

THE FOURTEEN THESES OF THE OLD CATHOLIC UNION CONFERENCE AT BONN. A.D. 1874



Original Text By

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Short Introduction

I believe that just about every web page I have looked at in the past 15 years are so has had something to say about the 14 Thesis of the Old Catholic Church or had a copy under the title "Documents". The first person to actually publish in an English pamphlet was Bishop James Rogers of Brooklyn, New York.

The first writing was in the German tongue and was prepared by the Old Catholic Congress. The Thesis was translated into Dutch, French and then into the Slavic tongue and then English. I believe Bishop Joseph Rene Vilatte (first Old Catholic Missionary to America) took the time to translate the document, but evidence is lost to time)

A few years back I had an open discussion with a cleric who visited our Abbey in California. He was very clear that he subscribed to the Thesis in question but he could not explain the theological or doctrinal meaning. I believe that if you claim to be Old Catholic, then every priest or layman should know what the Church stands for.

PART ONE:

This interesting document deserves a place in history, that this volume is the first attempt to formularize the doctrinal consensus of Old Catholics, Greeks, and Anglo-Catholics, who acknowledge, besides the Holy Scriptures, the binding and perpetual authority of the ancient Catholic tradition before the separation between the East and the West. The object of this Consensus-Formula is to prepare the way, not for an absorptive or organic union, but for a confederation or intercommunion of Churches, on the basis of union in essentials and freedom in non-essentials. It involves a protest against some of the medieval innovations of Romanism, and is so far an approach to Protestantism; but Protestantism goes beyond the œcumenical catholicity to the inspired fountainhead of the Apostolic Church.

A conference of divines friendly to the reunion of Christendom was called by Dr. Dollinger, of Munich (in behalf of a Christian Union Committee of the Old Catholic Congress), and held in the University at Bonn, Sept. 14–16, 1874. It consisted of about forty members—namely, 1. Old Catholics: Dr. DOLLINGER (who presided with great ability), Bishop REINKENS, Drs. REUSCH, LANGEN, KNOODT, LUTTERBECK, MICHAUD, and others. 2. Orthodox Russians and Greeks: JOH. JANYSCHEW, Rector of the Ecclesiastical Academy of St. Petersburg, ALEXANDER KIREJEW, THEODOR VON SUKHOTIN, ARSENIUS TATCHALOFF, Professor RHOSSIS, of Athens. 3. English Episcopal: Bishop EDWARD HAROLD BROWNE, of Winchester, Dean J. S. HOWSON, of Chester, Dr. HENRY PARRY LIDDON, Canon of St. Paul's, EDWARD S. TALBOT, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, Professor E. B. MAYOR, of Cambridge, Canon WM. CONWAY, of Westminster, G. E. BROADE, British Chaplain at Düsseldorf, and others. 4. American (High Church) Episcopal: Bishops JOHN B. KERFOOT, of Pittsburgh, Rev. Dr. WM. CHAUNCEY LANGDON, of Geneva, Rev. Dr. ROBERT J. NEVIN, Rector of the American Episcopal Church, Rome; Rev. H. F. HARTMAN, Rev. GEO. F. ARNOLD, and Rev. E. A. RENOUF. Besides, there were present as invited guests, without taking an active part in the transactions, several Lutheran and Evangelical theologians and ministers from Germany and Denmark, as Professors LANGE, KRAFFT, CAMPHAUSEN, of Bonn, Rev. VON GERLACH, of Frankfort-on-the-Main, Dr. WOLFF, of Rotweil, Rev. G. SCHMIDT, of Schlangen, Rev. J. V. BLOCH, of Copenhagen, and Rev. J. McMILLAN, a Congregational minister from West Burton. The proceedings were held in English and German.

The text is taken from the official Report of the Conference, edited by Prof. Dr. REUSCH in the name of Dr. Döllinger. Bericht über die am 14, 15, und 16 September zu Bonn gehaltenen Unions-Conferenzen, im Auftrage des Vorsitzenden Dr. VON DÖLLINGER, herausgegeben von Dr. F. HEINRICH REUSCH, Prof. der Theologie. Bonn, 1874. Compare also several communications on the Conference in the Deutsche Merkur (the organ of the Old Catholics) for 1874, No. 38–40; in the Churchman of Hartford, Conn. Oct. 10, 1874; and the New York Observer, Oct. 8, 1874. The titles of the Articles we have supplied.

