

COVENANT OF UNITY

*For Catholic Bishops United in
the Old Catholic Communion*



Affirmed and Adopted by the House of Bishops
05 May 2021 A.D.

Statement of Witness

I, *N. N.*, elected bishop of the Church of God, for the Diocese of *N. N.*, do embrace, affirm, and subscribe to the *Declaration of Utrecht*, as agreed to by Old Catholics on September 24, 1889, without addition or subtraction, as quoted and the following *Covenant of the Catholic Bishops United in the Old Catholic Communion* with its *Preamble* and *Order* for the House of Bishops.

Signed on this date: _____

the Most Rev. *N.N.*
Bishop, the Diocese of *N.N.*

Attested on this date: _____

The Most Rev. *N.N.*
Bishop-Chair,
House of Bishops of the Old Catholic Communion

The name of this Church is the *Old Catholic Communion, Inc. (OCC)*. It is civilly incorporated in the State of Florida and all member dioceses amend their own incorporation to accede to and reflect this *Covenant of the Catholic Bishops United in the Old Catholic Communion*.

The Old Catholic Communion affirms and embraces the *Declaration of Utrecht* and the subsequent declarations made by the Union of Utrecht including the *Preamble* to the *Statute* of the International Bishops Conference (IBC), and the *Order* document which govern the life of the Old Catholics of the Union of Utrecht. These aforementioned documents are included within this text with minor redaction to particularize the documents for appropriation in the life, ministry and polity of the Old Catholic Communion.

The Declaration of Utrecht

In the names of the Most Holy Trinity.

John Heykamp, Archbishop of Utrecht.
Caspar John Rinkel, Bishop of Haarlem,
Cornelius Diependaal, Bishop of Deventer,
Joseph Hubert Reinkens, Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of Germany,
Edward Herzog, Bishop of the Christian-Catholic Church of Switzerland,
assembled in the arch-episcopal residence at Utrecht on the twenty-fourth day of September, 1889,
after invocation of the Holy Spirit, address the following Declaration to the Catholic Church.

Being assembled for a conference in response to an invitation from the undersigned Archbishop of Utrecht, we have resolved henceforth to meet from time to time for consultations on subjects of common interest, in conjunction with our assistants, councilors, and theologians.

We deem it appropriate at this our first meeting to summarize in a common declaration the ecclesiastical principles on which we have hitherto exercised and will continue to exercise our episcopal ministry, and which we have repeatedly had occasion to state in individual declarations.

(1) We adhere to the principle of the ancient Church laid down by St Vincent of Lérins in these terms: *'Id teneamus, quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est; hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum'* [Let us hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all; for this is truly and properly Catholic]. Therefore, we abide by the faith of the ancient Church as it is formulated in the ecumenical symbols and in the universally accepted dogmatic decisions of the ecumenical synods held in the undivided Church of the first millennium.

(2) We therefore reject as contradicting the faith of the ancient Church and destroying her constitution, the Vatican decrees, promulgated July 18, 1870, concerning the infallibility and the universal episcopate or ecclesiastical plenitude of power of the Roman pope. This, however, does not prevent us from acknowledging the historic primacy which several ecumenical councils and the Fathers of the ancient Church with the assent of the whole Church have attributed to the bishop of Rome by recognizing him as the *primus inter pares* [first among equals].

(3) We also reject the dogma of the immaculate conception promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1854 as being without foundation in Holy Scriptures and the tradition of the first centuries.

(4) As for the other dogmatic decrees issued by the bishops of Rome in the last centuries, the bulls *Unigenitus* and *Auctorem fidei*, the Syllabus of 1864 etc., we reject them on all such points as are in contradiction with the doctrine of the ancient Church, and do not recognize them as binding. Moreover, we renew all those protests which the ancient Catholic Church of Holland has made against Rome in the past.

(5) We refuse to accept the decisions of the Council of Trent in matters of discipline, and we accept its dogmatic decisions only insofar as they agree with the teaching of the ancient Church.

(6) Considering that the Holy Eucharist has always been the true focal point of worship in the Catholic Church, we consider it our duty to declare that we maintain in all faithfulness and without deviation the ancient Catholic doctrine concerning the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, by believing that we receive the Body and the Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ Himself under the species of bread and wine.

