

Truth, Religion and Catholic Faith in Sweden.

Reflections on some recent signs of concern.

Rome, 20th of September 2010

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Dear friends,

First of all I would like to express my great gratitude to have been invited to this event and this congregation of passionate people in the service of Our Lord and His Church. It is truly an honor to be here. I don't know so much about the Centro Culturale Lepanto, however I know from Mr. Alberto Carosa that your commitment in participating in the contemporary world and its complications as soldiers of the word is awesome and I am convinced that this is an important war we all have to fight. We are obliged to it as responsible Christians. Our Lord gave us, each and every one, some special talents, and how futile they ever seem to be to us, we should use them for the common good.

I am also very happy to be right here in Rome, near the See of S. Peter, and among so many authentic relics of our martyrs and saints. (And actually, I am not disturbed by the less probable relics – I take all that can help my poor soul to my heart, even if it is made of rabbit bones or plastic).

We Christians don't need a Mecca, we don't need even a Rome, because we all pray with our face towards the eternal Jerusalem and Our Lord in Heaven. But still, places of saintly history have a special grace. For me, coming from a "dead end" on the European map – a peninsula called Scandinavia, every trip to Italy, France and Spain means a Catholic vitamin cure, and then I am referring not only to the

history but also to the living Church, however much in crisis it might be. There are still lamps burning and people praying...

Before I turn to the very recent situation for Christian truth in my country, I would like to give you a brief look on our history. The northern countries were Christianized late in history. During the era of the famous Vikings, around 600 to 800 AD we had some Christian influences, but not strong enough to change the society and the heathen rituals. That is the reason why we find just some stones and metal objects, left behind from Irish, British and oriental Christians. At 829 the brave Hamburg bishop, Ansgar, tried to convert the leading king's men to Catholicism, but it was not until 1008 that Sweden became a Christian country when king Olof Skötkonung was baptized by Sigfrid, an English missionary. (Olov's daughter Ingegerd was later married to Vladimir of Novgorod, they had six sons and four daughters, all became princesses in Christian European royal courts. Ingrid was proclaimed Saint in the Orthodox Church under the name S. Anna of Novgorod.)

Thanks to influences from the orders, Cistercienser, Franciscans and Dominicans even some Carthusian convents, Sweden became a important Catholic cultural center during 14th an 15th century. Churches were built all over the country. The nobles gave their property to the orders. And a religious order was also founded by one of our own; you are probably familiar with the patron of Europe, S. Birgitta of Vadstena, whose statue is the first you meet when you enter the gate to the Vatican. In Vadstena, a small town, there was a double convent (nuns and monks in separate building connected by the church), with an impressive library where people came from all Europe to study. Homilies were said in no less than five languages.

But this development of a truly Catholic civilization was violently interrupted by the so called Lutheran reformation from c. 1530. What the Swedish kings in the Vasa family achieved – against the peoples will - was nothing less than a cultural revolution, with many similarities to the one of Mao Zedong. Convents were closed and destroyed; beautiful handwritten missals were torn into pieces or used as accountant books. Gold, and silver were stolen, land confiscated. And Altar chalices were used as beer bowls by the royal court. Despite all this, some Catholic traditions were maintained, like blessings of the harvest, communion in the mouth and statues of S. Mary were strangely preserved and still there is a devotion to Mary in some churches. (I remember that I was learnt in the preparation for my Lutheran confirmation, that no layman was aloud to touch the chalice. However Catholic this might seem to be, it is just exterior relicts of passed times – the significance of the signs is lost.)

We still live in the aftermath from that destruction of truth, culture and religious freedom. The very year we today remember, 1870, the first post-reformatory Catholic parish was founded in Malmoe with only 15 members, all immigrants. A German aristocrat came to Sweden and was chocked to see the hard conditions under which the Catholics in the country lived. He became priest just to help the Swedish Catholics. And this was – not to forget – during the time of Kulturkampf in Germany.

