

THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCHES INTERNATIONAL

DE ANTIQUA LIBERTATE
ULTRAIECTENSIS

On the Ancient Liberty of Utrecht

A PASTORAL ENCYCLICAL

Concerning the Independent and Apostolic Origins
of the Old Catholic Church

Issued by

THE RIGHT REVEREND GREER GODSEY, OSFoc

Presiding Bishop

The Old Catholic Churches International

Given on the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

"The faith once delivered to the saints"

— Jude 1:3

GREER

*Bishop in the Old Catholic Succession, Servant of the Servants of God,
Presiding Bishop of the Old Catholic Churches International*

*To Our Beloved Clergy, Religious, and Faithful of the Old Catholic Churches International,
and to all persons of good will who seek the truth of our apostolic heritage:*

Grace, peace, and apostolic blessing.

It has been the constant care of the bishops of our communion to preserve, to defend, and to bear faithful witness to the apostolic heritage entrusted to the Church of Utrecht — a heritage older than the controversies that would later seek to obscure it, and more deeply rooted in the practice of the ancient Church than many have been permitted to understand. This encyclical is issued in that spirit of faithful witness.

In these pages We set forth, with the support of the historical record, the grounds upon which the Old Catholic Church rests its claim not merely to apostolic succession but to an institutional independence that predates the twelfth century. It is Our desire that the clergy and faithful of this communion, and all who encounter these words, should understand that what is called the 'schism' of the Old Catholic Church was in truth no departure from the ancient faith. It was, and remains, the refusal to surrender rights that were never Rome's to take.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH OF UTRECHT

1. We begin, as all sound argument must begin, at the beginning. The Diocese of Utrecht was established in the year of Our Lord 695, when Pope Sergius I consecrated the holy missionary Willibrord as the first Bishop of the Frisians. The consecration took place in the Church of Saint Cecilia in Rome, at the direct request of the Frankish prince Pippin of Herstal, and Willibrord received upon that occasion the episcopal name Clement.

2. From its very foundation, the see of Utrecht took its character not from Roman administration alone, but from the intertwining of ecclesiastical mission with the framework of the Carolingian and later the Saxon empire. Through successive grants of immunity and privilege from German kings and emperors, the Bishops of Utrecht became secular princes as well as shepherds of souls, exercising dominion over a territory as great as the neighboring counties and duchies. This is not the profile of a diocese that was ever wholly a creature of Roman appointment. From the first, Utrecht stood in its own right.

3. We do not cite this founding context to diminish the historic bonds between this church and the universal Church. We cite it because truth demands it, and because those who would portray the Old Catholic Church as a modern invention must reckon with the evidence that its institutional character was formed over a thousand years before any doctrinal rupture was alleged.

II. THE CONCORDAT OF WORMS AND THE RIGHT OF FREE ELECTION

4. In the year 1122, the long conflict between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire over the appointment of bishops was resolved by the Concordat of Worms. The primary text of that concordat, preserved in the archives of scholarship, records Emperor Henry V's declaration in terms that admit no ambiguity: that in all the churches of his kingdom and empire there may be canonical election and

free consecration. With those words, the right of church chapters to elect their own bishops was established in law.

5. The Church of Utrecht did not merely receive this right in common with other sees. It possessed and exercised it in a form more complete than any other diocese in the empire. While across the Holy Roman Empire most chapters gradually lost their independent voting powers as Roman centralization advanced through the thirteenth century and beyond, in Utrecht the right of free episcopal election was held not only by the cathedral chapter of Saint Martin's, but also by the chapters of the Old Munster Church, Saint Peter's, Saint John's, and Saint Mary's. Five collegiate bodies retained the vote. This was not an arrangement granted by Rome. It was an ancient local tradition that the canonical settlement of 1122 confirmed and that Rome was thereafter bound to respect.

III. THE PAPAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF 1145

6. We call the faithful's particular attention to the bull issued by Pope Eugene III in the year 1145. In that document, issued at the petition of the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad III and the Bishop of Utrecht, the Pope acknowledged the right of the Cathedral Chapter of Utrecht to elect its own successors to the see in times of vacancy, without the requirement of papal approval. The historical record is clear that this right was pre-existing — the bull acknowledged it, it did not create it.

7. This distinction is of great constitutional importance. When Rome, in later centuries, sought to impose its own appointments upon the see of Utrecht, the chapter did not claim rights that had been granted to it. It defended rights that had been recognized as belonging to it already — rights that reflected, as the historical sources confirm, the universal practice of the early Church before the

progressive centralization of the medieval papacy had altered the ancient order of ecclesiastical governance.

8. Those who charge the Old Catholic tradition with innovation or rebellion must explain why a church that possessed papally acknowledged electoral independence from at least 1145 should be required, without canonical justification, to surrender that independence at the pleasure of a later pontificate. We find in the historical record no such justification. We find only encroachment.

