

The Origins of Old Catholicism

By Jarek Kubacki and Łukasz Liniewicz

On September 24th 1889, the Old Catholic bishops of the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany signed a common declaration. This event is considered to be the beginning of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches, federation of several independent national Churches united on the basis of the faith of the undivided Church of the first ten centuries. They are Catholic in faith, order and worship but reject the Papal claims of infallibility and supremacy. The Archbishop of Utrecht holds primacy of honor among the Old Catholic Churches not dissimilar to that accorded in the Anglican Communion to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Since the year 2000 this ministry belongs to Archbishop Joris Vercammen. The following churches are members of the Union of Utrecht: the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, the Catholic Diocese of the Old Catholics in Germany, Christian Catholic Church of Switzerland, the Old Catholic Church of Austria, the Old Catholic Church of the Czech Republic, the Polish-Catholic Church and apart from them there are also not independent communities in Croatia, France, Sweden, Denmark and Italy. Besides the Anglican churches, also the Philippine Independent Church is in full communion with the Old Catholics.

The establishment of the Old Catholic churches is usually being related to the aftermath of the First Vatican Council. The Old Catholic were those Catholics that refused to accept the doctrine of Papal Infallibility and the Universal Jurisdiction. One has to remember, however, that the origins of Old Catholicism lay much earlier. We shouldn't forget, above all, that every church which really deserves to be called by that name has its roots in the church of the first centuries. For both Old Catholics and Anglicans this is especially important. The former bishop of Old Catholics in Germany, Joachim Vobbe, said once that "it applies to every church that it begun on the day of Pentecost".

Old Catholicism should not be understood only as a reaction to the First Vatican Council. The "mother church" of the Union of Utrecht is the Dutch Old Catholic Church. But how did it become independent of the Roman jurisdiction? The Netherlands won independence from Spanish rule in a struggle the Dutch call the Eighty Years War (1568–1648). The northern portion of the Dutch territories over which the Spanish Habsburg kings ruled from 1519 to 1700 succeeded in breaking free, while the southern half, which is today more or less the territory of Belgium and Luxembourg, did not.

At the beginning of the war religious issues were less important than the political and economical ones, but Dutch Calvinists quickly began to confiscate Catholic churches for their own use and ban the public practice of Catholicism in areas that they came to control. The Spanish king refused to concede any degree of religious freedom to Protestants within his territories and was supported by the papacy and the local hierarchy. These circumstances made Calvinist Protestantism the leading religious option in the Netherlands. Still, it was not until late in the seventeenth century that Calvinists became numerically dominant over other groups in the Netherlands. In the first place, there were more Protestant groups in the Netherlands (for example the Mennonites, the Arminians, but also a relatively small yet important group of Lutherans). However, a substantial proportion of the Dutch people remained Catholic. The fact that the Dutch Catholics managed to endure the Reformation came not without a reason. For we shouldn't forget that it was the Netherlands that were the cradle of the doubtlessly most important new religious movement in the late Middle Ages,

called *Devotio Moderna* or “Modern Devotion”, based on personal relation with God, the tradition of methodical prayer which arranged exercises day by day and week by week, and immersing oneself into the Biblical stories and, in the first place, the life of Jesus. The *Imitation of Christ*, a book attributed to Thomas a Kempis (ca 1418) that outlines the concepts of modern devotion, was one of the favorite books of the Dutch Catholics. Whereas in other countries the custom of private devotions (for example praying the rosary) during Mass was very popular, the Dutch prayer books contained fragments of the “*Imitation*” together with a call to reflect upon them. Recently we could almost touch that complicated yet fascinating reality when we were at Anglican Eucharist in a Lutheran church, while in the nearby museum an exhibition dedicated to *Devotio Moderna* was being opened. And that all took place in Zwolle, very close to Windesheim where one of the most important centres of *Devotio Moderna* was located. Another spiritual tradition which influenced the Dutch Catholicism was Christian Humanism, whose main representative was Erasmus of Rotterdam, in a sense an heir of *Devotio Moderna* as well. Although Erasmus criticized certain aspects of the Modern Devotion, he inherited from it that individual and practical approach to faith. Yet the spiritual movement which has influenced the Dutch (Old) Catholicism in the highest degree was Jansenism.

By the end of the seventeenth century the United Provinces had become a refuge not only for persecuted French Protestants, but also for French Catholic clergy adhering to that complex of theological and ecclesiological theory known as Jansenism. From the 1640s onward the papacy repeatedly condemned Jansenist ideas, but Jansenism continued to find adherents in France and elsewhere who attacked the authority of the papacy to condemn their ideas. Petrus Codde, archbishop of Utrecht from 1688 to 1710, was sympathetic to some Jansenist ideas and in 1702 was summoned to Rome to answer charges of Jansenism. Although no conclusion ever came to the case, the archbishop was suspended from the exercise of his office and remained under suspension until his death in 1710. From the time of Codde’s death onward Rome regarded the diocesan structure of the Netherlands as defunct and refused to confirm the candidates whom the body called Vicariate, which replaced the Chapter of Utrecht (then taken over by Calvinists) nominated to succeed Codde as archbishop.

