

Catholic in Finland

Information on and News from the Catholic Church in Finland

December 9th, 2016 – Issue #1.

Bishop Teemu Sippo SCI on the vicissitudes of the church during the years of Finnish independence.

A History of Growth

What have been the vicissitudes of the church during the almost one hundred years of Finnish independence? The Bishop of Helsinki Teemu Sippo SCJ considers this question in the interview given to Fides at the end of November 2016.

The coming of independence had a significant effect on the number of members of the Catholic Church in Finland. The Russian army, including Catholics, left, and this resulted in a slowing down of activities in the Catholic parishes. The economy weakened because the connection with the Archbishopric of Mohilev was broken. Kalevi Vuorela's important history *Finlandia Catholica* recounts that the parish of St. Henry's then "turned towards the homeland and Western countries more than before" (FC, pg.81). This was also in the interests of the young republic. The Vatican reacted benevolently to this new state of affairs and, on March 2nd 1918, was among the first countries in the world to recognise independent Finland.

Bishop Teemu underlines an interesting point: "The Russian army took good care of the representatives of all beliefs knowing that the preservation of the army's unity depended on all being integrated as well as possible, and that for this it was necessary to protect different religious customs." Even today this would be a good example to follow in many situations.

Successful integration

"This by the way would be an extremely wise way of proceeding even in today's school policies." In the 19th century, Finland was enriched when the Russian army brought Tatars, Jews - and Catholics to the country. "And they are still here."



"Today there is a tendency to build a unified culture by, for example in schools, teaching everybody only one way of thinking, as if that would integrate people. But things don't work that way. Belief is such a deep component of a person's identity that it must be respected."

Choices during Independence

At some stage after Finland became independent, the Catholic Church was asked if it wanted to have some sort of official position in the state. In those times, understandably, the thought of being a State Church seemed strange and even alarming. It was considered better to remain outside the state organisation and be independent in the nomination of bishops and other church matters. "Still today, Canon Law governs the social organisation of the church."

"We did not become a State Church and thus our position in society is weaker than the Evangelical-Lutheran or the Orthodox churches."

The breaking of the ties with Mohilev lasted a couple of years until the Vatican decided to found the Finnish Apostolic Vicariate (8.6.1920). In those years there were frequent exchanges between Helsinki and Rome both in political and in church circles. In the end the local priest, Father Adolf Carling, was not named Bishop but instead Father Michael

Buckx from Holland, a member of the congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that came to Finland in 1907. Father Buckx was named Apostolic Administrator in Finland on 17.3.1921 and was consecrated Bishop on 15.8.1923. From that day Finland once again had a Catholic Bishop - for the first time since Arvid Kurki who died in the beginning of the 1520s.

Freedom of religion was declared in Finland in November 1922. No special concordat between the Holy See and the Republic of Finland was signed, despite attempts to make one, but on 14.11.1929 the Vicariate was registered as a religious entity with its own organisation.

The seeds of growth

There were only a few hundred Catholics in Finland when it became independent. Polish and Lithuanian families and some others had remained in the country. "Even then it was quite an international group." Certainly this was so in Helsinki, but also in other parts of Finland. Some of their descendants are still here, "but others have disappeared completely. For example those Catholics who built a family and gradually became Lutheran under the influence of the majority."

The same situation could be seen in Orthodox circles. "Earlier perhaps the Catholic Church was regarded with more tolerance, although indeed there was also some opposition to it even in Russian times." The de Godzinsky family told the Bishop

that after moving to Finland they met with two prejudices: "They come from Russia and they are Roman Catholic".

When all is said and done, the fact was that after independence the Church, soon to be a Bishopric, finally could develop as a self-standing entity. "Before we only had parishes, chapels or soldiers' churches that belonged to the powerful and distant Archbishopric of Mohilev, but there was no local Finnish church."

Sacred Heart Bishops

The Vicariate's first Bishop, Monsignor Buckx (Apostolic Vicar of Finland 1923-1933) from Holland, was a priest of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and after him all the Bishops of Finland have been members of the same congregation. Bishop Teemu is now the fifth in line. After Buckx came Gulielmus Cobben (1934-1955-1967) and Paul Verschuren (1967-1998), both from Holland, then the Polish Józef Wróbel (2001-2008).

"It remains to be seen how long this custom will last. Until now it has been quite natural as most of the priests active in the Diocese belonged to the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus." Certainly there were also Dominicans who brought their own cultural activities with them, but after von Christerson and Carling there were not many Diocesan priests. Among them a special mention should be made of Father Robert de Caluwé, who is remembered above all for the Ecumenical Centre in Myl-

About the Catholic Church in Finland

The origins of Catholicism in Finland go back to the medieval times. We believe that the first Bishop of Finland was an Englishman, Bishop Henry, who came to Finland from Sweden in 1155 AD. He was martyred in the following winter, 1156.

Today, the Catholic Church in Finland is formed by only one Diocese, that of Helsinki. It comprises the whole of Finland. The Bishop of Helsinki is Msgr. Teemu Sippo S.C.I., under whose guidance there are eight parishes – two in Helsinki, the Capital city. There are almost 30 priests working in Finland and about 40 religious sisters.