The Eucharistic celebration in the Church is neither a continual repetition nor a renewal of the expiatory sacrifice which Christ offered once and for all on the Cross; the sacrificial character of the Eucharist, however, consists in its being the perpetual commemoration of that sacrifice and a real representation, being enacted on earth, of the one offering which Christ according to Heb. 9:11-12 continuously makes in heaven for the salvation of redeemed humanity, by appearing now for us in the presence of God (Heb. 9:24).

This being the character of the Eucharist in relation to Christ's sacrifice, it is at the same time a sacrificial meal, by means of which the faithful, in receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, have communion with one another (1 Cor. 10:17).

(7) We hope that the theologians, while maintaining the faith of the undivided Church, will succeed in their efforts to establish an agreement on the differences that have arisen since the divisions of the Church. We urge the priests under our jurisdiction in the first place to stress, both by preaching and by religious instruction, the essential Christian truths professed in common by all the divided confessions, carefully to avoid, in discussing still existing differences, any violation of truth or charity, and, in word and deed, to set an example to the members of our parishes of how to act towards people of a different belief in a way that is in accordance with the spirit of Jesus Christ, who is the Savior of us all.

(8) We believe that it is in faithfully maintaining the teaching of Jesus Christ, while rejecting all the errors that have been added to it through human sin, as well as rejecting all the abuses in ecclesiastical matters and hierarchical tendencies, that we shall best counteract unbelief and that religious indifference which is the worst evil of our day.

Given at Utrecht, the 24th September 1889.

Covenant Preamble

The Ecclesiological Foundations for the Old Catholic Communion

1. The Old Catholic Communion is a union of local churches and their bishops governing them who are determined to maintain and pass on the faith, worship, and essential structure of the undivided Church of the first millennium. By their uniting to form a communion, which other bishops joined later, the full communion of the Churches represented by them found its expression.

2. In the “Declaration of Utrecht”, fundamental for Old Catholic doctrine, the Old Catholic Communion, confesses the catholic faith as expressed in the Church in the east and west by the seven Ecumenical Councils. It approves of the historic precedence of the bishop of Rome as *primus inter pares* but rejects the papal dogmas of the said council and a number of other papal pronouncements as far as they are at variance with the doctrine of the ancient Church. It affirms its faith in the essence and mystery of the Eucharist. Furthermore, the Old Catholic Communion, shows its awareness of its obligation to do everything that will help to overcome the divisions in the Church, and based on the faith of the undivided Church, to seek and declare unity and communion with other Churches.

3. As has been recognized and expressed ever more clearly in the course of time, the Old Catholic Communion, implies a specific ecclesiology.

3.1 It presupposes that each fellowship and communion of people, which by the reconciliation in Jesus Christ and by the outpouring and the continuous work of the Holy Spirit is constituted as a unity in a given place around a bishop with the Eucharist as its center, is a complete church that carries out its tasks autonomously in that given place. Each local church living the common faith and having its indispensable synodal structures, uniting the ordained ministry and the laity, which bring to bear her communion and unity, is a representation of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church”, as confessed by the ecumenical creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381).

3.2 Each of them is “catholic” because on the one hand, it participates in the whole reality of salvation and truth that comprises God and humans, heaven and earth and finds therein its unity, and because on the other hand, it is linked in unity and communion with other local churches, in which it recognizes its own essence. Thus, the catholicity of each local church becomes manifest in the unity and communion with other local churches perceived in faith as being identical in their foundation in the redemptive work of the Triune God. The unity and communion of local churches in their supra-diocesan link - i.e., in the Old Catholic Communion, is a representation of the “one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” as well - however, not as a kind of super-diocese of supra-regional or even universal dimensions, but as a communion of episcopally and synodally organized local churches. It is in this perspective that the relationship between autonomy of the

local church (as to the self-government in the broadest sense) and supra-local obligation of each local church (as to the communion of local churches) should be viewed.

That this unity and communion has for a long time not existed universally among all the churches, is a consequence of human shortcomings and sin, which eclipses the fact that in Jesus Christ God has reconciled and called to partnership all humans who hear his call. This entails the obligation for each church, in obedience to the will of God and in faithfulness to the common tradition, to investigate whether existing separations must continue to be regarded as unavoidable or whether, on the contrary, its own catholicity should be recognized in a hitherto separated church.

