

Practical Ecclesiology of the Union of Scranton

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Introduction

As non-papal catholic churches, the Polish National Catholic Church and also several churches within the Anglican tradition have remained faithful to the traditional faith of the first 1000 years. Consequently, they have, in recent times, sought to recapture the communion that was shared prior to 1976. Through this seeking common consensus, they have begun to coalesce in thought and in the understanding of the many issues that had led them apart over the past 43 years. Rather than first seeking to deal with the individual issues that our Churches will have to address on an individual basis, we first lay out the goal to which we seek. In an examination of the practical ecclesiology of the Union of Scranton, we point a way forward for us as individual Churches, and within this examination, we can see where exactly we should be enmeshed as followers of Christ and where consensus will have to be reached in order for us to move forward.

The Union of Scranton

As many of you know, the Union of Scranton was born out of the Union of Utrecht as Utrecht sought to capitulate to the culture and began to ordain women in the early 1990s. This was followed soon afterwards by the blessings of same-sex couples. During the early years of this situation, the Polish National Catholic Church entered a period of impaired communion with the other Old Catholic Churches, while still maintaining membership in the Union of Utrecht. The Polish Catholic Church in Poland also entered into this situation as well. It was hoped that in following this course of action and in bringing forth the faith statements of earlier times that Union of Utrecht could be brought back into line with the faith of the undivided Church.

Ultimately this was not to happen. This situation, in fact, got worse as more Churches, acting independently, and with pressure applied from various Old Catholic circles, also began to ordain women to Holy Orders and ultimately to bless same-sex marriages as well. During this period of time the Union of Utrecht began to change the way it operated and make decisions regarding matters of faith. It left these to a simple majority vote to make any changes to Church matters,

even to bedrock matters of faith. The European Old Catholic Churches also took advantage at this time of the fact that the Polish National Catholic Church, since it was resident in America, could not easily attend various and quickly scheduled meetings which were usually called in one of the various Old Catholic countries in Europe.

Due to the changes made to the governing documents of the Union of Utrecht, (The Statutes), the acceptance of these innovations were accomplished at meetings of the Union of Utrecht bishops and ultimately the Polish National Catholic Bishops were faced with the question posed to them at a meeting of the International Bishops Conference of the Union of Utrecht which was held in 2003, if they did not accept the innovations that were begun and accepted by a number of Union of Utrecht Churches, first the German Church, then the Swiss and ultimately the Dutch, then the Polish National Catholic Church would be voted out of the Union of Utrecht. Again this was up for a simple majority vote and the Polish National Catholic Church, because it failed to accept these innovations, was voted out of the Union. It is always amusing to note that the vote was actually very close and the final vote cast to remove us was made by one of our own bishops, Rt. Rev. Thaddeus Peplowski.

It was following this event that the Polish National Catholic Church realized that the gift given to it within the Union of Utrecht was not something to be hoarded for itself, but rather shared, but it now needed a new context in which to make this a reality. During this same time, Bishop Peplowski was beginning missionary work with a number of former Lutheran clergy in Norway. A Commission of the Polish National Catholic Church sought to reanimate what had been the original workings of the Union of Utrecht, and they created the foundation for the Union of Scranton. In 2011, Bishop Roald Flemestad, having been elected by a Synod of the Nordic Catholic Church, was consecrated to the episcopacy and the Union of Scranton was formally inaugurated.

All of these matters, which some individuals try to capsule solely in the terms of simple church governance, are truly a much deeper matter within our churches, as they should be. They speak to the connections that we have, and must have, between the various communions of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Both the Polish National Catholic Church, the Nordic Catholic Church and also the traditional Anglican Churches have had to deal with issues of the undivided faith that were brought about through an ecclesiastical mechanism which was never intended by our churches.

It is for this reason certainly, among others, that the ecclesiology in which we find ourselves is a matter of prime importance in preserving the faith.

Where We Stand

As Churches which seek to live and thrive within our culture at the present time, but not capitulate to it. We stand at a point of tension between the two predominate church structures that are readily apparent around us. On one side, although we stand as catholic in our understanding of the faith, the Roman Church, which seeks to occupy the only place in being considered catholic in understanding, at least in the West, has adopted an extreme ecclesiology of centralization. This view has certainly culminated with the First Vatican Council which proclaimed the Pope of Rome as having universal jurisdiction over the whole Church.

