

Chapter 4

Historical Overview of the *Episcopi Vagantes* and the *Χορεπισκοποι*

The modern disputes about the *episcopi vagantes* and their Continuing Church kinsmen ultimately find their answers in the wandering bishops' ancient origins. The *vagantes* developed, at least partly, from the leaders known as the *χορεπισκοποι*, Greek for "country bishops." Originally, these were the urban bishops' delegates in remote rural areas, given partial episcopal powers to care for the country people within a single district only.¹

Scholars dispute which of the episcopal prerogatives the country bishops possessed. In fact, no one is certain whether these rural delegates even received actual episcopal consecration. Despite this uncertainty, however, it is clear that the *χορεπισκοποι* attended the 4th century ecumenical councils along with the urban bishops, including the Councils of Ancyra (314), Neocaesarea (between 313 and 325), and Antioch (341).²

By the fourth century, the urban bishops were trying to restrict the *χορεπισκοποι*'s powers and make them their complete dependents. The Councils of Sardica, A.D. 343-344 (Canon 6) and Laodicea (Canon 57) attempted to suppress them entirely by forbidding their installation in country places.³ In their place, the

¹ *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1991 ed., s.v. "Bishop."

² *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1908 ed., s.v. "Chorepiscopus."

³ The Sardican council forbade appointing bishops to tiny places in order to avoid "cheapening" the episcopal dignity. Quoting from the Latin text of the sixth canon (<http://ccel.wheaton.edu/fathers/NPNF2-14/6sardica/index.htm>):

BISHOP HOSIUS said: If it shall have happened, that in a province in which there have been very many bishops, one [i.e., but one] bishop remains, but that he by negligence has not chosen [to ordain] a bishop, and the people have made application, the bishops of the neighbouring province ought first to address [by letter] the bishop who resides in that province, and show that the people seek a ruler [i.e., pastor] for themselves and that this is right, so that they also may come and with him ordain a bishop. But if he refuses to acknowledge their written communication, and leaves it unnoticed, and writes no reply, the people's request should be satisfied, so that bishops should come from the neighbouring province and ordain a bishop.

But permission is not to be given to ordain a bishop either in any village, or in an unimportant city, for which one presbyter suffices, *lest the name and authority of bishop grow cheap*. Those [bishops] who are invited from another province ought not to ordain a bishop unless in the cities which have [previously] had bishops, or in a city which is so important or so populous as to be entitled to have a bishop. [*emphasis added*]

city bishops appointed priests as *περιοδευται*, or itinerant visitors.⁴ By the eleventh century on the Continent, archdeacons had taken over most of the functions of the rural bishops. Part of the urban bishops' dislike for itinerants was that the latter upset the orderly business of diocesan administration.

The country bishops may have provided some of the lineage of the later itinerants, but not all. Even fully and properly consecrated urban bishops apparently had to turn wanderer sometimes. At least in the Eastern Empire, a bishop usually turned itinerant due to deprivation of his office (but not his episcopal status) on account of heresy or misconduct. In other cases, the method of popular election might mean that a bishop "might be consecrated to a see which subsequently refused to elect him," an event which "compelled a number of prelates to wander in order to seek a livelihood."⁵

Western itinerants came in large numbers from Ireland as missionaries to the barbarized Continent, setting up monasteries and preaching the Gospel. The Irish practice required only one, not three, bishops for every consecration;⁶ because some of the post-Reformation *vagantes* trace their orders from the Irish, this factor has also caused the orders of the Continuing Church bishops to come into question. The

For another citation of this canon, see also the work of German bishop and theologian the Right Reverend Charles Joseph Hefele, bishop of Rottenburg and a professor of theology at the University of Tübingen. Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church, From the Original Documents, vol. II, A.D. 326 to A.D. 429*, from the German and ed. by Henry Nutcombe Oxenham (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896), 135. Cf. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1974 ed., s.v. "Chorepiscopus." One can see how in just four centuries from the time of Christ, the bishops were already moving away from concerns about evangelizing the lost, to concerns about their own "dignity."

As for Canon 57 of the Council of Laodicea (<http://ccel.wheaton.edu/fathers/NPNF2-14/2ancyra/Laocns.htm>), it reads:

BISHOPS must not be appointed in villages or country districts, but visitors; and those who have been already appointed must do nothing without the consent of the bishop of the city. Presbyters, in like manner, must do nothing without the consent of the bishop.

