

A Prolegomena to Old-Catholic Theology

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Old-Catholic Theology is Methodology

In a word, Old-Catholic theology is methodology since it is itself an hermeneutical return to the ancient Church, the orthodox faith and apostolic tradition. However, while Old-Catholic theology begins with our gaze fixed upon the ancient Church, it also demands an authentic ecclesial interpretation for today, for Christians living in the modern world.¹

Indeed, Old-Catholic theology is methodology; and as such, it is kindred with hermeneutical (existential) phenomenology. Old-Catholic theology does not assert anything new about the faith, but rather it is characterized by its looking back in order to look forward, so to speak. But, we must remember that it is the living Church (and the theologian today) that is looking back, not only for scholarly purposes but for a practical, moral, and pastoral purpose. It is a Christian theology that always concerns the present, living Church with all its own controversies and ambiguities, throwing it into questioning itself, its own sense of authenticity and its own falling to hypocrisy.

¹ This is an advance draft of the Preface to a book I am writing to be entitled, *An Introduction to Old-Catholic Theology*. ©2018 Craig J. N. de Paulo. All Rights Reserved.

Thus, it also could be said that it is a methodology rooted in the conscience of the Church.

As with the Protestant Reformation, Old-Catholic theology is the result of *outrage* and a conscientious desire to return to the ancient Apostolic Church. In this way, the ecclesial experience of *crisis* throws the Church into self-evaluation, seeking the illumination of the Early Church not as something static or fixed in history, but rather, as the horizon for possibilities for the Church today and tomorrow. Old-Catholic theology reveals the Church as living and organic, ever ancient and ever new; it is an existential theology, in fact, because it is moved into action from outrage and crisis, seeking to understand the Church as the people of God through its faithful dependence upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit at work in the whole Church. As such, it is a theology of *reformation* and *restoration*: a theology that looks back in order to move forward.

On the other hand, Old-Catholic theology is, of course, also very kindred with the Eastern Orthodox Church in its fidelity to the ancient Church, the orthodox faith of the first Seven Ecumenical Councils and the apostolic tradition. The ancient Church, the Scriptures, its liturgies, iconography, documents and patristic writings, are the sources of Old-Catholic theology. In this way, Old-Catholic theology is always historical in nature, always seeking the original apostolic Christian experience.

Old-Catholic theology, therefore, is a theology “in the middle,” or “in between” these two Christian traditions. “Being in the middle” makes Old-Catholic theology uniquely ecumenical. Indeed, the ancient Sees of Canterbury and Utrecht have formally recognized their common catholicity and apostolicity by their declaration of full Communion in the Bonn Agreement of 1931, which now includes all of the Churches of the Anglican Communion. Further, its ancient understanding of baptism has led the Old Catholic Church to embrace open Communion for all baptized Christians, which truly demonstrates the ecumenical approach intrinsic to Old-Catholic theology in its affirmation of the primacy of baptism.

Old-Catholic theology is a theology of *authenticity*, a witness to the ancient Christian faith and the Gospel of Christ. The Church is living, and the Holy Spirit is the life of the Church; therefore, it is the responsibility of the whole Church to be prayerful and open to the Holy Spirit. It is also the responsibility of the whole Church, and the bishops most of all, to be attentive to the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. Indeed, the Church, which is historical, continues in time, always looking back and moving forward, but also looking *around*. In fact, the Church must be particularly attentive when crisis, outrage and controversy appear, which often indicates an awakening, a need for renewal, or a cultural or philosophical shift. Despite the use of the word “Old” (or “Ancient”), the Church is always ancient and new. In fact, there is newness all the time: new baptized Christians, new experiences of mercy and forgiveness, new

marriages, new experiences of prayer and conversion. Thus, the Church must keep vigilance so that it does not become itself a hindrance to Communion with God. The Church must also avoid becoming hypocritical and inauthentic itself by teaching something that it itself does not practice.

The Fundamentals of an Old-Catholic Moral Theology

First of all, Old-Catholic theology is Christian theology, which means it takes its departure from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ Himself. However, in our looking back to Jesus and his teaching as our beginning and our end, we find that there are periods of departure from the Gospel. Old-Catholic theology is centered on Christ, and it is always concerned with restoring our focus as Christians to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

As such, Old-Catholic moral theology focuses on the fundamental teachings of Jesus in order to live as his followers, as Christians. Further, the foundation for an Old-Catholic moral theology would focus on the moral teachings of Jesus, restoring the primacy of the Gospel over the commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, with a top ten list similar to this: 1) Love God and our neighbor, 2) Avoid judgment of others, 3) Avoid hypocrisy, 4) Strive for detachment, 5) Be not afraid, 6) Think spiritually about everything, 7) Forgive always, 8) Avoid avarice and the love of money, 9) Practice humility and 10) do unto others as you will have others do unto you. This return to a

Christ-centered moral theology would also restore the relationship between morality and spirituality since Jesus focuses on spiritual maturity, authenticity and alterity that encourage us to get ourselves so we can begin to live our lives ready for service love and happiness in our pilgrimage toward a spiritual kingdom.

