

# The church of Sweden model of catholicity

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie**

Band (Jahr): **100 (2010)**

Heft [1]: **Globalization and catholicity : ecumenical conversations on god's abundance and the people's need**

PDF erstellt am: **21.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-422217>

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## 10. The Church of Sweden Model of Catholicity

*Anders Lindow, Church of Sweden*

It is much easier to describe a product than a process. To describe the Church of Sweden model of being a church must inevitably be to describe an ongoing process. This chapter is thus a short introduction to the Church of Sweden (CoS) in Swedish society and in the global context.

In A.D. 1593, the CoS adopted the Evangelical-Lutheran faith and became a church independent from Rome. To describe the historic roots and identity of the church, one could say that the CoS is a reformed catholic church with an Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, or even, in the words of Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, an evangelical-catholic church. Either way, the church is widely recognized as having preserved apostolic succession, a fact more important for some of us and less for others. When the winds of Reformation swept through Europe and the Nordic countries, some of our catholic bishops were ready to set sail to follow the new winds. The Reformation meant a break with Rome but not with the catholic tradition or with the catholicity of the worldwide church.

Later the church, during a period of Lutheran orthodoxy, became more like other European churches that had earlier on become more reformed. This change coincided with a period when the church and state were one, when the church practically administered the civil society hierarchically, with laws and orders coming down from the top. This reality must be understood within the special history of the Nordic folk churches. The separation of church and state was a slow process, effected by incremental reforms over at least seventy years.

Many church leaders have underlined the special character of the CoS and the importance of both its catholic and its protestant roots in an unusual combination. In many ways the second Vatican Council was the starting point of a more massive understanding of the church's roots. The 1970s and 1980s awakened new liturgical awareness and a movement toward spiritual renewal. These changes resulted from a rediscovery of the Roman Catholic heritage, which had been preserved in every local parish, but they also developed because of the ecumenical movement, which cut across church borders, and the work of Faith and Order in the WCC.

The CoS emphasizes the two sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. One can clearly see an integration of liturgy and dogma, liturgy and theology, liturgy and *diakonia*. We emphasize the preaching of God's

word and treasure the sermon as a transmitter and giver of life in faith. We adhere to the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds, confessing that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The word *catholic* is not used in Swedish, but rather the word *allmännelig*, which can be translated as *common* or *for all*. Today a variety of new forms are being used to express the same creed. Until the 1960s liturgy was celebrated in exactly the same way in all churches in our country, but today great liturgical variety and freedom are accepted as long as the historical structure of the ordinary mass and the theology of the liturgy are preserved.

### Church Structure

The CoS has an episcopal structure, with one bishop for each diocese, elected by the diocese, and one archbishop, but the church is strongly focused on the life of the individual congregation. The role of the bishop and the diocese is to support the parishes. The bishop, with his or her diocesan board and chapter, has great liberty in relationship to the national level. The national level is not pastoral in any sense; it is there to support the dioceses, to represent them, and to coordinate national and international work. The bishops, working together in the bishops' meeting and its theological committee, are responsible for teaching. The archbishop is *primus inter pares* and has a representative function. He or she cannot overrule any decision of another bishop.

The Statutes from 2000 declare that the local parish, with the members gathered in worship around the sacraments, constitutes the true church. The Statutes therefore define four fundamental and interrelated tasks for the parish: worship, *diakonia*, teaching, and mission. These tasks must be planned locally by every parish in a so-called Parish Instruction, which starts with a local analysis of the social context. This approach is something completely new and difficult for parishes that have through the ages always waited for orders from above.

