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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SWEDEN

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of today's talk is to be a Catholic in Sweden, or with the more institutional tone of the title, the situation of The Catholic Church in Sweden. Though the focus is on the present situation, I will begin with history, as contemporary Sweden is unintelligible without the *longue durée*. I will also give the presentation a personal touch by using the perspective of my own family, which with its long and multifarious history has walked parallel and sometimes in tandem with the Swedish modern state, but which also stretches beyond its borders. As everyone else's, my family is a set of families, a complicated pattern of lineages coming together in one person, or perhaps more correctly (and more modestly) it is the large system of birth and death unfolding through the centuries here seen from the perspective of one of its nodes.

SWEDEN?

Sweden is an oblong country, stretching out a somewhat hesitant hand toward continental Europe in the south, while it is securely anchored in the stern, snowy north, where the Saamis, the indigenous population, lives. The capital, Stockholm (founded in the 12th century), is located in the middle and is a fair city by the sea facing east, towards the Baltic States and Russia, a not so comfortable sight

during the Cold war, I can assure you, as I then lived in the middle of the Baltic Sea on the large island of Gotland. During the latest years, the exposure to increasing Russian ambition is making Swedes remember these old fears and uncertainties that temporarily faded in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Facing the opposite direction toward the west, we find the second largest city Gothenburg (founded in 1621) a port city with direct access to the Atlantic sea, thus having a natural connection with England, even called little London. My university is located in Gothenburg, or more correctly Göteborg, with the not so surprising name, University of Gothenburg (previously Göteborg University), founded in the late 19th century (1891, recognized as a university in 1954).

THE UNIVERSITIES

The two oldest universities are Uppsala University (founded 1477, closed due to the reformation, but reestablished in 1595) located 67 kilometers to the North of Stockholm; and Lund University founded in 1666 in the southern part of Sweden, Skåne, and with close connections to Denmark. Actually that part of Sweden belonged to Denmark until 1658. So, the establishment of the university was part of an effort in making Skåne less Danish, and securely integrated into the Swedish state and nation.

THE REFORMATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF SWEDEN AS A PROTESTANT NATIONAL STATE

With Gustav Vasa (king of Sweden in 1523), Sweden was transformed from an electoral kingship into a hereditary monarchy. In line with his rather Machiavellian establishment of a Swedish national state and the rule of his own family, the Catholic Church in Sweden was severed from Rome (1536) and transmuted into a Lutheran state church. In 1544 it was forbidden on the pain of death to belong to any other church than the Church of Sweden (the official name was though introduced as late as 1860); something that was carried out on several occasions. Citizenship and membership in the Lutheran Church became closely entangled and to leave and become a Catholic was thus an act of great courage (and treason).

FAMOUS CATHOLIC CONVERT: QUEEN KRISTINA

One famous convert, who wisely left the country, was the queen Kristina (1626-1689) daughter of Gustav Adolph II, who while fighting the religious wars on the continent on the protestant side died at the battle of Lützen (1632); leaving the kingdom to her when she was still a child (though she

assumed her position first in 1644). Kristina relinquished her title (in 1654) and left for Rome and lived there, with some interruptions, until her death in 1689. She is also remembered, somewhat more ingloriously, as the monarch who brought the father of modern philosophy, the Descartes of the *cogito ergo sum*, to an early death, by inviting him to Sweden where he perished due to the cold and drafty nature of Swedish castles.

The 17th century was the protestant golden age, and Sweden was a European ‘superpower’, fighting for the protestant cause (and rich booty), but with Christina as a reminder of the dangerous attraction of the Roman religion.

