

Sweden's Catholic past and future

Standing in a field north of Stockholm, I was looking at a Viking rune, an arrow-shaped stone as tall as a person. It was etched with words in Old Norse that wound like a ribbon over the face of the stone. On the top of the stone was a cross, and the words asked for blessings from God and God's mother, a reference to Mary. It was 1,000 years old.

Catholicism came late to Sweden, with monks arriving in the 800s. It is likely, however, that Viking explorers had already encountered Christianity as they made their way down to Byzantium and throughout Europe. What did these fierce warriors make of the Good Shepherd's disciples?

For several hundred years, Catholicism thrived in Sweden, building convents and monasteries, great cathedrals and modest churches. Its center was the soaring Gothic cathedral in Uppsala, built over the remains of the martyred King Eric. Sweden produced notable saints, most famously Bridget (or Birgitta) of Sweden (1303-1373). She was a remarkable woman — wife, mother, visionary, foundress of the Brigittines.

But it all ended relatively suddenly. King Gustav Vasa — Sweden's great warrior king — mandated that Lutheranism be the faith of the land. Within decades, the monasteries were closed, convents banned, and Sweden's Catholic churches transformed into Lutheran ones. The Brigittines were expelled to Poland in 1595. The Uppsala Cathedral, while still recognizably Catholic, is now a Lutheran church.

From 1617 until 1873, Swedes were forbidden, under pain of exile, to become Catholic.

Today, Catholics number only about 150,000, about 1.5 percent of the population. The vast majority of Swedes might log in as nominally Lutheran, but their religious practice has tumbled to about 2 percent.

In the beautiful old city of Vadstena, where St. Bridget's order was first established, the abbey church is now Lutheran (though admirably respectful of its link to this great Catholic saint.)

Her convent has been turned into a resort hotel. In a museum on the grounds, there are relics of St. Bridget and a great deal of fascinating details about the church in medieval Sweden. The exhibits also reveal a bit of the modern Swedish mindset. It tries to explain to visitors “the importance of religion in medieval society”:

“Religion today is regarded by most as a private matter, somewhat like a personal taste in music,” it explained, but in medieval Sweden, “the universe was much simpler than today.” Angels and demons roamed the earth, “capable of interfering in everyday life.”

Yet after centuries of banishment, the Brigittines are back in Vadstena, running a hostel not far from their historic convent. Mass is celebrated daily in a beautiful but simple chapel as tourists splash about in the lake nearby.

For the past 500 years, Catholicism has made little impression on Sweden. Yet perhaps even now in this ardently secular country, there are small signs of change. Sweden has its first native-born Catholic bishop since the Reformation, and its first cardinal ever: Cardinal Anders Arborelius, who was raised as a Lutheran.

He argues that his nation is not as secular as it is perceived, and that Swedes are open to Gospel values. Indeed, there is an impressive concern for the common good that appears to animate Swedish society, even as the country struggles with its influx of immigrants and the high costs of a social welfare state.

Whether Sweden is Europe’s past or future is hard to determine. The forces of secularization seem inexorable, with the rich Catholic histories of France, Germany, Spain and Italy facing growing hostility. As has often been the church’s history, will this adversity cause a rebirth of faith, or is Europe going the way of Christian Sweden?

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