It was not until 1873 a Swede could convert to the Catholic Church without being thrown in prison. Until 1951 it was prohibited by law to enter a convent and you could not build a convent on Swedish land until 1977. A teacher or a nurse could not openly confess his or her Catholic faith until 1962. And actually, even today you are better to keep silent on your faith as teacher, because you risk loosing your

job. (It is not considered to be objective if you teach about the embryonic development, but if you inform on how to have an abortion - it s OK). We had no diplomatic connections to the Holy See until 1982, and it was just some years ago that the Swedish state shut down (!) its embassy in the Vatican. The Lutheran church was a department of the state until 2000 and even today the royal family has to confess to the faith of Martin Luther, it is a constitutional obligation.

Now the Catholic population is growing continuously, due to immigration - actually we had more converts during the 50ths than now. We are some 100 000 members of the one and only diocese in Sweden, with different national identities. It is really a church in the “Diaspora”.

No wonder that those who try to introduce Roman-Catholic thinking have mountains to climb.

As editor of a Catholic magazine, distributing good ideas from the Catholic world, from our rich deposit in the tradition of course, but also from contemporary writers, journalists, philosophers, men of the holy orders, and laymen like you and me, I and my small staff of cooperators have to confront this climate of hostility. It is really a complex situation- every day we hear that our society is open, tolerant and that citizens are free to speak, to think and write and even print whatever they like. Our borders are open towards people from other cultures. But at the same time, it could really look like we still live in the Lutheran climate of anti-catholic controversy, where hatred towards everything Catholic in general and the Pope indeed, is extremely well tolerated but the very principles of Catholic faith cannot be tolerated, even if they are aimed towards only Catholics, like catechism in catholic schools or texts from the pope, encyclicals (*Humanae Vitae* ...).

Lies and prejudices regarding the Catholic Faith are abundant in media and schoolbooks and even in the Parliament. (A Swedish member –liberal - of the government and the European parliament started recently a Facebook group against the Pope, where her liberal comrades are expressing - without blushing - their will to “burn the Vatican” and “kill the Pope”. It is a paradox, indeed, to read this from so called liberal politicians.)

But one has to be careful to draw conclusions too quick; often it is all about ignorance and lack of knowledge and facts, or even a product of disinformation. People are not evil in general. There is always someone out there that wants to hear words of truth and common sense. I will give you some examples of how something evil actually can be turned to something good.

When Pope Benedict XVI had his now famous speech at the University of Regensburg four years ago, the headlines talked about a pope that had made provocations against the Muslim world, accusing them for always choosing violent solutions. Portraits were made of a pope prepared to reawake the idea of crusade. We could within few days publish the whole Regensburg text in Swedish. It was soon referred to in articles, and it actually started a good discussion on the concept of truth and religion.

Another example: A well known and respected radio reporter with Poland as his field reported that it had been a police raid against a convent with rebellion nuns – they had not paid their rent and it was a controversy between the convent and its motherhouse. The story was reported - not without amusement - that the police had found a man and a Franciscan monk in the nuns cloister, and “nuns carrying babies” ...Big headlines on the front-pages of our evening tabloids added that “some nuns looked pregnant”, all aimed at scandalizing the Church. However, we have

polish speaking members in the editorial staff, so we could easily check this up: The police was there because they were worried about the nuns; they had not paid the electricity bill so they had no heating. The baby was there because her mother and father were visiting a novice, who was the sister of the mother. And the priest was their spiritual father, reading mass every day in the convent. We succeeded in having the tabloid to make a correction and a minor excuse – that is a real sensation.

When the radio reporter was confronted with the truth he dismissed us – not because we were wrong but because whom we are. That was in the national radio. We were just some Catholics with “opinions”, but he had his professional status and undisputable contacts in Warszawa. What he did not know was that we have a network of information in that very province of Krakow; some 250 well informed polish priests!

I am telling you this because it says something on how we Catholics can meet the flood of disinformation. We have to confront it with truth. Media could be cruel, but they have rules to follow. We must force them to correct themselves and take the opportunities to spread the truth. For every attack we could take a step forward instead of hiding in the shadows of uncertain and, if not always, but often unjust accusations.

If media could be tackled, the news agencies on the other hand, is a growing problem in our time – never discussed, never analyzed or put into question. They are free of every ethical principle. They produce, buy and sell news as any other goods, whether they are true or not. They have no obligations, give no guarantees. It could be real news as well as pure propaganda. It is up to the publishers to judge – which they seldom do.

