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Utrecht and Uppsala together: A Developing Communion from a Swedish perspective

Christopher Meakin

1. Encountering the other – preliminary remarks

It can be an enlightening and sobering experience when an encounter with others forces us to reflect on our own identity. This can be the case both for individuals and groups, but also for churches. I have had the privilege of taking part in several ecumenical dialogues between very different traditions, including Swedish Baptists, the Episcopal Church, and the Uniting Church in Sweden. An early phase in such dialogues can be to explain to each other how we describe ourselves in each respective tradition.¹ Often this turns into a discussion of how to understand terms in general use, as one discovers that the same epithets can be given quite different meanings not just across denominational boundaries but even within one and the same family of churches. This can be an eye-opener for both parties: each understands not only the other but also themselves better. This phase of getting to know each other and defining concepts is a necessary clearing of the ground before the dialogue can go on to a more profound, mutual comprehension of identities through refined theological description.

I had such an experience in the dialogue between the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht which has now joyfully resulted in an agreement on communion. The dialogue started in 2005 and I joined the Swedish delegation in 2008 as Church of Sweden co-secretary, when I became the church's chief ecumenical officer. Since there were several new members on both sides at that time, there was a renewed need of acquainting ourselves with each other's traditions. I remember how we had long discussions on how to describe the Church of Sweden. Our Old Catholic dialogue partners thought initially that we without more ado could be called Protestant or Evangelical. When we realized what they intended by these terms, we felt that we did not really

¹ See the summary of results of such a process in the present case: *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion. Report from the Official Dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden* (2013), section 1.5.

recognize ourselves in their understanding. Quite apart from a number of theological distinctions that would have to be made before they could apply, we pointed out that many of our members would seldom use these epithets about themselves. After some debate among ourselves and without any claims to scientific or statistical proof, we Swedes came to the conclusion that our members would rather identify themselves quite simply as “svenskkyrkliga” (literally “Swedish Church”²).

The Church of Sweden stands in the Lutheran Reformation tradition, but the Reformation of the sixteenth century was in some ways moderate here. It has kept Catholic features of both theology and practice which have had varying significance at different times in history since then, for instance in the role attached to the episcopate, in its liturgy and in its church buildings. At times the influence of continental German Lutheranism has been strong; at others, its own brand of Lutheranism has been apparent. In modern times the church has been deeply engaged in and very much influenced by ecumenism and the liturgical movement, which have strengthened its Catholic identity in a broad sense. Today it is going through a transition from being a majority state church (the separation of church and state was formally made in the year 2000) to finding its role as a folk church still with a large percentage of the population as nominal members (around 60%), but with decreasing numbers due both to secularization and to the increasing pluralism of faiths, ideologies, ethnicity and culture in Swedish society. All these factors influence the way both active members and those not so closely involved look on the church, which probably explains why its identity comes to expression in the term “svenskkyrklig” rather than in a confessional epithet. These factors also lead to one of its greatest challenges: to rediscover what it means to be a church in mission.³

² See *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion* (as note 1), section 4.2.

³ For more information on the Church of Sweden see in addition to the presentation in *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion*, the official homepage <http://www.svenskakyrkan.se>. Clicking on the menu and then on the caption “Om oss” provides links to presentations of the church in other languages (Arabic, English, German, Spanish). For an initiated introduction to the history of the Church of Sweden in a Northern European and ecumenical context see Lars Österlin, *Churches of Northern Europe in Profile. A Thousand Years of Anglo-Nordic Relations* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1995). For a more explorative, academic examination of aspects of the Lutheran heritage in the Nordic countries, which also identifies problematics: Anne-Louise Eriksson et al. (eds), *Exploring a Heritage. Evangelical Lutheran*

When we discussed what being Old Catholic was, it became clear that we Church of Sweden people had great difficulty in liberating ourselves from automatic associations between Catholic Church and its Roman variety. This was the case even though we as schooled theologians were well aware of the foundational meaning of Catholic in creed and ecclesiology. Our Old Catholic partners patiently pointed out on a number of occasions that we were stuck in a stereotype denominational understanding, whilst sometimes confessing that they themselves could be guilty in a similar way of seeing us too simply through the lens of the continental Lutheranism they had earlier encountered.