3.3 Each local church is the Body of Christ in which the members, baptized and confirmed in the name of the Holy Trinity and united in the Eucharist, are called, authorized, and sanctified by the various gifts of the Holy Spirit to live a multifaceted common life in *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia* (*witness, public worship and service among others*). In communion with the other local churches they are the people of that God who has elected Israel to be a sign of salvation and has opened up the blessing promised to Abraham to all peoples in the power of the Gospel. Being the manifestation of the renewal of creation that has its origin in Jesus Christ, it is on the way to its fulfillment which all its members have to go in repentance and hope.

3.4 In continuity with its soteriological-trinitarian foundation, the catholicity of the Church is expressed by those elements and processes which are signified by the comprehensive term “apostolic succession”. This means that whatever the Church is doing in word and sacrament, doctrine and ministry, has and must have its origin, in space and time, in the mission of Jesus Christ and the apostles, operated by the Spirit. This includes preeminently the passing on of the ordained ministry by prayer and the laying-on of hands. The apostolic succession of the Church requires the full communion of the catholic churches that are headed by the bishops in unison with the college of presbyters and exhibit a synodal structure. It finds its particularly clear expression in the ordination by other bishops of a locally elected bishop.

4. Regarding the Old Catholic Communion, all this means that it is primarily the task and service of the bishops to maintain the catholicity of the church in the unity of the tradition of faith, to respond to arising new problems and to take decisions concerning the relationships to other churches. For they are at the intersection of primarily belonging, as individuals, to their local church on the one hand, and of taking on a collegial, primary responsibility for the fellowship and communion of the local and national churches on the other hand. The conciliar unity and committed communion of autonomous catholic churches - individual dioceses - is expressed in the synodal assemblies, i.e. the Holy Synod, and the House of Bishops and the Synodal Council.

4.1 The reception by the church is a manifestation that the decisions of the bishops, prepared and taken in a comprehensive conciliar process, have been initiated by the Spirit of God and correspond to the will of God for the mission of his Church. Reception therefore includes the participation and joint responsibility of the baptized (clergy and laity) in this process both within each local church (diocesan synods or other responsible organs) and within the Old Catholic

Communion, as a whole. Therefore, engaged in this process, they are led by the Spirit of God for freedom and life.

5. Wherever, congruent with the ecumenical self-obligation of the Old Catholic Communion, communion with churches outside the Old Catholic Communion, does exist or seems possible and necessary on account of theological clarifications, the bishops of the Old Catholic Communion, have to take care, in consequence of the explications above, that mutual consultations be initiated and maintained with these churches.

6. In order to maintain their communion and to fulfill common tasks, the bishops of the Old Catholic Communion, establish, in accordance with the foundations above, the following Order and thereafter the required Rules. By doing so they presuppose that they, as well as, all the faithful be led by that mind that has been expressed in the words of the holy bishops Cyprian of Carthage and Ignatius of Antioch: Do not decide without the counsel of the presbyterium and the consent of the people (*Ep.* 14:4); do nothing without the bishop (*Phld.* 7:2).

Order of the House of Bishops

of the Old Catholic Communion

Art. 1

The House of Bishops of the Old Catholic Communion, includes the bishops who

- (a) together with their local churches adhere to the “Declaration of Utrecht” of September 24, 1889;
- (b) maintain the catholicity of ministry, doctrine, and worship in apostolic succession;
- (c) together with their local churches are in full communion with the other local churches of the Old Catholic Communion;
- (d) are recognized by the members of the Old Catholic Communion, as having been elected lawfully and ordained canonically and exercise the catholic episcopacy in their local church;
- (e) have no links or obligations to other churches contradicting the “Declaration of Utrecht” and the present Covenant;
- (f) exercise their function as ordinary bishops, i.e. govern a local church (diocese).

Art. 2

The House of Bishops does not infringe upon the jurisdiction of its members in their local churches.