In 1724 French bishop Dominique Varlet agreed to consecrate the archbishop-elect of Utrecht, Cornelius Steenoven, despite Rome’s refusal to confirm the election. In response, Rome suspended them both from their episcopates. When Steenoven died the following year and C. J. B. Wuytiers was chosen as his successor, Varlet consecrated him—and Rome excommunicated them both. Similar scenarios unfolded in 1734, 1739, and 1758. The Old Catholic episcopate today derives its succession from these consecrations.

Down to 1854 the “Old Catholic” Dutch bishops regarded themselves as loyal Roman Catholics; they accepted fully, for instance, the doctrinal and disciplinary decrees of the Council of Trent and regarded, for example, the Eastern Orthodox as schismatics (also, they saw Anglicans simply as Protestants; and the other way around, Anglicans would rather perceive the Dutch Reformed Church as their sister church). Each time, in the years between 1724 and 1854, they selected a new bishop, they sent notice of the election to Rome, together with a profession of loyalty to the papacy; each time Rome annulled the election; each time the Dutch bishops proceeded to consecrate the bishop-elect; and each time the pope thereupon excommunicated all the parties concerned in the consecration. Then, in 1854, came the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which these Old Catholic bishops formally repudiated both as false in itself and as presupposing a belief in papal

infallibility. It should be also noted that a year before Rome reestablished its own Catholic episcopate in the Netherlands.

The First Vatican Council, meeting in 1869–1870, defined the doctrines of papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction. In the aftermath of the council, protest movements arose among liberal Catholic laity and clergy (and notably among academics and seminary professors), especially in Germany and Switzerland, who for nearly two decades had criticized Pius IX's increasingly intransigent opposition to most manifestations of nineteenth-century liberal thought. When it became clear over the next three years that all of the bishops who had not consented at the Vatican Council to the newly defined doctrines were prepared to assent to them rather than break with the Church, these dissident groups organized themselves into corporate bodies and ultimately sought episcopal consecration for their leaders from the Dutch Old Catholic bishops. The Dutch bishops agreed, and although the archbishop of Utrecht died on the day he was supposed to consecrate a bishop for the Germans, the bishop of Deventer did so in 1873, and in 1876 the new German bishop consecrated a bishop for the Swiss. There followed a decade of some estrangement between the Dutch church and the new churches because the latter refused to recognise the Council of Trent, reformed the liturgy and ended the practice of celibacy of the clergy. It was ended by the conference at Utrecht in 1889 which created the Union of Utrecht.

In addition to Germany and Switzerland, Austria and other German-speaking areas of the Austro-Hungarian empire saw some growth of Old Catholic sentiment from the 1870s onward. In the 1890s, the “Los von Rom” movement, a religio-political movement among ethnic Germans, brought additional numbers to the Austrian Old Catholics.

But it was among the Poles, in both America and Poland, that the Old Catholic movement was to reap its most numerous adherents. From the 1880s onward the Roman Catholic Church in the United States was frequently troubled by disputes over church property. The hierarchy required ownership to be vested in the diocesan bishop before any church building could be consecrated for worship, but parish trustees, who often represented those who had taken the initiative in constructing the church and seeking a priest of their own to minister to them, were reluctant to do this. Parishes whose trustees refused to surrender their title deeds to the local bishop were sometimes denied the services of a priest or placed under an interdict; if a priest said Mass for the parishioners in defiance of the bishop, he and his supporters would become liable to excommunication.

In 1895 A. J. Kozlowski formed an independent Catholic parish in Chicago for his fellow immigrant Poles. In due course he was excommunicated. His response was to turn to the bishops of the Utrecht Union, who accepted him into their fellowship and in 1897 consecrated him a bishop. In 1897–1898 a similar situation arose in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where a recently ordained priest of the Scranton diocese, the Polish-born Francis Hodur (1866–1953), agreed to serve an independent Polish parish there and for so doing was ultimately excommunicated. He went on to organize the Polish National Catholic Church, and in 1907 the European bishops chose to consecrate him as Kozlowski's successor.

In the early 1920s the PNCC began missionary activity in newly independent Poland: the result of this was the establishment of the Polish branch of this church. Originally a part of PNCC, it became a separate member-church of the Union of Utrecht, called the Polish Catholic Church, after the new Communist government of Poland forced it to sever its links with its American parent in the 1950s.