The first and preliminary Thesis, which was agreed upon, but not included in the fourteen, refers to the vexed question of the double procession of the Holy Spirit,

which was the chief cause of the separation of the Greek and Latin Churches. It makes an important concession to the Greeks concerning the legal aspect of the question of the *filioque*, but leaves the dogmatic question to future conferences. It is as follows:

<p>'We agree that the way in which the "Filioque" was inserted in the Nicene Creed was illegal, and that, with a view to future peace and unity, it is much to be desired that the whole Church should set itself seriously to consider whether the Creed could possibly be restored to its primitive form, without sacrifice of any true doctrine expressed in the present Western form.'</p>	<p><i>'Wir geben zu, dass die Art und Weise, in welcher das Filioque in das Nicenische Glaubensbekenntniss eingeschoben wurde, ungesetzlich war, und dass es im Interesse des Friedens und der Einigkeit sehr wünschenswerth ist, dass die ganze Kirche es ernstlich in Erwägung ziehe, ob vielleicht die ursprüngliche Form des Glaubensbekenntnisses wiederhergestellt werden könne ohne Aufopferung irgend einer wahren in der gegenwärtigen westlichen Form ausgedrückten Lehre.'</i></p>
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ART. I.	ART. I.
[<i>The Canon and the Apocrypha.</i>]	[<i>Der Canon und die Apokryphen.]</i>
<p>We agree that the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament are not of the same canonicity as the books contained in the Hebrew Canon.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass die apokryphischen oder deuterokanonischen Bücher des Alten Testaments nicht dieselbe Kanonicität haben, wie die im hebräischen Kanon enthaltenen Bücher.</i></p>
ART. II.	ART. II.
[<i>The Original Text and Translations of the Bible.</i>]	[<i>Der Urtext und die Uebersetzungen der Bibel.]</i>
<p>We agree that no translation of Holy Scripture can claim an authority superior to that of the original text.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass keine Uebersetzung der heil. Schrift eine höhere Auctorität beanspruchen kann, als der Grundtext.</i></p>
ART. III.	ART. III.
[<i>Use of the Bible in the Vernacular Tongues.</i>]	[<i>Gebrauch der Bibel in der Landessprache.]</i>

<p>We agree that the reading of Holy Scripture in the vulgar tongue can not be lawfully forbidden.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass das Lesen der heil. Schrift in der Volkssprache nicht auf rechtmässige Weise verboten werden kann.</i></p>
<p>ART. IV.</p>	<p>ART. IV.</p>
<p>[<i>Liturgy in the Vernacular Tongues.</i>]</p>	<p>[<i>Gottesdienst in der Landessprache.</i>]</p>
<p>We agree that, <i>in general</i>, it is more fitting, and in accordance with the spirit of the Church, that the Liturgy should be in the tongue understood by the people.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass es IM ALLGEMEINEN angemessener und dem Geiste der Kirche entsprechender ist, dass die Liturgie in der von dem Volke verstandenen Sprache gebraucht werde.</i></p>
<p>ART. V.</p>	<p>ART. V.</p>
<p>[<i>Justification by Faith working by Love.</i>]</p>	<p>[<i>Rechtfertigung durch den in der Liebe thätigen Glauben.</i>]</p>
<p>We agree that Faith working by Love, not Faith without Love, is the means and condition of man's justification before God.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass der durch die Liebe wirksame Glaube, nicht der Glaube ohne die Liebe, das Mittel und die Bedingung der Rechtfertigung des Menschen vor Gott ist</i></p>
<p>ART. VI.</p>	<p>ART. VI.</p>
<p>[<i>Salvation not by Merit.</i>]</p>	<p>[<i>Seligkeit ohne Verdienst.</i>]</p>
<p>Salvation can not be merited by 'merit of condignity,' because there is no proportion between the infinite worth of the salvation promised by God and the finite worth of man's works.</p>	<p><i>Die Seligkeit kann nicht durch sogenannte 'merita de condigno' verdient werden, weil der unendliche Werth der von Gott verheissenen Seligkeit nicht im Verhältniss steht zu dem endlichen Werthe der Werke des Menschen.</i></p>
<p>ART. VII.</p>	<p>ART. VII.</p>
<p>[<i>Works of Supererogation.</i>]</p>	<p>[<i>Uebersünderliche Werke.</i>]</p>
<p>We agree that the doctrine of '<i>opera supererogationis</i>' and of a '<i>thesaurus meritorum sanctorum</i>,' <i>i. e.</i>, that the overflowing merits of the Saints can be transferred to others, either by the rulers of the Church, or by the authors of the good works themselves, is untenable.</p>	<p><i>Wir stimmen überein, dass die Lehre von den 'opera supererogationis,' und von einem 'thesaurus meritorum sanctorum,' d. i. die Lehre, dass die überfließenden Verdienste der Heiligen, sei es durch die kirchlichen Oberen, sei es durch die Vollbringer der guten Werke selbst, auf Andere übertragen werden können, unhaltbar ist.</i></p>

