

## **The Encounter with the Orthodox Church in Russia – some personal and cultural aspects**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

My primary point of observation is that of personal experiences. At the same time, I am searching for a universal applicability to my observations (as far as possible). By nature, my survey is historical in the sense that it follows the views that have developed in the course of years, even decades, and have been partly modified, about the encounter and interaction between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church.

### **An encounter over 30 years ago as an eye-opener**

My first eye-opening encounter was in the summer of 1976, when I was let in with a Finnish Orthodox delegation to visit the Soviet Union and to meet the Russian Orthodox Church and its activities in Leningrad. The tour was conducted by a Finnish Orthodox priest and an interpreter who had an excellent command of the Russian language. Thanks to them, we were admitted to several places of interest. The first one of the photographs in my photo album is of the Smolna and Smolna church, of our Ingrian-born guide and of the circus of Leningrad! There are also pictures of Peterhof, not to mention the Spiritual academy where the later monk in holy orders Panteleimon of New Alamo – currently metropolitan of Oulu - was studying. My impressions of this first meeting with the Spiritual academy are beginning to cool off, even if I have had several opportunities to visit the place since and I have made an effort to recall the first visit.

## Archbishop Simojoki and Secretary-General Potter

One impression has remained strong in my mind's eye. In the session hall of the Spiritual academy there was a picture wall with pictures of numerous leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as that of Archbishop Martti Simojoki of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, and one of Mr Philip Potter, Secretary-general of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Archbishop Simojoki held the post until 1978, and Mr. Potter was WCC secretary-general from 1972 to 84. The pictures speak of the importance of outside contacts for the Russian Orthodox Church, not least during the cold war that tended to isolate even Christians within their own limited groups.

The photographs of Archbishop Simojoki and Secretary-general Potter were a symbol of the search for church unity and interaction beyond troublesome barriers. It was a two-way process of building up unity. A theological and socio-ethical dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church had started in 1970, due to an initiative by Archbishop Simojoki to Patriarch Alex I, and – as we know – it has continued as a fruitful meeting, affirmative and profound to the self-understanding of the faith of the churches until the present day. By order of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexis I, the church sent observers to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). It was also logical that the photograph of WCC secretary general is on display in the hall of the Spiritual academy, because it was a long period of negotiations that preceded the joining of the Russian Orthodox Church to the WCC in 1961.<sup>1</sup>

The dialogue between our churches has been productive and improved our reciprocal relationships. In connection with the talks on doctrine between our churches in Turku in 2005, the metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, The Most Reverend Vladimir stated among other things:

”In the course of the past few decades the Russian Orthodox Church has been in several bilateral negotiations, but it is only the negotiations with the Evangelic Lutheran churches that have proved their vitality.” ”It is up to us, believers, followers of Christ, by the most active means, to give testimony to the modern world of unchangeable values of Christianity based on the foundations of Christian faith. It is art and architecture, music and literature and many other things. Everything surrounding us in this world is filled with Christian meaning and content.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement. Edited by Nicholas Lossky etc. Geneva, 2002, page 16.

<sup>2</sup> Reseption 2/2005. Kirkon ulkoasiainosaston teologisten asiain tiedotuslehti. Negotiations with the Orthodox Church in Russia. Pages 5-6.

## Impulses of art to interpret church culture

The wise and profound statement by Metropolitan Vladimir calls forth interesting associations to a meeting between the Lutheran and Orthodox churches. Two valuable memories were imprinted in my mind from the same tour 1976: they recall St. Petersburg (Leningrad) the State Russian Museum. It was there that I for the first time saw the famous painting **Barge Haulers on the Volga** by Ilya Repin. In a very universal manner, it is a reflection of the strenuous human role in the world of work and heavy travail. Another painting whose memory I cherish alike is **The Raising of Jairus's daughter**, by Ilya Repin, too. In its own way, that painting transmits knowledge of faith about God's kingdom and Christ's strength and Messianic being that surpass all worldly and temporal realities.<sup>3</sup> To start with, Ilya Repin was not very interested in the theme until he associated it with the death of his own sister. The result is a masterpiece that, in a splendid way, interprets the event that the three synoptic evangelists (gospel writers) (Matthew, Mark, Luke) convey not only to the audience's eye but soul as well.

It was art and literature that led me to the book desk at Catherine summer palace in the summer of 1992. I was then with a group of people from Turku that visited St. Petersburg and its immediate surroundings. I bought a book called **Literaturnij Peterburg, Petrograd** (engl. **Saint-Petersburg, Petrograd: a city of writers and poets**).<sup>4</sup> Among other things, there is the famous painting by **Ivan Kramskoi, Hristos v pustine (Jesus in the desert, 1872)**. The painting belongs to the Tretjakov Gallery collection in Moscow.

