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6. “Catholicity” in the Early Church and in the Developing Roman Empire

J. Robert Wright, The Episcopal Church in the USA

Prepared for the second meeting of the Joint Working Group of Representatives of the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, and the Episcopal Church, being catholic churches in full communion with one another, as they confront and evaluate the realities of globalization.

In the concluding statement of the first meeting of this group, in the St. Martin’s Statement dated at Utrecht on the Feast of St. Martin of Tours in November of 2006, it was recommended that one element in the group’s second meeting be an ecclesiological and historical survey of the development of catholicity in the early church, considering patristic writers’ uses of that word and the development and functional understanding of related terms in a context of the developing Roman Empire that can be compared with the globalization of today’s world.¹

The emperor Augustus (63 B.C.–A.D. 14) is traditionally understood as the founder of the Roman Empire; its dates span the period from 31 B.C. to A.D. 476 in the West and from 31 B.C. to A.D. 1453 in the East. The concept of catholicity or inclusivity, as we might say today, became well established in Christian terminology and thought early in the context of this imperial period and can be seen embedded particularly in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Cyril of Jerusalem, Vincent of Lerins, and others to a lesser extent, as well as in the classical Christian creeds. Thus its foundational meanings were being established at the same time that catholic Christianity was becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The adjective *catholic* is derived from the Greek adverbial phrase *kath’ holou*, meaning ‘in general’ or ‘on the whole’ (as opposed to what is particular). It occurs once in the Greek New Testament, in Acts 4:18, where it is used incidentally, in an adverbial sense having nothing to do with the

¹ The conference at which this paper was presented, on Nov. 13, 2007, met at the General Theological Seminary in New York on the eve of a major New York conference on globalization (probably conceived without any reference at all to the term *catholicity*), a conference jointly sponsored by the *New York Times* and the Brooklyn Public Library.

church. It is early found in Tertullian as referring to the universal care and providence of God and in Theophilus of Antioch as referring to the general resurrection and also as a term to refer to those catholic epistles addressed to the church at large, or generally, rather than to particular communities.

Ignatius of Antioch

In the early church, as still today in the Episcopal Church, the basic Greek word for church, the word *ekklesia*, meant ‘called out’ and referred then as now to an assembly that God had called or summoned. God, therefore, is understood to be the one who gathers or summons the church, on the basis of God’s principles, which acknowledge no discrimination of persons on any basis whatsoever. The criterion of church membership, therefore, was and still is God’s call, not human affinity or race or sex or social status. Thus it can be said that from the earliest times Christians understood themselves sociologically not as selectively choosing to associate with their best friends but rather as gathering because of God’s call to all humanity.

This conviction early becomes fully transparent when the adjective *catholic* is first applied to the Christian church in the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans (*circa* A.D. 107); Ignatius is also the first writer to use the term *Christianity*. The second oldest Christian use of the adjective *catholic* to describe the new faith occurs in the document called the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written probably in A.D. 156. In both writers, the term *catholic* indicates the wholeness or entirety or inclusivity or universality of the Christian faith, based upon the conviction that God, as revealed in Christ, the church’s founder, is no respecter or discriminator of persons.

The earliest recorded appearance of the adjective *catholic* in Christian literature, indeed the earliest instance of the phrase *catholic church*, appears in the letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans:

Let no one do anything with reference to the church without the bishop. Only that eucharist may be regarded as legitimate which is celebrated by the bishop or someone whom he authorizes. Where the bishop is, there let the community be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church. (8.2)²

² The translation from Ignatius is mine. A convenient Greek text for the letters of Ignatius is *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman, 2 vols., the Loeb Classical Library, vol. 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

Whereas earlier scholars tended to interpret this reference to the concept of catholicity in Ignatius as meaning geographical extension, in more recent years some have preferred to see it as already presaging a reference to doctrinal orthodoxy, which later becomes its dominant meaning in Cyril of Jerusalem.

The next earliest Christian uses of the term *catholic* come in the document known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, closely associated with the Ignatian correspondence: "those of the holy and catholic church who sojourn in every place" (Preface); "the whole catholic church throughout the world" (8.1), "bishop of the catholic church in Smyrna" (16.2), and "shepherd of the worldwide catholic church" (19.2).

