

An Historic Overview of the Old Roman Catholic Church

by The Most Rev. Francis P. Facione

It seems appropriate to begin this discussion with a statement of what the Old Roman Catholic Church is not. It is not a sect or a schism as some of its self-appointed critics may claim. The Old Roman Catholic Church is a body of Christians committed to the Person of Jesus Christ and His teaching and, as shall become evident in this article, forms an historic part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The Old Roman Catholic Church affirms its historic continuity with the Apostolic Church of the first century through the ancient See of Utrecht in Holland. St. Willibrord, the Apostle of the Netherlands was consecrated to the Episcopacy by Pope Sergius I in 696 A.D. at Rome. Upon his return to the Netherlands, he established his See at Utrecht. In addition, he established the dioceses at Deventer and Haarlem. One of his successors was St. Boniface, the Apostle of Germany. The Church of Utrecht also provided a worthy occupant for the Papal See in 1552 in the person of Pope Hadrian VI, while two of the most able exponents of the spiritual life, Geert Groote, who founded the Brothers of the Common Life, and Thomas a Kempis, who is credited with writing the Imitation of Christ, were both from the Dutch Church.

Assenting to a petition made by the Holy Roman Emperor, Conrad II and Bishop Heribert of Utrecht, Blessed Pope Eugene III, in the year 1145 A.D., granted the Cathedral Chapter of Utrecht the right to elect successors to the See in times of vacancy. This privilege was affirmed by the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215. The autonomous character of the Ancient Catholic Church in the Netherlands was further demonstrated when a second papal grant by Pope Leo X, *Debitum Pastoralis*, conceded to Philip of Burgundy, the 57th Bishop of Utrecht, that neither he nor any of his successors, nor any of their clergy or laity, should ever, in the first instance, have his cause evoked to an external tribunal, not even under pretense of any apostolic letters whatever; and all such proceedings should be, *ipso facto*, null and void. This papal concession, in 1520, was of the greatest importance in the defense of the rights of the Church of Utrecht.

Armed with the protection of the papal concessions, the Church in the Netherlands continued to minister even through the turbulence of the Reformation. During this period of strife, the Church in the Netherlands, as in many other countries, was forced to "go underground" in order to survive and remain intact, it did. Eventually, the Archbishop of Utrecht and other church leaders reached informal agreement with the civil government whereby it could again function openly without interference from the Reformers.

While peace and toleration was achieved with the civil government, a new, growing tension was developing for the Church in Utrecht. The cause of this uneasiness was the motivation of the Counter-Reformers, most notably the Jesuits, to "re-missionize" the Dutch Church. In 1592, the Jesuits, for reasons largely political, began to invade the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Utrecht, and although more than once rebuked by the Pope and ordered to submit themselves to the authority of the Archbishop, their machinations continued unabated. This intrusion of the Counter-Reformers was strongly resisted by the clergy and bishops of the Netherlands as well as frowned upon by the Dutch government. Nevertheless, in 1691, the Jesuits took the step of falsely accusing the Archbishop, Petter Codde, of favoring the so-called Jansenist heresy. The Holy Father, Pope Innocent XII appointed a Commission of Cardinals to investigate the accusations against Archbishop Codde. The result of this inquiry was a complete and unconditional exoneration of the Archbishop.

Undaunted by the decision of the Commission appointed by Pope Innocent XII, the Counter-Reformers

prevailed upon the new Pope, Clement XI, to summon Archbishop Codde to Rome in 1700 under the pretext of participating in the Jubilee Year whereupon a second Commission was appointed to try the Archbishop. The result of this second proceeding was again a complete and unconditional acquittal. While this should have ended the matter, it didn't. Pope Clement was prevailed upon to issue an order which suspended the Archbishop in 1701 and appointed a successor to the See of Utrecht.

When news of these events was made public, the indignation, even on the part of those most favorable to the Counter-Reformers' position was unbound. Believing the suspension of their Archbishop to be an unprecedented injustice, those left in charge refused to acquiesce in it, and maintained not only the wrongfulness of the action, but also their unassailable right to choose a successor to Codde, and refused to recognize the person whom Pope Clement wished to thrust upon them. In this stance, they were joined by many theologians and canon lawyers as well as bishops and civil officials including the Dutch Government which not only refused to allow Archbishop Codde's "successor" to function in Holland, but also demanded that Codde be allowed to return to Utrecht.

