

“Nullus Episcopus...”
Rev. Dr. Marek Božek

Many of our independent jurisdictions make very public claims to offer valid Catholic sacraments and to possess validly ordained Catholic bishops, priests, and deacons. Countless websites and other publications of our movement proudly display the “apostolic succession lines” that are meant to prove the credibility of our bishops. Sometimes implicitly, but mostly explicitly it is implied that our jurisdictions and its bishops derive their credibility from their “great-great-great-grandfather bishop” being ordained by Arnold Harris Mathew or Joseph René Vilatte, who were clearly validly ordained in the Old Catholic and Syrian-Jacobite apostolic succession respectively. For the longest time, I took these claims at their face value, accepting their apparent veracity. While I was continually disappointed by the scandalous (in my opinion) fragmentation and ever new divisions of our movement in this country, and the firm refusal of the Old Catholics in Europe to take us seriously, I have always assumed that the claims of validity are true, and accepted as such both in the Vatican and in Utrecht.

Then, I found out that the Old Catholic Churches united in the Union of Utrecht not only do not take our American movement seriously, but they do not even recognize our leaders as validly ordained Catholic bishops, or our acts of worship as valid Catholic sacraments!

Earlier this year, while browsing yet another antique store, I came upon an Old Catholic theology textbook “Die Altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, Ihre Lehre, Ihr Anliegen” (The Old Catholic Church. Its history, doctrine, and vision) authored by Dr. Urs Küry, bishop of the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland (Christkatholische Kirche in der Schweiz) from 1955 until 1972. Together with Fr. Jayme Mathias we decided to translate this book into English in order to further facilitate education of our clergy and lay members. While working on this project, I arrived at page 96-97, with a subchapter titled “The Community of the so-called Episcopi Vagantes.” Bishop Küry's unflattering opinion of the independent Catholic movement in America was not a surprise, although he does sound harsh when calling episcopi vagantes “pretentious and pompous”. What did surprise, perhaps even shocked me, was his unequivocal position that both J.R. Vilatte and Arnold Harris Mathew were ordained invalidly, and thus all their successors are not valid bishops in the Old Catholic understanding. Since the matter is, in my opinion, extremely consequential, allow me to quote Dr. Küry directly:

“The two main creators of those communities are J.R. Vilatte and Arnold Harris Mathew. Vilatte, a Roman Catholic Belgian who had converted to Anglicanism, had been ordained a priest by Bishop Herzog on behalf of his Anglican bishop. He was commissioned to serve the Belgian congregations in the Episcopal Church in the United States. Against the will of his superiors, and without any parishes, he was ordained a bishop by one of the Syrian-Jacobite Church bishops in Malabar in Ceylon. The Englishman Arnold Harris Mathew tricked himself into being ordained a bishop by the Archbishop of Utrecht after presenting a forged certificate of election. When the fraud was discovered, all relations with him were immediately severed. Both were bishops without Churches, but this did not prevent them from ordaining a

number of other ecclesiastical adventurers as bishops and priests, whose successors are still at work today, especially in America. The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht have nothing to do with their communities... In the Old Catholic understanding, their episcopal consecrations are not only illicit, but also invalid because - although attempting to correctly and ritually transmit the apostolic succession - they were carried without any legitimate ecclesiastical authorization (missio)...

A consecration obtained surreptitiously under false pretenses, or authorized with forged documents cannot be recognized as valid, even if the rite of consecration was correctly performed by valid bishops. If the sentence applies: *nulla ecclesia sine episcopo* (there is no Church without a bishop), then the reverse also applies: *nullus episcopus sine ecclesia* (there is no bishop without a church). A person who has not been formally appointed or elected to hold the office of bishop by any organized Church, according to all the applicable laws, but who seeks to acquire the said office on their own initiative and in their personal interest, is not a validly consecrated bishop, even if the consecration rite is strictly observed."

