

THE LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

STATEMENTS OF PRINCIPLES AND SUMMARY OF THE DOCTRINE



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On behalf of The General Episcopal Synod

+ TOM DEGENAARS

Presiding Bishop

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THE LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

Introduction

The Liberal Catholic Church exists to forward Christ's work in the world; it is an independent and autonomous body, in no way dependent upon Rome or upon any other see or authority outside its own administration. It is neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant. It is called Liberal Catholic because its outlook is both liberal and Catholic. Catholic primarily means universal, but has also come to signify the outlook and practice of the historical church as distinct from later sects. The Liberal Catholic Church allies itself with this historical tradition. It aims at combining Catholic forms of worship, stately ritual, deep mysticism and witness to the reality of sacramental grace with the widest measure of intellectual liberty and respect for the individual conscience.

The Liberal Catholic Church came into existence as the result of a complete re-organization in 1915-1916 of the Old Catholic Church in Great Britain upon a more liberal basis. That Church derived its orders from the Old Catholic archiepiscopal see of Utrecht in Holland. The Liberal Catholic Church has carefully preserved this succession of orders. The religious and doctrinal outlook of historical Old Catholicism is not that of The Liberal Catholic Church which, in describing itself as Catholic, does so to indicate the source of its orders and its organic unity with the historical church.

Theological and Philosophical Background

The Liberal Catholic Church draws the central inspiration of its work from an intense faith in the living Christ, believing that the vitality of a church gains in proportion as its members not only commemorate a Christ who lived two thousand years ago, but strive also to serve as a vehicle for the eternal Christ who lives ever as a mighty spiritual presence in the world, guiding and sustaining his people. It accepts the promise of Christ when on earth: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the consummation of the age' (Matt. 28: 20) and 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt: 18: 20). It regards this promise as validating all Christian worship of whatever kind, so long as it be sincere and true.

It further holds that while the promise of the presence with individual believers is thus effective, our Lord also appointed certain rites or sacraments (called 'mysteries' in the Eastern Church) for the greater helping of his people, to be handed down in his church as special channels of his power and blessing. Through these means of grace he is ever present in his church, giving to his people the privilege of fellowship and communion with him, guiding and protecting them at every stage from the cradle to the grave.

The Liberal Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, Absolution, Holy Unction, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders. To ensure their efficacy to the worshipper, it guards with the greatest care the administration of all sacramental rites and preserves an episcopal succession that is acknowledged as valid among those Churches of Christendom that maintain the Apostolic Succession of orders as a tenet of their faith.

Besides perpetuating these sacramental rites, Christ's immediate followers handed down a body of doctrine and certain principles of ethics. Much of this original teaching of the Christ has no

doubt been lost and some of it obscured by the accretions of the ages. What remains is a priceless heritage, to be guarded with loving care and reverence.

The Liberal Catholic Church regards the scriptures, the creeds and traditions of the church as the means by which the teachings of Christ have been handed down to his followers. It does not invest them with any idea of literal infallibility nor, in view of their contents and historical career, does it see how any other church can logically do so. It deduces from them certain principles of belief and conduct which it regards as fundamental, true and sufficient, while not exhaustive, as a basis of right understanding and right conduct.

In forming this body of doctrine and ethics The Liberal Catholic Church takes what is, in certain respects, a distinctive position among the Churches of Christendom. The christian church has always contained within itself differing schools of thought. The mediaeval schoolmen who systematized theology in the Western church followed the method of Aristotle, but the earliest among the Church Fathers of philosophic bent were Platonists, and The Liberal Catholic Church, whilst not undervaluing the clarity and precision of the scholastic systems, has much in common with the Platonic and Neo-Platonic schools of christian tradition. It holds that a theology can justify itself and be of permanent value only in so far as it can withstand constant re-examination in the light of the progress of human knowledge and in individual spiritual awakening; such a theology partakes of the nature of a theosophy. Theosophy (Greek for 'divine wisdom') differs from theology in emphasizing the importance of each individual's quest for spiritual understanding based upon personal experience (*gnosis* or *sophia*) as opposed to dogmatic imposition of particular interpretations of scripture which may be limited by man's knowledge of the world at any one historical period. While certain higher teachings remain within the category of revelation, because they are beyond our grasp and attainment, others less remote are capable of verification, and even of development, by those who have awakened within them-

selves the necessary spiritual vision. Man, being in essence divine, can ultimately know the deity whose life he shares and, by gradually unfolding through successive lives on earth the divine powers that are latent in him, can grow into a greater knowledge of the universe which is itself the expression of that divine life. This method of approach is identical with the ancient Brahmavidya of the Hindu Upanishads, or the *dhyana* (Chinese Ch'an, Japanese Zen) of the Buddhists. It finds complete justification in scripture. The term 'theosophy' has constantly appeared in the religious thought of both East and West and denotes not only the mysticism but also the eclectic philosophy to be found in all religion.