In a later phase of ecumenical process, participants in a dialogue may experience that they have come to understand each other more deeply. They may have developed an intuitive sympathy for the other tradition as particularly explained by its representatives in the conversations. They have probably used ecumenical methods and positions to interpret the compatibility of the theological traditions involved. In this situation, it is not altogether easy for those involved in the conversations then to communicate the dialogue experience to those who are to receive its results in the respective churches. For these probably look on the other quite differently precisely because they lack this experience. They might even consider the dialogue group to be floating around in an “ecumenical bubble”. Of course, it can be said that the results should speak for themselves in terms of historical and theological criteria. And during a dialogue the progress should be reported back and analyzed by relevant authorities. The conclusions should certainly possess some form of objective and canonical validity if they are to have effect on the relationship of the churches to each other. However, the process of ecumenical reception involves many other factors than purely theological ones. Therefore, I have sometimes wished that many more members of churches – both leadership and congregations – could be involved in dialogue processes. This would, however, probably be deemed impractical.

These introductory remarks are not just a question of the methodology of formal ecumenical dialogue, but point to what I hope could be an important consequence of this dialogue and agreement on communion be-

Churches in the North (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), for example chapter 4, Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, ‘Ethics and Ecclesiology: Burning Issues for Church of Sweden’, 79–96, and chapter 13, Thomas Ekstrand, ‘The Construction of Lutheran Identity in Church of Sweden’, 249–264.

tween the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Church. We live in different traditions and contexts, and there are still differences in our theologies, but we have discovered that this does not hinder a deeper fellowship in which similarity behind apparent unlikeness can be developed. Since our churches have not in the past had much concrete contact or cooperation, there is ignorance of each other amongst our broader membership and we tend to work with oversimplified generalizations about each other. As section 2 in the report indicates, earlier interest for the Old Catholic Church within the Church of Sweden was often limited to certain groups that in a perhaps oversimplified way could be called high church. Exactly the experience of reflecting about epithets and identities, and talking to each other about faith and life in “ecumenical bubbles” should be extended to many church members, and this agreement creates possibilities for this in the arena of lived-out fellowship. Bubbles tend eventually to burst, so I think that this kind of process of encounter would not only deepen mutual understanding and the relationships between those most closely involved in getting to know each other but would help many to look in a more diversified way at what it means to be Catholic and/or to belong to a Reformation tradition. Therefore, such encounters could be beneficial to the encounter between the Church of Sweden and other churches as well.

The reflections on the dialogue and its results which follow are personal and selective. I make no claim to be an official representative of the Church of Sweden here, even though I was a member of the dialogue group.

2. Theological achievements and their challenges

I would like to look at what I believe are some theological achievements of this dialogue. Each of these is at the same time a challenge, at least from the perspective of the Church of Sweden. These achievements concern: connecting bilateral relations, communion of local churches, and the church and sacraments.

2.1 Ecumenical loose ends

The first point is a question of tying up ecumenical loose ends. Since the modern ecumenical movement started, both the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht have developed bilat-

eral relationships with churches from various traditions, some eventually becoming full communion. It is surely an anomaly, at least in concrete church life, but also in ecclesiological principle, that in several cases both have been in communion with the same churches but not in communion with each other. We have been sister churches with Anglican Churches (Old Catholics through the Bonn Agreement in 1931 and the Church of Sweden through the Porvoo Communion in 1994, respectively), with the Philippine Independent Church (by extension of the Bonn Agreement in 1965 and by a concordat in 1995, respectively), and with the Spanish Episcopal Reformed Church and the Lusitanian Church (by extension of the Bonn Agreement in 1965 and extension of Porvoo in 1998, respectively), but not with each other. This in a nutshell is the complex issue of the transitivity of ecumenical relationships. It is therefore a positive step forward that we have now solved this with respect to these churches through this communion between Uppsala and Utrecht.

But the challenge remains in various ways. The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht are in communion with the Anglican Communion whilst the Church of Sweden is formally speaking in communion only with certain Anglican Churches (specifically the churches in the British Isles through the Porvoo Common Statement and the Episcopal Church in the United States of America through an act in 2015 acknowledging the actual communion which had come to expression in ecclesial praxis at different times since the eighteenth century). In practice, there is perhaps an informal transitivity with regard to other Anglican Churches. Maybe this agreement could contribute something to a process of clarification of the relation between the Church of Sweden and the Anglican Communion, developing the significance of the relationship affirmed by the Lambeth Conference in 1920, which effectively led to what was then known as “intercommunion”.⁴ An even greater challenge is the lack of communion between other Lutheran Churches of which the Church of Sweden is a sister church in the Lutheran World Federation, and the Old Catholic Church. An added factor is the fact that some of these other Lutheran

⁴ See Lambeth Conference. Resolutions Archive from 1920, published by the Anglican Communion Office, [London]: Anglican Consultative Council, 2005, resolutions 24 and 25,10; on the internet www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127731/1920.pdf (accessed 16.12.2017).

