The common mission of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Anglican Communion

By the Rt. Rev. Pierre Whalon

My dear sisters and brothers of the Old Catholic Church of Germany, and my dear brother Bishop Matthias,

Thank you very much for inviting me to address this gathering on the common mission of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Anglican Communion — „ Katholizismus zwischen Tradition und Innovation.” I am reading my Thema to you in German, because as your former Bishop Joachim Vobbe gave me the great privilege of naming me as assistant bishop of your Church, it seems correct to address you in the language of this Church. Please understand that although I have worked on my German, my ability in the language of Goethe (as we French say) is still weak. So I ask you to excuse me if I reply to questions from you in English, and pardon my accent in any case.

Bishop Matthias has given me only twenty minutes to address what Old Catholics and Anglicans have as our common mission together. So — worwärts!

We could say, that is an easy question. We are in full communion, and have been for eighty years. We are churches who must witness to Jesus Christ as Lord through Word and Sacrament. This is what God has given us to do, and we have been doing this together more and more, not only in Europe but also elsewhere, such as the Philippines.

But first we must ask, what is this common mission, exactly? The American Lutheran theologian Craig van Gelder says in his book, *The Essence of the Church*, “it is not that the Church has a mission from God, it is that God’s mission has a Church.” This saying is becoming more and more famous, because it seems to be very true.

God’s mission has a Church. This means first that God’s work in the creation is not limited to the Church. We must agree, of course. And his work is primarily to transform the Old Creation into the New, through Christ in the Holy Spirit. As we read St Paul’s words in the Luther Bibel:

Darum, ist jemand in Christo, so ist er eine neue Kreatur; das Alte ist vergangen, siehe, es ist alles neu geworden! Aber das alles von Gott, der uns mit ihm selber versöhnt hat durch Jesum Christum und das Amt gegeben, das die Versöhnung predigt. Denn Gott war in Christo und versöhnte die Welt mit ihm selber und rechnete ihnen ihre Sünden nicht zu und hat unter uns aufgerichtet das Wort von der Versöhnung. (2 Kor. 5: 17-19)

It is clear that all Christians are to participate in this work of God.

But it is also clear that the churches are not all the same. Both the churches of the Anglican Communion and the Union of Utrecht are deeply engaged in ecumenical dialogues and collaboration. The Charta ecumenica, which we have both signed, calls upon all churches in Europe in these words:

„Wir verpflichten uns […] in der Kraft des Heiligen Geistes auf die sichtbare Einheit der Kirche Jesu Christi in dem einen Glauben hinzuwirken, die ihren Ausdruck in der gegenseitig anerkannten Taufe und in der eucharistischen Gemeinschaft findet sowie im gemeinsamen Zeugnis und Dienst.”

We Anglicans and Old Catholics have already come a long way down the road of im gemeinsamen Zeugnis und Dienst, much further than many other churches, and this is something to celebrate. However, we must ask the questions: what is the specific part of God’s mission that we share, and why are there differences between us that still continue?

To consider our differences is perhaps the best way to understand how God is calling our two churches into common work. The Old Catholic Churches uphold the ancient faith of the Land. You came together to protest the innovations of our church of origin, which were principally centered around the vast increases of the powers of the Bishop of Rome. Your gift to the world and your service to God are therefore to uphold the ancient Catholic faith, which had never heard of infallible pronouncements by a bishop or the universal ordinary jurisdiction of a particular bishop. Recent decisions of your International Bishops Conference have underlined this traditional identity, even as you have considered new developments such as the ordination of women to all three Orders of the Church.

The Church of England is very clearly also the ancient Church of that Land. The lie that people still repeat, either out of ignorance or malice, is that it was “founded” by a king. Yet an examination of history shows clearly that the present Archbishop of Canterbury is the 104th archbishop in unbroken line from St. Augustine, just as the present Archbishop of Utrecht is the successor of St. Willibrord, despite attempts by critics to prove otherwise. Our two mother churches, if I can use that term, England and Utrecht, are indeed very ancient in origin. Though as centuries have passed and doctrine has developed, it must be clearly stated that we, like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, start from the same source, which is the ancient Church. Furthermore, neither of our churches has ever sought to repudiate any doctrine of the ancient Church that had been received by all Catholic Christians.