ART. VIII.	ART. VIII.
<i>[Number of Sacraments.]</i>	<i>[Zahl der Sacramente.]</i>
<p>1. We acknowledge that the number of sacraments was fixed at seven, first in the twelfth century, and then was received into the general teaching of the Church, not as a tradition coming down from the Apostles or from the earliest times, but as the result of theological speculation.</p>	<p>1. <i>Wir erkennen an, dass die Zahl der Sacramente erst im zwölften Jahrhundert auf sieben festgesetzt und dann in die allgemeine Lehre der Kirche aufgenommen wurde, und zwar nicht als eine von den Aposteln oder von den ältesten Zeiten kommende Tradition, sondern als das Ergebniss theologischer Speculation</i></p>
<p>2. Catholic theologians (<i>e. g.</i> Bellarmin) acknowledge, and we acknowledge with them, that Baptism and the Eucharist are <i>principalia, præcipua, eximia salutis nostræ sacramenta.</i></p>	<p>2. <i>Katholische Theologen, z. B. Bellarmin erkennen an und wir mit ihnen, dass die Taufe und die Eucharistie 'principalia, præcipua, eximia salutis nostræ sacramenta' sind.</i></p>
ART. IX.	ART. IX.
<i>[Scripture and Tradition.]</i>	<i>[Schrift und Ueberlieferung.]</i>
<p>1. The Holy Scriptures being recognized as the primary rule of Faith, we agree that the genuine tradition, <i>i. e.</i> the unbroken transmission—partly oral, partly in writing—of the doctrine delivered by Christ and the Apostles, is an authoritative source of teaching for all successive generations of Christians. This tradition is partly to be found in the consensus of the great ecclesiastical bodies standing in historical continuity with the primitive Church, partly to be gathered by scientific method from the written documents of all centuries.</p>	<p>1. <i>Während die heilige Schrift anerkanntermassen die primäre Regel des Glaubens ist, erkennen wir an, dass die echte Tradition, d. i. die ununterbrochene, theils mündliche, theils schriftliche Ueberlieferung der von Christus und den Aposteln zuerst vorgetragenen Lehre eine autoritative (gottgewollte) Erkenntnisquelle für alle auf einander folgenden Generationen von Christen ist. Diese Tradition wird theils erkannt aus dem Consensus der grossen in historischer Continuität mit der ursprünglichen Kirche stehenden Kirchenkörper, theils wird sie auf wissenschaftlichem Wege ermittelt aus den schriftlichen Denkmälern aller Jahrhunderte.</i></p>
<p>2. We acknowledge that the Church of England, and the Churches derived through her, have maintained unbroken the Episcopal succession. This article, which refers simply to an historical question, caused some discussion. Döllinger and Reinkens recognized the validity of the Anglican succession, to the gratification of the Anglican members of the Conference; but the Greek and Russian members expressed doubts, and withheld their consent till further investigation.</p>	<p>2. <i>Wir erkennen an, dass die englische Kirche und die von ihr herstammenden Kirchen die ununterbrochene bischöfliche Succession bewahrt haben</i></p>