You are maybe familiar with the hate campaign against the Holy Father – just one of them – when it was stated that he had compared homosexuals with environmental pollution creating climate changes. That created a massive wave of hatred in my country, even from members of parliament, who wanted actions to be taken against the Vatican.

However, the Pope did not mention homosexuality in the speech. By translating the whole speech we could prove this, and at the same time we had a good reason to distribute that very lucid teaching, aimed for the cardinals, by the Holy Father to the Swedish newspapers and many readers to whom these thoughts never had reached otherwise.

(The source for this lie was the Reuter Rome reporter; he is not a lover of Catholic faith...)

Conscience Catholics today have to act. But we should not act from sentiments of suppression or to make us seem like victims. Action is not always equal to be seen and heard. Some weeks ago I interviewed a professor from the province of Orissa in India. He had something interesting to say. In that province houses and churches are put on fire, peaceful Christians are beaten up; they have to leave their families, homes and villages. They are even killed. But they never retort with violence. And that is – according to this professor of sociology – a strength that they have which make them even stronger for every new attack. What the enemies - mostly Hindu activists – want is a sign of hatred or revenge, so that they have a reason to upscale the violence.

Better than words of indignation or violence is truth. And that is how we must continue. We must never get tired in telling the hard facts, on faith, history, moral,

ethics, philosophy, and even unrevealing political trends that are threatening that truth that constitutes the fundamentals of our society.

Personally I am a bit concerned when even our coworkers in the vineyard seem to be afraid of speaking the truth, and prefer to be politically correct. This is not what people need. And it is not what the Church needs. It can even create disappointment and a lack of respect for the Church. In a minority church like the Catholic Church in Sweden, I experience this exaggerated cautiousness every day, not just from the Swedish “panchristian” democratic party (KD), that now has abandoned conservatism in values for liberalism and populism. But even in the few Catholic publications we have, a certain adaption to mainstream ideas on matters of religion and lifestyle is prevalent. This was not the case when there was just some 3000 faithful in the country, active, productive, united and always loyal to the Magisterium.

Let me give one last examples from my horizon as editor of a Catholic newspaper:

In March 2009 it was known that a 9 year old girl in Brazil had undergone abortion. She was pregnant with twins, in the 16th week. The archbishop José Cardoso Sobrinho had tried to convince the mother to avoid abortion and the diocese had put every effort to give medical and spiritual assistance to the family. But the girl was kidnapped by a pro-abortion organization, and the abortion was accomplished. On a question from some journalists the bishop is answering that all people that are cooperative in an abortion are excommunicated *latae sententiae*. And that is the start point of the most burning campaign against the Church.

Soon the Catholics bishops of the Nordic countries made an identical statement that the “behavior” of archbishop Sobrinho was “incredible” and that it had added suffering to the girl’s family. However they did not know the facts behind, which

were quite easy to find. We contacted the Archbishop himself, and he could confirm our informations. It was not until June 2009 that he got recognition in L'Osservatore Romano, it was stated that he had acted with pastoral sensitivity and at the same time explained Catholic teaching in this delicate matter. Instead of supporting the truth and a colleague, the bishops of the Nordic countries had created confusion and sent out double meanings.

We Catholics in Sweden find ourselves in a precarious situation because we let the government's tax system include tax for the Catholic Church. We have become dependent on the benevolence of the State. The State can put ideological pressure – and indeed it does - on Catholic institutions, like associations and the few schools we have, to follow the secular trends in respect of gender ideology, sexuality etc.

We know that Christ did not come with a solution of how to govern or organize a state, he was not a politician. We shall pay our tax and follow the law. But we also know that He is the Truth, the Way and the Life. So when the State orders us to go against Christ, we cannot obey. And we cannot keep silent.

What better example do we have than those dramatic days, 140 years ago, here in this very spot, when the political power tried to force the brave Pope Pius IX to capitulate with a lie and to obey even the false values of the secular state? But he did not sign. And he did not keep silent. And he refused to become “the chaplain of the king”. The Roman Catholicism has popes like him to thank for that the Vatican State still exists as a memento for the whole world about the Rock who is Peter, the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth.

Thank you and let us never forget to pray for the Holy Father. Prayer is of course also an action, and maybe the most productive of them all.

(Today we celebrate Our Lady of Stockholm in my parish – the Cathedral, I pray that She will protect the Holy Father and the Church from evil.)