Certain observations from the writings of Ignatius can now be made: (1) As noted before, the adjectival form *katholikos*, meaning 'whole' or 'entire', is derived from the adverbial *kath' holou*, meaning 'in general' or 'universal'. (2) *Catholic* is not a term used to describe the church in the New Testament, and therefore any who are dedicated scriptural purists or neo-fundamentalists will have to exclude this term from their vocabulary as being non-biblical. (3) There is at least an implication in Ignatius that the catholic church is to meet where the bishop designates and that already there are other eucharists being celebrated outside that are not legitimate or valid. (4) The word *catholicity* is itself a neologism and not a word recorded in patristic antiquity. Already in most of these observations we encounter the phenomenon of doctrinal development. Thus one is either forced to reject the term *catholicity* or to agree that beyond scripture there is also the development of tradition, which is closely related to the scriptural deposit and yet not absolutely demanded by it.

In the preface to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is also worthy of note that the Greek word *paroikia*, meaning 'temporary residents' and often translated *sojourners*, is the same word from which we derive our modern English word *parishioners*, and thus its basic meaning in the early church was that of persons in exile, away from their native home (*para* + *oikia*) while on journey towards heaven. Thus, the true catholic was understood to be one who had here no abiding city (cf. Heb 13:14), a wayfarer or traveler who was on the way to a destination that is above and beyond. By the later fourth century, however, the concept of geographical catholicity was beginning to develop (see Cyril of Jerusalem, below), but that is not yet found in these earlier writings.

A parallel to *catholicism* is the first appearance in Christian literature, also in Ignatius, of the term *apostolic* at the beginning of his letter to the

Trallians, whom he greets in *apostolic style* or *apostolic pattern* or *apostolic manner*, a term whose meaning he seems to assume is known but a term that also does not occur in the Bible. Ignatius does not, however, seem to be using the term *apostolic* as synonymous with *catholic*, or interchangeably with it, as would become the case in some other writers, early in Irenaeus and Tertullian, who maintained against the Gnostics that the catholic doctrine was true because it was taught by those churches that stood in apostolic succession, and later, perhaps most recently, in the usage of documents emanating from the World Council of Churches, especially under Lutheran influence, and related to the Lima Statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982).

Ignatius is also, we may note, the earliest writer to refer to the phenomenon of Christianity by the term *apostolic*, for example: "Christianity did not base its faith on Judaism, but Judaism on Christianity" (Ignatius here comes close to seeing Judaism as one stage of the divine plan) (Magne-sians 10.3); "The greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it" (Rom 3:3); and "It is better to hear about Christianity from one of the circumcision than about Judaism from one who is uncircumcised" (Philadelphians 6:1). In this last example Ignatius seems to have Gentile converts to Jewish Christianity in mind, but what he seems to be saying is that although any entanglement with Judaism is unfortunate, it is much better to have moved from Judaism to Christianity than in the reverse direction.

Cyprian of Carthage

Next after Ignatius we come to the use of *catholic* that can be observed in Cyprian of Carthage, in whom we begin to find a notion of catholicity that is closer to what today we might well describe as "orthodoxy" or "right doctrine," especially as contrasted to "heresy." Arguing in his treatise *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* (A.D. 251) that those baptized by heretics and schismatics have no share in the blessings of the church, Cyprian bases the need for unity in the local church on the unity that is also implied in, and required for, the universal church that Christ has founded. He places his emphasis upon the authority of the bishops in apostolic succession, who cohere as a college and must serve collectively as the guardians of the true faith but even more as the guardians of the church's unity. There is a question, however, whether Cyprian ever intended to use the word *catholica* in his title, since it is not found in some early manuscripts, and

the body of his treatise does not include the expression *ecclesia catholica*. “One can not have God as Father,” he adds, “who does not also have the church as Mother” (chap. 6).

Cyril of Jerusalem

The richest and fullest theological discourse about catholicity that one encounters in the patristic period of the later fourth century comes in the *Catechetical Instructions* of Cyril of Jerusalem (circa 315–387), in the period following the recognition by Constantine, as the church was beginning, somewhat awkwardly, to provide theological justification for the expansion and emerging structure of the Roman Empire. In the very first paragraph of his eighteenth catechetical lecture Cyril enumerates at least four concepts of catholicity that have stood the test of time and provide much food for thought as to what that word could mean. These concepts are (1) geographical catholicity, (2) doctrinal catholicity, (3) social catholicity, and (4) cultural catholicity, each of which I have numbered in Cyril’s text below for easy reference.

