

Esser's four points

A BACKGROUND TO PROFESSOR ESSER'S FOUR POINTS

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Introduction: Old Catholics are popularly known for their rejection of the Roman dogmas of Papal Infallibility and Papal Universal Jurisdiction. However, these rejections in themselves do not adequately express an Old Catholic identity. More basic and important are: (1) Ecclesiology; (2) The role of the bishop in the Church and the place and importance of apostolic succession; (3) the Theology of Communion and (4) Synodality.

The following is a brief introduction to the Old Catholic Theology behind these points.

A basic document is "The Preamble: Ecclesiological Foundations of the Union of Utrecht," attached to the "Statute of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Union of Utrecht." The Statute is available on the net in English translation. The German language original is the official document.

1) Ecclesiology

The ecclesiology of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht is also called "The Ecclesiology of the Local Church." This means that the fullness of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church resides in the local church, understood as the local diocese, or in countries with more than one diocese, the local province. The local church does not need a "super structure" or a "super bishop" to complete anything, for nothing is missing in its catholicity and apostolicity.

The local church is the church in one specific place under one specific bishop. This presupposes that there cannot be several local churches with several bishops in the same place (overlapping jurisdictions). Neither can a bishop from one local church interfere with or invade the jurisdiction of the bishop of another local church.

Bear in mind that the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches recognizes the Episcopal Church, USA, as the local church in the United States of America.

2) The Role of the bishop and apostolic succession

Let me begin with apostolic succession. Old Catholics understand apostolic succession as belonging to the church. Bishops are servants of the church, elected by the church, for ordained office in the church. Apostolic succession refers to the passing on of the faith of the apostles in and through the church under the leadership and oversight of

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the bishop of the local church, ordained for his office of bishop through the laying on of hands and prayer.

This means that apostolic succession is not the personal possession of a bishop that can be passed on to others in separation from the office of bishop in the local church. Just as there cannot be a church without bishop, conversely there cannot be a bishop without church. Here the expression "church" does not refer to a legal corporation, but to a community of faith that can best be described as a diocese, which in turn consists of a communion of parishes and missions. The Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches considers bishops without churches to be outside of the apostolic succession, even though they may have been ordained with the proper ritual and the proper intention.

3) The Theology of Communion

Even though the fullness of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church resides in the local church, the local church cannot remain alone. Its catholicity must express itself. This happens through communion. Local churches are in communion with one another. Communion is a necessary consequence of the church's catholicity. Examples of communion are: The Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches; the Anglican Communion; the communion of Eastern Orthodox Churches; the communion of Oriental Orthodox Churches.

The bishop of a local church stands at the intersection of where the local church meets with the other churches in communion. The bishop represents the local church to the other churches in communion, and represents the churches in communion to the local church. The bishop brings concerns of importance for the local church that may have consequences for the entire communion to the attention of the other bishops of the communion, and brings the concerns of the bishops of the communion to the attention of the local church.

The Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches has from its very beginning been on the forefront of restoring full communion between the separated Christian churches. After 1600 years of constant splits and separations, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of England reached an agreement of what we now call "full communion" on July 2, 1931 in Bonn, Germany. This was the first time two communions of churches, hitherto separated, had torn down the walls of separation and replaced them with communion. Other examples followed with united churches on the Indian sub continent; the Porvoo Agreement between most Baltic and Scandinavian Lutheran Churches and the Church of England; the Covenant between the Episcopal Church, USA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the U.S. Currently the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Churches and the Church of Sweden have initiated an official dialogue towards full communion.

4) Synodality

One way of translating the Greek word “synod” is: “Walking the same road together”. In the Old Catholic churches synodality permeates all levels of the church. Members of the local congregation meet and make joint decisions about how to implement the mission, pastoral care, and finances of the parish. It elects the pastor from qualified candidates. It elects a parish committee of lay people to govern the temporal affairs of the parish and minister side by side with the pastor. It elects representatives to the Diocesan Synod.

Old Catholic dioceses are governed synodically by a synod of elected lay people and clergy. The Diocesan Synod elects the bishop. An elected Synodical Council assists the bishop in the governance of the diocese between diocesan synods.

The bishops meet regularly in the International Bishops’ Conference. The synodal structure of the church has roots back to the early and undivided church, and this is still the structure of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht; the churches of the Anglican Communion; and the Orthodox Churches.

Conclusion

It is my hope that these brief remarks can give some clarification of the four points made by Professor Esser to Bishop Peter E. Hickman (Ecumenical Catholic Communion) and Bishop Charles Leigh (Apostolic Catholic Church) on behalf of the Archbishop of Utrecht as President of the International Old Catholic Bishops’ Conference (the IBC).

It appears to me that the four points raised and later formulated as four questions by Professor Esser and myself, are meant to help to find common ground for further contacts.