The "double line of responsibility" is an expression referring to the two fundamental church functions: a democratic process shapes the life and organization of the church, while the educational process operates alongside the democratic. The two processes cannot be separated, even though the responsibilities of the bishops and clergy are primarily in the spiritual field. The elected laypeople are responsible for the practical organization of church life, but the vicar is always part of the parish board and is normally the chief executive with delegation from the board. With the reform

of 1982 the democratic principle became predominant. That reform broke with historical tradition, with bishops no longer able to vote in the Church Assembly. The Assembly, the Board, and its standing committees have representation from the national political parties and non-political groups, which play an important role and have increasing numbers of active and spiritually aware delegates. This system, which clearly has both strengths and weaknesses, is related to the government's parliamentary system. Every fourth year church elections are held, with sixteen-year-olds allowed to vote, two years earlier than in the general elections.

A debate is underway on how far democratization can go in the CoS. With the democratic system come risks as well as benefits from having different opinions under the same roof. Alongside the majority decisions in the General Assembly comes the need to accept diversity of opinion. Both aspects of this process are restricted by the interpretation of what it means today to be true to the gospel, an interpretation that requires thorough theological consultation among both clergy and laypeople.

### **Ecumenical Action**

Ecumenically, because of its special history the CoS has always considered itself and been considered by others to be a bridge-building church, linking different church traditions both nationally and internationally. This fact has in many ways simplified the church's official relation to Rome. At the national level the CoS is in an intense and close relationship with the small Roman Catholic church in Sweden, which consists mainly of immigrants and has approximately 120,000 members. Since the 1920s the CoS has served as one of the strongest convenors in the world ecumenical movement. The Lutheran World Foundation began sixty years ago in Lund, Sweden, and the 1991 Porvoo Agreement (also Porvoo Agreement) led to a full "altar and pulpit communion" with the Anglican and Episcopal churches in northern Europe. It has also helped to strengthen CoS-Anglican relations around the world. The CoS is of course one of the most active members of the very strong Swedish Christian Council, which in addition to the CoS has twenty-seven catholic, Orthodox, and free churches. A retired Swedish bishop, the Rt. Rev. Jonas Jonson, is the chairman of the committee for dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC.

The CoS considers itself only a local office of the worldwide church and therefore incomplete until it has relations with the whole body of

Christ. Catholicity as we see it is an invitation to be included, never to exclude. We believe in non-fulfilled catholicity: the church does not yet include the whole world. When we say the whole world, we mean people of all faiths and religions. Today the CoS emphasizes the macro-ecumenical perspective, although we are still learners. We are starting up multifaith dialogues, especially with Muslims. We have been defending their right to build mosques in Sweden and working with them to serve people of all faiths in hospitals, prisons, and universities.

Since the 2001 World Trade Center attacks we have worked together to organize seminars and lectures on Islam to distinguish religion from terrorism, to avoid prejudice, and to promote dialogue and integration. No small number of Muslims participate in our church life, sharing our faith in one God as a common ground, as well as their understanding of Jesus as a prophet. Many Muslim families prefer that their children attend the CoS weekly children's activities, which are open to non-members, so that they may learn to respect the monotheistic faith, prayer to God, and a religious tradition rather than growing up with atheistic values.

### **The Church of Sweden in Sweden**

The CoS is organized, like all Nordic folk churches, to be related to and to serve the people of Sweden. It is therefore organized into territorial parishes that cover the whole country, though the geographical borders themselves are unimportant. Our view is that the church must be open and offer its services to everyone, just as a post office is needed to serve every village. Of almost nine million inhabitants in Sweden, approximately seven million are members of the CoS. Despite the separation of church and state in 2000, the CoS will probably remain a majority church, although we are gradually losing members.

For historical reasons, some bonds between the CoS and the state remain unbroken. The state has a special law for the CoS, requiring that it remain an Evangelical-Lutheran church and extend throughout Sweden. As a majority church we still believe in including all, irrespective of their beliefs, and we have the resources to make this requirement possible. The church must be open, welcoming, and giving, even for people who do not contribute to it. The church Constitution defines this position as the "concept of staying," meaning that the local parish has the responsibility to serve everyone who lives, works, studies, or for any other reason stays within its territorial borders. This concept is an interpretation of the catho-



licity of the church. The church has also a long tradition of offering support to sailors and other Swedish citizens living or spending time abroad.