And still another concept of catholicity, which I have not numbered because it is implied throughout Cyril’s essay, is that of chronological catholicity, a historical catholicity that runs across time. One can certainly say, from the perspective of Cyril’s essay, that a church is hardly catholic, whatever it may claim to be, unless it incorporates within itself at least these characteristics or features of its catholicity, and that for a church not to possess and manifest these features is to invite serious question as to its catholic credentials.

Now we turn to the text of Cyril:

The church is called catholic or universal because it has [1] spread throughout the entire world, from one end of the earth to the other. Again, it is called catholic because it [2] teaches fully and unfailingly all the doctrines which ought to be brought to human knowledge, whether concerned with visible or invisible things, with the realities of heaven or the things of earth. Another reason for the name catholic is that the church brings under the obedience of right worship [3] all classes of people, rulers and subjects, learned and unlettered. Finally, it deserves the title catholic because it heals and cures unrestrictedly [4] every type of sin that can be committed in soul or in body, and because it possesses within itself every kind of virtue that can be named, whether exercised in actions or in words or in spiritual gifts of every kind.

It is most aptly called a church, which means an ‘assembly of those called out’, because it “calls out” all persons and gathers them together, just as the Lord says

in Leviticus: "Assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting" [Lev 8:3]. It is worth noting also that the word assemble is used for the first time in the scriptures at this moment when the Lord appoints Aaron high priest. So in Deuteronomy God says to Moses: "Assemble the people before me and let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me" [Deut 4:10]. There is a further mention of the assembly in the passage about the tablets of the Law: "And on them were written all the words which the Lord had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire, on the day of the assembly" [Deut 9:10]. It is as though he had said, even more clearly, "on the day when you were called out by God and gathered together." So too the psalmist says: "I will give thanks to you in the great assembly, O Lord; in the mighty throng I will praise you" [Ps 35:18].

Long ago the psalmist sang: "Bless God in the assembly; bless the Lord, you who are the sons of Israel" [Ps 68:26]. But now the Savior has built a second holy assembly, our Christian church, from the Gentiles. It was of this that he spoke to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" [Matt 16:18]. . . .

The churches of Christ are already multiplying throughout the world, and of them it is said in the psalms, "Sing a new song unto the Lord, let his praise be sung in the assembly of the saints" [Ps 149:1]. Taking up the same theme the prophet says . . . "From the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is glorified among the nations" [Mal 1:10–11]. Of this holy catholic church Paul writes to Timothy: "That you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" [1 Tim 3:15]. . . .

The catholic church is the distinctive name of this holy church that is the mother of us all. She is the bride of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, for scripture says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" [Eph 5:25]. She is the type, and she bears the image of "the Jerusalem above that is free and is the mother of us all," that Jerusalem that once was barren but now has many children [Gal 4:26–27]. . . .

In the catholic church, "God has appointed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, and speakers in various kinds of tongues," as Paul says [1 Cor 12:28]. And together with these is found every sort of virtue, such as wisdom and understanding, self-control and justice, mercy and kindness, and invincible patience in persecution. "With the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left, in glory and dishonor" [2 Cor 6:7–8], this church in earlier days, when persecution and afflictions abounded, crowned her holy martyrs with the varied and many-flowered wreaths of endurance. But now when God has favored us with times of peace, she receives her due honor from kings and persons of high station, and from every condition and race of humankind. And while the rulers of the different nations have limits to their sovereignty, the holy catholic church alone has a power without boundaries throughout the entire world. For, as scripture says, God "has made peace her border" [Ps 147:15].

Instructed now in this holy catholic church and bearing ourselves honorably, we shall gain the kingdom of heaven and inherit eternal life. For the sake of enjoying this at the Lord's hands, we endure all things. The goal set before us is no

trifling one. We are striving for eternal life. In the creed, therefore, after professing our faith “in the resurrection of the body,” that is, of the dead, which I have already discussed, we are taught to believe “in life everlasting,” and for this as Christians we are struggling.