We must first admit that in some matters, this is an attractive way to structure the Church. The mechanisms for Church operations rely on simpler structures and less individuals, thereby taking less time and coordination. But unfortunately this structure also leads to a triumphalism, by the one person, or even one Church to which this person is attached. It is in this that we must bear in mind that this definition of Vatican I was only the final culmination of the exalted view of the papacy. It had certainly begun many centuries before as the Popes began to follow less in the footsteps of our Lord and more fully in the footsteps of the secular rulers of the day.

It was in fact this issue which brought about the organization of the original Church of Utrecht in 1724. Historically, the Utrecht Chapter had the right to elect and choose the archbishop of Utrecht. It was during the suppression of this Utrecht Diocese at the time, in a conflict between the native clergy and Jesuit missionaries, that the matter came to a head. When the native clergy was persecuted by the missionaries, they exercised their rights in response and elected one of their own, Cornelius Steenhoven, as Archbishop. He was consecrated by Bishop Dominique Marie Varlet who was living in Amsterdam at that time, having been suspended for celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation during an interdict. This thus began the journey which culminated in the Old Catholic Churches, a separation that was created not by doctrinal matters, but rather ecclesial ones. Of course we also know that the culmination of the definition of Vatican I came about as the secular rulers who claimed the divine right of kings had lost much of their power and control leaving only the Pope, now bolstered by the Council, within this position.

And certainly we have only seen this centralization grow, even within our lifetimes, especially as the Vatican can more efficiently communicate and exercise its authority in various areas of the world through modern communication and travel. We can only imagine that this centralization will continue to grow unabated. What is unfortunate is that this is the predominate way in which the world considers Catholicism and the Roman Catholic Church certainly encourages this view. What makes all of this even the more difficult in dealing with the Roman Church is that they couch all of this in dogmatic proclamations. In the ongoing dialogue that the Polish National Catholic Church has with the Roman Catholic Church, the issue of the papacy is one that they treat as a settled matter. While they speak of the God given rights and position of the Bishop of Rome, his accountability to the local churches (dioceses) and other bishops of the church is minimal.

We must also be aware that this issue also casts itself in the argument between the authority of the universal church against the local church. This is really a false way of framing the situation, as this distinction is a false one. As stated in the Statutes of the Union of Scranton, each local church (diocese) is the manifestation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in that place for those individuals.

On the other side of the governance issue is the ecclesial structure of many of the protestant churches as well as the non-denominational churches. Within the non-denominational churches, which seem to be growing without bound within our country, there is essentially no vertical structure at all. It is almost as if each local community is left to decide exactly what its own tenants of their faith will be, even if they do generally hold some overall theological outlook. Within the mainline protestant traditions there is certainly more of a vertical hierarchical structure, but again here the churches do not see the unity as found within the connections to one another as an important and essential part of their ecclesial structure. Also because of their governance structure, each congregation is essentially only a part of the larger denomination because of their local will to do so.

The primary view is that a person's individual view, or the collective view of a small gathered body, is the rule which must be followed. For example, this situation has recently showed itself within the United Methodist Church here in the U.S. Within their recent Convention a proposal to overturn their long-standing practice of "barring self-avowed practicing homosexuals from being ordained" and "prohibiting pastors from marrying same-sex

couples in church” was defeated when their Traditional Plan was upheld on a vote of 438-384. In response to this close vote there has been much consternation and discussion of a split. Now the only issue that still seems to be discussed is, who exactly are the ones that will split away, the Traditionalists or the Liberals. The ecclesial problem is much deeper than just the fact that such a vote could take place in such a venue. While it seems impossible that matters of faith and church practice could be up for a simple majority vote, it is an aberration that an ecclesial structure should find itself in this position. It is here that the “comprehensive conciliar process” is lacking within this ecclesial structure. A position, championed by one individual group within the Church, has become an acknowledged part of that one small group and it now seeks to impose its life and position on others. We can all see that this will surely lead the United Methodist Church to a split.

Within this situation there was no concern for maintaining the unity and consensus for the Church before this particular issue was brought forward. If the connections of the various local churches (dioceses) has been considered, than any discussion would have be had at the level of local church leaders (bishops), and possibly even at the local synodal level, and if consensus could not be reached it would not raise any further. It would seem here that the desires of one individual group were placed above the commitment to unity.