IV. CONFIRMATION BY THE FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL, 1215

9. The privileges of the Church of Utrecht were not left to rest upon a single papal document. In November of the year 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council — convoked by Pope Innocent III, attended by more than four hundred bishops and eight hundred abbots and priors, and rightly described as the greatest council of the Western Church before Trent — formally confirmed the electoral privileges of Utrecht among its canonical provisions governing ecclesiastical election.

10. Canon Quia propter of that council established the foundational canonical framework for chapter-based episcopal elections throughout the Latin Church, and under that framework the multi-chapter electoral structure of Utrecht received universal conciliar confirmation. Let this be stated plainly: the independence of the Church of Utrecht in the matter of episcopal elections was not merely acknowledged by a single pope in 1145. It was confirmed by an ecumenical council of the universal Church in 1215. There is no higher canonical authority than this.

11. We commend this fact to the attention of all who approach the history of our communion with honest inquiry. The Old Catholic Church does not rest its claim to institutional independence on the

events of 1724, nor on the controversies of 1870. It rests that claim on rights that were recognized, confirmed, and entrenched at the highest levels of ecclesiastical authority before the end of the twelfth century. The later events are chapters in an older story, not the origin of it.

V. A PRECEDENT OF COURAGE: THE SCHISM OF 1423–1432

12. History provides us with a proof of this claim that is as instructive as it is often overlooked. Nearly three hundred years before the Jansenist controversy that is commonly cited as the origin of our present communion's separation, the Church of Utrecht was compelled to defend its ancient rights against direct papal interference — and it prevailed.

13. When the greatly respected Prince-Bishop Frederick of Blankenheim died in 1423, the collegiate chapters of Utrecht duly elected Rudolph of Diepholz as his successor, in full accordance with their recognized constitutional rights. Pope Martin V refused to acknowledge the election and imposed first Rabanus of Speyer and then Zweder of Culenberg upon the see. The chapters rejected both. Rome imposed ecclesiastical censures. The clergy and people of Utrecht endured them, and refused to yield.

14. The impasse continued for the better part of a decade. In the end it was Rome that conceded. Pope Eugenius IV recognized Rudolph of Diepholz as the lawful bishop. The ancient rights of the Church of Utrecht had been tested under severe pressure and had held. When, two and a half centuries later, the same rights were again invoked in the face of the same Roman overreach, the chapter of 1724 stood upon ground that had already been proven firm by their predecessors of 1423.

VI. THE CRISIS OF 1702–1724 AND THE PRESERVATION OF APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

15. In the year 1702, the clouds of a long-gathering storm broke upon the Church of Utrecht. Archbishop Petrus Codde was suspended by Pope Clement XI on charges of sympathy with the Jansenist movement — charges that had already been examined by a formal congregation of cardinals convened by Pope Innocent XII, and unanimously rejected. The theological pretext was thin. The true object was the imposition of Roman control over a see that had, for centuries, governed itself.

16. The chapter of Utrecht refused the papal-imposed replacement. They did not do so lightly, nor in a spirit of defiance for its own sake. They did so because the surrender of their ancient and repeatedly confirmed right of free episcopal election would have been not merely a practical concession but a capitulation to a claim of universal jurisdiction that had no foundation in the canonical settlement under which their church had always lived. They had the precedent of 1432. They had the bull of 1145. They had the Fourth Lateran Council. They stood upon all of it.

17. In the year 1724, the chapter elected Cornelius Steenoven as Archbishop of Utrecht. He was duly consecrated by Bishop Dominique Marie Varlet. Both were subsequently excommunicated by Rome. We do not here adjudicate the question of that excommunication's validity under the law as Rome then understood it. We observe only that under the law as the Church of Utrecht had understood it — and had seen confirmed — since 1122, 1145, and 1215, the consecration was entirely lawful. The apostolic succession of our communion proceeds from that act, and from the unbroken episcopal line that stretches back through it to Willibrord and to the undivided Church.

VII. THE FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL AND THE EXPANSION OF THE COMMUNION

18. We turn now to the events of 1870, not because they are the origin of the Old Catholic Church, but because they mark the moment at which the constitutional question became a theological one,

and at which the communion of Utrecht found itself joined by brothers and sisters across Europe who had arrived, by a different path, at the same understanding of the ancient faith.

19. The First Vatican Council, opened by Pope Pius IX on the eighth day of December, 1869, defined on the eighteenth day of July, 1870, the doctrine of papal infallibility. The vote was four hundred and fifty-one in favor and eighty-eight against, with many of the opposition having departed Rome rather than record a formal negative. The definition was promulgated. For a great many faithful Catholics in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, it was a step too far.

20. The German theologian and church historian Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger gave voice to what many felt when he refused to accept the new doctrine as consonant with the tradition of the ancient and undivided Church. He was excommunicated in 1871. By that same year, nearly fourteen hundred Germans had formally declared their rejection of the infallibility decree as an innovation contrary to the faith once delivered to the saints. They sought episcopal consecration not from Rome but from the Church of Utrecht — and in receiving it, they were bound into the apostolic succession that had been preserved there in unbroken continuity since the seventh century.