ART. X.	ART. X.
<i>[The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.]</i>	<i>[Unbefleckte Empfängniss der Jungfrau Maria.]</i>
We reject the new Roman doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as being contrary to the tradition of the first thirteen centuries, according to which Christ alone is conceived without sin. It is remarkable that on this article Döllinger and the Old Catholics were more decided in their opposition to the papal dogma of 1854 than Canon Liddon, of St. Paul's, who was willing to tolerate the Immaculate Conception as a 'pious opinion.'	<i>Wir verwerfen die neue römische Lehre von der unbefleckten Empfängniss der h. Jungfrau Maria als in Widerspruch stehend mit der Tradition der ersten dreizehn Jahrhunderte, nach welcher Christus allein ohne Sünde empfangen ist.</i>
ART. XI.	ART. XI.
<i>[Public and Private Confession.]</i>	<i>[Öffentliche und Privat-Beichte.]</i>
We agree that the practice of confession of sins before the congregation or a Priest, together with the exercise of the power of the keys, has come down to us from the primitive Church, and that, purged from abuses and free from constraint, it should be preserved in the Church.	<i>Wir stimmen überein, dass die Praxis des Sündenbekenntnisses vor der Gemeinde oder einem Priester, verbunden mit der Ausübung der Schlüsselgewalt, von der ursprünglichen Kirche auf uns gekommen und, gereinigt von Missbräuchen und frei von Zwang, in der Kirche beizubehalten ist.</i>
ART. XII.	ART. XII.
<i>[Indulgences.]</i>	<i>[Ablass.]</i>
We agree that 'indulgences' can only refer to penalties actually imposed by the Church herself.	<i>Wir stimmen überein, dass 'Ablässe' nur auf wirklich von der Kirche selbst aufgelegte Bussen sich beziehen können.</i>
ART. XIII.	ART. XIII.
<i>[Commemoration of the Departed.]</i>	<i>[Gebete für Verstorbene.]</i>
We acknowledge that the practice of the commemoration of the faithful departed, <i>i. e.</i> the calling down of a richer outpouring of Christ's grace upon them, has come down to us from the primitive Church, and is to be preserved in the Church.	<i>Wir erkennen an, dass der Gebrauch des Gebetes für die verstorbenen Gläubigen, d. h. die Erflehung einer reicheren Ausgiessung der Gnade Christi über sie, von der ältesten Kirche auf uns gekommen und in der Kirche beizubehalten ist.</i>

ART. XIV.	ART. XIV.
[<i>The Mass.</i>]	[<i>Die Messe.</i>]
<p>1. The eucharistic celebration in the Church is not a continuous repetition or renewal of the propitiatory sacrifice offered once for ever by Christ upon the cross; but its sacrificial character consists in this, that it is the permanent memorial of it, and a representation and presentation on earth of that one oblation of Christ for the salvation of redeemed mankind, which, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews (ix. 11, 12), is continuously presented in heaven by Christ, who now appears in the presence of God for us (ix. 24).</p>	<p><i>Die eucharistische Feier in der Kirche ist nicht eine fortwährende Wiederholung oder Erneuerung des Sühnopfers, welches Christus ein für allemal am Kreuze dargebracht hat; aber ihr Opfercharakter besteht darin, dass sie das bleibende Gedächtniss desselben ist und eine auf Erden stattfindende Darstellung und Vergegenwärtigung jener Einen Darbringung Christi für das Heil der erlösten Menschheit, welche nach Hebr. ix. 11, 12 fortwährend im Himmel von Christus geleistet wird, indem er jetzt in der Gegenwart Gottes für uns erscheint (Heb. ix 24).</i></p>
<p>2. While this is the character of the Eucharist in reference to the sacrifice of Christ, it is also a sacred feast, wherein the faithful, receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord, have communion one with another (1 Cor. x. 17).</p>	<p><i>2. Indem dies der Character der Eucharistie bezüglich des Opfers Christi ist, ist sie zugleich ein geheiligtes Opfermahl, in welchem die den Leib und das Blut des Herrn empfangenden Gläubigen Gemeinschaft mit einander haben (1 Cor. x. 17).</i></p>

NOTES.