My own ancestors made their first mark on history, by fighting against Gustav Vasa in the so called Dacke war, a peasant uprising in 1542, which though failed miserably in 1543, after a treacherous attack of the troops of the King, and my ancestor Sven i Huledal had to pay a heavy fine. One of the reasons of the uprising was the church politics of the new king; and Niels Dacke thus during his short rebellion reintroduced the Catholic liturgy. My family, nevertheless, became firmly integrated into the new nation-state and its church, and a later ancestor Olof Cavallius (1648-1708), became professor in history at Lund University in 1682 (rector 1686) and 1703 bishop in Växjö. The university was then only twenty years old and the Lutheran church a mere century.

THE LOSS OF POWER

During the 18th century, Sweden lost its position as a European political power, and a symbol for this is Carl XII (1682-1718) who fought valiantly many wars, but who finally lost his life in battle, and Sweden shrunk to more or less its present borders; Finland was though lost to Russia in 1809. One of my forefathers, the son of the Lutheran bishop, was captain within the cavalry, and (in 1716) was offered nobility as reward for bravery in the field, but declined. With this a dual tendency of the family was reinforced, that of the Church and the Academy specializing in the philological study of classical languages with a firm bourgeoisie identity. This ethos was very strong during the 19th century and closely connected to Lund’s university.

My grandfather, a researcher of medieval Latin, was the last classicists in the line. He died in 1959 of a heart attack at Lerum train station outside of Gothenburg while trying to catch the commuter train to the University of Gothenburg. At the time of his death, he had only reached the letter L in his work of writing a dictionary of medieval Latin. To this day, it remains an unfinished opus: a heritage like a puzzle lacking in vital pieces.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND CONVERSIONS

To become Catholic in Sweden was made possible first in 1860 when it was permitted to leave the Church of Sweden for another officially recognized Christian church. However, it was only in 1951, that it became legal to leave the state church without entering any other Christian Church. In the year 2000, the state church was largely dismantled – the logical next step of the development during the 20th century.

For my family, the male part focused on matters of the Lutheran Church of Sweden and the study of Latin and Greek, this of course opened up new possibilities; and especially for my grandfather Samuel Cavallin (1903-1959), who travelled to Catholic monasteries on the continent in search of manuscripts, the Catholic influences were inevitable.

This was part of a general interest in the first half of the 20th century for the Catholic Church, then still untainted by modernity, and several prominent intellectuals converted.¹ For example, Sigrid Undstedt (1882-1949) in Norway (1924), the Nobel Prize laureate in literature (1928), and the Swedish literary critic Sven Stolpe (1905-1996) in 1947, who among many things wrote a biography of queen Kristina.

My grandfather discussed intensively with his wife and his cousin, who had become a Brigittine nun (sister Gunhild) in the 1930s, matters pertaining to the Catholic Church, and conversion became increasingly the expected result, but he died before taking the final step; his religious quest, as his research, was a sketch to be filled in by later generations. His wife and one of their six sons took the step though already in 1958; he is now a Catholic priest. Four other followed, and the one who didn't convert is the abbot of the only Benedictine monastery within the Lutheran Church of Sweden. My grandmother (Inger Holt 1901-1972)² was Danish with a degree in literary studies (cand. mag.) and her father was a priest in the Danish Lutheran Church, so her decision was a decisive and well contemplated one.

However, with the Second Vatican Council, much changed, the church to which my grandmother had converted morphed into something markedly different. Gone was the heroic fight against ideological

¹ Yvonne Maria Werner, 1996, *Världsvid men främmande: Den katolska kyrkan i Sverige 1873–1929*. Uppsala: Katolska bokförlaget.

² <http://www.henrikpontoppidan.dk/text/kilder/breve/holt/index.html> Her correspondence with the author Henrik Pontoppidan (Nobel price 1917) and Knut Ahnlund who did a Ph.D. (1956) on Pontoppidan's work includes interestingly a letter from 1956 in which she comments on Pontoppidan's interest in Catholicism http://www.henrikpontoppidan.dk/text/seclit/secbreve/cavallin_inger_holt/1956_02_22.html and she also comments, with humor, on her inability to combine her family life (6 children) with writing literary letters. http://www.henrikpontoppidan.dk/text/seclit/secbreve/cavallin_inger_holt/1951_02_20.html

modernity with its progressing secularism. To enter a church was prior to the 1960s to go into an alternative Catholic world, filled with a pre-modern sense of beauty, transcendence and awe, socially supported by schools and other institutions. Now the Church was instead full of people trying to harmonize it with modernity. She even had to experience that when she kneeled during the liturgy, someone raised her up with force – she was literally dragged into the new liturgy. They even painted lines on the floor so people would queue in the proper way and not receive communion kneeling.