For another citation of the Laodicean canon, see also Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church*, vol. II, p. 321, 322.

⁴ Schaff-Herzog, s.v. "Chorepiscopus." Cf. *ODCC*, s.v., "Chorepiscopus."

⁵ Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church*, 1.

⁶ This may have been due partly because of the exigencies of the Irish situation. There were no cities in Ireland when Christianity first arrived there in late Antiquity, only tribal settlements. The monasteries, though eventually numerous, were still merely frontier outposts of civilization as compared with the well-settled regions of the Mediterranean. It was not always easy or even possible to gather three bishops together for the consecration of another bishop. For an overview of the Irish church, and the missionaries' contribution to Western civilization, see Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, c. 1995).

modern *episcopus vagans*, on the other hand, “is less easy to classify than his predecessor, and the grounds of objection against him are different. In some respects the title is misleading, since the majority of these prelates do not wander as their predecessors did.”⁷ Yet the majority of the modern *vagantes* combine the disadvantages of both eras: “they invade jurisdiction, and in most cases their episcopal status is doubtful.”⁸

A helpful starting point in defining the modern *episcopi vagantes* might be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, which states bluntly that this is the name

given to persons who have been consecrated bishop in an irregular or clandestine manner or who have been excommunicated by the Church that consecrated them and are in communion with no recognized see. A man is also included in this group when the number in communion with him is so small that his sect *appears to exist for his own sake*.⁹ [*emphasis added*]

Brandreth restates these conditions to say that in some cases, “there is not even the pretense of an organized church.”¹⁰

The Western Church’s theology is generally ready to admit that these irregular consecrations are valid, an admission which seems to follow the Latins’ penchant for lawyerly definitions. The Eastern Church, on the other hand, declares that one must be in communion with the Church (by which she means herself) in order to be a valid bishop.

In the Anglican breakaway movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, to which the Continuing Church is an heir, one finds several main streams of succession from the *vagantes*:¹¹

- 1) Julius Ferrete (or “Ferrette,” according to Anson)
- 2) Dr. J. Joseph Overbeck
- 3) Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle
- 4) Joseph René Vilatte
- 5) Ulric Vernon Herford
- 6) Arnold Harris Mathew

For the purposes of this thesis, the three most important are Ferrete, Vilatte, and Mathew, for it is from them that most of the American churches seem to take their orders.

Ferrete, a Frenchman who styled himself the “Bishop of Iona,” was the first of the modern *vagantes*. He was apparently born in France of Protestant parents, but

⁷ Brandreth, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *ODCC*, 1974 ed., s.v. “Episcopi vagantes.”

¹⁰ Brandreth, 2.

¹¹ Anson, from the table of contents.

was as a youth received into the Roman Catholic Church.¹² In 1851 he became a novice of the French Province of the Friars Preachers at Flavigny, and was given the religious name of Raymond. He professed the following year, and then studied in Paris and Grenoble in philosophy and theology. By 1854, he was living in Rome with the Italian Dominicans at S. Maria sopra Minerva. Ordained a deacon on April 7, 1855, and a priest on June 2, he was then ordered to join the Dominican Mission of Mesopotamia and Kurdistan. Surprisingly, only a year later he had given up his faith in Catholicism; he said as much a June 17, 1856 letter to his abbot, Père Jandel. Ferrette also at this time said he no longer regarded himself as a Dominican.¹³

Following this, Ferrete headed toward Protestantism, making contact with both the Anglican Bishop Gobat in Jerusalem, and then with the Irish Presbyterian Mission in Damascus. While still in the East, Ferrete became friendly with Mar Bedros, Bishop of Emesa (Homs), of the Syrian Jacobite Church.¹⁴

Pivotal in Ferrete's life is an incident for which Anson says no documentary evidence has been produced—that “Mar Bedros had obtained the sanction of Patriarch Mar Ignatius Jacobus II to initiate a sort of Reunion Movement, and, because Mar Bedros was unable to leave his diocese, he was looking for a likely person to direct this movement in Europe.”¹⁵ The incident is important, despite the lack of proof, because so many of the autocephalous churches trace their descent from Ferrete. Further is it alleged that

having discussed the introduction of Eastern Christianity into Western Europe (without reference to Monophysitism), Mar Bedros managed to persuade Ferrette to take the leading part in it. Then, so we are told, with the sanction of the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, the Bishop of Emesa (Homs) raised the French “Minister of the Gospel” to the episcopate on June 2, 1866 (Old Style); and that the function took place in Homs, in the presence of many witnesses.¹⁶

Ferrete, who received the title “Bishop of Iona,” was then dispatched as “Patriarchal Legate for Western Europe,” with the authority to erect indigenous Orthodox Churches under their own, autonomous Patriarchate.¹⁷

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ “‘Jacobite’ is the name by which a number of Monophysite Churches, including the Syrian Church, are commonly called. The name derived from Jacob Baradaeus, Bishop of Edessa (541-78), who saved the Monophysite heretics from the extinction which threatened them through persecution. They were accused of so identifying the two natures of Christ so as to obliterate the real distinction between the divine and the human.” Footnote 3, Anson, p. 35.

