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The Quest for a “New Catholicity” and the Future of Old Catholic Theology

Andreas Krebs

Theologians all over the world speak of a “crisis of ecumenism”. The hopes that reconciliation and reunion of the Christian churches would soon take place have not come true. Important dialogues and dogmatic clarifications, relative success in finding expressions for the common ground of our belief, the quest for convergence and consensus – all this has taken place, but with few practical consequences. New Christian movements beyond the established churches have arisen which make Christianity more pluralistic than ever, and which consequently make ecumenical dialogue even more complicated. New conflicts – for instance concerning the role of woman or questions of gender and sexuality – have produced new divisions between and within traditional denominations. These developments are far from purely theological in nature; they reflect problems of colonialism, post-colonialism, economic inequality, and the collapse of traditional social structures driven by the highly ambivalent dynamic of capitalist globalization.

At second glance, however, the situation appears to be more paradoxical. In parallel with this “crisis of the ecumenism“, recent decades have seen an unprecedented theological, spiritual and ethical deepening of ecumenical dialogue and mutual understanding, with a corresponding reception and incorporation of ecumenical insights. What is more, due to economic integration, global communication, and migration, different Christian (and non-Christian) traditions have come to a much closer contact and practical exchange than ever before in human history. The problems and opportunities arising from this development challenge us to break new ground and – in the words of Robert Schreiter – to open ourselves to a “New Catholicity”.¹

Valuable conceptual resources for a theology of such a “New Catholicity” can be found in the ecumenical quest for an original, non-denominational concept of catholicity developed in a series of important papers of the World Council of Churches in the 1960s and 1970s. This has found

¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity. Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

expression in the recent convergence paper of the World Council of Churches *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.² Ecumenical dialogue is about the discovery of already existing, albeit perhaps not yet visible, unity, about the limitations of that unity, and about the search for possibilities of overcoming these limitations. This endeavour to qualitatively deepen and quantitatively enlarge church unity represents the striving towards a catholicity that subsists in all churches but, at the same time, lacks adequate expression in all churches as long as they have not reached reconciliation and visible communion. The theological basis of this quest for true catholicity is a theology of *koinonia*. Its spiritual basis is a spirituality of relationality. Its ethical basis could be the attempt to interpret catholicity as an answer to the challenges and an alternative to the pathologies of capitalist globalization. The remainder of this paper will offer some brief reflections on these three points.

1. *Theology of koinonia*:³ According to the theology of *koinonia*, the ground of faith and the foundation of the Church is its participation, made possible by grace, in the life of the triune God. The Trinitarian God is a God who *is* communion – his very being is personal, relational and perichoretic. In God, there is no lack of communication, no self-centredness, no hierarchical inflexibility. Each person in God shares her life with the others, owes herself to the others, lives in the dynamic of eternal intersubjectivity. The triune God is unity in variety. Consequently, the unity of the church can only be unity in variety. Christian faith is deeply pluralistic. It is pluralistic not because it recognises and tolerates variety as a mere fact, but rather because it recognises the presence of a communicative God in variety itself. This pluralism, however, is not to be taken as relativism. Relativism leaves differences as they are without actually relating them to each other and to a shared vision of mutual understanding and communion. In contrast, the Christian vision of plurality is of a plurality in communion, and unity in communion.

2. *Spirituality of relationality*: Ecumenism is often seen by its critics as a kind of church diplomacy far distant from questions of faith and spiritual practice. In reality, ecumenism is a deeply spiritually enterprise with

² *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper 214; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

³ See Lorelei F. Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology. From Foundations Through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

a specific character.⁴ Today, in Christian as well as non-Christian contexts, much of what is described as “spirituality”, is of an unmistakeably individualistic nature. The basis of an ecumenical spirituality, however, is the discovery that the precondition and the aim of my existence is always in my relation to others. I do not lack freedom in this relatedness to others, since I can and I must relate myself in my relations to these relations. This is the freedom that constitutes me as a person. However, personal freedom is not a mode of self-possession of a monadic individual; it is rather the gift of being in relation. What this means is this: I can discover the fullness of my own existence only in the face of others. Spirituality, a life in the spirit of God, cannot be found in an enclosed inward realm. It cannot be found in an outward realm either. Ecumenical spirituality is discovered in-between, in encounter, dialogue, commitment.