We must remember that each of the two ecclesial situations described above are an overreaction in a response to the dynamic tension that existed within the ecclesial structure of the church from earlier times. It is this structure that the Union of Scranton tries to encapsulate and preserve within the Statutes. These statutes are in large measure based on the original Union of Utrecht statutes, before a number of changes were made to weaken them.

It is also important for us to remember that not only do we live and operate under these Statutes as member churches of the Union of Scranton, but we also seek ways to hold ourselves within this dynamic tension between the two opposite poles of ecclesial governance.

The Statutes of the Union of Scranton

Section (B) of the Statutes of the Union of Scranton speaks to the ecclesiological foundations that we operate under and through which we share a common life. We will examine these points individually seeking to explore the tension that is exhibited between the two poles of church governance shown above.

The ecclesiological portion begins: “Each local Church is a communion of people, reconciled in Jesus Christ, and, by the outpouring and continuous work of the Holy Spirit, is constituted as a unity in a given place.” This point speaks to the fact that each local church, each diocese, is completely and fully the church of God in that given place. There is no dependence for this acknowledgment upon a higher person or higher entity that makes it fully catholic. This stands against the false dichotomy concerning which is preeminent, the universal church or the local church. In the acknowledgement of the faith of the undivided church we also acknowledge that “each local Church is gathered around a bishop with the Eucharist as its center.” Apostolic succession, exercised within the ministry of the bishop, and a common celebration of the Eucharist, as it is expressed within the Declaration of Scranton, is a part of what expresses the catholic nature of this local catholic church.

But within this very broad structure there are certainly ties which bind these local churches (dioceses or national churches) together. Again the Statutes state: “Each local church is a representation of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as confessed by the ecumenical Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople.” Each church is therefore, not only to hold and confess the tenants of the Creed as plainly given, but also to hold the faith of the Church which produced it. It is given above in the preamble to the Statutes that: “The Union of Scranton confesses the Catholic faith as articulated by the first seven Ecumenical Councils and expressed throughout the Undivided Church.” Therefore, while each Church is fully the catholic Church in that place under the direction and authority of its bishop, it is only so in as much as it holds and proclaims the faith of the undivided church which it shares with the other local churches. Again the Statutes say: “the catholicity of each local church is manifested in the unity and communion it shares with other local Churches perceived as being identical in their essential beliefs in the redemptive work of the Triune God.” This speaks in a very similar way to the first point of the Bonn Agreement which states “each Church recognizes the catholicity of the other.”

In an effort to continue to hold the ecclesial structure in tension, the Statutes also require that: “Each church lives in the common faith and has an indispensable synodal structure uniting clergy and laity, thereby expressing its communion and unity.” While the bishops, as those standing in Apostolic Succession, have the awesome duty to protect and guard the faith of the Church, they are not entirely responsible for it, even in the local situation. A synodal structure of the individual local church (or national Church) must be a part of its makeup, its very essence.

Now within this broad ecclesial structure there are also the ties which bind each of these local churches together. These ties are not an addition or somehow auxiliary to the full makeup of the local church, they are an essential part of it. Of course I speak here of the principles behind the words of the Statutes. The Statutes themselves are an expression in an effort to put these principles into practice. Section 2 of this portion of the Statutes speaks to these responsibilities. “The Bishops of the Union of Scranton: a) uphold the catholicity of the Church by maintaining its Apostolic Faith and Sacred Tradition; b) respond to issues and challenges as they arise; c) make decisions concerning relationships with other Churches. The bishops, with their churches, gathered to work together in these areas make up a vital part of the ecclesial nature of the Union of Scranton.

Each of these three items: Faith and Tradition, Facing Challenges and Ordering Relationships are a vital part of the work and unity of the Church. We also must realize that it is not just a goal of the Union of Scranton that these things be done together, but it is, in fact, that they are a necessary part of what membership within the Union is about. We have all certainly seen that in the desire to accomplish any one of these alone has been the cause of division, and even eventual splits within the Church.

The Statutes spell out what ecclesial conciliar processes will be used to accomplish this important work of the Church in Section 2.2 of part (B) of the Statutes. It states: “Decisions of the International Catholic Bishops Conference (ICBC) are made in a comprehensive conciliar process. Reception of the decisions by the member Churches requires the participation and joint responsibility of the baptized (clergy and laity) in this process within each member Church (synods or other responsible bodies). Once reception is completed by all member Churches, such decisions are acknowledged to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and correspond to the will of God for the mission of His Church.” Through this process, no one hierarch, or even one church is tasked with the ability or obligation of making final decisions for the Union of Scranton. Each member Church must be a full part of all decisions. But on the other hand, in matters as described above (faith, challenges or relationships), no one church can accomplish them only for themselves as well. Each member Church must be a part of the decisions, working together with all churches of the Union.