¹⁵ Anson, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Joseph René Vilatte, the second most prolific figure among the 19th and 20th century vagabonds, was a Parisian who emigrated to America at an early age.¹⁸ Unlike Mathew, who began his clerical career with a view to being an Anglican but became a Roman Catholic, Vilatte initially intended to join the Catholic priesthood but later moved toward Protestantism (of various varieties). For a short while, however, he was a member of the Methodist church in Montreal, Quebec. This did not satisfy him, however, and during the following years “his changes of religious affiliation were numerous and bewildering. He four times returned to the Roman Catholic Church, once to the Methodists, became a Congregationalist minister, and twice a Presbyterian.”¹⁹ In 1885, he approached the PECUSA bishop of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, Dr. Hobart Brown, to ask about becoming ordained as a priest in that church. His name appears in the official record of the diocese as a candidate for Holy Orders.²⁰ At Brown’s suggestion, Vilatte went for ordination to Dr. Herzog, the Old Catholic²¹ bishop in Switzerland. In June, 1885, Herzog ordained Vilatte as a deacon and then as a priest; the new priest’s oath of canonical obedience, however, was made to the Protestant Episcopal Church bishop of Fond du Lac.²² Although he apparently served well in his work in his mission, at the time of Dr. Brown’s death in 1888, Vilatte was “intriguing with the Old Catholics with a view to being consecrated bishop.”²³ When Dr. C.C. Grafton, Brown’s successor as the PECUSA bishop of Fond du Lac, refused to consecrate Vilatte as “Bishop-Abbot” of the American Old Catholics, Vilatte then entered into relations with the Russian Archbishop Vladimir, “who, while not offering him consecration, appears to have granted him some form of recognition.”²⁴ Vilatte then claimed to have been elected to the episcopate by the Old Catholics themselves, at a synod at Duvall (Wisconsin?). In remarks printed in *The Church Review*, October, 1898 to January, 1899, Grafton remarked on the Synod,

“The story that he was elected to the bishopric of the Old Catholics is simply this: He carried around a paper amongst the few poor, ignorant people under

¹⁸ Brandreth, 47.

¹⁹ Brandreth, 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The Old Catholics were a movement in the German-speaking Europe which rejected the First Vatican Council’s (1870) declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility. The historian and theologian J.J.I. von Döllinger (1799-1890), with others, founded Catholic churches which were not in communion with Rome. The separatists designated themselves “Old Catholics,” because they claimed Rome had created a new church through decrees such as those of the Vatican Council. Good relations have existed between the Anglicans and the Old Catholics since the movement’s beginning; in 1925, the Old Catholics recognized Anglican ordinations, and later obtained full communion with the Church of England (in 1932), and most of the other Anglican churches.

²² Brandreth, 47, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴ Brandreth, 48.

his charge, which he demanded that they should sign. Most of them complied, some of them being little children. There is only one clergyman's name on the petition and that, according to the statement of the clergyman so named, was forged."

Vilatte was finally consecrated in Ceylon by "Archbishop Alvares" of the "Independent Catholic Church of Goa and Ceylon."²⁵ At the General Convention of 1892, the Protestant Episcopal Church responded to this consecration with certain resolutions. The bishops concluded that Vilatte had obtained his consecration from a Church separated from Catholic Christendom because of its non-acceptance of the Chalcedonian definition of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, they affirmed that Vilatte was never elected by a duly accredited synod, and that he seemed anxious to obtain the episcopate from any body which would give it to him. Additionally, they declared that these non-Catholic bishops had no jurisdiction or right to ordain a bishop for any part of the diocese under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Fond du Lac.²⁶ They also found that more than two months before the time of his so-called consecration, he was deposed from the sacred ministry.²⁷ Therefore, the Episcopal Church declared Vilatte's orders null and void, and resolved to send messages to the Old Catholics about this.

