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The Declaration of Utrecht

Wietse van der Velde

125 years ago – on 24 September 1889 – the bishops of the Old Catholic churches in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland met in this ‘French House’ (Franse Huis) at the Mariaplaats in Utrecht, the home of Johannes Heykamp, Archbishop of Utrecht. They came together to formalize their growing bond of unity. And as a result they published a Statement to the Catholic Church, afterwards known as the ‘Declaration of Utrecht’. The signing of this document we celebrate in these days.

The events leading up to the Declaration of Utrecht

The birth of the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic bishops and churches was the result of the developments in the Roman Catholic Church after 1870. Following the proclamation of the decrees of the 1st Vatican Council concerning the infallibility and universal primacy of the Pope, protests arose in many countries, especially in Germany and Switzerland. These protests were founded on theological and historical grounds, but they also grew out of fear that in the Europe of the rising national states the new dogmas would disturb the balance between state and church in favour of the Roman Catholic Church. The protesters called themselves ‘Old Catholics’, because they considered themselves as ‘holding to what has been believed everywhere, always, by all’. The adherents of the papal dogmas were ‘new Catholics’: they had added new articles of faith to the catholic faith.

The protesters were excommunicated by their Roman bishops and had – against their will – to set up new ecclesiastical structures. They sought contact with the Roman Catholic Church of the Old Episcopal Clergy in the Netherlands. This church lived separated from the Roman Church, since she elected against the will of the Pope an Archbishop of Utrecht in 1723. A first result of these overtures was the invitation by German Old Catholics to the Archbishop of Utrecht, Henricus Loos, to make a confirmation tour in Bavaria in 1872. After some hesitation he accepted this. By thus administering a sacrament outside his own metropolitan province, Loos took an important step away from Rome. Since the break with Rome the Dutch Old Catholics had tried to avoid anything that could widen the

gap with Rome. Administering sacraments in other dioceses implied that since the Vatican Council Loos did not acknowledge the jurisdiction of the German Roman Catholic bishops. In 1873 the German Old Catholics decided to elect a Bishop. Archbishop Loos had promised to consecrate the elect. But on the very day of the election of Joseph Hubert Reinkens as Bishop of the German Old Catholics, Loos died. His suffragan, bishop Heykamp of Deventer, agreed to consecrate the new bishop, which he did on 11 August 1873.

Compared with the Old Catholic movement in Switzerland the German Old Catholics were more conservative and motivated by theological and ecclesiological principles. The start of the Swiss movement was mainly political: the fear that Rome would prescribe the political decisions of the Catholics in their country. Only after some time the Swiss movement became also a theologically and ecclesologically motivated protest. A key figure in this change was Eduard Herzog. He was elected a bishop in 1876. But the rather conservative Dutch Church looked with suspicion to the sometimes radical reforms in liturgy and church order in Switzerland and in a lesser degree in Germany, which they considered hasty and immature. For example the rejection of the decrees of the Council of Trent (1564), the permission given to clergy to marry and the powerful position of synods in contrast with the authority of the bishops. They feared that the catholic character of the new Old Catholic churches was in danger. As a result of these hesitations Herzog was consecrated by Reinkens without the assistance of the Dutch bishops.

For some years there was less contact between the Dutch Old Catholics and the German and Swiss Old Catholics. In these years there was the real possibility that the Dutch Church would fall back in a splendid isolation and that the German-speaking Old Catholics would look for closer contacts with the Anglican Communion. But in the Dutch Church some clergy were determined to keep in contact with their Old Catholic brethren. They visited, for instance, the regularly held Old Catholic Congresses organized by the German church. In the Dutch Church some influential clergy and laity were also asking for some reforms in church order and rules concerning the sacramental life of the church. According to them, standing firm in the catholic faith *and* making reforms in church life did not rule out each other. In the 1880s there was a rapprochement. Even a common pastoral letter was planned. It was evident: the Old Catholic churches of a different background belonged to each other and needed each other.