Now real and true life is none other than the Father, who is the fountain of life and who pours forth his heavenly gifts on all creatures through the Son in the Holy Spirit, and the good things of eternal life are faithfully promised to us humans also, because of his love for us.³ (Cyril 18:23–29)

Augustine of Hippo

There are also traces of what may be called a generic catholicity in the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), especially in his opposition to the Donatist schism in North Africa, and the word *catholica* as a noun was also used by him to designate the church as being the great and worldwide church, the noun being used without any particular reference to either doctrine or geography. The understanding of the church as sacramental communion can be seen in his Epistle 61.1, as he gives priority to worldwide catholic unity over doctrinal purity.

The Nicene and Athanasian Creeds

By the fourth and fifth Christian centuries, we find the term *catholic* sufficiently strong in the tradition to be elevated to credal status, most importantly as one of the four marks of the church, or *nota ecclesiae*, in which we express our belief at the end of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in its third paragraph (“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”), just as that same council, Nicaea I, is by the later fourth century being called both *catholic* and *ecumenical*, or ‘worldwide’. In the same context, in the same third paragraph of that creed, we also profess to believe in the Spirit-filled church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The church as catholic, that is, is also an object of our belief, and listed as such under the topic of the Holy Spirit.

Some half a century later, perhaps by around 430, the catholicity of the church is again affirmed in the so-called Creed of St. Athanasius, probably emanating from southern Gaul and possibly related to the thought if not the phraseology of Vincent of Lerins. Known by its opening Latin words, *Quicumque vult*, and affirming the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation in ringing phrases, it asserts:

³ Translation mine.

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

For a long time an integral part of the English Anglican prayerbook tradition, and since 1979 incorporated within the Historical Documents section at the back of the American Book of Common Prayer, its final line reads: “This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved” (BCP 864–65). Perhaps a little too rigid for the mentality of Anglicans and thus never achieving among us the highest dogmatic status, it does have the merit of actually offering an early definition of the catholic faith, and of so doing primarily in terms of worship rather than on the basis of the fads and fashions of the times.

Vincent of Lerins

In the fifth century, in the *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lerins, dated to 434, a further definition of the term *catholic* was formulated. It has been boldly endorsed in the tradition of the Old Catholic churches. Among Anglicans it has been both approved and attacked, though for different reasons, as we shall see. Let us now review the text of Vincent:

Within the catholic church itself, the greatest care must be taken that we hold on to that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. This is what is truly and properly “catholic,” as the very force and meaning of the name indicates, that is, it comprehends almost everything universally. This will be the case if we follow universality, antiquity, and consent. We shall follow universality in this way if we acknowledge that one faith to be true which is confessed by the entire church throughout the world; antiquity, if we in no way depart from those interpretations that were proclaimed as sacred by our ancestors and fathers; and, finally, consent, if in antiquity itself we continue to follow the definitions and opinions of all or nearly all of the bishops and teachers.

What then will the catholic Christian do, if a small part of the church has cut itself off from the communion of the universal faith? What indeed, except to prefer the good health of the whole body over the limb that is morbid and corrupt.

But what if some novel contagion try to infect the whole church, and not merely a tiny part of it? Then the catholic Christian will take care to cleave to antiquity, which cannot now be led astray by any deceit of novelty.

What if in antiquity itself two or three persons, or maybe a city, or even a whole province, be detected in error? Then the catholic Christian will take the greatest care to prefer the decrees of the ancient universal councils, if there are such, over the irresponsible ignorance of just a few persons.

But what if some error arises regarding which nothing of this sort is to be found? Then the catholic Christian must make the best effort to compare the opinions of the fathers and inquire their meaning, provided always that, though they belonged to diverse times and places, they yet continued in the faith and communion of the one catholic church and were masters tried and approved. And whatever is found to have been held, approved, and taught, not by one or two only but by all equally and with one consent, openly, frequently, and persistently, let that be taken and held without the slightest hesitation. (Vincent 10–13)⁴

Vincent then proceeds to illustrate his test of catholicity with examples of universality from Donatism, of antiquity from Arianism, and of consent from Nestorianism. The following are the key Latin words within his first paragraph, often quoted in their original: *Ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (Vincent 10).