Arnold Harris Mathew is the another important figure from whom the modern "Continuing Churches" trace their origins. He originally prepared for orders in the Church of England, but in 1878 was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest.²⁸ He spent some years in service as a parish priest in various cures, but "a set of unfortunate circumstances for which he was not personally responsible caused him to leave the Roman Catholic Church; later he married."²⁹ For a while, he served as an Anglican curate at Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Street, London, England, with the sanction but not the license of Dr. Frederick Temple, the Bishop of London.³⁰

In 1907, after he had resigned from this curacy, and an effort to find another ministerial charge in the Church of England had failed, Mathew was approached by an ex-Roman Catholic priest, Richard O'Halloran, "who informed him that there were two hundred and fifty priests and congregations who wished for the ministrations of an Old Catholic Bishops, and that they had elected Mathew to that office. Negotiations were opened with the See of Utrecht, and Mathew wrote

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

²⁷ Footnote 1 from Brandreth, 53. "He was degraded from the priesthood and excommunicated by the Protestant Episcopal Church on 21 March 1892."

²⁸ Brandreth, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

informing the Archbishop of Canterbury of what was going forward.”³¹ On April 28, 1908, Mathew was consecrated bishop in St. Gertrude’s Cathedral in Utrecht, the Netherlands, by the Old Catholic Archbishop Gul, who was assisted by the Old Catholic bishops of Haarlem (J.J. van Thiel), Deventer (N.B.P. Spit) and Germany (J. Demmel).³² When the newly-made Bishop Mathew returned to England, immediately after his consecration, he “appears at once to have discovered that the information given him by O’Halloran was entirely false, and that the actual number of those willing to accept his ministrations was negligible. There seems to be no doubt that Mathew immediately informed Utrecht of the true state of affairs and added a request that he might be permitted to retire.” The Dutch bishops exonerated him from personal blame, through a letter.³³ Brandreth considers that there is no reason to doubt the Old Catholic Dutch bishops’ view that O’Halloran was to blame for the confusion.³⁴

For the next two years, Mathew for two years following his consecration, Mathew remained in full communion with the See of Utrecht, having the status of a missionary bishop³⁵ In October 1909, Mathew assisted in Utrecht at Archbishop Gul’s consecration of the Mariavite bishop Jean Marie Kowalski. In September, 1909, however, while attending the Old Catholic congress in Vienna, Mathew

claimed to have discovered various differences between the Old Catholics of Switzerland and Germany and the traditional position of the Church of the Netherlands, notably with regard to the acceptance of the decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem (1672, the Sacrament of Penance, invocation of Saints, alterations to the liturgy, and their general attitude toward the Pope.³⁶

Then, in December, 1910, Mathew issued a “Pastoral Letter,” in which he declared his autonomy and independence.³⁷ Ten years later, in 1920, the Old Catholic bishops made a formal pronouncement against him, claiming that his consecration had been “surreptitiously secured by the production of false testimony, and would never have taken place had the consecrators known that the conditions stated in the questionable documents and required by our Episcopate were non-existent.”³⁸ The Dutch bishops also stated in this pronouncement that they broke off intercourse with Mathew once they discovered these facts, “a statement which appears to be in error, for the Dutch bishops were in communion with Mathew for two years after the facts were made

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Brandreth, 16, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* This letter is printed in Mathew’s book *The Catholic Church of England*, pp. 20ff. and in *An Episcopal Odyssey*, pp. 21ff.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19. This excerpt is taken from the *Report of the Lambeth Conference*, 1920, 155.

known to them.”³⁹ At the time of Brandreth’s writing, in the 1960’s, the Old Catholic Church of Utrecht maintained that Mathew’s consecration was obtained *mala fide*, in bad faith, and therefore was null and void. The Lambeth Conference, however, only expressed doubts about the validity of Mathew’s episcopal orders.

Brandreth considers that Mathew’s unsuitability for the episcopal office shows, among other things, in the fact that within twelve months of the break with the see of Utrecht “five bishops had been consecrated without any see or flock being assigned to them.”⁴⁰ Of those whom he consecrated, at least two of them (who had been deposed Monsignors of the Roman Catholic Church) refused to exercise their episcopate.⁴¹ Following this fiasco, Mathew’s clergy

then proceeded to elect four of their number and to press for their consecration. Mathew acceded to their request... No reason seems to have been given as to why it was necessary to consecrate four men at once for a movement which had barely four places of worship, but in the event all these prelates departed from the Rite after a short time.⁴²

In April, 1916, Mathew consecrated James Charles Thomas Ayliffe Williams, as his perpetual coadjutor with right of succession.⁴³ This man, who assumed the names of Bernard Mary at his consecration, claimed that he represented the only legitimate continuation of Mathew’s movement.