Art. 3

The House of Bishops has the following tasks:

- (a) it takes the necessary decisions in all organizational or disciplinary matters concerning the maintenance of communion and regarding joint projects;
- (b) it responds to controversial matters of faith and the ensuing ethical behavior as well as to matters of order;
- (c) it issues declarations of faith and principle on behalf of the Old Catholic Communion, if inquiries or the circumstances so require;
- (d) it orders the relationships to other churches and religious communities;
- (e) it decides about the admission of a local church to the Old Catholic Communion;

- (f) it decides about the reception of a bishop into the House of Bishops, aside from the procedure outlined in Art. 8;
- (g) it ascertains whether a bishop has gravely harmed the confession of the “Declaration of Utrecht”, the catholicity of ministry, doctrine, and worship, or this Covenant, or has seriously violated the moral order, and determines whether that bishop ought to be deprived of the membership in the House of Bishops;
- (h) it initiates, whenever possible, a process of discussion regarding matters concerning Art. 3 b-d in universal Old Catholic discussion forums (for instance, conferences, congresses), assisted by the Ministry of Information and Communication;
- (i) it exercises jurisdiction over Old Catholic parishes and groups outside the local church of a member of the House of Bishops or in-formation, by commissioning one or more bishops to fulfill this task;
- (j) it maintains a relationship with a theologian for consultation, as necessary;
- (k) it maintains a documentation center for Old Catholic literature and publications of the member churches of the Old Catholic Communion.

Art. 4

Each member of the House of Bishops is bound

- (a) to take part in the meetings of the House of Bishops;
- (b) to bring problems, insights, and developments which are receiving significance beyond his/her local church, thereby affecting the Old Catholic Communion, as such, to the attention of the House of Bishops early enough and with sufficient explanation and to get them on the agenda as business item for a statement;
- (c) to initiate in his/her local church a discussion of matters concerning Art. 3 b-d which will be dealt with in the House of Bishops, assisted by the Ministry of Information and Communication, so that s/he can express her/his views in the House of Bishops in knowledge of the conviction in his/her local church;
- (d) to make known in his/her local church as doctrinal statements of the bishops united in the Old Catholic Communion, any declarations and statements of the House of Bishops in matters of faith and the ensuing ethical behavior as well as order, thereby including the given justification;

- (e) to implement her/himself, or have implemented, the decisions of the House of Bishops on discipline, organization, and common endeavors in his/her church according to its internal order;
- (f) to carry out in his/her church the decisions of the House of Bishops on relationships to other churches and religious communities in suitable ways;
- (g) to bring to the attention of the House of Bishops the eventual non-reception of decisions of the House of Bishops by his/her local church.

Art. 5

- (a) A member of the House of Bishops according to Art. 1 f is in principle bound to participate and give voice in decisions taken concerning Art. 3 a-g. A member does not take part in a vote on a matter immediately touching his/her personal interests or possible conflict of interest.
- (b) A bishop who does not take part in the meeting has to authorize another bishop of a local church of the Old Catholic Communion, or another member of the clergy of his/her local church to speak on his/her behalf and to participate in the building of consensus.
- (c) In the case of an episcopal vacancy that particular local church may delegate the diocesan administrator or another member of the clergy as an observer to the meeting. This person has advising rights.
- (d) Decisions are made by consensus. Abstentions are not an option.

Art. 6

- (a) In decisions and statements concerning Art. 3 b-d, the following procedure is observed. The same applies if a matter about to be decided is, after the first debate in the House of Bishops, regarded by two of its members to be a matter touching the further maintenance of the communion of the Old Catholic Communion.
- (b) This procedure provides as a first step for an agreement by the House of Bishops for the fixing of a period in which a consultation is held in all the local churches, possibly also in national Old Catholic discussion forums, on the matter under discussion, the results of which are being made known to both the members of the House of Bishops and the synodal governing bodies of the local churches. At the same time consensus is required for determining when the matter under discussion will be put on the agenda of the House of Bishops for further decisions.
- (c) The matter once again being put on the agenda will then be discussed by the bishops in a second reading. By doing so, they are to take into particular account the written results of the consultations and of possible further expert opinions requested as well as the possible effects of a decision for the Old Catholic Communion and for its existing ecumenical relationships.