The Emerging Christian Roman Empire

At the same time, against the background of these catechetical and credal assertions that were developing over the fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian Roman Empire was also growing and taking its strength from an imperial establishment that was increasingly in control. Since the purpose of this essay is primarily to trace the concept of catholicity and related words in this early period, there is not the space or scope even to summarize here the astonishing growth of imperial legislation that has been precisely catalogued in the three volumes of 1,358 pages and 652 documents meticulously edited by P. R. Coleman-Norton from the time of the Emperor Constantine well up into the sixth century.⁵ Needless to say, the increasingly close alliance of church and state, and the growth in power of the Roman see in the West, to which these documents bear ample testimony, are just as regularly scorned and disparaged by liberationists and protestants as they are upheld and defended by papalists and establishmentarians. Such is the raw evidence of history, and about all that can be done in the brief compass of this essay is to cite a few examples of what was happening in real history at the same time that the theologians were writing their treatises and creeds and other reflections that have already been surveyed.

⁴ Translation mine.

⁵ Documentation for most of the developments described in the following few pages may be found in this volume.

Constantine had won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312, and soon after his edict of toleration in February 313, he began to issue letters of privilege for the Christian church and its clergy (already called by him “ministers of the lawful and most holy catholic religion”). He also began to restore church property previously confiscated in time of persecution, to grant state financial support for Christian clergy, and to exempt the clergy from public duties (“liturgies”) so that they would be free to lead Christian worship. He established a permanent papal residence for the bishop of Rome in 313 and also the first “cathedral” (or first church serving as the seat of a bishop) of the Christian Roman Empire (St. John Lateran and its baptistery) on the territory of his old enemy Maxentius. He intervened in the Donatist controversy on behalf of the church, convoking the first church synod under imperial convocation (Arles, 314).

In further legislation over the years 315–322, he decreed that Christian bishops could give final verdict in civil legal suits, forbade the practice of pagan divination, repealed legal restrictions against celibates and ascetics, gave legal force to manumissions of slaves by Christian bishops, made Sunday a public holiday with courts closed and manual labor forbidden (321), legalized bequests to the Christian church, and penalized those who still attempted to compel Christians to offer pagan sacrifice.

In 336 Constantine informally assumed the title “Overseer of the Church’s External Affairs,” even calling himself a “common bishop ordained by God.” He appropriated many basilicas (imperial audience halls) for use as places of Christian worship, thus converting courthouses into churches and building other ones anew, and he adopted the civil structure of Diocletian’s empire for church use to establish the church’s earliest sixteen dioceses.

Some of these same arrangements continued under Constantine’s son Constantius, though there was a temporary but brief setback under Julian the Apostate (361–363). Then the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, under the joint rule (378–392) of Valentinian II in the West and Theodosius I in the East, legally defined the catholic church as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the catholic faith as that religion that Peter the Apostle had transmitted to the Romans, and those who followed it as catholic Christians. Not content with such definitions, however, Theodosius also proceeded to exclude and condemn those who failed to follow its rule:

The rest, however, whom we adjudge as demented and insane, shall not sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name

of churches [*ecclesiae*], and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of our own initiative, which we shall assume in accordance with the divine judgment.⁶

In 384, an edict was issued forbidding the trial of bishops in the secular or civil courts, the first such edict having been promulgated in 355. In 388, there was an edict forbidding public debate about religion. Intermarriage between Jews and Christians was forbidden in the same year, considered as equivalent to adultery. Also in 388, Christian heresies (especially Apolinarianism) were defined as legal offenses, and heretics were forbidden to assemble, to ordain new clergy, or even to approach the emperor. Under Theodosius I as sole emperor in 392, there was an absolute prohibition of all pagan worship and sacrifice, with heavy financial penalties attached, and Mithraism was outlawed in 395.

Further edicts followed under Theodosius II in the East (408–450) and Valentinian III in the West (425–455). Church lands were exempted from most taxes in 412, in 416 it was proclaimed that only Christians could serve in the imperial army, and in 419 the right of sanctuary was granted to all churches within fifty paces of their doors. Christian priests were granted unrestricted entrance to state prisons in 419, and total cessation of pagan sacrifice was commanded in 435, with destruction of all pagan places of worship and their replacement by signs of the cross. The death penalty was even proclaimed in 438 against Arian heretics who denied the Trinity. In the mid-sixth century the Code of Justinian solidified further extensive legislation, some of which was already established in the Theodosian Code of 438. Still more examples could be cited, the overall intent and result of such legislation being the defense of the catholic Christian faith as the only permissible religion of the Roman Empire.