In these two sentences, the Old Catholic understanding of the apostolic succession and of the episcopate is implicitly expressed, namely: that neither one is valid without the parishes, for which they are created." (Die Altkatholische Kirche. Ihre Geschichte, Ihre Lehre, Ihr Anliegen. p. 97)

Having read and translated the above quoted sentences, I was left with an improbable impression that, in the eyes of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches the vast majority of American independent Catholic bishops are not valid Catholic bishops, that their sacraments (with the exception of baptism) are not valid Catholic sacraments, and that none of the deacons, priests, and bishops ordained within this movement are validly ordained Catholic deacons, priests, or bishops. This is quite drastic, painted with a wide brush assertion, and instead of panicking right away I decided to confirm its validity straight at the source, in Utrecht.

In the second week of July, Fr. Jayme and I participated in the Summer School program at the University of Utrecht. In addition to deepening our understanding of the Old Catholic ecclesiology, canon law, history, and sacramental theology, I had a chance to ask, on two different occasions, whether Bishop Küry's claim that J.R. Vilatte and Arnold Harris Mathew were consecrated invalidly, is still the official position of the Old Catholic Churches gathered in the Union of Utrecht. First chance appeared during the sacramental theology lecture given by Dr. Mattijs Ploeger, the Dean of the Old Catholic Seminary. While presenting a strong case for the ordination of women, he warned that it has to happen within the context of the Church's community, not apart or away from it. When he literally quoted *nullus episcopus sine ecclesia* doctrine, I had no choice but to ask, if based on his lecture and Dr. Küry's book, they believe that most, if not all, independent U.S. bishops are not validly ordained. Without a moment of hesitation, Dr. Ploeger said "Yes, of course they are not!"

On the last day of the program (July 15, 2022) our group had lunch with the Most Rev. Bernd Wallet, the Old Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht. He graciously agreed to sit with Fr. Jayme Mathias and I for a private conversation afterwards. Fr. Jayme presented him with the many books and magazines published recently by the “Extraordinary Catholics” project, as well as the first chapters of our translation work of Bishop Küry’s textbook. Given the rare chance of having his (the archbishop’s) undivided attention, I told him about my uneasiness with the “invalidity assertion” made in the book, and confirmed a day earlier by Dr. Ploeger. Archbishop Wallet did not hesitate to state that indeed, he and the European Old Catholics recognize as valid and Catholic only those ordinations (and consequently the sacraments) received in the Episcopal Church, the Filipino Independent Church, the Polish National Catholic Church, and (naturally) the Roman Church. While very respectful and open to a constructive dialogue, he sees all the American bishops, priests, and deacons ordained outside these four ecclesial bodies as “nice Christian ministers, not Catholic bishops or priests.”

To illustrate his point, he told us the story of the Good Shepherd Monastery (Goede Herder Monasterium) in Belgium, which for many years functioned as an “independent Catholic” community. When the members of that community asked to be received into the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, they were welcomed as monastics, not as ordained men (one of them was a bishop). Later, during the pandemic, when the local Old Catholic parish priest was not able to celebrate Sunday Mass for the Good Shepherd community, the Archbishop agreed to ordain *sub conditione* (conditionally) one of their members to the priesthood, even though that person was previously ordained in the independent Catholic movement. “This example should give you a clear understanding of our position, Marek” said the Archbishop.

Since I am not a bishop, nor a member of any independent Catholic jurisdiction, I cannot tell you what you, my friend, can or should do with this information. However, if you and/or your jurisdiction claims to offer “valid Catholic sacraments”, but neither the Vatican nor Utrecht agree with you, I believe that we need to have an honest and deliberate conversation on this important subject.

The Reformed Old Catholic Church has no connection with the Magazine “Extraordinary Catholics” where the above was originally printed. ¹ However, this document was presented by the author on his facebook page. ²

¹ <https://www.flipsnack.com/extraordinarycatholics/extraordinary-catholics-september-october-2022.html>

² <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10226805659037974&set=pb.1545753701.-2207520000>.