The Old-Catholic Position on Conscience

As we said, Old-Catholicism is founded in an historical (ancient) understanding of the Church, doctrine and polity in order to preserve theological orthodoxy and the authenticity of sacred tradition. Thus, an Old-Catholic approach to moral theology would also involve an historical retrieval of that which puts focus on our humanity; specifically, in the assertion of our free choice of the will and our calling of openness to divine grace in penance and conversion.

As such, the position of the Old Catholic in the United States and the Old Catholic Confederation on social issues is not the result of whim, self-interest or social fad; but rather, the result of serious theological speculation, faithful commitment to the Gospel, and grounded in the moral imperative intrinsic to the apostolic exhortation of the primacy of conscience. Now, while this might seem rather straight forward, modern Roman Catholic moral theology has become quite complicated due to its exaggerated dependence upon its own Scholastic ideological commitment to a NeoThomistic-Aristotelian understanding of conscience that has not only resulted in circular logic but

the disappearance of the significance of conscience in favor of conformity with a more parochial version of magisterial teaching on various moral topics. Ironically, the magisterium on these topics (birth control, for instance) keeps changing from pope to pope. Indeed, modern Roman Catholic moral theology has not only silenced the voice of conscience, but needlessly confused it with the ambiguity of terms like “formed” and “unformed” that are simply insufficient in addressing an educated laity worthy of a mature moral theology that focuses on freedom and responsibility.

Indeed, as human beings created in the image and likeness of God, we have been endowed with a rational soul, with intellect and will; and it is in the very exercise of the freedom of the will that we come to discover ourselves in relation with the Creator. Despite whatever fallen inclinations may exist within us as a consequence of original sin, we are called to exercise our free choice of the will in the discernment of the good by turning within ourselves and listening to the interior master’s voice in conscience, and by our willingness to be moved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Old-Catholicism: Historical Understanding and Retrieval

So what is Old-Catholicism? Old-Catholicism is authentic Catholicism: A return to ancient Catholicism and to the ancient Church. Thus, it is pre-medieval Catholicism, pre-Baroque Catholicism (which was a reaction to the Reformation) and pre-modern Catholicism.

As such, Old-Catholicism is Nicene Christianity; that is, it is very focused on the essentials of the faith as defined by the first Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church and especially as articulated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in its original formula, which defines Christian orthodoxy. Thus, Old-Catholicism is rather conservative in itself. As the term derives from the Latin root "conservare," meaning "to keep, preserve, hold intact, or guard," Old-Catholicism is concerned with preserving and guarding the faith from corruption.

Old-Catholicism is traditional Catholicism; but it is not Catholic traditionalism, which is confused with an early Twentieth-century understanding of a Baroque and triumphal anti-Protestant (and Counter-Reformation) version of Catholicism that is actually modern Roman Catholicism.

While the Second Vatican Council was an attempt to return to the ancient Church, it was also a re-action to this early Twentieth-century parochial derivative of a Sixteen-century Baroque Catholicism and its Early Modern Tridentine liturgy. Sadly, the Second Vatican Council caused ideological division within modern Roman Catholicism; with so-called Traditionalists and conservatives on the one hand and progressive Liberals on the other. However, both of these camps (conservative and liberal) within modern Roman Catholicism, in fact, derive from the same historical point of departure, resulting in utter theological and liturgical confusion, as evident nearly everywhere in the modern Western Church. Furthermore, both of these share a

distorted and very modern conception of Christian orthodoxy, which lacks historical accuracy and remains more focused on the Medieval Church than the Ancient Church.

Whereas, Old-Catholicism is focused on a restoration of Catholicism and the Western tradition in its theological focus on the ancient Church while living as modern Christians today; and this is exactly what distinguishes Old-Catholics from Eastern Orthodox Christians: as Old-Catholics, we have our gaze turned to the ancient Church in order to move forward in the Church today. As Old-Catholics, we view the ancient Church as our central inspiration for theological speculation and as the historical source that guides us as Christians today. Nevertheless, as Old-Catholics, we are orthodox Christians clinging to the faith of the First Seven Ecumenical Councils and the sacred Tradition of the Church; and so, we sense a special kindredness with our Eastern Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters.

The Old-Catholic Position on the Papacy

Concerning the role of the papacy, both the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Old Catholic Church in the United States of the Old Catholic Confederation view the pope as "primus inter pares" among all bishops in apostolic succession: having precedence of honor among the ancient patriarchal sees and affirming his other historical titles, such as Bishop of Rome and Metropolitan-Archbishop of the Province of Rome, Primate of Italy and Patriarch of the West. Of

course, the title "Pontifex Maximus" is an imperial title granted to the pope from the Emperor St. Constantine the Great, who was formerly high priest of the old (pagan) religion.

