Did Finland become an ecumenical model country? Developments in Lutheran–Catholic relations in Finland from the 1960s to 1990s

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*Introduction*

»Finland is an ecumenical model country. Nowhere else in the whole world has a majority Church treated a minority Church with such openness and warmth.« Thus claimed Ambrosius, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Helsinki, at an ecumenical church event held in eastern Finland in 2001.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Apparently, the favourable ecumenical atmosphere remained unchanged over the following years, as Ambrosius repeated this praise in the Lutheran Archbishop Kari Mäkinen’s Festschrift 13 years later, explaining there how he had arrived at this evaluation. He praised the Lutheran Church for its resettlement of Orthodox Finns who had had to leave their homes in areas ceded to the Soviet Union following the Second World War, assigning them premises where they were able to continue their parish meetings and services. Metropolitan Ambrosius also expressed his gratitude that Lutherans were not disdainful that the relatively small Orthodox Church had been granted a similar legal status to that enjoyed by the Lutheran Church. Ambrosius was furthermore grateful that the Lutheran Church sympathized with a minority church, allowing it to express a strong identity which occasionally manifested in pronounced self-esteem.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Catholic Church in Finland echoed these warm words. In the Festschrift for an earlier Lutheran Archbishop of Finland, John Vikström (1982–1998), Paul Verschuren, the Catholic Bishop of Helsinki, lauded Vikström’s achievements toward Catholic-Lutheran ecumenism. Over Vikström’s time in office, the Finnish Lutheran Church had become internationally celebrated for its prolific activity on the ecumenic field.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Verschuren provided an anecdote which, in his view, illustrated well how open and trusting interconfessional relations in Finland were. Vikström, an avid footballer, once asked Verschuren for a favour: to approach the Catholic Bishop of Málaga to see whether a match could be arranged for Vikström and his team, The Bishop’s Boys, in Málaga. Verschuren considered this an interesting addition to the standard tools of ecumenism.

Verschuren also considered Vikström’s approach a fine example of how, in Finland, ecumenical activity takes place at two separate levels. The first consists of work done by the Finnish Ecumenical Council and its various subcommittees and working groups to rally together representatives from many religious communities. The second consists of bilateral negotiations effected chiefly through unofficial meetings and personal contacts.[[4]](#footnote-4)

By the early 2000s, Finnish Lutherans had become ecumenical partners of high international regard. When the German Bishop Rolf Koppe, at the time head of the German Evangelical Church’s foreign office, was asked whom he considered the best ecumenical cooperation partners, he named the Finns, explaining that »Finns are calm and tenacious, but their unhurriedness often proves ecumenically more efficient and profitable than the busy fussing of others.«[[5]](#footnote-5)

What were the reasons for Koppe’s view? How did Finnish Lutherans earn this reputation? These are the questions I shall try to answer in the following pages.

*Fresh views on the Catholic Church*

Ecumenism in the 1960s was mostly realized in inter-Lutheran relations and only occasionally in interaction with the member churches of the World Council of Churches, of which the Roman Catholic Church (henceforth, the Catholic Church), however, was not a member. Finnish Lutherans at this time viewed the Catholic Church with suspicion, imagining that Catholics were conspiring to convert unsuspecting Finns. An investigation commissioned by concerned members of the Lutheran Bishops’ Conference in the late 1950s, however, revealed that there was little cause for concern. The number of converts of Catholicism was minimal.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) of subsequent years was a watershed in many regards. In the Finnish context, the council signalled a distinct change in how the Papacy and the Catholic Church were perceived by Lutheran theologians and clerics. Nevertheless, news about the impending ecumenical council had first stirred consternation, because it was initially misunderstood to have called for a council for all Christians, Lutherans included. The resulting hysteria was short-lived, as theologians with better knowledge of Catholicism stepped forward to explain the Pope’s intentions.[[6]](#footnote-6) One of these theologians was Adjunct Professor Seppo A. Teinonen, who had taken a special interest in Catholic theology. Teinonen managed to be accredited as a journalist for the first three sessions of the council, for each of which he wrote long reports to the Finnish Journal of Theology. Through these documents, Finnish theologians gained valuable insights into the inner workings of the Council. During the last session of the Council, Teinonen even participated as an official observer for the Lutheran World Federation.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition to his journalistic endeavours, Teinonen also educated Finnish theology students and clerics on Catholicism inasmuch as was in his capacity as a university teacher. Many of Teinonen’s students would even become experts in Catholic theology and ecumenical activists.