Churches are in communion with some Anglican Churches,⁵ which are in communion with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht. The Union of Utrecht-Uppsala communion is thus an ecclesiological achievement which will increase in significance if it does actually contribute to continued and shared work on the question of transitivity.⁶

2.2 *Subjects of communion*

Another achievement is that we have an agreed text on the church as a communion of local churches.⁷ The idea of local church is used more or less exactly, and more or less consistently, in different contexts. This does not have to be a problem. Many terms are often used loosely without causing misunderstanding. However, when providing the basis for communion between churches, it is important to have an agreed understanding of the subjects that are bearers of this relationship. This is not primarily an organizational question but a theological one. In this agreement, it is clear that communion between churches from different traditions is to be related to how responsibility is taken within each church for its unity and life.

Since the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Church are both episcopal churches, even if the historical and theological reasons for this are not identical, it should follow that the local church is where the bishop is the focus of local communion. The dioceses in communion with each other form larger unities which in a variety of ways can be bearers of “denominational” communion. The organizational and historical cultural forms for these larger unities can vary, so that the Church of Sweden is a structurally unified national majority church whilst the Old Catholic Church is a union of autonomous national minority churches. This plurality of organizational forms calls for a basic theological understanding of the local church as bearer of communion.

This agreed understanding of communions of local churches at different levels as the basis for the communion between the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Church can be a positive challenge to the Church of

⁵ The other Lutheran Churches in Porvoo are in communion with the Anglican Churches of the British Isles (1992), whilst the Episcopal Church has a similar agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (2000), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada with the Anglican Church of Canada (2001).

⁶ See *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion* (as note 1), section 6.3.

⁷ See *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion* (as note 1), section 5.2.

Sweden in its work with some internal complexities. The role and function of the bishops is continually under discussion, as is the relationship between parish and diocese. The Church of Sweden as the sum of its thirteen dioceses is in principle and formally unquestioned, but some claim that dioceses show tendencies towards autonomous self-understanding so that rather than one Church of Sweden there are thirteen churches of Sweden. The question of how the whole people of God is responsible for the church and involved in decision-making which is seen in the relationship between episcopacy, the ordained ministry and synodality is also often under debate. In all these discussions, it is my impression that there is a tendency in Sweden for organizational, even bureaucratic considerations to play a disproportionate role. An engagement with the understanding of the communion of local churches, coupled with the fact that our partners in the churches of the Union of Utrecht live this out in other ways, may offer helpful perspectives to continued processes in the Church of Sweden.

2.3 Approaches to sacramentality

A third achievement I wish to comment on is the treatment of the sacramentality of the church.⁸ This idea has been used in multilateral and bilateral ecumenical documents and has become a common dimension in much ecumenically oriented writing on ecclesiology. The Church of Sweden has been involved in or taken cognizance of these developments in various ways. A number of Swedish theologians have also integrated this ecclesiological approach but it is probably not a general characteristic of thinking about the church, and there are reservations about it both among church leaders and theologians. There are certainly various reasons for this, but two are often mentioned. Firstly, there is the question of the compatibility of this approach with the traditional Lutheran teaching on sacraments where clear institution by Christ and a promise related to the sacramental act are important. The other is the question of the matter of the sacrament, where there is a fear that this use of sacramentality can give (certain) organizational structures of the church undue significance, for what material element of the church is transformed by the word, apart from the dominical sacraments? These reservations remain for some even if they fully accept that this whole question is related to an incarnational theology in a broad sense.

⁸ See *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion* (as note 1), section 5.3.