Needless to say, the Old-Catholic movement has its origins in its objection to 1) the modern doctrine of universal papal supremacy that violates ancient episcopal-synodal polity and 2) the modern doctrine of papal infallibility, which is not only heresy but a logical absurdity. Whereas, modern Roman Catholics continue to affirm papal supremacy and papal infallibility, which once again reflects a more Medieval (monarchical) understanding of the papacy than one reflected in antiquity where episcopal collegiality and synodality was the norm. This monarchical understanding of the papacy continues to promote a disproportionate view of papal authority, which places the Bishop of Rome above all other bishops, not merely in precedence of honor, but as a supreme governor of the universal Church. But, this idea of a "supreme pontiff" is inconsistent with apostolic tradition; and it demeans the college of bishops in apostolic succession to subjugation and subservience, which violates the very notion of collegiality among bishops who are equals in office and sacred authority. Further, sacred power in the Church derives from the supreme authority of Christ through apostolic succession in the office of the bishop, which is manifested in the bishop's exercise of his apostolic authority in the local Church and through synodal representation. Thus, papal supremacy distorts the entire Church, from the pseudo-

election of bishops that are simply appointed by the Bishop of Rome (and what is argued as ordinarily requiring papal mandate), to the idea of a papal magisterium that requires universal adherence by all bishops around the world. However, as evident in patristic writings, every bishop has teaching authority by virtue of apostolic succession; and the calling and election of a bishop does not require permission from the pope. Finally, while there are other problematic issues that stem from this distorted (ultra-Montanist) view of the papacy, suffice it to say that these are the main historical, theological and political issues that separate Old-Catholics from full Communion with the pope.

Some Polemical Distinctions Concerning "Independent" Catholics

Now, as we have made some distinctions between Old-Catholicism and modern Roman Catholicism, it is equally important to address the recent phenomenon of the so-called "independent" Catholics. Sadly, these so-called "independent" Catholics often try to associate themselves with Old-Catholicism in an effort to gain theological legitimacy and historical credibility; however, there is no such thing as an independent Catholic, an independent bishop or an independent priest. The Church hinges upon the ministry of the bishop, which is a sacramental and ecclesial reality of apostolic succession, through whom we are brought together in one faith, one baptism and one Eucharist. Indeed, it is through the ministry of the bishop that we experience the Church and our unity in Christ. Unfortunately, the fallacious claim of apostolic succession by so many of these "independent" bishops is widespread despite the fact that the vast majority of whom rely upon the pretense of a very convoluted pedigree in lieu of an episcopal lineage universally accepted.

Oddly, many of these "independent" Catholic sects (and some of which fallaciously and unlawfully make use of the term "Old Catholic") tend to view the Old-Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht as another pope of some sort from whom they hope to receive recognition; and thus, not only revealing a very confused modern Roman Catholic view of a centralized Church with a supreme leader, but also a terrible lack of

understanding the organization of the ancient Church and the fundamentals of Old-Catholic ecclesiology.

Furthermore, it is quite evident that these so-called "independent" Catholics are simply dissident Roman Catholics, who fallaciously use the term Old-Catholic while remaining modern Roman Catholics in faith (and heresy) following similar liturgical practice to the modern Roman Rite. Ironically, a distinguishing characteristic of these "independent" dissident Roman Catholic sects is, perhaps, their contempt for hierarchy and sacred authority despite their disproportionate number of bishops who tend to be utterly unqualified for ordination much less leadership within the Church. Indeed, most of these "independent" bishops generally do not have much formal higher education, and they are otherwise employed in jobs inappropriate for clergy.

The reality is that these so-called "independent" (Roman) Catholics are quite simply what is often referred to as "Cafeteria Catholics," who have removed themselves from canonical jurisdiction over certain social issues that have divided them from the hierarchy. It is also noteworthy to mention that they have no distinguishing theological differences from modern Roman Catholic theology, and that they have no noteworthy theologians of their own. Moreover, these so-called "independent" Catholics, i.e. dissident Roman Catholics, generally do not have an historical understanding of the Church or doctrine and their central *raison d'être* is disobedience, which is reflected in their lack of organization and anti-authoritarianism. Quite frankly, this claim of an

“independent” Catholicism is the antithesis of Catholicism: It is a charade of Catholicism and a mere cloak of associated symbolism over its fundamental confusion of self-identity and modernity having absolutely nothing to do with Old-Catholicism except for the pretense of its association in order to feign justification for their state of separation.