For several reasons, Brandreth’s book is an invaluable Anglican resource for its contentions concerning the *vagantes*. Not only does it cite the Lambeth Conferences’ resolutions concerning the itinerants, as well as contain introductory remarks from two high-ranking English bishops to introduce his work, but the author was also on good personal terms with many of the itinerants about whom he wrote (despite his disagreement with their positions). The introductory matter, though, is what is especially of interest for this study, because of its attitude toward ecumenism in general. In his commendation to Brandreth’s book, the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey, Lord Fisher of Lambeth, wrote:

The book has proved quit invaluable to all who are interested for one reason or another in the history and doings of the various successions of bishops who operate without the authority or approval of any of the recognized historic Churches of Christendom.⁴⁴

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ Herbert Ignatius Beale and Arthur William Howarth told Mathew that they were simply going to continue their quarrel with Rome. *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² Brandreth, 20, 21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey, Lord Fisher of Lambeth, Archbishop of Canterbury, commendational forward to Brandreth., ix.

It is unclear whether the archbishop means by “the recognized historic Churches of Christendom” only those churches which possess the “Historic Episcopate.” If so, this would be but another example of the Anglican sense of superiority to Methodist and Lutheran episcopal orders.

Fisher’s fellow prelate, Bishop Sherard Falkner Allison of Chelmsford, England,⁴⁵ penned similar sentiments in his forward. Falkner cites Resolution 54 of the 1958 Lambeth Conference, which said that Anglicanism “cannot recognize the Churches of such *episcopi vagantes* as properly constituted Churches or recognize the orders of their ministers.”⁴⁶ The Lambeth Conferences of 1920 had also offered warnings against the itinerants.

Brandreth objects to the itinerant bishops of his own day in large part because of what he considers almost a distinguishing feature of the entire class—a “light-hearted trafficking in holy things.”⁴⁷ Though he makes it clear that some of the *vagantes* are honest, godly men, as he knows from his personal acquaintance with them, Brandreth asserts that they are all mistaken in their episcopal claims.

In his book *Bishops at Large*, Anson builds upon Brandreth’s assumptions. He points out that almost none of the founders of the “autocephalous” churches has had a vision comparable to those of the 16th century Protestant Reformers or their forerunners, for the restoration of primitive Christianity:

In most cases they have been quit content with the later developments of ecclesiastical polity, ritual and ceremonial. They have not been satisfied with being simple superintendents or overseers of their flocks which after all, is the meaning of the Greek word *episcopos*. In almost every instance they have taken over the late medieval or post-Tridentine conception of prelacy—lock, stock and barrel.⁴⁸

Sadly, in his desire for orderly churchmanship, Brandreth apparently unchurches most of the Protestant world as well. He seems to take the tack that only churches which possess the “Historic Episcopate” may even claim the name of “bishop” for their superintendents and overseers. This is seen in the passing remark he makes about the numbers of the *vagantes*; as of his writing, he remarks, there existed more than 200 such wanderers, but

⁴⁵ *Crockford’s Clerical Directory*, 1975-76 edition, lists him under this name. It is not clear why he refers to himself this way in his forward to Brandreth. See *Crockford’s Clerical Directory: A Reference Book of the Clergy of the provinces of Canterbury and York and other Anglican Provinces and Dioceses*, 1975-76. London: Oxford University Press, 1976, 1448.

⁴⁶ Sherard Falkner Allison, forward to Brandreth, xi.

⁴⁷ Brandreth, xiii.

⁴⁸ Anson, 27.

the number is greatly increased if one adds the number of exotic sects in America which claim to possess bishops, but do not claim a succession, and the number of African natives who claim the title “bishop” merely in order to gain prestige in the eyes of their tribe.⁴⁹

One wonders whether these “exotic sects” would include Methodists and Lutherans, whose leaders are known as “bishops” but who do not claim the “Historic Episcopate.” In any case, to understand the *vagantes*’ claims to valid episcopal ministry, one must first understand the competing views of apostolic succession, and it is there that we turn our attention next.

⁴⁹ Brandreth, 2.