help in the bilateral church dialogue.

(IV) Fundamental Principles

11. The faith of the Ancient Church is the directive groundwork to search and create unity and community with other churches. In the Declaration of Utrecht (1889) it is said that this faith is verbalized by “the ecumenical creeds and by the commonly acknowledged dogmatic decisions of the ecumenical synods of the undivided Church in the first millennium” (No.1). The Lima-Text (1982) on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry - a consensus document of the Faith-and-Order-Commission of the World Council of Churches – serves as orientation mark for the UU in so far as the common heritage of the churches is described. In this it helps fulfilling the task of searching and discovering unity and community with other churches.
12. The shared celebration of the Eucharist finds its appropriate place in the context of a full church communion. In 1992 a IBC-text mentions the giving of communion towards members of churches not in community with the UU. This text aims at the special situation of individual persons, not at a general guideline or an agreed upon regulation between churches.

13. Old Catholic ecclesiology, informed by the model of the Ancient Church, entrusts the bishops with a special role in maintaining the “communio” and the unity. This is true as well in respect to the own local church as in respect to the communion/community of local churches. The bishop has the first and foremost responsibility for the maintenance of and unity and catholicity. This responsibility in oversight (episkopé in Greek) implies a personal, a collegial and a communal dimension. For Old Catholic ecclesiology the order of bishops, the episcopate, is necessary for an all-embracing catholicity.

14. In regard to the Union of Utrecht the bishops share their responsibility and oversight in their function as members of the IBC (International Bishops Conference). The IBC is the synodical instrument of the Old Catholic church communion where the bishops serve the inner unity of the Union of Utrecht in their function of oversight. One of the tasks towards the “outside” of the IBC is the fostering of ecumenism, especially the dialogue on questions of faith and order. Those questions effect the UU as a whole, therefore the bishops of the IBC look after national ecumenical dialogues and their implications for the IBC (cf. IBC statute, preamble No.4; Inner Order No.3 and 11). Decisions which concern the question how the unity of the Union of Utrecht is kept, are brought into an inner process in which the local church is involved and therefore the conclusions can be received by the Church as a whole (cf. IBC statute, preamble No.4.1; Inner Order No.6).

15. The following aspects are to be taken into account when ecumenical engagement is concerned:

a) Concerning the UNIVERSAL REACH OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE, where the implementation is possible in general for all cultures in their various forms, the model of the Ancient Church as a “communio” of local churches offers a unique possibility to experience unity in the fundamentals while allowing manifold forms in the realization of the life of the Church.

b) To ACCEPT THAT OTHERS AND THEIR CULTURE ARE DIFFERENT is a basic requirement that the “communio” of the Church can serve as a community of solidarity and for experiencing reconciliation, wholeness and salvation.

c) The ecumenical process asks for a building up of relations where equality, open communication and mutual sharing are crucial for an improved understanding of the own cultural and religious context.

(V) The present regular connections to other churches and the future engagement of the Union of Utrecht for the next years
16. The Anglican churches and churches with which there is church communion on the basis of the Bonn Agreement (1931)
   a) Based on the Bonn Agreement the exchange with the Anglican Communion is presently most probably the most intensive one. This work is coordinated by the Anglican – Old Catholic International Coordinating Council (=AOCICC). The various sections of the Willibrord Society help to foster interchurch bindings. The Archbishop of Canterbury as well as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA both have a delegate to function as a permanent observer in the International Bishops Conference.
   b) The cooperation with the Philippine Independent Church (Iglesia Filipina Independiente) is maintained by various exchange programs, in study projects and in actions of solidarity.
   c) The bishops of the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and the Lusitanian-Catholic Church in Portugal have been invited from 2005 on to observe the IBC sessions.

17. The Orthodox Churches.
   The current Old Catholic policy to cherish the church community with the Orthodox Churches among the first and outstanding goals, is still valid and serves as a landmark. That this direction of the theological dialogue, containing 26 text documents of a reached consensus (cf. Koinonia on the grounds of the Ancient Church), was approved meanwhile by all synods of Old Catholic Churches, gives this dialogue a prominent stress and authority in an Old Catholic perspective. Since 2004 a mixed group of delegates from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and from the Union of Utrecht sets its effort into a vision of a common way into the future in spite of old and new points of difference which obviously stand in the way of church community.