Indeed, the Second Vatican Council would leave a deep and lasting impression on many Catholic churchmen and especially on their appreciation for the importance of ecumenical thinking. One such individual was the Dutchman Paul Verschuren, who became the bishop for Finnish Catholics in 1967. At the time, the Catholic Church in Finland was a tiny minority church, comprising only around 2,000 people, most of which were concentrated in the cities of Helsinki and Turku. The year 1967 also marked the 450th Jubilee of the Reformation, celebration of which took place in autumn of that year. To reflect the anniversary, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki also arranged a festive degree conferment ceremony. Ecumenically speaking, the most important feature of the ceremony was that, for the first time in the history of the Faculty, the degree of *doctor honoris causa* was awarded to a non-Protestant, the Finnish Orthodox Archbishop Paul. Furthermore, Bishop Verschuren was one of the guests of honour at the ceremony, marking the first time a Catholic churchman was present at the event.

Bishop Verschuren later told an anecdote which perfectly captures how different the ecumenical attitudes of two successive generations could be. When Verschuren first arrived in Finland as a Coadjutor Bishop in 1964, he asked Bishop Cobben whether he should pay his respects to the local Lutheran and Orthodox Bishops. According to Verschuren, Cobben was little enthused by the idea, replying to him, »We are the older Church!«[[8]](#footnote-8)

Bishop Paul Verschuren was not the only constituent of the Catholic Church in Finland interested in improving relations with the majority Church—and with other religious communities as well, for that matter. Father Jan Aarts was another Dutch pastor who had arrived in Finland after the Second Vatican Council. What made him especially well-suited to Finland was his work-in-progress doctoral thesis on Martin Luther’s theology. Over the period of working on his thesis, during which he conducted his research at the library of the Faculty of Theology, Aarts became acquainted with many Finnish Lutheran theologians. Aarts’s official instructor at the Faculty, Professor Lauri Haikola, claimed that he was happy at last to count a »real papist« among his students.[[9]](#footnote-9) Aarts finished his thesis (»Die Lehre Martin Luthers über das Amt in der Kirche«) and publicly defended it in 1972, at which four bishops representing three different denominations were in attendance, seated in the front row of the audience, giving the event a strong ecumenical character. None of the bishops had been especially invited, Aarts later explained. As Aarts’s opponent at the defence was Professor Gotthard Nygrén, a Swede himself, from the Swedish-speaking theological faculty at the Åbo Akademi, the resulting spectacle was that of a Dutchman defending his thesis on a German against a Swedish opponent from a Finnish university.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Verschuren and Aarts were both important personalities for the reorientation of the Catholic Church in Finland toward a more ecumenical direction. Verschuren probably also entertained a somewhat liberal reputation among Catholics at a global level. At the fourth Vatican Synod of Bishops, convened in 1974 to study the theme »Evangelization of the Modern World«, Verschuren suggested that an entire synod in the future be dedicated to the topic of the role of women in the Church. This suggestion followed that of Zairean Cardinal Joseph Malula, who spoke in favour of a married clergy. *Time* magazine opined that »the very fact that such proposals could calmly be suggested in the Pope’s presence suggests how open the synods have become.«[[11]](#footnote-11)

Even more significant in Finland was the role of Dominican Father Martti Voutilainen, who, in 1961, became the first Finnish Catholic priest to be ordained since the 16th century. Voutilainen lived in the Studium Catholicum, a Dominican cultural center in Helsinki established in 1949. He offered his most important contributions to Finnish ecumenism in his significant and active role at the Finnish Ecumenical Council (FEC), in which capacity Voutilainen remained as one of the two Catholic representatives in the FEC until 1992. In 1968, Finland became one of the first countries in the world in which the local Catholic Church joined the national ecumenical organisation. Until 1977, when Teemu Sippo was ordained, Voutilainen was also the only native Finnish Catholic priest.