3. *Catholicity and globalization*: Capitalism tends to represent relations between people as relations between things and money. We speak of global streams of goods – and the global investments and global profits that keep them going – as if they were some kind of natural phenomena. But this is not true. The truth is that human beings produce goods which are useful for others, and human beings relate to each other when they exchange these goods.⁵ For a theology of *koinonia* and a spirituality of relationality, this point is of great relevance. Globalization must be drawn into a human perspective. And from this perspective, the quest for a “New Catholicity” can be understood as a quest for an alternative globalization that does not focus on the transfer of goods and money, but on the healing of human relations.

Within the Old Catholic Church, these three aspects have received intensive attention and discussion. For the last forty years or more, the theology of *koinonia* has informed all the ecumenical dialogues of the Old

⁴ Ulrike Link-Wieczorek, ‘Gott-sensibel werden in gemeinsamer Lebensdeutung: Überlegungen zu einer kommunikativen ökumenischen Spiritualität’, in: Anja Goller et al. (eds), *Weg-Gemeinschaft. Festschrift für Günter Esser* (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2015), 140–153.

⁵ Karl Marx famously described the social structure that treats relations between human persons as if they were relations between things as “fetishism of commodities”. But there is no need to go back to orthodox Marxism to make this point. One interesting theoretical alternative – inspired by Marcel Mauss’ theory of the gift – has been developed by the French M.A.U.S.S.-group. For an introduction by one of its most prominent advocates, Alain Caillé, see <http://www.revuedumauss.com.fr/media/ACstake.pdf> (accessed 26.10.2017).

Catholic Church, underpinning the Orthodox/Old-Catholic consensus documents (1975–1987),⁶ the international Roman Catholic/Old Catholic dialogue paper “Church and Church Communion” (2009 and 2017),⁷ and the report of the dialogue between the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Church (2014),⁸ which resulted in the declaration of church communion in 2016.⁹ In my view, a relational understanding of catholicity has also become an important aspect of Old Catholic spirituality. Finally, the Old Catholic Church, together with its Philippine brothers and sisters, has intensely participated in the ecumenical discourse about catholicity and globalization.¹⁰

Three points arising from this seem of particular relevance for the future of Old Catholic theology:

1. Catholicity and globalization: In traditional Old Catholicism, theological reflections on ethical questions have not played a prominent role. This does not mean, of course, that Old Catholicism has had no ethics. In the recent years, it has been possible to observe amongst Old Catholics an intensified awareness of and an intensified commitment to diaconical projects. Until now, however, no specifically Old Catholic ethics has emerged from this diaconal practice. The ecumenical discourse relating to “catholicity and globalization” challenges Old Catholic theology to reflect more explicitly on the ethical implications of our shared catholicity.¹¹

⁶ Urs von Arx (ed.), *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis. Deutsche Ausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-altkatholischen Dialogs 1975–1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung* (Beiheft zu IKZ 79; Bern: Stämpfli, 1989).

⁷ *Kirche und Kirchengemeinschaft. Erster und Zweiter Bericht der Internationalen Römisch-Katholisch–Altkatholischen Dialogkommission 2009 und 2016* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2017).

⁸ *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion. Report from the official dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden (2013)*, <http://www.utrechter-union.org/fman/258.pdf> (accessed 26.10.2017). An edition of the report in both English and German as Beiheft zu IKZ 108 (Bern: Stämpfli, 2018) is forthcoming.