American Old-Catholicism

While the Old-Catholic movement arose in Europe through the writings of the Old-Catholic divine, Ignatz von Döllinger, and especially surrounding the circumstances of the First Vatican Council and the subsequent declaration and promulgation of the new doctrine of papal infallibility by Pope Pius IX in 1870, Old-Catholicism in the United States has its beginnings with the Old-Catholic missions established in cooperation with the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac near Green Bay in Wisconsin by then Father Joseph René Vilette before 1890.

Sadly, since that time, there have been several divisions and schism that have left the landscape of Old-Catholicism rather chaotic due to its fragile organization and by exploitation by those who fallaciously use the term Old-Catholic. Nevertheless, Old-Catholics have always had a good rapport with Anglicans around the world and Episcopalians in the United States; and our Old-Catholic bishops have rejuvenated Anglican and Episcopal Orders around the world, especially after the absurd and unjust

declaration of the nullity of Anglican Orders by then Pope Leo XIII in 1896. Indeed, Bishop Rudolph de Landas Berghes served in the Episcopal Diocese of New York from 1914 until 1919 when he renounced his former offices and became a novice at St. Thomas of Villanova monastery in Villanova, Pennsylvania. With Bishop de Landas Berghes, Bishop Carmel Carfora and Bishop Paolo Miraglia-Gulotti also established and served Old-Catholic missions within the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and their work greatly contributed to converting the Protestant Episcopal Church into its more Catholic culture we find today in the Episcopal Church in the United States. In fact, American Old-Catholics and Episcopalians were working together seventeen years before the Bonn Agreement of 1931 between the Old-Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of England; and our Churches continue to work together in many parts of the nation despite the uncharitable attempts by the Archbishop of Utrecht Dr. Vercammen to interfere with our historical relationship with the Episcopal Church.²

² When Archbishop Joris Vercammen was informed of my consecration to the Episcopate, he was apparently outraged, and he contacted Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, then Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, asking her to punish Bishop Rodney Michel, Assisting Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, who served as an assistant principal consecrator. At that time, Bishop Michel was also Episcopal Visitor of the U.S. Vicariate for Old-Catholics in Philadelphia (now the U.S. Prelature for Old-Catholics of the Old Catholic Confederation), and I was serving as Vicar General, with hospitality at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Cathedral Road. In fact, early that year on February 16, 2013, I had been received by Bishop Michel as an Old-Catholic priest with the blessing of Archbishop Vercammen. Then, in June of the same year, I was elected to the Episcopate by our Synod, which also received the consent of the Synod of Bishops of the Church of the Province of West Africa (Anglican Communion). Sadly, in reaction to my consecration, Archbishop Vercammen pressured Bishop Schori to further issue a statement to all of the bishops of the Episcopal Church wrongly informing them that full Communion only existed with the Churches of Utrecht and not with American Old-Catholics despite a century of ecclesial

Despite all of the chaos, the Old Catholic Church in the United States continues to thrive and communicants continue to find their way into our humble churches, especially since the Old Catholic Confederation has rejuvenated the discussion of the religious identity of American Old-Catholics continuing more than a century of friendship and full Communion with Anglicans. Today, the Old Catholic Confederation has a special rapport with the Church of the Province of West Africa and the Church of Nigeria, and we have correspondence with many Anglican churches around the world.

Finally, the future of American Old-Catholicism is very promising. In fact, the number of Christians in North America who identify as “Old-Catholic” continues to grow, with the growth of parishes in Canada and in the United States, which certainly has the potential to far exceed the number of Old-Catholics in Europe.³ Indeed, with the limitations of the nomenclature of “Anglo-Catholic” (despite its venerable history) and its decades of schism within its own ranks, many Anglicans and Episcopalians prefer the term Old-Catholic since it is not limited to English culture and it is more theologically precise. Further, dare I say, that most American Roman Catholics would

cooperation and assistance. Nevertheless, on Christmas day 2013, I was Licensed as an Assisting Bishop and appointed Episcopal Commissary of the Church of the Province of West Africa of the Anglican Communion by Archbishop S. Tilewa Johnson, then CPWA Primate, who spoke with Vercaemen and Schori personally and argued that the Bonn Agreement includes American Old-Catholics.

³ According to statistics in the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 14th edition, ed. Roger E. Olson et al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. In consideration of the available statistics concerning the Polish National Catholic Church and other Catholics, such as Eastern Rite Catholics, along with the circumstances within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Continuum, there is enormous potential for growth, especially since many of these Catholic Christians already self-identify as “Old-Catholic” while registered in these respective denominations.

probably identify more as Old-Catholics if there were greater exposure to our Church. With a hundred and fourteen years behind us, American Old-Catholicism is beginning to mature, and I look forward to seeing the building of a national Old-Catholic Cathedral that will proclaim the Gospel of Christ from sea to shining sea!