At the University of Helsinki Faculty of Theology, Seppo A. Teinonen was appointed Professor of Ecumenics in 1966, and, in 1970, Professor of Dogmatics. Teinonen encouraged many of his students to study Catholic theology, an effort that culminated in two doctoral theses (by Eero Huovinen and Risto Cantell) and one licentiate thesis (by Simo S. Salo) on different aspects of the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng’s theology in the late 1970s. Küng was a high-profile theologian known for his opposition to the doctrine of papal infallibility. In the latter part of 1969, when the Catholic Church was still reeling from the aftermath of the controversial »contraception encyclical« Humanae Vitae of the previous year, Teinonen arranged a study trip for his students to Rome that included an audience with the Pope. There, Risto Cantell delivered a speech in Latin, and the Pope was given a large special edition of the Bible in Finnish. The Finnish students were pleasantly surprised to receive illustrious commemorative medals, in contrast to which the bishops and cardinals whom the Pope had greeted before them received »mere postcards«. Cantell, who also discussed the visit in an article for the leading weekly *Suomen Kuvalehti*, described the significance of the event in the following way:

For Finns who see the truth only in the Lutheran Church, the visit is of course an abomination. Those also who nurse the old 16th-century suspicions will have trouble finding anything good in the visit. From the viewpoint of the churches’ mutual dealings, there was also nothing new or epoch-making about the reception itself. What was essential and must be emphasized above all was the Pope’s heartfelt friendliness. We arrived at the beginning of a genuine ecumenical collaboration. The times of the Counter-Reformation are over.[[12]](#footnote-12)

When Teinonen became the Chair of Dogmatics in 1970, his post in ecumenics was taken up by Professor Kalevi Toiviainen. Under Toiviainen’s tutelage, Huovinen, Cantell and Salo visited Küng in Tübingen and invited him to visit the University of Helsinki and Finland in general. Küng was finally able to come to Finland in April 1975. In his memoir, he describes his travels, which took him from Helsinki all the way north to Lapland and even close to the Soviet border. The days in Lapland were spent skiing and, in the evenings, the three young scholars interviewed him about his theological views, recording the conversations on tape. Küng proudly recalls in his memoir being the only one of the foursome who, after sauna, dared to dash naked through the snowy forest. However, despite his request, the young Finns declined to cut a hole in the frozen lake so that he could have a dip in the icy water.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Hans Küng was also interviewed by *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest Finnish newspaper. The story portrayed him as a »heretical« Catholic reformer whom the Vatican was unable to silence. Küng was quoted saying »in earlier times, I would have been damned and burned at the stake«.[[14]](#footnote-14) The interview was perhaps unhelpful in improving Lutheran–Catholic relations.

By the mid-1970s, Hans Küng became the most widely published Catholic author in Finland. The year before his visit to Finland, the three Finnish Küng scholars had written a slim volume analysing Küng’s theological impact titled *Kirkon ykseys ja reformi. Hans Küngin herättämä ekumeeninen keskustelu* (Church unity and reform. The ecumenical discussion raised by Hans Küng). The Finnish translation of Küng’s *Was ist Kirche* appeared in 1975, followed by Eero Huovinen’s translation of *20 Thesen zum Christsein* in 1976.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Ecumenical pilgrimages start in 1985*

The next phase of the Finnish inter-church relations commenced in January 1985. John Vikström, who had been elected the Lutheran archbishop in 1982, travelled together with the Orthodox Archbishop Paavali and the Catholic Bishop Paul Verschuren to Rome to celebrate an ecumenical mass at the basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva held for Finns living in Rome or elsewhere in Italy. There had been Finnish masses held sporadically at a side altar of the basilica in earlier times, but this mass would be the first such one to be held at the prestigious Capranica Chapel, situated next to the main altar. The descendants of the Capranica family had only two years earlier consented to leaving the chapel to the Finnish churches’ disposal. It was clear from the beginning that masses held there would be ecumenical in nature. Initially, the trip had been negotiated by Archbishop Vikström, while Bishop Verschuren and Archbishop Paavali had joined the talks only later.[[16]](#footnote-16)