The Liberal Catholic Church recognizes within the Father-hood of God a maternal aspect of divinity* which brings forth and nourishes all created life. This aspect is represented by the Holy Lady Mary whose tender care for all women and children, and for all who suffer, supplements the divine ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ; it is shown forth on earth in our recognition of the sanctity of life and is exemplified by the sacrifice and love of human motherhood which call forth our deep reverence and respect.

The Liberal Catholic Church believes that there is a body of doctrine and mystical experience common to all religions, which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any. Moving within the orbit of Christianity and regarding itself as distinctively Christian church it nevertheless holds that other religions are divinely inspired and that all proceed from a common source, though each may stress different aspects of this teaching; some may even fall temporarily into abeyance. Such teaching rests on its own intrinsic merit. It forms that true Catholic faith which is catholic because it is the statement of universal principles in nature; St. Augustine wrote: 'The identical thing that we now call the christian religion existed among the ancients and has not been lacking from the beginnings of the human

* Gen. 1:27 God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

race until the coming of Christ in the flesh from which moment on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called christian' (Retract I, xiii, 3). The same principle was involved in the well-known declaration of St. Vincent of Lerins:

*Id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est: hoc etenim vere proprieque catholicum.** The Liberal Catholic Church accordingly does not seek to convert people from one religion to another.

Relation to other Churches

The Liberal Catholic Church is not a new religious communion, it is a constituent part of the One, Catholic and Apostolic Church. That historical church is truly one, despite its many outward divisions both in East and West, because the one life of Christ animates and sustains it through the sacraments he instituted. The Liberal Catholic Church preserves these sacraments in their integrity and plenitude, and believes its doctrine to be in conformity with the teaching of Christ, freed from the distortions of later ages.

Moreover, it regards the catholic or universal church of Christ as consisting of all who profess and call themselves Christians' (The Book of Common Prayer: Occasional Prayers 31). All churches, whether 'historical' or 'new', receive his blessing in proportion to the sincerity of their members and the extent to which each church retains the sacramental channels of grace and reflects what Christ intended his church to be.

The Liberal Catholic Church seeks to work in amity with all other christian denominations. It has no wish to proselytize the adherents of any other church and, as an earnest of this, welcomes them to regular and full participation in its services without asking them to leave their own church. Its chief appeal is addressed to all who are not members of any church or religious society. The Liberal Catholic Church is ready at all times to establish relations of intercommunion with other churches upon the friendliest possible

* 'That let us hold which everywhere, always and by all has been believed; for this is truly and rightly catholic'. (Commonitorium II (3).)

basis. For example, it would not deny to the non-episcopal bodies either the charismatic or the prophetic ministry of preaching and inspiration; as these bodies do not claim the Catholic priesthood, The Liberal Catholic Church would not therefore credit them with it. Accordingly, when all parties are agreeable, The Liberal Catholic Church permits its clergy to exchange pulpits with ministers of non-episcopal churches, but does not invite such ministers to officiate at its altars.

The Scriptures

The Liberal Catholic Church teaches that the scriptures are not verbally or uniformly inspired, but only in a general sense. It considers that they contain much that is divinely inspired; also that with things literally true are mingled others which may be, as Origen taught, allegorically and spiritually understood. It recognizes that the books of the Old Testament are of unequal value.

It would suggest that there are also evidences of the existence of the highest inspiration in other scriptures. Indeed, the knowledge of Eastern religions and psychology, which has become increasingly available, throws much light on the interpretation of christian doctrine.

Freedom of Thought

Membership of most christian churches rests on acceptance of a common belief. There is often wide discrepancy between the real belief of a thoughtful individual and the official profession that may be required of him. Such inconsistency leads to suppressed disbelief or insincerity and tends to check the free exercise of the mind.