It seems to me that the brief presentation of the sacramentality of the church in the agreement is carefully worded, with the necessary qualifications so that it can be interpreted in such a way that the reservations can be met. However, this was one of the question marks raised during the process of reception and decision by the leadership in the Church of Sweden. It is therefore a significant achievement that this did not create an obstacle to the eventual decision to approve the agreement on communion. The question of sacramentality can be interpreted in different ways. We are agreed on the fact that our differences in sacramental theology and praxis are acceptable within communion. This can also be given theological justification in other ways. This achievement can also challenge us in the Church of Sweden to explore the resources of the Lutheran tradition regarding ecclesiology and sacramental theology to find our own way of relating to the idea of the sacramentality of the church which has become so important in ecumenically oriented thinking on the church.

3. Ways forward in established communion

The agreement has now been approved and the communion it establishes has become part of the reality of our churches. This was solemnly celebrated in Uppsala in November 2016. Will this communion become a concrete reality in the life of our congregations and members, or will it remain something which impinges solely on the world of church leaders and theologians? The report as a whole from the dialogue is of course important for understanding the basis of communion, but the recommendations in section 7 are the most important part if communion is to be realized in the life of our churches. These recommendations provide many opportunities. We are to look on each other's members as our own and therefore welcome them to receive sacramental and other pastoral ministrations. We can work together in mission and service to the world, sharing resources where appropriate. There are possibilities for partnership in ordained ministry, since those ordained in the one church can serve in the other. Our communion in the apostolic ministry can be expressed by the participation of the bishops of our churches in each other's ordinations of bishops. Through the participation of representatives of one church in consultations and events of the other, as well as through the exchange of ideas and information, or of students, there can be much mutual learning in theological and pastoral issues. Cooperation between our parishes can also be a concrete expression of the communion between our churches.

Therefore, it is vital that we continually bear these recommendations in mind and do not miss opportunities to put them into concrete practice.

During the years of dialogue, I sometimes heard people say: “Will this be relevant for our members, given that there are so few Old Catholics in Sweden and very few know of the existence of this ecclesial tradition at all?”⁹ I am also sure Old Catholics have given expression to similar sentiments: “When do we have anything to do with Swedish Lutherans?” Despite the geographical, sociological and numerical factors which might make some doubt the significance of this communion, I am nonetheless convinced that it can be fruitful for all of us if we want it to be. I would particularly like to identify the following perspectives for the future.

Bearing in mind the mobility of people today, both literally and culturally, they encounter churches in many countries. People who have Church of Sweden or Old Catholic backgrounds will find themselves in the vicinity of our respective parishes and congregations, either briefly as tourists or longer-term as residents in a new country for work or because of new family situations. In this situation, we could cater to the spiritual needs of the other church’s members when they do not have access to their own. The Church of Sweden has congregations abroad in certain places, for example in Copenhagen, Oslo, Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin, Wien, Lausanne, New York, but in other places where we do not, where language skills permit, the Old Catholic Church could now be a natural alternative. The Old Catholic Churches do not have the same sort of “ex patriot” congregational organization. Of course, Old Catholics from one country will go to an Old Catholic Church in another country where it is present. In Sweden or in countries where we have congregations abroad but there are no Old Catholic parishes the Church of Sweden could now be an alternative for them. However, for this to work we must make the possibilities known to our members and this requires conscious effort. In some areas both our churches are present, for instance in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and a closer cooperation between them could benefit both and strengthen the significance of our communion.¹⁰

⁹ There is a small Old Catholic congregation in southern Sweden, but the Church of Sweden has not had very much to do with it. We understand that a member of the International Bishops’ Conference is delegated to keep in touch with it; this is currently the Bishop of Haarlem, Dr Dirk Jan Schoon.

¹⁰ This is, I believe, already happening in Austria.

The report notes that the two churches “have a deep commitment to the visible unity of the church and to the ecumenical movement, and maintain an open, though critical, attitude to changing values in society”.¹¹ Therefore, our communion with each other should find many fruitful expressions in various ecumenical organizations or projects and shared engagement in issues relating to the church and society in the ecumenical movement.¹² The fact of our communion and the experiences and insights we might gain together from its lived reality could also contribute to other processes towards greater fellowship between other churches.

My final perspective on the future relevance of our communion is in the field of ordained ministry. Here I would identify two areas for fruitful interaction.

Firstly, the fact that our two churches, whilst coming from different traditions of theology and spirituality, today have a similar polity as regards the role of men and women in the ministry can be an important witness. The decision to ordain women was taken in Sweden in 1958 and the first three women were ordained in 1960.¹³ For many within the Church of Sweden it may be an unexpected realization that a church from the Catholic tradition can also have women priests. This could be a useful contribution, both within our own ranks and in a number of other contexts, enabling discussions on the future of ministry to take place with fewer preconceptions. I would also hope that the exchange of ideas and experiences of both male and female priests in our two churches would enrich the practice of ministry.