The most basic focus of the Church is to uphold and preserve the Apostolic Faith and Sacred Tradition. It is within this sphere that the Polish National Catholic Church and the Nordic

Catholic Church as well as the Churches of the Anglican Tradition, have had to deal with an issue such as the ordination of women, or more recently the blessing of same-sex marriages. Both poles of the governance issue for the various churches have led to the abandonment of the traditional faith. Within the original Union of Utrecht one Church alone made decisions regarding the issue of the ordination of women. That one Church chose to put its own agenda above unity and consensus. Even more concerning, following this there was no penalty for this action and the Union of Utrecht continued on as before. Over time of course this innovation to the faith caused there to be a painful rupture later rather than dealing with any issue from the start. Because only one church was allowed to come to a decision on its own the communion was broken. On the other side within the Episcopal Church in the United States, again one centralized authority was allowed to impose a decision (or at least attempt to impose a decision) on a local Church (a diocesan structure) which did not accept it. Again in this situation the one centralized authority ultimately caused a break in communion.

We can also see that within these recent issues which have caused breaks, a real point of difference is that the challenge was not confronted in a true collegial spirit. In some senses it is in dealing with such challenges that the most important aspects of this dynamic tension must be lived. If the member Churches (dioceses or national Churches) would have stood by their commitment to take on the challenge together and have each local Church (diocese or national church) participate fully before any final decisions or alterations were made, then this could have been avoided.

Within the last item, the ordering of relationships, there can also be cause for concern. In the example of the Union of Utrecht, the German Old Catholic Church had entered into a communion agreement with the Lutheran Church in Germany, while the other Old Catholic Churches did not. This certainly caused concern as what did it now mean in terms of sharing communion. To use the language of mathematics of which I am familiar, there is a transitivity problem. If Church A is in communion with Church B and Church B is in communion with Church C, what does this say about the relationship between A and C? Again ruptures in communion between Churches have occurred based on these very issues. By mandating that the ordering of relationships be done with every member church (diocese or national church) a part of the ongoing process, this will not be allowed to occur.

While we, at present, hold this out as the ideal, I am also aware in this situation that there is a certain amount of baggage that each church brings when we come into our first discussions with the Union of Scranton. This is true of the Polish National Catholic Church as it is for any other Church. At the present time, the Polish National Catholic Church has a limited communion sharing agreement with the Roman Catholic Church and is also in full communion with the Polish Catholic Church (PKK) in Poland. These are certainly situations that must be dealt with and at the present time I am truly not sure concerning the way that such items should be handled from a starting point, but certainly no future such relationships can be entered into individually.

A commitment to these three aspects as things which must be accomplished in unity with other churches are what helps to keep the dynamic tension of the ecclesial situation of the Union of Scranton. It also, of course, discourages any innovations and acts as a mechanism of stability. While some would certainly lament such a view which keeps the faith in a more static position, we must remember that it is only the bedrock of the Apostolic Faith and Sacred Tradition, the meeting of Challenges and the Ordering of Relationships that is regarded in such a way. In matters of sacramental devotion and liturgical practice there is ample room for many traditions (as mentioned with the Bonn Agreement). And also even within each local Church (diocese) there can be various aspects of cultural expression and church social life that can also be lived.

Conclusion

If I had to choose an adjective which defined the ecclesial structure of the Union of Scranton, I would say that it is one that is horizontal, but strongly connected. It is essentially horizontal in that there is little vertical structure. While each local church is certainly overseen by its bishop in Apostolic Succession, and even while within a National Church there may be a hierarchy, there is no single entity or person which guarantees or ensures the catholicity of the Churches. Likewise it is strongly connected in that while each local church (diocese or national church) is fully the catholic church in that place, it participates in the upholding and preservation of the Apostolic Faith and Sacred Tradition, the resolution of challenges and the ordering of relationships in common.

Ultimately though, the question each church will face will be one of commitment to this ecclesial concept of a horizontal, strongly connected Union of Scranton. In seeking to live this reality we seek to follow the words of Scripture in our authority.

“So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servants, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.’” (Mark 10:42-44)

“I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:1-3)