The Liberal Catholic Church leaves to its members freedom in the interpretation of creeds, scriptures and tradition, and of its Liturgy and Summary of Doctrine. It asks only that differences of interpretation shall be courteously expressed. It takes this attitude

not from any indifference to truth but because it holds that belief should be the result of individual study or intuition. Truth is not truth for a man, or revelation a revelation, until he sees it to be true for himself. As a man grows into spirituality so will he grow into the perception of truth; no mere lip profession or superficial assent of the mind can take the place of this growth. Christ surely intended his religion to be one of love and freedom, which should help people at their many different stages along the path of spiritual growth; he did not intend it to dictate in God's name formulas the acceptance of which is a condition of salvation. Inability to recognize a truth involves simply the loss of the help that such recognition would bring.

The Liberal Catholic Church considers, therefore, that it acts in accordance with the spirit of its Master in welcoming gladly into its ranks those who seek truth. While it presents certain doctrinal statements to its members, it does not exact from them acceptance of any dogmatic standards. It asks of them, as a working basis of fellowship, not a profession of common belief, but a willingness to worship corporately through a common ritual. It aims at helping them to discover truth for themselves, by providing opportunities for spiritual growth and explaining the ancient science of manifesting the divine potentialities in every man. It asks of its members sincerity, purity of motive, tolerance, breadth of mind, courtesy of expression, willingness to work and a constant pursuit of high ideals.

Clergy

The clergy of The Liberal Catholic Church make no claim to spiritual or temporal domination over those who adhere to its Rite. In common with the priesthood of other churches they hold Christ's commission to teach (Matt. 28: 18-20) but claim no authority over the individual conscience, stress being laid rather upon their function as ministers of the divine sacraments, stewards of the mysteries of God, ready to place themselves in all reasonable ways at the disposal of those who may ask their help.

The Liberal Catholic Church neither forbids nor enjoins the marriage of its clergy. It does, of course, expect that its clergy, as well as its members, will respect the sanctity of marriage vows, and show responsibility in their behaviour towards other people. ..

The clergy of The Liberal Catholic Church are unpaid and usually retain secular occupations while devoting to the service of the church other available time.

Ethics

The Liberal Catholic Church emphasizes the value of corporate christian life and worship. Essentially Christianity, as a system of ethics, philosophy and worship, enables man to express more fully the love of Christ. In the power of such love man may solve the many difficulties which beset the path of human brotherhood, that brotherhood which is the corner-stone of all truly religious life. Without it no system of social organization can function properly.

Man's ethical responsibilities embrace tolerance, love and brotherhood and must, because of the inherent oneness of all life, extend beyond nation and colour to fellow-beings of all religions, of no religion. and even to those who deny the existence of God. Further, The Liberal Catholic Church believes that man has ethical duties towards all the realms of nature within which pulses God's creative life; as elder brethren, men should, as a sacred trust, protect and nurture the plants and animal creation. The true disciple of Christ is distinguished by his capacity for love and concern, rather than by his beliefs. By the living example of true brotherhood all may be led, in God's good time, nearer to him.

The Liberal Catholic Church does not refuse to marry divorced persons.

Mysticism and Extra-Sensory Experience

Within the bounds of its teaching The Liberal Catholic Church includes all that is good and true in the widening field of scientific knowledge. It welcomes new studies of the psyche of man, including psychology, extra-sensory perception and psychical research.

It would, however, seriously question the validity and value of sects and cults emanating solely from such studies.

The Liberal Catholic Church believes that the ancient rites for administration of the sacraments are based on the wisdom of Christ and that therefore they must be according to divine order and, necessarily, scientific. Although little attempt has yet been made to study the rationale of the changes in the psyche of man effected by these rites, there are encouraging developments in this field.

'Where there is no vision the people perish' (Prov. 29:18). In the early days of every religion there are men of vision who, experiencing first-hand apprehension of spiritual truth, are able to speak with the only authority of value other than revelation, the authority of knowing. Such truths are at all times capable of discovery or reverification by those who are spiritually developed.

As a church ceases to produce men of knowledge, so do its teachings narrow and harden, its theology grows legalistic and mechanical and its priesthood, lacking inner illumination, seeks to impose its will by authority and to persecute those who resist. The Liberal Catholic Church aims at being a gnostic church, not in the sense of reproducing certain extravagancies of early Christianity, but in the sense of helping its members to attain for themselves this certainty of knowledge which is the true gnosis of which St. Clement of Alexandria wrote. The ancient path of purification, illumination and union, which in olden times brought the candidate to this certainty, is still open for his treading. Those who tread it may still hope to attain to discipleship, that direct communion with the Master which should be the aim of every Christian. The Way of the Cross is the progressive unfoldment of the Christ-spirit within man, and to this end the sacraments of Christ's holy church avail.

