

My dearest sister,

I wrote a reflection on today's sad commemoration. Maybe you can share your thoughts about this:

On July 18, 1870, during the First Vatican Council, two dogmas were proclaimed: the dogma of papal infallibility and the dogma of the pope's universal jurisdiction. This decision, expressed in the constitution *Pastor aeternus*, declared the Bishop of Rome infallible *ex sese, non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae* – by his own authority, not by the consent of the whole Church. For many, this marked a turning point, dividing the path of the ancient, undivided Catholic Church from the newly emerging vision of the Catholic Church under the leadership of the “new papacy.” For this reason, this date is also particularly significant for our Old Catholic community of the Reformed Catholic Church in Poland.

Although our Church is not formally a member of the Union of Utrecht, it fully embraces the Declaration of Utrecht from September 24, 1889, which states:

“We hold fast to the faith of the ancient Church, as expressed by St. Vincent of Lérins: We hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all; for that is truly and properly Catholic.” This principle forms the foundation of our position regarding the papacy.

Love, not power

We do not reject the Bishop of Rome as an important figure in the history of Christianity. On the contrary – we recognize in him a certain primacy of honor (*primus inter pares* – first among equals), as it was understood by the undivided Church of the first millennium. This primacy, however, was not based on jurisdictional dominance or presumed infallibility, but on the special significance of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire and on the consensus of the entire Church.

The nature of this primacy became even more evident when the imperial center moved to Constantinople. The bishop of the “New Rome” began to play an increasingly significant role in the Church – a role he did not previously have. This means that the importance of a bishopric was closely connected to the status of its city in the political and social structure of the empire, not to any immutable, divinely granted authority.

This model of primacy is confirmed by the canons of the ancient councils, which clearly defined the limits of the authority of individual bishops and forbade interference in the affairs of other dioceses – that is, local churches. The Bishop of Rome had a significant voice, but not the only or final one – he was not above the councils but part of them.

Indeed, Church history records instances where popes were condemned by Ecumenical Councils. One example is Pope Honorius I (†638), who was condemned for heresy by the Third Council of Constantinople (680–681), and that condemnation was confirmed by the Second Council of Nicaea (787). This clearly shows that even the Bishop of Rome could be judged by the whole Church.

A dogma contrary to Tradition

The dogma of papal infallibility does not meet St. Vincent's criterion: it was not believed "everywhere, always, and by all." It was unknown to the early Christian Church, to the Eastern Churches, and to the early Church Fathers. None of them attributed absolute authority over all Christianity to the Bishop of Rome, nor considered him an infallible teacher of faith. Moreover, the very concept of dogma, as understood by the Fathers of the early Councils, referred solely to truths about God – not to human institutions such as the papacy. The pope was not – and is not – the guarantor of the Church's faith. That guarantor is the Church as a whole.

Apostolic successors – all bishops

Every bishop is a successor of the Apostles, including St. Peter, because through the sacramental mission received in episcopal ordination, he continues their mission: preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments – especially baptism and the Eucharist – and serving within the local church, which constitutes the fullness of the Church of Christ.

In our theology, there is no place for the idea that one man can "stand in" for Christ on earth. Christ is always present in His Church – in the Word, in the community of believers, and in the liturgy. He does not need a "vicar" in the sense of an exclusive representative. It is the Holy Spirit who leads the Church, not a single episcopal see.

Old Catholics recognize that the Bishop of Rome plays an important role in Christianity, as one of the voices within the community – provided that his teaching aligns with the Gospel, the tradition of the undivided Church, and the principle of synodality, which is essential to Christian governance and discernment.

It is worth emphasizing that formal dependence is not the key issue. Even without it, we can and should attentively listen to what is happening in other local churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican churches, the Orthodox and Lutheran churches – and especially the Old Catholic churches with which we share a special bond. All these communities, though diverse, participate in the life of the Holy Spirit and are not deprived of it.

As a community of believers, we are called to discern the work of the Holy Spirit wherever it is manifested, regardless of jurisdictional boundaries. At the same time, we must be aware that no community is entirely free from the influence of "the spirit of this world." This becomes evident where, even by bishops, views and values are proclaimed that contradict the Gospel of love, mercy, and reconciliation. Such attitudes call not only for discernment but also for evangelical vigilance.

Therefore, as an Old Catholic community, we strive to discern where the Holy Spirit truly speaks – and to follow that voice, even if it speaks through others.

In unity with Tradition

In the spirit of the ancient Church, we preserve continuity with the faith of the early centuries and seek paths of reconciliation amid the diversity of churches and jurisdictions – not dominance. We believe in the Church as a communion of communities – One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic – in which every bishop serves, not rules.

In this spirit, the Reformed Catholic Church in Poland remains faithful to the original Tradition and invites all to humility, communion, and shared discernment, just as the Apostles and the early Christian communities did.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” (Mt 28:18)
Christ alone is the Head of the Church.

With blessings,

Bishop Tomasz Jordan Puchalski
Reformed Catholic Church in Poland
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