

Ecumenical dimensions in Sweden

When discussing Sweden and Ecumenics we will have to take a short look back in history to make the situation today understandable.

There we will find that at the time of the Reformation Sweden was in the throgs of regaining its independence, which had been more or less lost during an attempt in 1397 to create a Scandinavian union. This came to influence the religious and political situation of the country radically. In Sweden the reformation hit a church, which showed signs of vigor and growth rather than decay. The king, Gustav Vasa, found it convenient of mainly economical reasons to follow the example of the reigning powers in the parts of Germany that had turned Lutheran. These developments lead to the confiscation of practically all the Church property in Sweden. The privileged position of the bishops was abolished and the church leaders became dependent on the king. Very soon, the active Catholics were replaced by Lutheran laymen, trusted by the king, religious orders were suppressed and bishops were replaced by superintendants. A German Lutheran was entrusted with full powers over the Swedish church and Swedes were forbidden to study abroad except in Lutheran centers of learning.

In 1604, Swedes were forbidden to be or become Catholics, a situation which lasted until 1860. From the 30 years war onwards patriotism increased and encouraged a strong bias against all things Catholic. This state of affairs lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century when Swedes for the first time began traveling abroad in a larger scale and gained personal experience of other countries and met and saw Catholics for the first time.

It was only in 1952 that a more liberal law of religious freedom was enacted. Since then a noticeable development of the Catholic Church in Sweden has taken place. At the end of the Second World War, there were no more than some 7-8 000 Catholics out of a population of more than seven millions. The number increased constantly during different waves of immigration and today there are probably around 150 000 Catholics from many different nations in the country. Because of this fact, the parishes are very international, uniting people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A growing number of Swedish converts gives the Catholic Church an increasingly Swedish countenance. The vast majority of the Clergy and the Religious in the country is however still from abroad.

For the ecumenical dialogue all this means that the Catholic partner in ecumenical discussions is a minority that mainly consists of foreigners, as I am myself. This fact makes it understandable that the Lutheran Church of Sweden tends to address Rome as a partner for the ecumenical dialogue rather than the local Catholic Church in Sweden.

We have stressed the situation of the Catholic Church in Sweden and its difficulties to present itself as a strong partner in the dialogue. But it must also be pointed out that is not easy for Catholics to know exactly who their counterpart for the dialogue is. The Church of Sweden, which makes the biggest partner in the discussion, has traditionally been very much dependent on the close state-church relations - it was

only a couple of years ago that the Swedish Lutheran Church became independent of the state. And even today, strong ties bind the church to the political system in Sweden. Parish councils and councils on diocesan and national level are elected by the political parties. Indeed, the Swedish Lutheran bishops no longer have any authority in theological matters.

The question of who is our partner in the dialogue is therefore acute.

However, a positive development is the remarkable change in the ecumenical climate and that the old prejudices against the Catholic Church are almost negligible. The current jubilee celebrations of the 7th centenary of Saint Birgitta resulted in an enormous publicity in the media and a reevaluation of the saint.

It has also encouraged local ecumenical encounters on a level where the practicing Christians meet, get to know each other and pray together. This is undoubtedly of great importance.

An important approach to the ecumenical dialogue was the founding of The Swedish Ecumenical Council in 1994. The council has the goal to coordinate the ecumenical efforts in Sweden. This initiative has deeply improved the knowledge that the Christian churches have about one another in Sweden and is helping to reduce prejudices.

The wish for intercommunion has found a temporary solution in the local practice where the members of other Christian communities approach the Catholic altar with the right hand on the left shoulder as a sign of wishing to participate but knowing that it is not yet possible. The Holy Father was deeply impressed when he experienced this local sign of the expectation of the future unity of the churches during his visit in Sweden 1989.

On a more local level ecumenical commitment is realized in a collaboration of the university chaplains of the different denominations at the big university cities as for example Stockholm, Uppsala and Lund. This expresses itself in ecumenical services, common retreats, and personal encounters on the level of the different Christian student groups.

Again, we have to live with the fact that many of the Catholic students in the university cities are exchange students from all European countries. Mostly, they only stay for a shorter period of time and consequently hardly develop any interest in the local ecumenical work. Furthermore, many of these students feel that they rather want to take the opportunity to explore and deepen their Catholic identity during the years of studies than getting involved in ecumenism. This is understandable from the biographical situation of the young people and has in itself an "ecumenical" impact since it proves that the Christian faith is still alive in committed Christians. Also the young people need to know where they come from before they can start discussing their faith with students from other denominations. In a country, which is regarded to be one of the most secularized of the world, any commitment of faith in Jesus Christ has an ecumenical dimension because it reminds the surrounding secular environment of its Christian heritage and reveals the strength that the faith still has today.