The pre-Vatican II intellectual conversions from 1920 was thus made in a context where after the first world war the idea of progress had been challenged by the senseless brutality of modern warfare. The Church was seen as standing defiantly in the face of modernity that was rapidly undermining the traditional faith within the Lutheran Churches (cf. the neoclassicism within the arts of the 1920s).

For a Swede contemplating conversion there was though not a continuous *Swedish* Catholic Church from the 16th to the late 19th century to connect to as in England; though the scene changed in 1781, when Catholic immigrants were allowed to practice their religion.

For a Scandinavian Catholic identity, the reconnection to the medieval Church is instead central.³

IMMIGRATION DURING THE 20TH CENTURY

During the 20th century, Catholics increased in numbers through immigration on a new scale, in 1900 there were only 2500 Catholics in Sweden and in 1950 (16 000).⁴ The diocese was established in 1953, after many refugees had come to Sweden after the Second World War; there is still only one diocese and consequently only one bishop in Sweden. The Church begun to expand from a very small Swedish community to a multiethnic one, which in 2011 numbered around 150 000 people, consisting of a bewildering number of nationalities and languages.

³ The reconnection to the Middle Ages is natural for a Swedish Catholic, as the Catholic period of Sweden actually was as long as the later protestant one in Sweden, and as there are still marvelous medieval churches, small ones in the 9th and 10th century and then the magnificent gothic ones of the later medieval times, though many church paintings were painted over and sculptures destroyed. To reconnect with this heritage is natural for a Catholic Swede and can be compared with the nationalist reconnecting to the pagan Viking religion as an alternative. We can compare with Rome where almost every church have been baroquified, and no sense of medieval gothicness is left. If you combine the seriousness and transcendence of gothic buildings you come close to one component in the Swedish collective psyche. In Sweden in contrast to Rome, baroque architecture sculptures and paintings are connected with triumphant Protestantism and coincided with Sweden's only period of political superpower, excepting the earlier looting Vikings and their adventurous exploits.

⁴Nyman, Magnus, "Stiftet 50 år" on the website of the Catholic Church in Sweden www.katolskakyrkan.se/1/1.0.1.0/24/1/

My great grandmother on my mother's side, Olga Jonson born Dawson (1890-1978) is a representative, though rather untypical, of early 20th century immigration.⁵ She was born in 1890 in USA, Kingston, New Mexico (they later moved to Jacksonville), in a wealthy merchant family, and at a dance in Paris, she met my great grandfather of similar background, and as you have already guessed, they fell in love; he proposed to her at the top of the Eiffel tower and threatened to throw himself to the ground if she didn't say yes. Both families hired private detectives to check up the other part, and seemed to have concluded that everything was ok. They married in 1909 in Paris, moved to Sweden, and thus one Catholic was added to the few thousands then living in Sweden.