At the Vatican, the Finnish delegation visited the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and talked with its head, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands. The fact that the three Finnish Churches had come to Rome together to pray, Willebrands acknowledged, was significant for the ecumenical movement. In the private part of the meeting, convened between Willebrands and the three bishops, Archbishop Vikström explained to Willebrands the whole kaleidoscope of the Finnish Lutheran Church’s ecumenical relations. He expressed his gratitude toward the spirit of ecumenical openness displayed by Bishop Verschuren and the Catholic Church in Finland, stressing that he felt the two Churches were very close to one another. Vikström also mentioned that, at the Lutheran World Federation’s Assembly in Budapest of the preceding year, the Reformed Churches had expressed concerns that Lutherans were drawing too close to Rome and further away from the Reformed churches. Willebrands and Vikström also discussed recent developments in the Soviet Union’s religious policy and in the Russian Orthodox Church with Willebrands concluding that Soviet–Vatican relations were, at the moment, non-existent.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Finnish Bishops also secured an audience with the Pope. Naturally, the audience was closely followed by the media. This was the first time the Pope had met with leaders of three different Churches from the same country, and Vikström was the first Finnish Lutheran Archbishop to meet the Pope. The Orthodox Archbishop Paavali had met Pope Paul VI in 1971.[[18]](#footnote-18) The Finns were impressed with the Pope’s hospitality and were convinced that he was »a great friend of Finland«. Bishop Verschuren claimed that the atmosphere was so homely that even difficult issues could be discussed effortlessly. Archbishop Paavali even considered inviting the Pope to Finland but eventually failed to do so. Paavali explained to the Pope that the ecumenical service the bishops would be holding jointly the following day »represented the first flower of a new ecumenical spring« and that »an atmosphere of freedom« prevailed between the Churches in Finland. He also hoped that a similar climate of equality and brotherhood could be possible in countries where the majority church was not Protestant but Catholic or Orthodox. The Pope expressed his curiosity about the city of Kuopio, the location of the Finnish Orthodox Archbishop’s see, ordering that a map be brought in so that Paavali could show him Kuopio’s location.[[19]](#footnote-19)

During this trip, *Helsingin Sanomat* published an editorial on the journey of the Finnish church leaders. The newspaper portrayed the Holy See as the third great power in the world, based on its »religious influence and per-capita wealth«. In the article, the editors expressed their scepticism over what could be achieved by meeting with the Pope, especially if Vikström were to enter the Vatican hand-in-hand with Martin Luther. They stressed that, for Archbishop Vikström, the journey was »no pilgrimage« and reminded their readers that Luther was still banned by the Catholic Church and that the Catholic Church was hardly about to abandon its traditional teachings or morals. The editors, notwithstanding the reservations of theologians and laymen alike concerning rapprochement with Rome, opined that a chance to meet with Pope John Paul II and to discuss topical ecumenical issues together with other Finnish church leaders must be considered the most important benefit of the trip.[[20]](#footnote-20)

After the trip, John Vikström addressed reactions at home to his visit to the Vatican, stating that meeting with the Pope had not even been the main goal of the trip. Vikström and Archbishop Paavali had said to Bishop Verschuren that they would be ready to see the Pope if he granted them an audience. Shortly before setting out for the journey, they had been informed that an audience would indeed take place. To those worried that the meeting had been a step too far, Vikström promised that it had not signalled the abandonment of Luther or Lutheranism. Luther had been a prominent point of discussion in the talks both with the Pope and Cardinal Johannes Willebrands at the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Vikström said that all participants were fully informed of the differences between their Churches, pointing out that Catholic attitudes towards Luther had changed for the better following the Second Vatican Council and that there were many renowned Catholic Luther scholars. Already even then, Catholic–Lutheran theological dialogue had been taking place for some time with promising results. Furthermore, Vikström was convinced that an essential part of promoting visible Christian unity was the holding of a common prayer. He said that, both in Turku and in Rome, he had acted and prayed for the unity of the Christian Church.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Although the first joint visit of the Finnish bishops to the Vatican was a success and there were plans to continue on the same track, a two-year hiatus elapsed before the following visit. Since 1987, these visits have taken place on an annual basis. They have always followed the same formula: the delegation has comprised one of the Finnish Lutheran bishops, who have taken turns in participating, a delegate from the Catholic Church in Finland (not always the Bishop), and, irregularly, a delegate from the Finnish Orthodox Church. The delegation has usually visited the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (from 1988 onwards, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity) first before meeting with the Pope. Always on 19 January, the visitors have held an ecumenical service at the basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. The Finnish ambassadors to the Vatican and to Italy have also participated in the services and social events arranged in connection with visits, usually held at Villa Lante in the Gianicolo hill, once the office of the Finnish Embassy to the Vatican.

