

Project Canterbury

The Place of the Old Catholics in the Work of Unity

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THE Old Catholic churches are seven small autocephalous churches in communion with the ancient see of Utrecht, which was founded by St. Willibrord in 697, and was excommunicated by Rome early in the eighteenth century. Their separate position is the result of three movements in different periods and countries; the struggle between the See of Utrecht and the Jesuits; the revolt in Germany and other countries against the Vatican Council; later "Los von Rom" movements in South-Eastern Europe and in America.

The Old Catholic movement has always received much sympathy both from Orthodox and from Anglican authorities. The Oecumenical Patriarch Joachim II. sent his last message to his Anglican friends not to forget the Old Catholics: and successive Lambeth Conferences, ever since 1878, have offered special privileges to Old Catholics deprived of the ministry of their own clergy.

The International Congress of the Old Catholic Churches meets about every three years. The Bishops meet in private, and decide questions affecting the whole Communion: the clergy and laity, with visitors from other communions, meet in public. It is like a Lambeth Conference and a Church Congress combined. Last summer the Congress was held at Utrecht, the mother-city of the Old Catholic Churches. At the Pontifical High Mass in St. Gertrude's Cathedral, with which the Congress opened, the Archbishop and his assistants wore fifteenth-century vestments which have survived in the Church of Utrecht from the age of Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus. A visit was paid by the members of the Congress to the tomb of Van Espen, the great canonist and ardent defender of the rights of the See of Utrecht, at Amersfoort, and to the theological seminary in that city, now two centuries old. A series of tableaux was given in the theatre, illustrating the history of the See of Utrecht from the mission of St. Willibrord, of whom the present Archbishop, Mgr. Francis Kenninck, is the canonical successor, to modern times. The visitors to this Congress included priests representing the Greek, Bulgarian, English, and American Churches.

The Old Catholics, like the Orthodox churches, accept the Seven Councils and the Seven Sacraments, but not the Papal Supremacy or the "Filioque" clause. They resemble the Anglican churches in being modern and critical, and in certain points of discipline: e.g., the clergy of all orders are permitted to marry after ordination. It is natural that Utrecht should be regarded as a bridge between Constantinople

and Canterbury, with each of which it has points of contact. And yet this is not quite the real place of the Old Catholic churches in the work of unity.

It is clear that the dogmatic basis of the re-united Church of the future must be Orthodox, for it is fantastic to suppose that the dogmatic basis of Orthodoxy can be changed, though it may be explained. But its Eastern forms are not of universal obligation. St. Cyprian and St. Augustine are Orthodox saints as well as St. Athanasius and St. Basil. If Orthodoxy were opposed to the Latin element in Christianity as such, it would have no claim to be a universal religion.

We Anglicans are often told that we are "Western." In a sense, of course, we are. But the phrase is a misleading half-truth. It is like saying that Englishmen are Teutons, or that the United States is of English origin. The English Church is, of course, of Latin origin (though we must not forget the important work of the Greek Archbishop Theodore), but she has developed a character of her own. The characteristic Anglican theologians, such as Hooker and Butler, Westcott and Moberly, belong to a different world from the great stream of Latin theology which extends from Tertullian to Cardinal Mercier. And what is true of the theologians is still more true of the laity. The idea of a fundamental division of the world into "Eastern" and "Western" (which means Greek and Latin), which befogs the mind of the man trained in early church history, does not exist for the ordinary Englishman. He knows that in many ways the Mediterranean peoples are more like one another than he is like any of them. The re-union between Constantinople and Canterbury for which we work and pray is not a re-union of "East" and "West." Anglicans are not non-Papal Latins. We represent a third development of Catholic Christianity, and are as different from Latins (apart altogether from Protestant infiltration) as Latins are from "Easterns."

But though we are not non-Papal Latins, that is just what the Old -Catholics are. Though not Latins in speech (for the Old Catholic movement never took root in France, Italy, or the Peninsula), they are Latins in rite, in theology, in canon law. Few and weak though they are, they are the heirs of a great tradition, the tradition of opposition within Latin Christendom to the Papal claims, of Gerson and Bossuet, Pascal and Van Espen, Hebronijs and Strossmayer. Gallicanism, indeed, was doomed, once it had consented, at that ill-omened Council of Constance, stained for ever by the broken safe-conduct of John Huss, to elect the new Pope before proceeding to the reform of the Church. For the struggle between the Pope, who is always there, and the Council, which can only meet occasionally, could end in but one way: and the triumph of Martin V. led inevitably to the Vatican Decrees of Pius IX. There was only one real alternative to Ultramontanism, the autocephaly of national churches: which Gallicanism never ventured to demand, but which the Anglican and Old Catholic churches have won, at the cost, it is true, of schism and many other evils.

So we look to the Old Catholic churches to represent, in the greater Orthodox Church of the future, that Latin element which neither Constantinople nor

Canterbury can supply. And therefore it is of the utmost importance that there should be no interference with their independence, or disturbance, even unconscious, of their Latin traditions, from either the Anglican or from the Eastern side.

But there is another service to Christendom which the Old Catholics may possibly be able to perform hereafter. If their traditions are Latin, the speech of most of them is German or Dutch. They may be able to interpret the Orthodox Faith to the Teutonic nations of the Continent. The famous correspondence between Leibniz and Bossuet with a view to re-union broke down because Leibniz discovered, to his dismay, that even the Gallican Bossuet would not listen to his proposal to go behind the Council of Trent. "Protestants," he writes, "as well as all those who really love the honour of God and the welfare of the Church, are bound to reject such a council for ever: if it was regarded as Oecumenical we could no longer trust in Oecumenical Councils nor in the stable tradition of antiquity. There could be no greater rashness and folly than to utter an anathema against the whole ancient Church, arising as it does from a mere hatred of the Protestants, without reason or necessity." These are the words of the man who was ready to concede more to Rome than any other Protestant leader since the Reformation.

Now the Old Catholics have done what Bossuet would not do: they have gone behind Trent. Therefore, should any successor to Leibniz arise among the Lutherans in our day, the Old Catholics are the natural bridge by which he might seek union, not, indeed, with Rome, but with Constantinople.

As we look to the Old Catholics to supply the Latin element in the Orthodox Church of the future, so we also look to them to interpret the Orthodox Faith to Germany, Holland and Scandinavia.

For Orthodoxy is not necessarily Greek or Slavonic, any more than Anglicanism is necessarily English or American. We look forward to a time, perhaps not very remote, when Orthodox doctrine (though not necessarily Byzantine ritual, beautiful and splendid though it is) shall be spread throughout both the English-speaking and the German-speaking world, as the basis of a greater Orthodox Church, no longer merely "Eastern," but "Northern," as well; when the children of Theodore, Willibrord, and Boniface, shall be perfected together with those of Athanasius and Chrysostom, Cyril and Methodius, "in the same mind and in the same judgment" (I Cor., i, 10.)