18. The Roman Catholic Church.
   While the Roman Catholic Church the Union of Utrecht entered into a theological dialogue on the question of the universal primate of the Bishop of Rome during these last years. This dialogue came to an end with the final report “Church and church community” in 2009. The question of church community which is not to be understood as a kind of “homecoming Ecumenism” has been openly dealt with in those talks. Now the stage of the reception process has begun and it is looked into possibilities of further dialogue.

19. The Old Catholic Church of the Mariavites in Poland.
   The church of the Mariavites has again asked the International Bishops Conference to be included into the Union of Utrecht once more. Already between 1909 to 1924 their bishops have been members of the IBC, so the talks focus on the issue of an Old Catholic identity on the side of the Mariavites which is compatible with the other churches of the Union of Utrecht. Points of ecclesiology as well as dogmatic questions are touched. It is the goal of the IBC to engage in a bilateral dialogue within the next years to clarify all those topics in order to be able to reach a definitive conclusion on the readmission. At present the Presiding Bishop of the Mariavites is a guest in the IBC gatherings.
20. The Church of Sweden.
Since 2005 consultations exist between the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden to explore possibilities of church communion. This could become a signal that the Union of Utrecht can overcome the gap between her and a church of the Continental Reformation, provided that the episcopate of the Ancient Church has been maintained.

21. The Syrian Mar Thoma Church in India.
A contact to the Mar Thoma Church has been established in recent years. In 2008 a delegation of the IBC visited this church in India and was impressed by the spiritual richness. The Mar Thoma Church is from her origin an Oriental Church, specifically shaped by Anglicanism. Since the IBC has discovered a theological closeness to the spirit of Old Catholicism, talks of preparation will be held to explore a possible official dialogue.

22. A special project.
In the framework of the above mentioned relationship of the Union of Utrecht to other churches, the IBC considers it to be her special project to join together with bishops of smaller churches into a reflection process exploring the meaning and practical implications of a commonly lived out “Catholicism informed by the Ancient Church”. A successful meeting took place already in 2010 with a smaller number of bishops from the Philippine Independent Church, the Mar Thoma Church, the Marivites, and bishops from the Union of Utrecht. It was resolved then to pursue this road. The goal of those meetings is clearly to encourage bishops in their own commitment for the catholicity of their own church and beyond (cf. above No. 4.7).

23. The local realization of the UU’s ecumenical mission in dioceses and parishes.
Relations with other churches are able to be a sign of the ecumenical mandate of the Old Catholic churches when local parishes take part in initiatives and such are able to bring forth impulses. This is true as well for those long existing relations as for newly initiated ones.

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Appendix

Declarations of the IBC

Statements of other Old Catholic Institutions

Documents of recent bilateral Dialogues

Articles of individual Autors
• Sarah Aebersold, The Church Local and Universal. Beiheft IKZ 96 (2006), 85-101
• Urs von Arx, Unity and Communion. Mystical and Visible. Beiheft IKZ 96 (2006), 140-173
• Urs von Arx, Der kirchliche und ökumenische Auftrag der altkatholischen Kirchen der Utrechter Union: Wie weiter in der Zukunft? IKZ 98 (2008) 5-49
• Günter Esser: Überlegungen zur Frage Altkatholizismus und Ökumene. Unveröffentlichter Text für die IBK-Sitzung 2008, 12 S.
• Anton Houtepen, Ökumene oder der Weg zu einer neuen Katholizität. IKZ 96 (2006) 9-42
• Mattijs Ploeger: Catholicity, Apostolicity, the Trinity and the Eucharist in Old Catholic Ecclesiology. Beiheft IKZ 96 (2006), 7-27
• Joris Vercammen: Bauen an der „neuen Katholizität“. Der ökumenische Auftrag der Utrechter Union. IKZ 98 (2008) 73-96