The model of being a church is defined in the tension between being a communion of believers and being an institution for the whole population. The important thing is the function of the church, which is clearly a viewpoint dating from the Reformation. The Reformation is therefore always ongoing. The sanctity of the church always resides not in its organization but in ensuring everywhere that the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. Understanding how society has developed over time and is developing today is essential for the organization of the church life and interpretation of its mission.

The idea of the folk church is now moving toward an idea of being a church that offers its services to everyone who asks for them, toward being a mission-oriented church. This understanding comes from the awareness of the CoS's theological and pastoral responsibility as a majority church: a big church has a big responsibility for others. Exercising responsibility for the development of the society and the whole world is therefore central to its mission. The CoS wishes to offer both services and responsibility to everyone, but that offering must come from a communion of believers at the center. The identity of the community of believers is that it is a communion for others.

### **The Church of Sweden and Catholicity**

If catholicity means that the church has everything, believes everything, and seeks to give its definition of truth to everyone, then the CoS interprets catholicity differently today. When in 2004 former Archbishop K. G. Hammar, with Swedish journalist Ami Lönnrot, published a book titled *Jag har inte sanningen, jag söker den (I Do Not Have the Truth, I Seek It)*, it prompted a massive debate within the churches; some accused him of teaching a liberal theology. But he had the courage to be the first archbishop to raise the real questions and respond to the spiritual search of his people, who enormously appreciated his book. The CoS way is to search openly for the truth in everything in the gospel and to invite everyone to join in this search.

Today, clearly, the role of the CoS has dramatically changed. It has become distanced from power and is no longer at the center of people's daily lives. But it remains the framework for the great majority of Swedes in interpreting life.

If catholicity is to announce the whole gospel, the CoS interprets that role as meaning that it must address all the social, political, economic, and environmental issues of the gospel. When the CoS took the lead in the so-called “Easter Appeal” to the government, demanding a more liberal and humane Swedish policy on asylum and immigration, it united not only the Swedish Christian Council but also a great number of people and organizations in Sweden. The Swedish Christian Council is an important platform for the churches’ common statements and criticism on social issues. The local parishes are heavily involved in the creation of alternative economies and markets for fair-trade products. On a national level, the policy department works hand in hand with many other organizations on issues like global warming, the debt crisis, and the eradication of poverty. A pastoral letter from the Swedish bishops on HIV/AIDS was printed and distributed in Sweden in November 2007.

### **Self-Critical Reflections on the Church of Sweden Model of Being Church**

How much is our model of being a church dependent on our economic resources and how much on our true identity and faith? Maybe this question can only be tested in a context of the lack of resources. Would such a situation make us more credible, or would it cause us to be seen as acting out of desperation?

If the church is indeed mission, mission is greatly needed in Sweden. Maybe the problem today in our country is less secularism than idolatry. When everything and everyone is measured in economic terms, individualism and consumerism reign. Each person must decide what is sin, but the church as a communion must also make that discernment by means of the gospel.

We live in God’s world, and our mission is to assist in God’s mission to create one world for all. The CoS needs to practice the ability to discern, analyze, and make the right choices by means of our Christian faith. For this work we need better organization and more consciousness and awareness. We have been working a long time in multilateral church communion; now we need strong bilateral relations linked to our local parishes. We have still not learned to appreciate or fully understand communion and bilateral relations with other churches. We have to learn, from other churches and together with them, better ways of resistance to the negative effects of global restructuring and economic reductionism; we

must instead globalize solidarity. We are a donor of economic resources for development work in poor countries and for church growth abroad, but we need to learn that others also have important resources from which we can benefit. We must develop good relations with churches worldwide if we are to be prophetic and to give hope. In pursuit of this goal we want to contribute our own way of being church, respecting our own identity and the identity of the other churches. We want to be willing to listen to others. That also is catholicity.