The bulk of the theological discussions has always been conducted during the visits to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which was headed first by Cardinal Willebrands and, since 1989, by Cardinal Edward Cassidy. In their reports, the Finnish Lutheran bishop visitors since 1987 frequently expressed that they felt the persons in charge of the ecumenical relations in the Vatican regarded highly the Finnish connection.[[22]](#footnote-22) In addition to doctrinal and ecumenical questions, themes discussed have usually included international political or church political topics, such as the turbulent situation in Ukraine at the end of the 1980s or the beginning of the Gulf War in 1991.

*Pope John Paul II’s visit to Finland, 1989*

The Scandinavian Catholic bishops made their quinquennial *ad limina* visit to meet the Pope in October 1982. Bishop of Oslo John Gran, who was also the Chairman of the Scandinavian Bishops’ Conference, invited the Pope then to visit Scandinavia. In an interview published in the Finnish Catholic monthly *Fides*, Bishop Verschuren said that there was disagreement among the Bishops whether the time was right for a visit from the Pope. Verschuren pointed out that all the other Bishops’ Conferences had invited the Pope to visit except the Scandinavian, and it would seem odd if they did not do so as well, suggesting additionally that it would be good for the Pope to visit places where the Catholic Church was a minority church and to see what kinds of difficulties Catholics there faced. In doing so, the Pope would also would have the chance to meet with representatives of the majority churches. The main problem in Verschuren’s view was that the visit needed a theme, and the Bishops did not yet have a good idea for what that should be.[[23]](#footnote-23)

At their next *ad limina* visit in 1987, the Scandinavian bishops renewed their invitation, and this time the Pope accepted.[[24]](#footnote-24) Before presenting the invitation, Bishop Verschuren, who was now chair of the Scandinavian Bishops’ Conference, had made sure that none of the Nordic Lutheran Archbishops and their Churches would have anything to say against the Pope’s visit. From the outset, Verschuren planned for both the Evangelical Lutheran and the Orthodox Church to participate in welcoming the Pope to Finland and for the visit to be not only pastoral but also ecumenical in nature.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Intensive preparation began immediately in the Finnish Catholic and Evangelical Churches. In the latter, the Church Council’s Department for International Relations set up a team to prepare for the visit, and the Turku archdiocese set up another to plan the ecumenical service to be held in the Cathedral of Turku. One important dimension of the preparations was informing the media and people about the papacy, the Catholic Church and the ecumenical significance of the visit. Risto Cantell, who prepared a key memorandum for the Department for International Relations, stressed that the Pope was neither leading a crusade to Finland nor trying to entice Finns back to Catholicism. That is, the Catholic Church’s ecumenical method since the Second Vatican Council was not one of *reditus* (return) but of *unitatis redintegratio* (restoration of unity).[[26]](#footnote-26)

The *30Days* (*30Giorni*) magazine (an Italian magazine for »ecclesiastical geopolitics«) interviewed Bishop Paul Verschuren on the eve of the pope’s journey to Scandinavia. They asked Verschuren to comment on the image of Scandinavia as an »incubator for secularism on a world-wide scale«. Verschuren said he was annoyed by the *L’Osservatore Romano*, which had stated that Scandinavians live »in a pool of immorality«. A further source of Verschuren’s indignation was one German bishop who had warned about the dangers of »the Scandinavization of Europe«. While Verschuren did not deny that secularization had made great strides in Scandinavia, he pointed out that this was not the reality in the vast rural areas, where one could still find »truly aggressive religiosity«. Verschuren also challenged the idea that secularization was a phenomenon born in Scandinavia: »Someone will have to explain to me why, in Poland, there are more abortions than in our countries, and why, in Italy or Belgium, there is a lower birth rate than here. Regarding sexuality, if one takes a walk around Rome, one can observe a sexual morality which is much worse than here: here, one sees nothing.«[[27]](#footnote-27)

