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A Story of Friendship

Maria Scharffenberg

It all started when I was living in Vienna. Working as a parish priest in the Swedish Church, I had heard rumours about the cooperation between the Old Catholic Church and the Swedish Church, but I did not think much about it. In Vienna, I looked up the Old Catholics and saw that there was an Old Catholic Church not far from where I lived, but I did nothing more.

Then one Sunday, as I was preparing for the service at the Swedish Church in Vienna, he was standing there: a gentleman who, judging by his collar, was a colleague. It turned out he was the parish priest of one of the Old Catholic parishes in Vienna. And so it all began. A few weeks later I returned the favour and visited his church. During the months and years that followed our congregations have come to know each other and friendships have been built at all levels.

So, thank you, Thomas! By that visit, you were the one who started it all.

Churches are never bigger than their members. Therefore, it has been important for us that the cooperation between the two churches is not only at the "Pastor-level" but between the members of our congregations: church to church, congregation to congregation.

Groups from the Old Catholic Church have visited us, and we have had the pleasure of talking with them. We told them the story of the Swedish Church in Vienna. Although the history of the Swedish Church in Vienna only reaches back to the early 1920s, it is both colourful and exciting, and includes among other aspects priests who risked their lives to save people during the Second World War. But we also talked about our churches today. What is similar? What is different?

When the pensioners' group at the Swedish Church in Vienna was planning their annual spring excursion, it was natural for them to visit the Old Catholic Church in Baden (Austria). There we were met and guided and in every way well taken care of by the local pastor.

Naturally, we have celebrated the Eucharist together, a strong symbol of the unity between the churches, but also offering a possibility for the congregations to meet and talk having coffee afterwards. In this matter of building relations between churches, social contacts are equally important.

When we have a jubilee or another celebration, it is now self-evident to invite each other. In September 2017, the Swedish Church and the Old Catholic Church celebrated a *Festgottesdienst* in the presence of Bishops from both the Swedish Church and the Old Catholic Church of Austria to commemorate that we now are in full communion.

My experience of the cooperation between the Swedish Church and the Old Catholic Church has been at all levels: from personal meetings between two persons, both Christians, but in different denominations, to large official events; from meetings that are planned years ahead, to the easy going contacts, just popping by for a cup of coffee.

In September 2017, I moved to a new country, a new city and a new church. I now live in Berlin where I am the priest of the Swedish church in Berlin, *Victoriaförsamlingen*.[1] This time I did not wait. It was clear that the Old Catholic priest must be invited to my installation service, along with others, Anglicans, with whom Old Catholics have a long history of cooperation, and ecumenical guests. The Old Catholic priest and I have already talked about how we can cooperate in Berlin and how we can find places and possibilities for the members in our congregations to meet, and we have started to plan how we can celebrate the Eucharist together. When I talked to my church council, they fully supported the idea and are already looking forward to it.

In Vienna, representatives from the Old Catholic Church were present and welcomed, together with the Swedish congregation, the new priest for the Swedish Church.

The cooperation continues. From small meetings, informal chit-chat over a cup of coffee, to big events planned years ahead, but always between friends in Christ.

Yes, we are different. And I myself cherish those differences. But we are also so much the same. I do not know if this is because I learned to know the Old Catholic Church while I was working for the Swedish Church abroad. In that we shared something important: being small! At home, in Sweden, I belong to the big church. *The* Church, so to speak. But in Vienna I was the small Church. Moreover, I was a female priest in a mainly Roman Catholic country. I was the odd one out. This helped me to see the similarities and to have an understanding for the problems we both

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[1]   The congregation *(församlingen)* is called after Victoria (1862–1930), born Princess of Baden, who became through her marriage Queen of Sweden. She supported the congregation when it was founded in 1903.

faced. Had an understanding of being different that maybe someone who is living and working in Sweden does not have. I also saw the pride, the pride every member has about "their" church and the joy of the possibility of showing it to someone else.

Being the big church, you take so much for granted. Being the small one, the odd one out, you somehow think in a different way.

I hope that the cooperation between the Swedish Church and the Old Catholic Churches in several countries will continue. I think that it will grow at the ground level between friends that meet over a cup of coffee: through pensioners' groups that go on a day-trip; a youth group that visits; and occasionally through a big fancy service with a bishop or two present.

Because sometimes a cooperation between two churches starts when one of the priests visits the other to attend an ordinary Sunday service.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Autorin war von 2012 bis 2017 Pfarrerin der Gemeinde der Kirche von Schweden in Wien und beschreibt ihre Begegnungen mit der Altkatholischen Kirche Österreichs seit 2013. Seit Herbst 2017 ist sie Pfarrerin der Gemeinde der Kirche von Schweden in Berlin und setzt dort ihre ökumenische Arbeit fort.

Key Words – Schlüsselwörter

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