⁹ For an overview of the ecumenical commitments of the Old Catholic Church, see ‘The Ecumenical Mission of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht’, http://www.utrechter-union.org/page/280/the_ecumenical_mission (accessed 26.10.2017).

¹⁰ Marsha L. Dutton with Emily K. Stuckey (eds), *Globalization and Catholicity. Ecumenical Conversations on God’s Abundance and the People’s Need* (Beiheft zu IKZ 100; Bern: Stämpfli, 2010).

¹¹ Franz Segbers, ‘Ethik in alt-katholischer Perspektive’ (forthcoming).

2. *Spirituality*: In our Old Catholic Churches, there is a discourse which turns on Old Catholic identity and the specific character of an Old Catholic spirituality.¹² This kind of self-reflection and self-reassurance may be legitimate and relevant for a small church seeking its role and its mission in an increasingly secular Central European context. However, the discourse about a specific Old Catholic identity also has its dangers. In the end, a truly Old Catholic spirituality cannot be anything else than a relational spirituality, not committed to navel-gazing, but facing the Other in her Otherness, including an openness for encounter and commitment across cultural, economic, and geographical divisions. This demands a truly ecumenical and diaconal spirituality.

3. *Koinonia local and universal*: The theological self-understanding of the Old Catholic church is strongly influenced by an ecclesiology of the local church which stresses the qualitative aspect of catholicity: every local church of the baptised people of God celebrating the Eucharist is a truly catholic church. Of course, such a catholic church cannot be enough for itself in isolation. It searches communion with other local churches, and the universal church is the communion of such communions of local churches. In this model, the local church is primary in relation to the universal church. This emphasis on the dignity and catholicity of the local church is of great relevance for a church which came into being out of opposition to papal universalism. But this model also has its disadvantages. It can be misunderstood as a legitimization of a provincialism which limits itself more or less to its own social and cultural context, and which regards the universal aspect of the church as an aspect of lesser theological and practical relevance. In ecumenical dialogue, especially in the dialogues of the *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*,¹³ but also in the recent Roman Catholic – Old Catholic dialogue, it has been repeatedly asserted that the local and the universal aspect of the church are co-original; neither can be neglected for the other. One way of resolving the tension between the local and the universal church is to draw attention to the eschatological perspective: from this viewpoint, the local church relates to the universal church in a way analogous to that in which the eschatological present relates to the

¹² See, for example, the proceedings from the 43rd International Old Catholic Theologians’ Conference, in: *IKZ* 104 (2014), issue 4.

¹³ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/jwg-rcc-wcc> (accessed 26.10.2017).

eschatological future. This idea is also prominent in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, and it is worth more reflection and discussion.

The relations between the Old Catholic Church and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente offers us as Old Catholics countless precious opportunities to gain practical experiences with the ecumenical, the global, the universal aspect of the Church. This is a wonderful gift as it is a theological challenge.

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Zusammenfassung

Man spricht gegenwärtig von einer Krise des Ökumenismus; andererseits haben die letzten Jahrzehnte eine beispiellose Vertiefung des ökumenischen Dialogs, des gegenseitigen Verstehens und der Rezeption und Verarbeitung ökumenischer Einsichten gesehen. Zudem kommen die verschiedenen christlichen (und nicht christlichen) Traditionen – dank ökonomischer Integration, globaler Kommunikation und Migration – miteinander in viel engeren Kontakt und praktischen Austausch als je zuvor in der menschlichen Geschichte. Dieser Artikel skizziert aus einer altkatholischen Sicht die potenziellen theologischen, spirituellen und ethischen Ressourcen für eine ökumenische Suche nach einer «Neuen Katholizität» (Robert J. Schreiter): die Theologie der *koinonia*, die Spiritualität der Relationalität und der Versuch, Katholizität als eine Antwort auf die Herausforderungen der Globalisierung und eine Alternative zu ihren Pathologien zu verstehen.

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

Ecumenism – Catholicity – Universal Church – Koinonia – Spirituality