Pope John Paul II arrived in Finland on 4 June 1989, following his visits to Norway and Iceland. In Norway, the Pope’s reception was hardly ideal: only 4 of the 11 Lutheran bishops of Norway attended the ecumenical prayer service in the Nidaros Cathedral of Trondheim. Furthermore, Bishop of Oslo Andreas Arflot pressured the Pope to recognize the Protestant Churches as genuine independent churches, and revival movements held public demonstrations against the Pope.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The Pope was accompanied, among others, by Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, the Vatican Secretary of State, and Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. On his first day in Finland, the Pope met with the representatives of the Finnish State, President Mauno Koivisto and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pertti Paasio. The following day began with an ecumenical prayer service in the Cathedral of Turku. Archbishop John Vikström and the Pope spoke together, on the one hand acknowledging that there were significant differences between the Churches, on the other hand stressing that there was much in common to unite them. The Bible texts at the service were read in turn by Bishop Verschuren and the Orthodox Archbishop Johannes and delegates from the Baptist, Methodist and Anglican Churches. The Lutheran Church had invited all Finnish Churches and religious communities to send their delegates to the service. Only the Pentecostals and the Free Church had abstained from sending a representative. All Finnish Lutheran Bishops attended the service and the following reception. After the service, Archbishop Vikström and the Pope led the congregation on foot to the nearby Archbishop’s House, where the informal reception was held. The Pope stopped occasionally to greet members of a cheering audience that had lined up along the route. Archbishop Vikström later revealed that the topics discussed at the reception included not only such theological themes as secularization and ecumenism but also more secular ones like skiing and football. In the chapel of the Archbishop’s House, the Pope even blessed Vikström’s first grandchild.

After having travelled to Helsinki, John Paul II first met with priests from Estonia and Belarus then gave a private audience to Archbishop Johannes, the head of the Finnish Orthodox Church. The main religious event of the visit, at least for Finnish Catholics, was the Papal Mass held in the Helsinki ice stadium. Around 8,000 people were in attendance, including the Lutheran and Orthodox Archbishops. In the evening, the Pope gave his main political speech for the whole Scandinavian visit at the Paasikivi Society, a prestigious foreign policy forum. He looked back at the summit of the Conference of Security and Cooperation, held in Helsinki in 1975, noting its significance in promoting religious freedom and human rights in Europe.[[29]](#footnote-29)

From Finland, the Pope continued first to Denmark and finally to Sweden. In Denmark, the atmosphere and attitudes towards him were the chilliest, whereas, in Sweden, the Pope’s reception was very warm.

The Pope returned to Rome accompanied by Bishop Verschuren. According to Risto Cantell, at that time Archbishop Vikström’s secretary, the Pope had told Verschuren that »we have now much work ahead of us«. When Verschuren asked what the Pope meant, he said that »we must rethink many matters«.[[30]](#footnote-30) Cardinal Willebrands stated that the Pope had, immediately after the journey to Scandinavia, said that it had been his best so far.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Evidently, this visit changed Pope John Paul’s perceptions about religious life and the staying power of Christianity in the Nordic countries. The positive impressions from the visit were reflected in the encyclical *Ut unum sint. On the commitment to Ecumenism*, which came out in May 1995. There, Finland and Sweden are especially noted.[[32]](#footnote-32) On the audiences he granted to the Finnish St Henrik’s Day ecumenical delegations in the 1990s, he fondly recalled the spiritual atmosphere of the prayer service in the Turku Cathedral, the walk to the Archbishop’s House in the sunny summer weather and the informality of the reception there.[[33]](#footnote-33)

*The Finnish and Swedish Archbishop’s return visit to the Pope, 1991*

Pope John Paul’s visit to Scandinavia was not the only reason why Sweden and Finland were so positively regarded in the encyclical *Ut unum sint*. In October 1991, the Finnish and Swedish Archbishops returned the Pope’s 1989 visit to Scandinavia. The occasion was the 600th anniversary of the canonization of St. Bridget of Sweden. The Lutheran and Catholic Churches in Finland and the Vatican agreed to hold an ecumenical prayer service in St. Peter’s Basilica. It was presided over by Pope John Paul II, the Lutheran Archbishops Bertil Werkström from Sweden and John Vikström from Finland and the Catholic Bishops Hubert Brandenburg from Stockholm and Paul Verschuren from Helsinki.