The Catholic Church in Finland has today (2016) about 14,000 registered members, half of whom are native Finns. The rest of the Faithful come from at least 100 different countries from all five Continents.

If you live in Finland, register

If you are a Catholic moving to Finland, or planning to stay here for a longer period of time, you are requested to register in the Catholic parish of the territory of which you live in. Please contact your closest parish for more details.

Being a registered member of the Catholic Church in Finland helps the local Church to better organise its pastoral work and makes it easier to organise baptisms, weddings, funerals etc.

Please give your support

Since the Catholic Church in Finland is not eligible to take part in the so called Church taxation system – whereby members of the Evangelic Lutheran and Orthodox Churches pay a certain membership fee to their parishes – all Catholics are asked voluntarily to pay a membership fee of 1.5% of one's income to the Catholic Diocese of Helsinki, which then distributes the money to the central administration and parish level. The obligation to support one's parish also remains. Also, all Catholic homes receive the Diocesan Magazine *Fides*, and are asked to help its publication by paying its voluntary annual fee of 39€.

lyjärvi, and Father Guy Barbier who had previously dedicated himself to helping Estonian Catholics.

One could say that the Congregation and the Diocese have been very close to each other. But they are not the same thing:

“The Diocese is far more than just priests. In addition the Sacred Heart priests have not emphasised their own charisma but have worked as any other Diocesan priest.” They are of course united as a congregation, but their activities in the parishes has not been any different from an ordinary Diocesan priest.

“Even if sometimes their charisma has shown, one can surely say that the Sacred Heart priests have always been hospitable. They have invited, served, given, without expecting anything for themselves. They have given all they could to the Diocese.” For example Father Brügemann donated to the Diocese the house in Pakila where the Catholic Information Centre began its activities. “The priests also sought out their parishioners and visited their homes, which was possible when there were so few Catholics.” Many good bonds of friendship were made in those years between parishioners and the priests.

Importance of religious Sisters and Brothers

“One must remember also the congregations of Sisters.” For many not enough importance have been given to them, but their work has been of vital importance. “For instance without the American (Most Precious Blood) and Dutch (Sacred Heart) sisters it would be difficult to imagine our Church as it is today.”

At the same time the Bishop warmly remembers the Sacred Heart Brothers who did so much work in the parishes as caretakers, organists, gardeners, drivers and all possible jobs. In their way they were “incredible people”.

The time of Building

In Bishop Cobben’s time one must recall the building of churches in Helsinki (Maria), Turku and Jyväskylä - and also that in 1955 the Vicariate became a Bishopric. It was in his time that the Second Vatican Council began. “It was the time of quiet growth when church life in Finland gradually found its own path.”

Bishop Verschuren succeeded to Cobben during the Second Vatican Council. It can be said that it was then that the church’s ecumenical activities began. “Of course Cobben and Carling had contacts with the representatives of different churches, but mostly on an individual plane. But now there came about a remarkable opening between the churches.”

The Catholic Church became a full member of the Finnish Ecumenical Council. “This also did good to us: we were received very positively; relations with

other churches became closer and more trusting.” This was due to the Vatican Council’s influence, but without doubt also to Bishop Verschuren’s enthusiastic engagement in these questions.

During Verschuren’s time the church developed further and gradually the origin of the priests became more varied. “The Dutch were replaced by Polish priests, then Opus Dei and Neocatechumenal priests arrived.” Certainly “the clergy looks very different now than fifty years ago. Also there are more Finnish-born priests today! Formerly there were at most only two, but now there are five - more than there have been since the Reformation.”

The international clergy reflects the diversity of our Diocese. “This has had a great importance for the life of our church; now over half of our members come from other lands.” Starting from when the Vietnamese boat refugees arrived in Finland, new pastoral groups have been formed within different languages and cultures. Among others there are large groups from the Philippines, Iraq and, most recently, Myanmar. “There are also movements in the Diocese, and strong lay groups, especially the Neocatechumenals, who contribute to shaping the life of our church. Opus Dei is present too, but does not have an equally strong influence.”

The way to Unity

“Our Diocese is small and therefore it would always be advisable to ascertain what unites us.” It is right that different language groups can at times attend Mass as well as receiving instruction and participating in the sacraments in their own languages, but we must be careful to avoid this leading to the formation of splinter groups, as has happened for example in Sweden and Norway. There such groups have become so strong that they often withdraw from their dioceses in favour of their own communities.

“Most certainly unity does prevail in our Diocese. In my opinion this shows in a very beautiful way during our yearly Diocesan celebration, when all the different groups come to Mass together.” But this must also show in parish life, Fortunately “the Catholic faith is such that it unites more powerfully than outside factors divide. Even if I did not fully understand the language, yet the feeling of unity is strongly present in the Mass. A couple of years ago I attended a youth event at the English School with children from Burma and other countries, and I asked them if they preferred me to speak in Finnish or in English. They all answered: in Finnish!”

“I am extremely happy that we have such a varied church with many nationalities and many languages. All are equally valuable and important. My hope is that all can feel themselves “at home” in our church.”

*Interview by Marko Tervaportti
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