- (d) Normally a second reading is followed by a call for consensus in which all members of the House of Bishops present take part.
- (e) A unanimous decision of consensus is communicated to the member churches as a decision of the House of Bishops, with the justification provided.
- (f) If a decision is not unanimous but reveals the mind of the House of Bishops in the sense that a majority of bishops from each local church is in favor, the result is made known to the member churches as a decision of the House of Bishops, together with the arguments of those in favor as well as the arguments of those opposed.
- (g) If there is no unanimous decision or a decision “of one mind” according to Art. 6 e and f, no decision has been taken by the House of Bishops, and the item is removed from the agenda. This result is made known to the churches of the Old Catholic Communion, together with the arguments advanced in the House of Bishops, the local churches, and - if it is the case - in national Old Catholic discussion forums.

Art. 7

- (a) Decisions on the admission of a church to the Old Catholic Communion, (Art. 3 e) are taken in accordance with Art. 6 e-g.
- (b) In all other matters, a decision has been taken if and when the consensus of the members of the House of Bishops present agree to it.

Art. 8

The election of a bishop is carried out by the respective local church according to its order, the consecration is performed by bishops of the Old Catholic Communion.

Art. 9

- (a) The respective local church carries out the election being aware of the following impediments to consecration as determined by the House of Bishops:
- the lack of theological formation and pastoral experience required for the episcopal ministry;
 - a conduct of life incompatible with the dignity of the episcopal office;
- (b) The responsible church authority notifies all the member local churches of the Old Catholic Communion, of the election and supplies the respective certification.
- (c) The chair of the House of Bishops for her/his part notifies the members of the House of Bishops of the election.

(d) If within three weeks after the notification by the chair of the House of Bishops a member of the House of Bishops raises an objection against the election or the elect, the question will be dealt with at a special session of the House of Bishops and there decided by consensus after having heard the respective local church. If the House of Bishops objects to performing the consecration, it is up to the respective local church to draw the appropriate conclusions.

(e) If within three weeks after the notification by the chair of the House of Bishops no objection to the election or the person of the elect is raised, the moderator will send a copy of the “Declaration of Utrecht” and of the “Covenant of the Catholic Bishops United in the Old Catholic Communion” to the elect requesting her/him to document her/his assent to them by signing them.

(f) After having received the copies of the “Declaration of Utrecht” and the “Covenant of the Old Catholic Bishops United in the Old Catholic Communion” carrying the signature of the elect, the chair of the House of Bishops notifies to the members of the House of Bishops that the consecration may be performed; she/he also communicates this fact in a letter to the responsible authority of the respective local church.

(g) A member of the House of Bishops who performs a consecration to which the House of Bishops has objected in accordance with Article 9 d incurs suspension *ipso facto* pending a final decision by the House of Bishops at its next meeting (cf. Art. 3 g).

Art. 10

(a) All the bishops of the Old Catholic Communion, are to be invited to the consecration by the respective local church.

(b) If possible, the three principal consecrators are to be taken from ordinary bishops of local churches of the Old Catholic Communion. Whenever possible, the predecessor is *not* to be among the three principal consecrators.

Art. 11

(a) The bishops do not enter into any obligations concerning the ministry, doctrine, or worship to other bishops or churches, nor do they terminate them, without prior joint discussion and approval of the House of Bishops.

(b) In particular, the bishops commit themselves not to consecrate any bishop for other churches or to take part in the laying-on of hands without the approval of the House of Bishops.

(c) In the case of ordinations of bishops in churches with whom the Old Catholic Communion, is in full communion, a decision of the chair suffices which is notified to the other members of the House of Bishops.

Art. 12

The bishops distribute among themselves the constitutions, their canonical provisions, pastoral letters, official prayer books and hymnals, rituals, catechisms, manuals, the annual lists of clergy, the minutes of their synod, the study and examination regulations, particularly important decisions, and the like.

Art. 13

Deacons and priests going from one Old Catholic diocese to another and living there for a longer or shorter period are as a rule licensed to function if provided with letters of recommendation by their bishop; a formal reception into the clergy of another diocese can be made only after the canonical excardination by the competent bishop. This does not apply to a member of the clergy being elected bishop of another diocese.

Art. 14

(a) Each bishop is bound to ordain or receive only such candidates to the diaconate and presbyterate who are duly qualified and can prove the required training, theological studies and examinations according to the order of the bishop's church.

(b) Candidates for the diaconate and presbyterate from other dioceses are ordained to the respective order only at the request or with the consent of the competent bishop or their church.