Among the leading ecumenical organizations, this event raised suspicions that the Finnish and Swedish Lutheran Churches were paving their own path in their relations with the Vatican and thus frustrating wider organizational ecumenical efforts. The Archbishops were asked to stop in Geneva on their way to Rome to talk with the General Secretaries of the three leading ecumenical organizations, Emilio Castro from the World Council of Churches, Gunnar Stålsett from the Lutheran World Federation and Jean Fischer from the Conference of the European Churches. Archbishop Vikström and Archbishop Werkström succeeded in alleviating the concerns of their hosts, convincing them that their churches were not planning to make any fundamental changes in the ecumenical approach agreed upon by the organizations and that their relations to the ecumenical organizations would remain unchanged.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The ecumenical service in the Basilica of St. Peter, 5 October 1991, marked the first ecumenical service in the Basilica that the Pope held jointly with bishops from other Churches. The Pope and both archbishops gave brief homilies focusing on the contemporary significance of St. Bridget’s heritage and ecumenical relations between the Churches. Afterwards, Cardinal Willebrands said that the Pope had taken a concrete step to unity by holding the service jointly with the Lutheran archbishops in the Basilica. He pointed out that the Pope had also wanted to send a message to the Curia and Italian Catholics. Not everyone in the Catholic Church would be happy with the ecumenical progress he was making, the pope warned, and negative reactions were only to be expected.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In conversation with his guests, John Paul II himself hearkened back to his visit to Scandinavia, expressing his hope that »you there in the North will find a way forward that could be an example for everyone«. Cardinal Willebrands, for his part, confirmed that the Scandinavian tour had changed the Pope’s views of the Nordic Churches, noting the uniqueness of the Nordic countries. Bishop Paul Verschuren was likewise convinced that the Pope had truly seen the Scandinavian Churches for the first time: these churches were not abandoned by their people.[[36]](#footnote-36)

*Conclusion*

The Finnish and Swedish Lutheran Archbishops’ visit to the Vatican in October 1991 marked an important milestone in the post–Vatican II history of Catholic–Lutheran ecumenical in general. In Finland, the 1960s had still been a period of mutual reservations, often characterized by prejudice and suspicion. The Second Vatican Council initiated a dialogue in Finland that quickly led to increased conversations between Lutheran and Catholic churchmen and theologians, following which 1985 saw the start of the annual St. Henrik’s Day ecumenical pilgrimage to Rome, which united the Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic Churches in Finland. Pope John Paul II’s visit to Finland in 1989 showed the Pope and his closest advisers that truly warm relations existed between the Finnish Churches and that Finland was hardly the irreligious country devastated by secularization of the prevailing Vatican imagination at the time. Although the 1991 visit marked an important milestone, progress did not cease there. Annual ecumenical visits by Finnish churchmen have continued uninterrupted, and John Paul II has always recalled with fondness his visit to Turku and Helsinki.

Another milestone in Catholic–Lutheran relations was the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999. Bishop of Helsinki Eero Huovinen played an important role in the birth of this document.

Since the late 1980s, the idea of Finnish Lutheran–Catholic theological dialogue has continued to gather speed. In 1993, in connection with the celebrations of the anniversary of the 1593 Lutheran Uppsala Synod, Cardinal Edward Cassidy proposed that the Lutheran Churches in Sweden and Finland engage with the Catholic Dioceses of Stockholm and Helsinki in a dialogue on the church and the ordained ministry. However, it was only in the early 2000s that the Swedish-Finnish Roman Catholic–Lutheran dialogue began. The dialogue culminated in the 2010 report *Justification in the Life of the Church*. In 2014, a Finnish Lutheran–Catholic dialogue group was inaugurated, which produced the 2017 report *Communion in Growth: A Declaration on the Church, Eucharist, and Ministry.*

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