

Tradition as Renewal: An Old Catholic Perspective on Renewal in Church and Theology

PETER BEN SMIT*

This paper argues that precisely by focusing on the continuation of tradition, Old Catholic theology is able to arrive at theological renewal, especially in an intercultural manner and in ecumenical dialogue. As a case study, this paper considers the recent dialogue between the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic Church and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

Key-words: *renewal, mission, tradition, ecumenism, old Catholicism, Mar Thoma, intercultural theology, church history*

Introduction

“Oh, are you part of the Society of Pius X, then?” Old Catholics, members of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, are sometimes confronted with remarks such as this upon indicating that they are members of an Old Catholic Church. Confusion reigns, then, given that Old Catholics often take pride in the fact that they are not traditionalists, but, on the contrary, seek to pass on the living tradition of the Church in lively dialogue with today’s society. The cause of the confusion is the notion “old” in the name “Old Catholic.” Here, this notion will be unpacked in relation to the question of ecclesial and (therefore) theological renewal. In particular, it will be argued that the notion of “tradition” in Old Catholic theology implies renewal rather than conservatism due to a dynamic, ecumenical return to the sources, in a process that can be described along the lines of intercultural theology. In doing so, first, a brief sketch will be given of the notion of “tradition” as it was developed in the 19th century Old Catholic movement (a movement that included earlier traditions, notably the tradition of the Church of Utrecht with its strong Augustinian emphasis)¹ will be discussed, then attention will be given to the discussion concerning tradition and its

* Peter-Ben Smit, PhD, extraordinary professor of Ancient Catholic Church Structures and the History and Doctrine of Old Catholicism at Utrecht University, assistant professor of New Testament at the Faculty of Theology of VU University Amsterdam, associate researcher at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Pretoria, assistant rector of the Old Catholic parish of Amsterdam; email: p.b.a.smit@uu.nl.

¹ See, e.g., the account offered by Dick J. Schoon, *Van bisschoppelijke Cleresie tot Oud-Katholieke Kerk. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Nederland in de 19e eeuw*, Nijmegen 2004.