The Liberal Catholic Church is a living christian church, progressive in that it maintains that the forms of religion should keep pace with human growth and enlightenment, and historical in that it holds that the church has handed down a precious heritage from Christ himself.

Terms of Communion

The Liberal Catholic Church welcomes to its altars all who reverently and sincerely approach them. It looks upon the christian church as the great brotherhood of all who turn to Christ, their master and friend, as the inspirer of their spiritual life. It offers the Blessed Sacrament of his love to any member of that brotherhood who reverently desires it.

Candidates are admitted to The Liberal Catholic Church by Baptism or, if that has been duly performed, by Confirmation. If the candidate has received both Baptism and Confirmation in complete form, a simple form of admission is used in which a blessing is invoked on the religious aspiration of the candidate.

Such candidates as wish to join The Liberal Catholic Church who have received these sacraments according to any less complete form will receive them 'conditionally'.

Liturgy

The Liberal Catholic Church uses a revised liturgy in the vernacular; the essential features of the sacramental forms are preserved with scrupulous care and the prevailing tone is one of devotional and joyous aspiration. Throughout, the endeavour has been to place no sentiment on the lips of priest or congregation which he or they cannot sincerely mean, or reasonably be expected to carry out in practice.

The fear of God and his wrath, imprecations on the heathen, servile cringing and self-abasement, repeated appeals for mercy, naive attempts to bargain with God, and fear of everlasting hell, together with other crude survivals of the past, have been eliminated as derogatory alike to the idea of a loving Father and to man whom he has created in his own image. While the essential truths of religion are changeless, the presentation and setting of these truths must vary as mankind advances into fuller enlightenment. Aspirational utterances and forms of petition that suited agricultural communities in Asia Minor in the earliest centuries of the

Christian era cannot give adequate expression to present-day sentiments of worship. The same may be said of mediaeval forms.

The central act of Christian worship is the Holy Communion or Mass, called by Liberal Catholics the Holy Eucharist to emphasize the thankfulness with which it should be approached. In this Blessed Sacrament Jesus Christ is present in a spiritual manner under the form of bread and wine. The Liberal Catholic Church affirms that the Holy Eucharist, far from being a mere commemoration of his life, death and resurrection, is Christ's supreme gift of himself to his church.

The Holy Eucharist is essentially a corporate act; all who take part, indeed the whole of mankind and the whole of creation, are thereby blessed.

Confession

Auricular confession is optional and is not required as a preliminary to the reception of Holy Communion. Its frequent and systematic practice is not encouraged, as tending to defeat the true value of the sacrament in the spiritual life of the individual.

Believing, nevertheless, that the grace of Absolution is one of the gifts of Christ to His people (John 20:23) The Liberal Catholic Church offers this aid, either by the auricular method or in its public services, to those who desire it. To absolve means to loosen. Consistent with this meaning The Liberal Catholic Church does not regard absolution as ridding a man forever of sin or freeing him from the consequences of his wrong-doing. Absolution should lead to a re-heartening, a restoration of nature's inner harmony which has been disturbed, and a bringing of the man once more into a fuller flow of that divine power of which he is to be a true expression.

Healing

The Liberal Catholic Church gives special attention to the ministry of healing. Although phenomena of healing appear to have been frequent in the time of the Apostles we are not justified in assuming that an ability to heal is conferred at ordination, or that

the gift of healing is other than a charismatic power. But in the revivifying breath of the Holy Spirit, in the grace of Absolution, and in the sacraments of Unction and the Eucharist, Christ's church has means of grace to vitalize and supplement ordinary healing methods. Healing and priestly functions may be seen to be complementary; there is growing recognition that bodily ailments are in many instances the outcome of maladies of the psyche and can best be remedied when the soul is at peace. The Liberal Catholic Church endeavours to restore these ministrations of healing to their rightful place in the economy of life. The sacrament of Unction is used to this end in three ways; as public services of spiritual healing, as a private unction for the sick and as Extreme Unction for those in imminent danger of physical death when it may particularly be regarded as a healing of the soul. Although instances of physical recovery do occur, the aim of spiritual healing is always more directed towards the actual source of disease, often an unrecognized discord within the psyche and a separation from the stream of grace.

The Arts

True artistic expression is a creative activity of the Holy Spirit and therefore a potent factor in the moral and spiritual upliftment of man. The Liberal Catholic Church strives to give practical recognition to the truth that training and refining of the emotions and intuitive perception through the influence of art are as necessary as is the development of the mind by science and philosophy. To love beauty is to love a manifestation of the divine. When people are beautiful within they will necessarily express their innate divinity. The power of art in cultivating this inner beauty should not be under-estimated.