The differences between our two Churches come from our different origins, naturally. The Church of England went through a long period of the influences of the continental Reformers, especially Bucer, Zwingli and Calvin. The internal struggle in the church led to the abolition of the Anglican church for a while in favor of a Puritan Commonwealth. With the Restoration and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, what we call Anglicanism began to flourish. We began to be what we are today, a reformed catholic church.

The English Church did not do much to help her faithful in the American colonies, and after the American revolution, these people had to work out for themselves how to be Anglicans without a monarchy. Thus the Episcopal Church was born, and we are the beginning of what is now called the Anglican Communion. Our history also shows the same tension between Reformed and Catholic influences as our mother church.

Here is I think the main difference between our churches. While the Old Catholic Churches have national churches, your polity in each one is similar. Among the churches of the Anglican Communion, there are wider differences. You could say that the Church of England’s way of governing itself and the Episcopal Church’s polity are the bookends, so to speak, with the other 36 provinces or national churches falling in between.

I do not believe that these ideas about polity reflect any fundamental differences between us. But they do make for nuance in the way each of our churches approaches the task of evangelization. We Anglicans have missionary societies, like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, founded in England in 1701. Since 1824 every Episcopalian belongs to the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, which is the name in American law of the Episcopal Church. This is why we have become a global communion, with ministry in 164 countries. My own church, which people like to call “the American church,” has a Chinese-speaking diocese in Taiwan, nine dioceses in Latin America, and our largest diocese is Haiti. In Europe we have congregations in five countries, and we are planning more.

In all these efforts, our goal has been to help people around the world create their own churches of their land. For example, the Archbishop of Uganda, Janin Luwum, a few days before the dictator Idi Amin personally murdered him, said to his wife, “If I am killed, I will die for Jesus Christ and for Uganda.”

As I understand the Old Catholic movement, it seems that your work of evangelization is much more centered on the Land you live in. Please excuse me if I am wrong. But I believe that in the depths of Anglicanism and Old Catholicism is the insistence that the Gospel must be inculturated so that the people who share that culture can hear the Gospel and turn to Jesus Christ. This is that fundamental mission we have of the ministry of reconciliation about which St. Paul wrote. This will lead them to build their own church of the Land, worshipping God the Holy Trinity in their own language, celebrating their own saints as well as those of the wider church, and working to help the Spirit build the New Creation in their own time and place, and their own way.

Here then is our part of God’s mission, to pray, work and give for the building up of the church, so that the cultural treasures of each people —their language, history, art, music — can be transformed into fresh new ways to praise God. We know that this work is never finished, until Jesus returns.

Furthermore, Anglicans in Europe are divided between two churches of the Land, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church and the Lusitanian Apostolic Church, and two non-geographical jurisdictions, the Diocese of Gibraltar in Europe and the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. I see two basic raisons d’être for the English diocese and my own. The first is that expatriates need to be able to worship God and be the church in their language and tradition of their land. The second is that expatriates who settle in their new home need to help build up the church of that land. In this work, we need your help, first, to allow us to have congregations for expatriates, and when these become permanent, to help them become part of the church of the land, as both Anglicans and Old Catholics understand what this means.

To sum up, we share so much. We are catholics of the undivided Church. We have allowed doctrine to develop naturally for these sources. We seek to build up the church in the nations of which we are a part. Your experience of finding common ground with the Philippine Independent Church is showing you that Old Catholicism has a vocation beyond Europe. It is the same as for us Anglicans— to build up the catholic Church in every part of the world.

Jesus befahl seinen ersten Jüngern, deren Nachkommen wir sind : „werdet meine Zeugen sein zu Jerusalem und in ganz Judäa und Samarien und bis an das Ende der Erde.”

„Darum gehet hin und lehret alle Völker und taufet sie im Namen des Vaters und des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes, und lehret sie halten alles, was ich euch befohlen habe. Und siehe, ich bin bei euch alle Tage bis an der Welt Ende.”

Alle Völker. Alle Landen. An der Welt Ende.

Vielen Dank.