The signing of the Declaration of Utrecht

The ninth Old Catholic Congress in Germany in 1888 urged Bishop Rein-
kens to promote the co-operation of the three churches. Together with
Bishop Herzog, who already had convinced the Dutch bishops of the good
catholic standing of his church, he persuaded Archbishop Heykamp to
convene a conference in Utrecht. A great help was also the fact that in the
spring of 1889 the Dutch Bishops and their clergy in a kind of synod had
accepted some points of view of the other churches.

So in September 1889 the three Dutch bishops of Utrecht, Haarlem and
Deventer and their German and Swiss colleagues, together with theologi-
ans of their churches, convened in Utrecht. The Archbishop of Utrecht
presided over the conference. After a preliminary meeting on 23 Septem-
ber, in which they discussed some questions and differences, the official
meeting was held on the next day. This was opened with a prayer for the
assistance of the Holy Spirit. This prayer was used in the past in 1414 at
the great Council of Constance, the council that had proclaimed the supe-
riority of an Ecumenical Council over the Bishop of Rome in matters of
faith. Constance stood more or less at the beginning of the so-called Con-
ciliar Movement in the Western Catholic Church, to which principles the
Dutch Church always stood firm.

The Declaration of Utrecht (*Utrechter Erklrung*), signed that day, was
not written during this conference. It was an amended proposal from the
German theologian Franz Heinrich Reusch, in the spirit of the *Bonner
Unionskonferenzen* of 1874 and 1875. In this spirit, the influence of the
great Old Catholic theologian Ignaz von Dllinger was clearly present in
the Declaration of Utrecht. In this document one can find the doctrinal
principles of the Old Catholic Churches, based on the faith of the undivid-
ed Church of the first millennium, summarized in the rule of faith written
by Vincent of Lrins.

In the declaration the common theological views are formulated. The
first article mentions that the bishops keep the faith of the primitive church,
as expressed in the ecumenical creeds and the commonly agreed doctrines
of the undivided church of the first ten centuries. As contrary to the beliefs
of the primitive church, the decree of the First Vatican Council of 1870,
concerning the infallibility and the universal episcopate of the Bishop of
Rome, was rejected. Yet the bishops held on to the historical primacy of
the Bishop of Rome, whom they acknowledged to be the *primus inter
pares*, the first among his peers, the other bishops. In addition to the de-

cree of 1870, a number of other decisions of the Roman Catholic Church concerning faith and church order were dismissed as being contrary to the teachings of the church of the first centuries. This concerns for instance the promulgation as a dogma of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary in 1854, as well as those doctrinal resolutions to which the Dutch Old Catholics offered resistance since the seventeenth century. The Council of Trent is accepted only as far as its teachings are in harmony with the ancient church. A further article professes the belief in the presence of Christ in the eucharist under the species of bread and wine and gives a biblically founded explanation of the sacrificial character of the eucharist. This was not a part of Reusch's draft, but added after a lengthy discussion. The document closes with an ecumenical overture: the task of the Old Catholic churches, while maintaining the faith of the undivided church, to heal the historically developed disputes and divisions, is positively emphasized.

The second agreed document was the *Vereinbarung* (Agreement), in which the bishops state that the churches they represent and rule are in full ecclesial communion, from which fact they draw a few ecclesiological conclusions. The third document, the *Reglement* (Regulations), deals with the Bishops' Conference that was to meet at a regular rhythm.

The three documents together are known as the *Convention of Utrecht*. The latter two documents were for the third time updated in the year 2000 and now form the *Statute of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Union of Utrecht*. But the first document, the unchanged *Declaration of Utrecht*, remains the Union's fundamental doctrinal text to which every bishop who wishes to become a member of the Union of Utrecht has to subscribe. The *Statute* is preceded by a *Preamble*, in which the ecclesiological foundations of the Union of Utrecht and their ecumenical motivation are stated. For the Old Catholic churches – holding fast to the handed down faith of the Catholic Church – have to give fresh answers to new questions in an ever changing world in which the church of Christ lives. This is what they tried to do in 1889 and let us hope and pray that it is what we will be doing in the coming years.

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