Upon his return to Utrecht in June of 1703, Archbishop Codde found everything in the wildest confusion. Continued conflict seemed inevitable as attempts to resolve the matter were useless. Finally, in a Pastoral Letter of 19 March 1704, Codde announced his decision to retire from the actual exercise of his office, under protest against the injustice of his suspension. He retired to his country house near Utrecht where he died on December 18, 1710.

With Archbishop Codde's decision to retire, the administration of the diocese reverted, according to all principles of canon law, to the Cathedral Chapter which ably discharged its duties. During this period, the chapter arranged to have an Irish bishop, Luke Fagan, Bishop of Meath and later Archbishop of Dublin, ordain priests for the Church of Utrecht. Following Luke Fagan's lead, three French bishops also signified their willingness to ordain clergy for the Dutch church.

Meanwhile, the oppressed Church continued its efforts to obtain a hearing for resolution of its grievances. Its case was presented to the University of Louvain in May of 1717. In the course of that year and the next, the entire body of theologians and canonists of the University agreed that the rights of the Chapter of Utrecht had been violated and the actions against it were not only contrary to church law but null and void. Its appeal to a future General Council of the Church was ignored. As a result, the Church of Holland which had been, *de jure*, autonomous, became, *de facto*, an independent Catholic church.

Thus was the situation to remain until 1723 when on April 27th, the Cathedral Chapter proceeded to the election of the Seventh Archbishop of Utrecht, Dr. Cornelius Steenoven, who had been the companion of Archbishop Codde during his sojourn at Rome. Steenoven was consecrated to the episcopacy on October 15, 1724 by Monsignor Dominique Varlet, Bishop of Ascalon, then resident in Amsterdam because of his own difficulties with Counter-Reformers and others intriguing against him. Bishop Varlet was to be called upon to consecrate three other archbishops for Utrecht between 1724 and 1739. He died at the Hague on May 14, 1742.

The Tenth Archbishop, Peter John Meindaerts, consecrated by Varlet on St. Luke's Day, 1739, proceeded to the consecration of Jerome de Bock for the diocese of Haarlem thus assuring the episcopacy for the Church of Holland following Varlet's death.

The question of a third bishop had long occupied the attention of Archbishop Meindaerts. After much discussion and considerable delays, the Archbishop and Canons assembled in September, 1757 and elected Bartholomew John Byevelt, one of the Canons, Bishop of Deventer. He was consecrated bishop on the Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 1758.

In 1763, at the call of Archbishop Meindaerts, a synod of the bishops and clergy was held, and the acts of

this synod are a remarkable testimony to its firm hold of the Faith, and its intention that the church of Holland should remain steadfast in it. With the publication of these acts in other countries, there was considerable hope that a medium had been found to heal the breach between Rome and the church of Holland. Unfortunately, these hopes were destined to remain unfulfilled and the church of Holland continued in its forced state of isolation.

In 1853, Pope Pius IX established a rival hierarchy to that of the church of Holland, and so now there were two churches of Holland, both catholic, rivals, though not actually enemies. It was this "restoration" of the hierarchy which gave rise to the name "Old Roman Catholic" which began to be applied to the original Church to distinguish it from the new establishment of Pius IX.

In 1870, Pope Pius IX convened [Vatican Council I](#), enriching the hope of the church of Holland that it would receive a hearing on its grievances. Alas this was not to be as its bishops were refused seating in the deliberations of that synod. In fact, at the instigation of those unfavorable to the cause of the church of Holland, the Vatican Council abolished the principle of appeal to a general council of the Church.

Following the Vatican Council I, a considerable dissent among Catholics in parts of Germany, Austria and Switzerland arose over the issue of the definition of papal infallibility as a dogma of the Church. The dissenters, while holding the Church in General Council to be infallible, were unwilling to accept the proposition that the Pope, acting alone in matters of faith and morals is infallible (*cf* [Bishop Josip Strossmayer](#) (1815-1905) speech at Vatican I, which speech by some is claimed to be a fogery). Many of these Catholics formed independent communities that came to be known as Old Catholic because they sought to adhere to the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church of the post-apostolic era. These communities appealed to the Archbishop of Utrecht who consecrated the first bishops for these groups. Eventually under the leadership of the Church of Holland, the Old Catholic communities joined together to form the Utrecht Union of Churches. The foregoing text file is an electronic "reprint" of the first in a series of articles by Bishop Facione, Presiding Bishop of the Old Roman Catholic Church in North America, published originally in The Scroll by the Society of St. Mark, who has given its permission that it be freely distributed with attribution.

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