My grandmother Anita (1910-2002) went to a Catholic school in Denmark; she was though not very devout but still active in the parish of Gothenburg. Her children in their turn attended the Catholic primary school in Gothenburg, and my mother, Stella, was strengthened in her faith by the, for Swedish circumstances, very exotic German Notre Dame Sisters who taught the children.⁶

THE POST VATICAN II CHURCH IN SWEDEN

In contrast with my father for whom the process towards a Catholic identity was that of a Scandinavian convert coming from an academic milieu, my mother was gradually strengthened in her childhood faith. She met my father in the 1960s and they married in 1968, and I was born in 1969. They were caught up in the divided post Vatican II Church, in which a whole generation inspired by the student revolts, Marxism and counter culture thought they witnessed the dawn of a new Church animated by the so-called spirit of Vatican II; they imagined that what was budding forth was a Church truly in line with modern, or the then emerging postmodern, society. As we all know, this was a movement that grew in power, but which with the death of communism ended up severely disappointed. From the beginning, my parents distanced themselves from this progressive version of Catholicism; however, not in the manner of rigid legalistic conservatives. They both broke with their social backgrounds; my mother with her affluent upbringing and my father with his centuries old

⁵ My great grandmother Olga Mims Dawson. http://hem.spray.se/lakterhall/olga_early.htm Parents: William Dawson and Anita Ball <http://instantanswer.net/claesjonsson/Dawson.htm> Mr. Dawson (1856-1916) was from Mitcheldean, England and moved to USA and started up a shop in Kingston, New Mexico. He married Anita Ball from New Orleans in 1885, and they finally settled in Jacksonville, Florida. The Ball family came to America in 1635. The Catholic dimension seems to come from the Jemison family. The amazing story of Mary Jemison captured by Indians involves Catholic features. <http://www.claesjonsson.com/Jemison.htm> Dr. Doric Ball married in 1830 Harriet Jemison and their daughter was Anita Ball. One of Anita's sisters seems to have been a religious: "Sister Fidelie (Member of a Religious Order)". The Jemisons came from Ireland in 1740 and were Scottish-Irish. <http://www.claesjonsson.com/Jemison.htm>

⁶ www.katolska.com/files/skolanhistoria.pdf

academic family tradition of the humanities and theology. Working as a lawyer, he decided together with my mother that they should become farmers instead. This was during the 1970s, so it was not totally out of tune with the Zeitgeist of the Green Wave and so forth. It was though bad both by business and academic standards: to work with cows, they must be crazy! They bought an old farm on Gotland with a three-storied stone house from the 18th century. As I remember it, it was large, whitewashed, and had a mystical aura around it: there was even a resident ghost who made his presence felt at some occasions.

Gotland is a large island in the middle of the Baltic Sea, with very good climate and large fields, and famous for its many medieval churches and ruins from the 12th and 13th century (the island of a hundred churches, where you literally could trip over medieval gold treasures). The middle ages was the high period of the Island before its decline, which, luckily for us, left most of the churches largely untouched (some became then ruins). The main city, Visby, is situated by the Sea and surrounded by a very well maintained stone ring wall. Every year there is a medieval fair inside it and people dress up and enact the Middle Ages for a whole week. During one of these weeks, my uncle, the one who is, as I said previously, something so strange as a Lutheran Benedictine (though not very Lutheran), was there in his habit and of course they thought he was part of the show – the fiction of the Middle Ages blending in with its still living heirs.

I especially remember when we celebrated the Catholic mass in one of the magnificent ruins, S:t Nicolai; most of the church is still standing, including some stumps of the stone roof truss, but not the wooden roof; so hopefully it did not rain. To reconnect to the Catholic period became real for me in a physical sense with the sky above adding a cosmic sense to it.

The farm of my parents slowly became something of a Catholic center, as they were very open for what the spirit was saying. Many passed there and even lived there for a while. One could say that the Catholic set apart milieu of the pre-Vatican church was recreated within an alternative lifestyle of the 1970s, the time period of the blossoming of the movements and communities of the church. My parents pondered much the idea of a community, but it was something that never really worked out; the principle of the family had to be safe guarded.