BY DR. PHILIP SCHAFF

1. Dr. Döllinger proposed also the following article concerning the Invocation of Saints, but withdrew it in consequence of the opposition of the Greek and Russian members, who maintained that such invocation was a duty, on the ground of the seventh œcumenical Council:

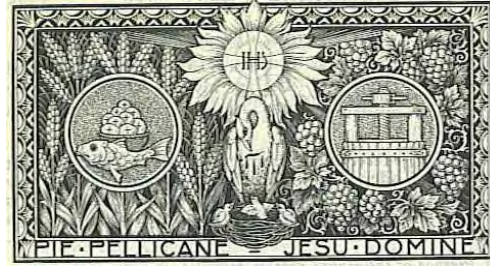
'We acknowledge that the Invocation of Saints is not commanded as a duty necessary to salvation for every Christian.'	<i>'Wir erkennen an, dass die Anrufung der Heiligen nicht als eine Pflicht anzusehen ist, deren Erfüllung für jeden Christen zur Seligkeit nothwendig wäre.'</i>
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2. These theses have no official authority, and express simply the private convictions of the members of the Conference; but they may be regarded as the provisional creed of the Old Catholics until acted upon by their Synod, which is the official organ.

3. Art. XIV. —Dean Howson, of Chester, at the second Bonn Conference, held a year afterwards, entered, in behalf of some evangelical Anglicans, the following protest against a possible Romanizing interpretation of this Article:

'Some members of the Church of England, who earnestly desire success to the present efforts for reunion, having been made anxious and doubtful by that part of the Article on the Eucharist, provisionally adopted last year, which speaks of the eucharistic celebration as a "representation and presentation on earth of the one oblation of Christ, which is continuously presented by him in heaven;" and those expressions being capable of different shades of interpretation, I beg leave respectfully to state the meanings which such persons, with myself, are disposed to attach to them. We view the eucharistic celebration as a "representation," because in it (according to [1 Cor. xi. 26](#)) we show forth the Lord's death till he come; we speak of it as a "presentation," because those who receive, in the Holy Communion, the blessings procured by the sacrifice of Christ, do at the same time, as sinners, plead that sacrifice before God; and we conceive the sense assigned to Christ's "continuous oblation in heaven" must be limited by the revealed fact ([Heb. vii. 27](#); [ix. 12](#) and [25–28](#); [x. 10](#) and [18](#)) that his sacrifice for sin was made complete, once for all, before he ascended to heaven. I feel bound in conclusion to add that, on further reflection, I have less confidence than I had before as to the strict consistency of the language of this Article with the language of the English Book of Common Prayer.'

Dr. Liddon dissented from this protest, and expressed his agreement with the Article in the full sense of its language. Döllinger and the Old Catholics were silent. There is, however, no precise correspondence between the original 'representation and presentation' and the German translation, '*Darstellung und Vergegenwärtigung*;' and both terms are capable of different interpretations.



Theology and practices:

The Old Catholic Churches reject the doctrine of papal infallibility; thus they reject the dogmatic status of the teachings promulgated in the Roman Catholic Church by such means, namely the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary. While Old Catholics affirm the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharist, they do not emphasize transubstantiation as the sole dogmatic explanation for this presence. Old Catholics generally refrain from using *filioque* and *deum de deo* clauses in the Nicene Creed and also reject a dogmatic understanding of Purgatory; however, they generally do recognize a purification by Christ's grace after death and include prayers for the dead in their liturgy and devotions. They maintain some basic Roman Catholic practices such as baptism by infusion (pouring of water) or the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist. Additionally, they have many aspects in common with the Orthodox and Anglican Churches and Roman Catholic Eastern-rites, such as optional clerical celibacy.

The Old Catholic Churches tend to maintain a more liberal theological anthropology than the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, many churches of the Union ordain women to the priesthood. Dr. Angela Berlis was the first woman priest in the Union, ordained in 1996. In addition, the churches of the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Switzerland offer the blessing of same-sex unions. The individual's primacy of conscience in ethical matters is stressed. Private confession is not mandatory, though it is practiced, and decisions regarding the use of artificial contraception are individual and discretionary.



Bishop ReINKENS
First Old Catholic Bishop.