In the past few years, it has been the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and the Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg that have shown the way to the exhibition of religious and Christian art. The exhibition **Christ in art and culture** that the State Russian Museum arranged is a significant turning point where the "underground" teacher of mankind at once becomes a "visible" corner stone of the Church, "manifested" in publicity, the Saviour. True enough, Russian museums have exhibited icons with Christ as the motif even earlier in St. Petersburg as well as in Moscow at the Tretjakov Gallery, but the Christ exhibition at the State Russian Museum was beyond comparison. A book compiled of the exhibition material comprises 521 large pages and weighs about 4 kilos! A work of such significance covers the whole of Biblical history of salvation that unrolls the most beautiful descriptions of God's amazing plan towards mankind. The exhibition and the book about it provided the foundation of Christianity with a worthy expression.

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<sup>3</sup> The painting is naturally most impressive when seen in the Museum of Russian Art, but e.g. in the voluminous works **JESUS CHRIST in Christian Art and Culture 14th to 20th Centuries, JUBILAEUM. A.D. 2000**, The State Russian Museum 2000, pages 148-149 there is a high-standard picture of it.

<sup>4</sup> The book is in Russian language with a short summary in English. That was one of the reasons why I started to study Russian language.

Let me mention a few details: the painting **Christ and the Adulteress [Who Is Without Sin?]** 1888 by **Vasily Polenov**. In the painting, there is a reflection on Christ's face and being, of an attempt at harmony and mercy towards the world. The victory of beauty and goodness over ugliness and evil are reinforced by the imposing architecture in the background and the unbroken nature.<sup>5</sup>

**Ivan Shishkin** is known for his nature paintings that are precise and vivid to the extreme, almost like skilful "digital pictures" of the different seasons in their colour splendour. It is easy to share the view of Metropolitan Vladimir: In spite of the difficult decades, the foundations of Christianity have been preserved in art and architecture, music and literature and in many other things.

Beauty is (going) to save the world. **Fyodor Dostoevsky**, the author lived his last years in the vicinity of the Church of Our Lady of Vladimir, which he could see from his balcony and hear its the bells calling. By the way, Dostoevsky's wife **Anna Dostoevskaja** was of the old Miltopeus family from Turku, which has been proved by the local Swedish-language journalist Hans Otman. On her visit to Turku Anna Dostojevskaja looked for the tomb of her ancestors in the Cathedral but without avail because the language barrier made it impossible to locate the tomb.

In 2003, the Ethnographic Museum of St. Petersburg had an exhibition of religions and different forms of devotional life in Russia. It was an all-round and objective view of the religious variety in Russia, particularly so in the Leningrad area. A book was also published on the exhibition. It was called **Multinational St. Petersburg, History, religions and nations. (Mnogonatsionalnij Peterburg, Istorija / Religii / Narodii. Sankt-Peterburg, 2002. )**

On its pages are presented, in words and pictures, some of the most central churches to the western Christians, the same way it was done at the exhibition itself.<sup>6</sup> There is an account of Finnish, Swedish and German Lutherans and the life and their churches in St. Petersburg, among them a mention of St. Mary's Church in St. Petersburg and of the rise of the Ingrian church; a picture of the Estonian Lutheran church, and one of the Roman-Catholic spiritual academy. There is a picture of the cover of the magazine of the Ingrian church and a picture of the young Mannerheim is there as an expression of Finnish presence in St. Petersburg in the past.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Polenov's Christ expresses the artist's own personal disposition, which was based on an aspiration towards harmony and grace in the surrounding world. The quiet majesty of the architecture and nature confirms the victory of beauty and good over ugliness and evil." JESUS CHRIST in Christian Art and Culture 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Page167.

<sup>6</sup> Mnogonatsionalnij Peterburg, Istorija / Religii / Narodi. Picture appendix following page 160.

## **From estrangement and unfamiliarity to rapprochement and unity**

Experts on science and art have done great services to the intercourse between our churches. It should be evident that ecumenical perspective has been true even before in Russia, particularly in the environs of St. Petersburg, which has provided a good basis for the rise, development, and further building-up of a dialogue between the Lutheran and Orthodox churches. However, this dialogue demands a clear knowledge of one's own identity whereby the other party can be seen as an enriching and complementary interlocutor. These encounters could be further extended within reason past one's own preferences and obsessions towards an ecumenical consensus (mutual understanding).