My father had a dream, and that was to build a church, and slowly he transformed one of the houses to a chapel and they started to pray the liturgy of the hours. Eventually, he bought a real church bell, set it up and started to ring it at set times. From the farm he could see, while proudly ringing his new

bell, the medieval former Catholic Church of Stenkumla, that now the was local parish church of the Lutheran Church of Sweden.⁷

One could say that my parents leaving their social backgrounds turning instead to farming, nurtured a charismatic catholicity that later was given powerful backup by pope John Paul II, beginning in 1979. They were thus traditional and charismatic at the same time. Their experiment actually developed in a special way as another of my uncles, the one who is a Catholic priest, had to retire due to heart problems, and came to live with them on the farm. He, henceforth, celebrated daily mass in the chapel. My parents besides praying the liturgy of the hours also developed a Carmelite spirituality with daily silent prayer.

I would like to tell you just one more thing from this period that illustrates the reconnection to the medieval age. There was a need of a new Catholic church in Visby, and the parish was offered a piece of land inside the historical city. To the amazement of all, the design of the church was discovered to exactly match a medieval house foundation buried in the earth, and also religious artifacts were found. The new Church was thus built upon a medieval house and is half under the ground (the old building) and half above it (the modern one): a very symbolical building for a Swedish Catholic.

THE CATHOLIC ETHNIC SALAD BOWL

At the same time as I was born, but a month earlier, my wife was born, also in Sweden, though her parents had come from Croatia during the 1960s as part of the labor immigration. They worked hard in the factories of Sweden and slowly built up a middle class life, though returning yearly to Croatia, nurturing a dream of one day returning Home. It was now that the Catholic Church really began to become a Church to be reckoned with in Sweden, but it also developed a very divided ethnic character. My wife was brought up with this duality of cultures and the tension between, on the one hand, a Croatian Catholic life with a strong folk religiosity connected to particular cultural customs and, on the other hand, a Swedish society secularized in quite a unique way. For her, the turning point came by the help of the Focolare movement and a three months education at their village Loppiano outside of Florence.

To marry me, a Swede, was seen by many as a sure way to lose her faith, as Swedes by default were seen as non-religious, or at least non-Catholic; I even went to a Croatian mass where the priest

⁷ One day actually a bus full of German Catholics led by a priest from Aachen came driving into the courtyard because they had heard the bell while passing. In this way, that almost became a tradition, there appeared from Germany a bus each summer full with Catholics, led by this priest. He also sent to us every Christmas a box of Aachener printen, a large and hard sort of gingerbread.

warned the parish against letting their children marry outside of the Croatian ethnic group. To their astonishment, we seemed more Catholic than the couples staying within the Croatian sphere, and they asked my father and mother-in-law how they had managed to get me to Church. This illustrates nicely the close connection between ethnic and religious identity and the necessity of creating bridges between Swedish converts (often academics) and folk religious immigrant groups.

For me the difference between Croatia and Sweden was huge. For example, my wife and I visited the little town of Nin in Croatia when it celebrated its patron saint. The whole village more or less turned up and they took the saint for a tour around town; the priest used a megaphone to call out the prayers. It was a totally natural part of life. I as a Swede was strangely aware that I didn't have to be ashamed and wonder what people would think of me, being so publically religious. The contrast was radical compared with my experience as a teenager in Sweden, with the two meter long Swedish parish priest who liked to make his voice heard and thus on Sundays bellowed with an apocalyptic tone at his parish, telling them what they should not do. He had a weakness for the Russian Tsar and had the imperial coat of arms put up next to the Sacristy. When he, the black biretta on his head, intoning in a booming voice a psalm, thus competing with the tolling church bells, took the lead of his little flock and ventured outside the church in a procession, I can assure you that we were not a natural part of the grey Swedish suburban street. He was also quite a sight when annually blessing the polish graves at the mostly Lutheran or secular graveyard; both dead and alive got a heavy dose of holy water which he distributed liberally with a tool that looked like a mace.

THE NEW SWEDEN

Sweden developed during the first half of the 20th century from a protestant nation-state with the king as its guarantor, to *folkhemmet* (the state as the home of the people, the welfare state) of the social democratic period (1932-1976). The latter was built on a strong paternalistic state and party, empowered by high taxes. It knew what was best for you and in return you were given security. One consequence was that higher education was free of charge, but controlled by the government.