In retrospect today we may ask, was there no bedrock definition of catholicity from the patristic period that could be followed with assurance by those who believed in the catholicity of the church but had little sympathy for all this structure of establishment that had taken place? Among Anglicans, especially of the Anglo-Catholic persuasion, Vincent’s *Commonitorium* has seemed quite appealing – appealing, that is, until they have thought about it and actually attempted to construct a list of particular

⁶ Translated from the Theodosian Code, Stevenson 160. Other brief illustrations of the church’s expanding notion of catholicity may be found in various excerpts throughout the remainder of this volume.

doctrines within catholic Christian history that could be proved to have been believed everywhere, always, and by all. Among Anglicans of all persuasions, there has developed a general consensus that the Vincentian canon is not very useful if one is seeking an absolute test of anything, but also, on the other hand, that it does serve as a helpful pointer towards an ideal standard that may itself be unattainable. When confronted with a confusing plurality of interpretations of the Bible, for example, the three-fold standard of universality, antiquity, and consent is a useful compass for navigation.

The Vincentian canon has been frequently used by Anglican splinter groups as their reason for resistance to any and every doctrinal development in the mother church that they think they want to leave, but it has also been cited as a warning against the attempt to walk alone that seems to be a principal attraction of Old Catholicism for some few. And yet care must always be taken lest the Vincentian *Commonitorium* serve to stifle creative theology and merely be a rubber stamp for patristic fundamentalism, a blind adherence to patristic tradition, an argument for turning the clock backwards under a rubric of *nihil innovare*.

Concluding Ecumenical Observations

While it remains for our Old Catholic friends to explicate the practical implications of the Vincentian canon within their own tradition and its present-day authority for them, it must be noted that for Old Catholics its dogmatic status is very high indeed, inasmuch as it constitutes the very first chapter of the Declaration of Utrecht of 1889. In that text they say that they “adhere faithfully” to the canon of Vincent of Lerins and “For this reason we persevere in professing the faith of the primitive Church, as formulated in the oecumenical symbols and specified precisely by the unanimously accepted decisions of the Oecumenical Councils held in the undivided Church of the first thousand years.”⁷ It should also be noted that at an important high point of Anglican-Old Catholic relations, the Lambeth Conference of 1930 in its Resolution 35(c) affirmed that “there is nothing in the Declaration of Utrecht inconsistent with the teaching of the Church of England,”⁸ and an English translation of that 1889 declaration

⁷ Full text cited in Wright, *Anglican* 128.

⁸ Lambeth Conference 49.

was printed on pages 142–44 of the official 1930 Lambeth report. The current understanding of catholicity for the Utrecht Union of Old Catholics is now said to be officially located in a statute of their International Bishops’ Conference from the year 2000, which is best explicated by those who are their own representatives, although it is not clear to me whether that statute was intended to replace the Vincentian canon on catholicity or merely to provide a contemporary explication thereof.

As regards the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, I assume that its attitude towards the Vincentian canon, and indeed towards the evidence of catholicity in the early church, is very similar to the Anglican and Old Catholic approaches. Article 17 of the official IFI Articles of Religion of 1947 implies this understanding:

When this Church withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church, it repudiated the authority of the Pope and such doctrines, customs, and practices as were inconsistent with the Word of God, sound learning and a good conscience. It had no intention of departing from Catholic doctrine, practice, and discipline as set forth by the Councils of the undivided Church. Such departures as occurred were due to the exigencies of the times, and are to be corrected by official action as opportunity affords, so that this Church may be brought into the stream of historic Christianity and be universally acknowledged as a true branch of the Catholic Church. (IFI, Liturgy V)

Earlier, in 1903, the IFI Constitution had explained that “Our Church is Catholic, or Universal, because it considers all men without distinction children of God.”