The expression of beauty in acts of worship is most valuable in our technological and utilitarian age. Many people have little experience of its creative influence in their daily lives. The rhythm of ceremonial, the colour and form of vestments, the uplifting power of music, clean architectural lines in buildings and the simple beauty of their furnishings are all ideally part of the liturgical work of the

church. The Choral Eucharist is planned as the main service of the church, using music that allows full congregational participation. So, too, the other services encourage corporate praise.

The Liberal Catholic Church recognizes that by the influence of such aids, even if they are not in themselves essential, the consciousness of man expands towards the divine harmony and he increasingly responds, however imperfectly, to the reality of beauty. Art has sometimes been called the handmaid of religion; in truth it is an integral part of worship.

Politics

The Liberal Catholic Church does not, as a body, enter into politics or social work. It feels that it should rather make itself a motive power behind social and political progress by inspiring its members with the love of humanity and the desire to serve their fellows, while leaving them free to select their own suitable aims and methods.

Finance

The operations of The Liberal Catholic Church are dependent entirely upon the voluntary contributions of both its laity and its clergy. No salary or personal recompense is given to its clergy; indeed, its clergy serve willingly often at considerable expense to themselves, and many earn their livings in secular occupations. No fee may be exacted for administering the sacraments or for other spiritual work.

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SUMMARY OF DOCTRINE

1. The Liberal Catholic Church teaches the existence of God, infinite, eternal, transcendent and imminent. He is the one essence from which all forms of existence are derived. 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17: 28).

2. God manifests in his universe as a Trinity, called in the christian religion Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God, co-equal and co-eternal; the Father the cause of all, the Son the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us, the Holy Spirit the life-giver, the inspirer and sanctifier.

3. Man is a complex of spirit, soul and body. The spirit of man made in the image of God is divine in essence. Therefore he cannot cease to exist; he is eternal and his future is one whose glory and splendour have no limit.

4. Christ ever lives as a mighty spiritual presence in the world, guiding and sustaining his people. The divinity which was made manifest in him is gradually being unfolded in every man until each shall come 'unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4: 13).

5. The world is the theatre of an ordered plan, according to which the spirit of man, by repeatedly expressing himself in varying conditions of life and experience, continually unfolds his powers. This spiritual unfoldment takes place under an inviolable law of cause and effect. 'Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap' (Gal. 6: 7). His doings in each physical incarnation largely determine his experience after death in the intermediate world (or world of purgation) and the heavenly world, and greatly influence the

circumstances of his next birth. Man is a link in a vast chain of life extending from the highest to the lowest. As he helps those below him, so also he is helped by those who stand above him on the ladder of life, receiving thus a free gift of grace. There is a communion of saints, just men made perfect or holy ones, who help mankind. There is a ministry of angels.

6. Man has ethical duties to himself and to others. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and Prophets' (Matt. 22:37-40). It is the duty of man to learn to discern the divine light in himself and others, that light 'which lighteth every man' (John 1: 9). Because men are sons of God they are brothers and inseparably linked together; that which harms one harms the entire brotherhood. Hence a man owes it as a duty to the God both within himself and others, first, to endeavour constantly to live up to the highest that is in him, thereby enabling that God within himself to become more perfectly manifest, secondly, to recognize the fact of that brotherhood by constant effort towards unselfishness, by love of, consideration for, and service to his fellow-men. The service of humanity, reverence for all life and the sacrifice of the lower self to the higher are laws of spiritual growth.

7. Christ instituted various sacraments in which an inward and spiritual grace is given to us through an outward and visible sign. There are seven rites which may be ranked as sacraments, namely, Baptism, Confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, Absolution, Holy Unction, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders. The doctrine of these sacraments is sufficiently set forth in the authorized Liturgy of The Liberal Catholic Church. Christ, the living head of the church which he founded, is the true minister of all sacraments.

Inasmuch as The Liberal Catholic Church welcomes to its membership all who are seeking truth, it does not require its members to accept this Statement of Principles and Summary of Doctrine; it is, however, to be regarded as embodying the distinctive contribution of The Liberal Catholic Church to christian thought. The Bishops of The Liberal Catholic Church are prepared to accept as candidates for ordination only those who find themselves in general agreement with this Statement of Principles and Summary of Doctrine.

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