Let me mention a few points that show the unity of religious gesture language between the (Finnish) Lutherans of the Church of Ingria and the Russian Orthodox. Having received the sacramental bread and wine as the soul's remedy for this life and hereafter, the parishioners of St Mary make the sign of the cross. I see the frequent crossing of oneself as a habit taken over from the Orthodox, even if it can come from an old Lutheran tradition with the Lutheran Ingrian Finns that lived in these parts of Russia. The liturgy used in the Church of Ingria by Mooses Putro has been preserved in tact and a peace-giving factor so much so that one accustomed to the liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland feels a sense of homecoming in the Ingrian Church. This may be the reason why several parishes of the Church of Finland have partnerships parishes in the Church of Ingria within the Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, these partnerships parish members have all too few chances to acquaint themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church. Their encounters and talks tend to stay at the level of intercourse between Finns and Ingrians only, and short visits do not allow an establishing of contacts with the Orthodox Christians of our neighbouring country. This may also be due to the lack of sufficient command of the Russian language – even if all communication with Ingrians of a younger generation requires knowledge of Russian or an interpreter.

## **Our love is being weighed on roads and pastures**

Some of our revival movements may have a principal negative attitude to the spiritual life of the Orthodox Church in Finland as well as in Russia. Yet, there are good and positive examples of practical encounter in addition to the above dialogues. Forms of diaconal aid and cooperation are worth all support as means of building bridges between our churches. The Martinus foundation that has originated within the diocese of Tampere has given substantial support to the repair and building of the Orthodox-run orphanages (children's homes) of Lieutenant Schmidt and Lermontov Streets in

St. Petersburg. This is certainly one of the best forms of encounter and cooperation between churches of different Christian traditions. It may be noted that the plot of land where the Lermontov Street orphanage is now located, was earlier the site of an Orthodox chapel. And now there is located an orphanage to secure a healthy growth and development for approximately 40 small children. This project is a positive proof of active love for one's neighbour between Finnish Lutheran religious life and the undertakings of the Russian Orthodox Christians, love that stems from the salvation that Christ has put on offer and that leads to the love of service for the minor brothers and sisters that would be left without care and God's love.

### **Life-long learning with the help of Mary, Mother of God**

We Finns could, and should perhaps, learn more of the traditional Russian Orthodoxy, art, music, way of life, spontaneity and bravery. The sheer abundance of painting and icon art amazes a Finnish Lutheran wanderer. Church architecture is unforgettable. By the Gribojedova canal there is the **The Church /Temple of the Resurrection of Christ** – a magnificent sight, with the exterior and interior, and **the Cathedral of Kazan** have got a worthy interior for liturgical life.

**The Church of Christ the Saviour in Moscow** with all its different stages before the Second World War and afterwards are a miraculous testimony of Christ's strength that becomes complete in weakness. As if risen from ashes, the **Church of Christ the Saviour** has become a symbol of spiritual life in the entire country of Russia. If you ever go to Moscow, it is worth taking a look also at the work of the Lutheran churches, the Church of Ingria and the German parishes. Finnish is heard up to today in the Lutheran church that stands in the middle of the Protestant cemetery.

The "resurrection" of religious life in Russia has, in many ways, brought Finnish Lutherans and Russian Orthodox together. They share the memory of martyrs and cherish it with reverence and piety. Therefore, the cemetery of Levashovo close to St. Petersburg has become a shrine for many silent and earnest pilgrims: a wreath is laid down, silent prayers are said and hymns sung from the Finnish hymnal. The visible and invisible congregations come together at the forested cemetery of Levashovo. The tragic fate of mankind is common and undivided.

Allow me to dwell on one more memory. It was about ten years ago when I often spent my evenings watching the television in my flat near Sennaya Ploshad (Hay Market). There was a commercial where a grandfather took his grandchild by hand and lifted his other hand to point up towards an empty plot that used to have a church and where there was a new church being built. The grandfather said something like this: There was a church there some decades ago. He shed a tear, but continued, full of hope and with an appeal to people: Please give your contribution to the rebuilding of the church, and the word of God will nurse us all.

To conclude, I want to make a wish. The Lutheran Church of St. Petersburg is dedicated to St. Mary. But there is no icon of Mary there! When the renovation was taking place, the planners of a Lutheran Church of the Word obviously missed the notion that an icon of Mary, Mother of God, perpetual virgin should have been placed in the church to make sure that both Finn from Finland and from Ingria as well as Russians and other God-fearing people have a chance to compose themselves to prayer by an icon. An icon to St. Mary could be placed there within a few years when an organ will be installed in the church. It could be a wonderful donation!