

Light from the north: Church growth in Nordic countries



When the Nordic Bishops' Conference met in Iceland last September, it noted an exciting new trend. The Catholic Church is growing in Scandinavia and is showing signs of vitality in several ways, one of which is the growing number of vocations both to the secular priesthood and to religious orders.

A month later, at the Synod of Bishops in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI mentioned Norway among the countries where the Church is experiencing renewal. He concluded: "Today we see, where one would not expect it, how the Lord is present and powerful, and how he continues to be effective through our labour and our reflection."

At the moment, out of about 282,000 registered Catholics in the Scandinavian countries, there are 31 candidates preparing for the priesthood. Looking back over the past 15 years, this indicates a small and steady – but not dramatic – increase in vocations and in the Catholic population. As a proportion of the total number of Catholics, the Scandinavian countries have more seminarians and people in the early stages of consecrated life than many other regions in Europe. The Archdiocese of Vienna, Austria, for instance, has 30 seminarians out of 1.3 million Catholics.

The Nordic Bishops' Conference provides the following statistics:

Sweden has nine seminarians in formation for the secular priesthood and eight preparing for ordination

in religious orders out of 103,500 Catholics (population nearly 9.5 million).

Norway has nine seminarians out of 115,600 Catholics (population 4.9m).

Denmark has two seminarians out of 40,400 Catholics (population nearly 5.6m).

Finland has two seminarians out of 11,900 Catholics (population 5.4m).

Iceland has one seminarian out of 10,500 Catholics (population 319,000).

In addition, the Neo-Catechumenate has 18 candidates in formation in Denmark and 15 in Finland. In terms of vocations to women's congregations, it appears that contemplative sisters are doing better than sisters in apostolic orders, though statistics are not available.

How can these encouraging numbers be explained? The following impressionistic analysis is based on informal interviews as well as my own reflections. It is by no means a comprehensive sociological study.

Love for Jesus Christ and a sense of a calling constitute an absolutely central motivation for the candidates, several of whom have been received into the Catholic Church as adults. Matteus Collvin, one of the Swedish seminarians, points out that the intense search for God during an ecclesial conversion process can be paralleled by, or leads into, an equally thorough exploration of the personal path of service.

The fact that religion is nowadays part of the public sphere, whereas it was almost taboo only two decades ago, facilitates the search, according to Collvin. Even though Catholicism and the Catholic priesthood are still perceived as something rather strange in society at large, candidates feel that the growing interest in religion (including non-traditional forms) makes their way of life sufficiently accepted.

The Bishop of the Stockholm Catholic Diocese, Anders Arborelius, says that the candidates have settled in well and feel at home both in Catholic culture and in traditional Swedish culture, which is becoming more pluralistic. Some candidates have one native Swedish parent and one who is a Catholic immigrant. This mixture shapes someone who discerns and becomes critically loyal to the Church, as well as to values and customs in civil society. On some ethical issues and values, however, Catholicism and mainstream thought are irreconcilable. But to be well acquainted with both makes candidates cap-

able of navigating the moral waters, even if they are not always able to dissolve the tension.

Bishop Arborelius also suggests that the Catholic Church in Scandinavia has the benefit of being less intertwined with national sentiments and structures, in comparison with, for example, the Church in Flanders or the Basque country. Practising Catholics are spurred on by the missionary challenge of being a minority community that has not been in a dominant position in the past. Unlike the Lutheran Churches in Scandinavia, the Catholic Church is not part of the establishment in society. Despite an official separation of Church and State, political control and influence over Lutheran Churches is still operative in many ways. The Catholic Church, by contrast, is less dependent and seems freer to manifest its views, irrespective of public opinion.

A series of promising initiatives have been taken in Scandinavia in recent years, which have developed the Catholic community in general and promoted vocations in particular. Three of them stand out. Sr Marie Ronnegård, at St Dominic's Convent in Røgle, southern Sweden, is impressed with the network of young, committed Catholics in Norway. Norwegian youth work has built on foundations laid by past generations. Authors such as Sigrid Undset and various charismatic Franciscan and Dominican personalities have given Catholicism an attractive face. Large groups of acolytes are carefully formed and clergy are highly professional in the encouragement they offer to potential candidates for the priesthood.

Secondly, in the Gothenburg region of Sweden, Franciscans and various people in the main parish in the city also work extensively with the young generation.

Thirdly, there was the inauguration in 2010 of the Newman Institute in Uppsala, the first Catholic university in Sweden since the Reformation. Run by the Society of Jesus, it offers courses in philosophy, theology and cultural studies. Its theology degree is accredited by the state, and an application for recognition of a philosophy degree has just been sent to the Swedish Higher Education Authority.

Occupying a new wing of the Newman Institute is the seminary of the Stockholm Catholic diocese. While priestly formation used to take place predominantly in Rome, the Catholic Church in Sweden now benefits from having a local seminary. The seminarians attend courses at the Newman Institute, together with laypeople from all over Scandinavia, some 60 per cent of them via distance learning.

Because the Catholic community is small, a type of family network has emerged. The Catholic Church as an organisation is – perhaps surprisingly – rather horizontal, which reflects Scandinavian

management culture at large, as depicted in the book *Moments of Truth* (or literally translated *Tear Down the Pyramids!*) by Jan Carlzon, the inspirational former president of Scandinavian Airlines. The bishops often know the faithful by name, and although titles are used, conversation quickly moves into the more familiar second-person pronoun.

Another element that promotes vocations is the fact that practising Catholics in the Nordic countries mostly speak favourably of the priesthood and of the Catholic Church. They identify themselves easily and naturally with Catholicism. There is an atmosphere of optimism without, however, denying the existing problems and the need for improvement. Those who consider a possible vocation might be motivated to represent a Catholic community, with which other Catholics may wish to be associated. Priests, nuns and brothers will probably be respected, though neither excessively venerated nor hopelessly disrespected.

Sr Marie Ronnegård, of St Dominic's Convent, recalls that when she attended secondary school in the 1980s, pupils were awarded high marks for deconstructing and criticising a subject. In her view, tearing things apart led to a rather cynical attitude. By contrast, Catholic teaching offers a coherent and more meaningful world view, while still allowing both critical reflection and debate. For anyone coming from the Dominican tradition, that can only be seen as encouraging.

More generally, the prioress of St Dominic's, Sr Sofie Hamring, argues that all sociological explanations are secondary to the essential love for Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work. Notwithstanding her focus on theological aspects, Sr Sofie holds that Sweden has been at the forefront in terms of questioning moral values, but not necessarily always for the better. In recent decades, Sweden has taken the lead in liberalism; people have been able to try almost anything, without boundaries or limits. What we are experiencing now is a counter-reaction to this liberalism, a reaction that may surface in other countries too.

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