21. The Old Catholic movement that emerged from 1870 was not a new creation. It was a new branch upon an ancient tree. The roots of that tree reach to Utrecht, and through Utrecht to Willibrord, and through Willibrord to the apostolic mission of the undivided Church. Those roots had held for more than eleven hundred years before any question of papal infallibility was raised. They hold still.

VIII. A WORD TO THE FAITHFUL

22. We address these words to the clergy and faithful of the Old Catholic Churches International with pastoral directness. You belong to a communion whose history is one of endurance, not of novelty. When you are asked why the Old Catholic Church separated from Rome, you may answer with confidence and with precision: it did not separate. Rome departed, gradually and incrementally, from the ancient order of the Church — from the conciliar governance, from the freedom of canonical election, from the humility before the universal tradition that characterized the faith of the early centuries. The Church of Utrecht held its ground.

23. The rights confirmed in 1145 and 1215 were not invented by theologians hostile to the papacy. They were acknowledged by a pope and confirmed by a universal council. The resistance of 1432 was vindicated by Rome itself. The consecration of 1724 was performed in direct continuity with a constitutional tradition of extraordinary longevity. The witness of 1870 was the witness of men and women who loved the ancient faith too well to see it altered without protest.

24. Know your history. It is a history worth knowing. Know that when you receive the sacraments of this communion, you receive them through an unbroken chain of apostolic succession that the historical record confirms and that no act of excommunication has the power to sever. Know that the faith we profess is not the faith of a protest movement. It is the faith of the Church before the controversies that divided it — the faith of the councils, the faith of the fathers, the faith once delivered to the saints.

IX. CONCLUSION

25. We close this encyclical with a summary of the historical evidence upon which it rests, and with an exhortation to all who read these words.

26. The Diocese of Utrecht was founded in 695 AD with imperial immunities that distinguished it from the outset as an institution of broad institutional independence. The Concordat of Worms in 1122 confirmed the right of canonical election of bishops across the Holy Roman Empire, with Utrecht uniquely retaining a multi-chapter electoral structure unparalleled elsewhere. Pope Eugene III formally acknowledged Utrecht's independent electoral rights in 1145. The Fourth Lateran Council confirmed those rights in 1215. In 1423–1432, those rights were tested against direct papal imposition and vindicated when Rome conceded. In 1517, Pope Leo X's bull *Debitum Pastoralis* further codified Utrecht's exemption from outside jurisdiction. The suspension of Archbishop Codde in 1702 and the consequent crisis of 1724 were the latest, and most serious, instance of a pattern of Roman encroachment that the chapter refused, on constitutionally sound grounds, to accept. The international expansion of the Old Catholic communion after 1870 drew upon and extended this ancient apostolic inheritance.

27. The Old Catholic Church did not depart from Rome. It held the ground of the ancient Church while Rome moved away from it. That is the testimony of the historical record. That is the testimony of this encyclical. And it is, We believe, the testimony of the Holy Spirit who has preserved this communion through every trial to the present day.

Given this day at the See of the Old Catholic Churches International, on the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty-Six.

May Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless, protect, and preserve in the ancient faith all who read these words, all who labor in the vineyard of this communion, and all who seek with sincere hearts the Church that Christ founded and the apostles handed on.

Given under my hand and seal,

† Greer

The Right Reverend Greer Godsey, OSFoc

Presiding Bishop

The Old Catholic Churches International

Laus Deo Semper

APPENDIX

Historical Record Supporting the Claims of This Encyclical

Date	Event	Canonical / Historical Significance
695 AD	Willibrord consecrated first Bishop of the Frisians by Pope Sergius I	Diocese founded with imperial immunities; independent of purely papal framework from origin
1122	Concordat of Worms establishes canonical episcopal elections	Utrecht uniquely retains multi-chapter electoral rights beyond all comparable sees
1145	Pope Eugene III formally acknowledges Utrecht's free election privilege	Papal recognition of pre-existing rights; not a grant but an acknowledgment
1215	Fourth Lateran Council confirms Utrecht's electoral privileges	Highest canonical authority — a universal council — ratifies Utrecht's independence
1423–1432	Utrecht defies Pope Martin V's imposed bishop; Rome concedes	Constitutional independence tested, defended, and vindicated; precedent established
1517	Pope Leo X's <i>Debitum Pastoralis</i> codifies Utrecht's jurisdictional exemption	Rome itself legally confirms Utrecht cannot be subject to outside canonical tribunal
1702	Archbishop Codde suspended by Pope Clement XI	Chapter invokes ancient rights and refuses Rome-imposed replacement
1724	Cornelius Steenoven consecrated Archbishop without papal mandate	Apostolic succession preserved; constitutional rights exercised; formal break recorded
July 18, 1870	First Vatican Council defines papal infallibility (451–88)	Theological rupture triggers international expansion of Old Catholic communion
1871	Döllinger excommunicated; Old Catholic movement formally organized	International Old Catholics receive episcopal succession through Utrecht's apostolic line

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica | The Catholic Encyclopedia (New Advent) | Yale Avalon Project

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