Secondly, in discussions in the dialogue group, we considered our different ways of fulfilling the church’s diaconal vocation, which are rooted

¹¹ *Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion* (as note 1), section 1.1.

¹² The Church of Sweden has already been involved as an observer in a project on globalization and catholicity involving the Union of Utrecht, the Philippine Independent Church and the Episcopal Church. There were three meetings in Maarsen (the Netherlands) in 2006, in New York (USA) in 2007 and in Manila (the Philippines) in 2008. The Church of Sweden was represented at the second and third meetings. A paper on “The Church of Sweden Model of Catholicity” was given by Rev. Anders Lindow in New York. See Marsha L. Dutton with Emily K. Stuckey (eds), *Globalization and Catholicity. Ecumenical Conversations on God’s Abundance and the People’s Need* (Beiheft zu IKZ 100; Stämpfli: Bern, 2010), 119–125.

¹³ See Karin Sarja, ‘Women’s Situation in Church of Sweden’, in: Eriksson et al. (eds), *Exploring a Heritage* (as note 3), 177–190. This study was written in 2012. Since then two critical points mentioned have changed, namely that the Church of Sweden has a female archbishop and a female chair of the synod.

in our different presuppositions and contexts. It was noted by both sides that it might be appropriate for the Old Catholic Churches to strengthen the role of their permanent deacons. In that case, something could perhaps be learnt from both the history and present situation of the diaconate in the Church of Sweden with both its positive and problematic aspects. The importance of the permanent diaconate was also discussed in the process of reception and decision-making by the Church of Sweden leadership. This could be an area of mutual learning both in relation to the ordained diaconate and to the diaconal responsibility of congregations and their members.

“Communion is one of the most beautiful names of the Church.”¹⁴ Thus wrote Frère Roger (1915–2005), founder of Taizé. He wanted his community of brothers, coming from various church traditions, to be a parable of communion. He wanted the thousands of people, both youths and adults, who visit Taizé to learn from this parable what the church is all about: not one more religion but the offer to all of communion with God.¹⁵ We must, however, live constructively with differences in communion. Frère Roger, who was a Protestant, wrote:

I found my own Christian identity by reconciling within myself the faith of my origins with the mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking fellowship with anyone.¹⁶

My hope is that the experience of communion in difference between the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht could also be a parable of communion for others.

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¹⁴ [Roger Schutz], *A Path of Hope. The Last Writings of Brother Roger* (London: Continuum, 2006), 41.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Ibid.

2008 until 2013 the Swedish co-secretary on the dialogue between the Church of Sweden and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht.

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Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag beginnt mit einer kurzen Reflexion über methodische und psychologische Komplexitäten ökumenischer Dialoge. Begriffe und Benennungen zu definieren, ist nicht nur eine intellektuelle Übung, sondern erfordert, um eine gegenseitige Verständigung zu erreichen, Gesprächspartner, die ihre Identität verstehen und sich zu eigen gemacht haben. Der Rezeptionsprozess kann durch die Tatsache beeinträchtigt werden, dass diejenigen, die formell und informell die Ergebnisse akzeptieren sollen, die schrittweise wachsende Verständigung innerhalb der Dialogkommission nicht miterlebt haben, wie dies etwa in den Gesprächen zwischen der Kirche von Schweden und der Altkatholischen Kirche der Fall war. Anschliessend werden drei theologische Errungenschaften dieses Dialogs kommentiert und dabei jeweils deren Herausforderung für die Kirche von Schweden benannt: die Frage der Transitivity, die Gemeinschaft von Ortskirchen und die Sakramentalität der Kirche. Zum Schluss erörtert der Autor drei Arten, wie die Gemeinschaft zwischen den beiden Kirchen konkret umgesetzt werden kann – in der Seelsorge an den Mitgliedern der anderen Kirche, wenn diese sich im Ausland aufhalten, in der gemeinsamen Wahrnehmung ökumenischer Verantwortung und in der Entfaltung des Dienstes.

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

Church of Sweden – Union of Utrecht – communion – ecumenical methodology
– theological achievements and challenges