One final comment should be made on the patristic evidence and the see of Rome. Although none of our churches would want to embrace an antiquarian view of patristic antiquity, claiming that we are bound by it and cannot move beyond its legacies, yet we must all observe that when the patristic sources discuss catholicity by name, they make no mention of any Roman primacy. The Utrecht Declaration implies the same absence. Although there are many references in the early church to the see of Rome that can be (and have been) extracted from the patristic legacy by Roman apologists, it needs to be stressed that no such references have been found in the present enquiry that specifically link the Roman primacy verbally with the patristic concept of catholicity. In fact, and this point needs to be underlined, it does not seem to be until the Gregorian reform movement of the eleventh century that the papacy under Gregory VII clearly sought to exclude all bodies or groups assumed to be counterfeit or alleged to be imposters from using the term *catholic*, explicitly stating in the year 1075

that “whoever does not agree with the Roman Church may not be considered Catholic” (*Dictatus papae* no. 26).⁹

This claim even Roman Catholic ecumenical representatives regrettably admitted in their church’s official dialogue with the Lutherans in the latter part of this last century to be still their church’s official position: “Catholic,” then and still now, for them, must also of necessity mean “Roman” as well. Making this view absolutely clear as early as 1864, against Anglican claims, the Holy Office underscored this official Roman position in its statement that “No other church is catholic except that which is built on the one individual, Peter, and which grows up into one body closely joined and knit together in the unity of faith and love.”¹⁰ The late Msgr. Henry Beck of Newark, no extreme papalist but an eminent historian, even commented on the Vincentian canon in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* that “Precisely because legitimate development has been at work there are truths securely Catholic today which have not ever, everywhere, and by all been explicitly believed in the past” (Beck).

We now ask: Is “Roman” a legitimate and necessary development of the patristic concept of catholicity found in such writers as Ignatius of Antioch, Cyril of Jerusalem, Vincent of Lerins, and the others and in the ancient creeds? If so, then the Roman claims may still be credible, but if not, then those claims must be seriously questioned. Is the alternative a catholicism that is polycentric?

It is just possible, I would suggest, that the earliest evidence of globalization in the history of the church is to be found not in its developing sense of catholicity, but in its increasing Romanization under the papacy that developed following the church’s imperial recognition by Constantine in the fourth century. There was indeed an escalating Romano-centralization of the church in the course of the developing imperial establishment in that century and the following centuries, indeed an early form of globalization that most of our churches in this trilateral conversation would seriously question today, but that was not the result of its catholicity but of many other factors. It is interesting that the late Cardinal Avery Dulles agreed that all this was a new situation with new challenges that arose after Constantine. He himself attributed this not to the increasing

⁹ Translation mine. There is a convenient text in Tierney 20.

¹⁰ Letter of the Holy Office to the Bishops of England, 16 Sept. 1864, quoted by Dulles, *Catholicity* 21.

power of the Roman see and certainly not to the phenomenon of catholicity that was already in existence, but to the imperial establishment itself, both for worse and for better. In his book *Models of the Church*, Dulles clearly implies that in his opinion the communion of bishops with the see of Peter makes his own church “more perfectly the sacrament of Christ” (Dulles, *Models* 150).

But if we agree that Romano-centralization is a by-product of post-Constantinian globalization and not clearly an essential ingredient of patristic Christian catholicity, not finding any specific or convincing patristic evidence for that claim, then how do we evaluate it? Can that legacy be reformulated and reconfigured in such a way that the present reality of the Roman see can be accommodated? Can it be freed in such a way that its self-evident potential for good can be recognized and embraced even by those who are unconvinced of its historical claims? If the development of the monolithic Roman primacy in the context of the early Roman Empire assisted the mission of the church in the global community that was emerging then, how can it be balanced now by a renewed and expanded framework of polycentric, even multivalent, catholicity for the world of tomorrow – as is already represented, albeit imperfectly, by our own churches in full communion?

All three of the churches in this dialogue consider themselves to be fully catholic and in full communion with one another, but they also want to respect the truth of the historical evidence as well as to welcome the ecumenical spirit in the Roman church when they find it. Given the absence of Romano-centrism in the patristic writings on catholicity, though, we must ask whether it is necessary, or even desirable, for us to endorse the development of post-Constantinian Romano-globalization in order to come to terms with the much more complex and secular globalization that we find in the twenty-first century.