This vision was broken by the first electoral loss in 1976 of the Social Democratic Party, but the socialist vision crumbled more decisively in 1989 with the fall of communism. They were then actually trying on a large scale to socialize private companies by *löntagarfonder* (employee funds), which were in place from 1982-1991.⁸ The struggle to have more than two (state) television channels

⁸ Parts of the profit of companies were used to buy shares in them; the shares were then owned by employee funds controlled by the unions.

was ended in the 1990s when the government admitted defeat. When I was a child, no commercials were allowed on TV, besides news, entertainment and documentaries, we could see only information from the government and its agencies; these small info-films on the necessity of wearing a life jacket, and not to drink while driving a boat, or to remember to submit your income-tax return form in time was the closest we got to commercials. When satellite dishes came, a Social democratic politician argued that it should be prohibited for private persons to own such dangerous devices. In 1993, the radio monopoly was, however, abolished.⁹ It is vital for a discussion of religion in Sweden to understand that the country in 2011 had just emerged from this rather totalitarian state of affairs.

During the late 20th century, Sweden was once again transformed, now from a more or less monolithic welfare nation to a multicultural mix, but still with a strong consensus culture. The two political poles were liberal and socialist. No significant sensible conservatism existed, only fringe nationalists with cultural conservative features. However, since its foundation in 1988, the nationalist party, the Sweden Democrats, has become increasingly stronger, and due to the recent waves of immigration, it is challenging the established parties.

With the emergence of this new multicultural Sweden, the position of the Catholic Church on a numerical scale grew, as immigrants are more likely to come from the globally dominant religious positions, and these are Catholic and Muslim – it is not very likely that we will have a strong immigration wave of Lutherans. The state church became more and more an anomaly, and was ended in 2000, though we still educate the priests for the Church of Sweden at state universities and there is a special law for the Church of Sweden (the former state church).

The main question now is what the ideological foundation of the nation and the state should be? Should we return to Swedishness in some form or hold fast to a liberal-socialist mainstream view with its individualistic rights language and welfare state solutions.

This is parallel to the problem facing the Catholic Church in Sweden, should all Catholics become Swedes, thus making the liturgy in Swedish the normative point (the nationalist option). Or, should we adopt a multiculturalist approach; with no effort to create a center (more or less the present situation). Or should we with missionary zeal try to convert the Swedes? Or should we embrace a global church, the Catholic globalist option, and settle once again for Latin, for example? No masses in national languages, but only in Latin, and everyone having their translations in little pamphlets.

⁹ In Sweden one can still buy wine only in special government shops and if you own a television set you have to pay a special fee that goes to SVT, the state television.

CONCLUSION

My own nuclear family with its Swedish, American, Danish, Croatian cultural mix is emblematic of the new Sweden. The questions vital for Sweden as a nation and state and for the Catholic Church in Sweden are very much the same questions that we try to straighten out, or at least handle, in our everyday family life.

The present challenge for the Catholic Church in Sweden is to find a viable position in the new global context that is true to the tradition of the Church. Neither multiculturalism with a relativist basis nor Swedish nationalism is of any great help in that process. In one sense, the Swedish situation is fortunate as the plurality of ethnic groups and languages within the Church and the fresh memory of a state church rules out a nationalist protectionist identity which can be tempting in countries like Poland, France or Italy.

To be a Swedish Catholic in the 21st century would then be to embrace a cosmopolitan identity colored by the particular Swedish context of departure from a state church system in which ethnic and religious identity were closely fused.

However, in order to do this the Catholic Church needs to resist the strong pressure of political correctness and recapture some of the milieu of an alternative culture, in which a vision of an interconnected life (truth, beauty and goodness) is incarnated, in contrast to the now ruling monetary utilitarianism and hedonism.