



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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ORTHODOXY IN CONTEMPORARY SWEDEN

From Viking-Era Christian Roots to a 21st-century Pan-Orthodox Theological Academy

On a sunlit afternoon at a lakeside Swedish manor near Södertälje that now houses a pan-Orthodox theological academy serving Orthodox Christians throughout the country, *Road to Emmaus* staff spoke with Dr. Michael Hjälms, Dean of Sankt Ignatios Theological Academy, Theological Secretary at the Finnish Orthodox Diocese of Helsinki and Assistant Professor at the University of Uppsala, on Orthodoxy in contemporary Sweden.

RTE: Dr. Hjälms, will you begin by telling us about yourself?

DR. HJÄLM: At fourteen I began studying the Church Fathers and once I found that I had begun to believe what I was reading, I understood that I had to do something about it. I was a Lutheran Priest Candidate for about six months, and then joined the Orthodox Church. That was twenty years ago.

After my conversion, I did a doctorate at the University of Uppsala, where I also taught Lutheran theology as a post-graduate student. I soon understood that this was not for me and left when I was recruited as an ecumenical officer for the Christian Council of Sweden to coordinate the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church family, a newly-appointed category within the Christian Council of Sweden, the state's religious arm, that included Chalcedonian Orthodox, the Eastern-Oriental Orthodox family, and the pre-Chalcedonian Orthodox, such as the Syriac Orthodox, the Ethiopian Orthodox, and Copts.

Dr. Michael Hjälms visits a Syrian Orthodox parish school in Tur Abdin, southeastern Turkey. June, 2013.

When the Swedish government saw the increasing numbers of Christian Orthodox refugees, they wanted to extend the same support that they give to all recognized churches, but in doing so they put us all into the same administrative category, which meant that if we Orthodox were to accept this offer of support, we would have to learn to work together. Some of our churches hadn't been in communion for 1,500 years, so when the various Orthodox Church leaders met, almost none of us clearly understood what the divisions were, except for the Serbian bishop, His Grace Dositej Motika of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Great Britain and Scandinavia, who had a very clear understanding of the Oriental churches and what opportunities existed for cooperation.

Later, I became director of the Department of Orthodox Studies and Culture for both Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches that was part of a Swedish government financed Educational Study Association. My knowledge of the Oriental Orthodox Churches was limited, but I quickly discovered that there are forty million Ethiopian Orthodox both in and outside of Ethiopia, as well as ten million Copts in Egypt—more than the entire population of Sweden. These churches are from very different cultures, they have different levels of education, different views of women, different use of tradition, and many of their members are uprooted immigrants who are trying to start a new life in Sweden. From the beginning we had huge conflicts and the government's top-down, artificially-contrived cooperation simply didn't work.

I ended up in a situation where I realized that if I continued I would make enemies in every church (*laughter*) so I decided that I personally needed to try something else. At the same time, the Chalcedonian and pre-Chalcedonian bishops understood that it was important to continue cooperating, but that we couldn't do it as a "government" department; we had to free ourselves from these regulations. So, a number of the bishops founded the St. Ignatios Foundation, consisting of a board of hierarchs and an executive chairman—a layman responsible for ongoing operations. These hierarchs include the Romanian Orthodox bishop, the Coptic Orthodox bishop, the Serbian Orthodox bishop and two Syriac Orthodox bishops for the two Syriac dioceses here in Sweden. Now, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is ready to join us.

This group of bishops then founded the St. Ignatios Theological Academy, named after the early Christian apologist, St. Ignatios of Antioch, with the intention of providing students in Sweden with an Orthodox education. We are affiliated with Botkyrka College, through which we are accredited for a

basic liberal arts curriculum, and we are in conversation with several academic institutions about affiliated accreditation for specialized academic studies. Our classes are conducted in Swedish.

RTE: With such diversity, how is the school administered?

DR. HJÄLM: We have a board of trustees consisting of five bishops and an executive chairman. The presidency rotates annually among the bishops, with a new term every July 1. This year the president is the Serbian Orthodox bishop. The executive chairman chairs the committee that handles the running of the school, which consists of one representative from each bishop. We also have a management group, a director of development, a dean and chancellor, as well as a prefect, who takes care of chapel prayers and the students. No one is employed full time, we are all part time.

RTE: Do you have many native Swedish converts among the students?

DR. HJÄLM: No, there aren't many native Swedish students, although they are welcome. There are about 500 native Orthodox converts in Sweden today, still a relatively small number. Our focus is on immigrants from post-Communist countries or the Middle East. Often these immigrants left the Orthodox Church, but they or their children become interested again once they come to Sweden. Many of these second or third generation immigrants have lost touch with their ethnic roots, and these "returning converts" often don't speak their parents' language. It's these people who come to St. Ignatios. They've adopted a more Swedish identity and some of them join Swedish-speaking parishes that are growing rapidly. There are approximately 160 Orthodox parishes in Sweden if you include the Oriental Orthodox. About 50 of these are Eastern Chalcedonian Orthodox.

Among the Oriental Orthodox, about 80,000 belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church in Sweden and they mainly speak Syriac or Arabic. The Copts are approximately 15,000 and their services are in Arabic. The Ethiopians are a small community with 3,000, and they of course use Ge'ez. Armenians also number about 3,000. The Serbian Orthodox number 30,000 in Sweden, mostly Serbian speaking, because they are recent immigrants from the Balkan war. We have about 12,000 Greeks and 3,000 Russians. The total population of Sweden is nine million, with 140,000 Orthodox Christians. Finland, where Orthodoxy is one of the state churches, only has 60,000 adherents.



The island of Birka with St. Ansgar's Cross in the distance.



Climbing to St. Ansgar's Cross, Birka, Sweden.

St. Ignatios' Students and Curriculum

RTE: Please tell us now about St. Ignatios' students and your course of studies.

DR. HJÄLM: We have ten full-time live-in places and fifty part-time places for students who come for lectures and live elsewhere. At the moment we have only twenty-nine enrolled for the fall, but that will grow. Some of the so-called part-time students actually study full-time, but they don't live here. To live here you have to have a kind of vocation, an idea of how you want to develop in your ecclesiastical life, such as becoming a priest or monastic, or a youth leader.

RTE: Does the Swedish government offer financial aid to the students?

DR. HJÄLM: Yes, you can study here with the help of the state without having to take out loans.

As for our studies, in Sweden we have a two-tier system of education and academic studies. The Russians and Slavs in general have a very useful word for this education—*obrazovanie*—*obraz* in Serbian means both “cheek” and “moral posture,” and also “the image of Christ,” in a sense, the face of Christ. *Obrazovanie* means that you have to internalize knowledge in your own life or thinking so that it becomes meaningful, so that the image of Christ becomes your own image. In Germany this concept is called *Bildung* (formation). So, our studies follow academic methodology, but instead of beginning with knowledge itself, we start with how to internalize knowledge and make it one's own. When Orthodox institutions try to compete on a scholarly level with western academic institutions, they often just import the western scholarly model of knowledge without reflection. The mission of St. Ignatios Theological Academy is to combine this *obrazovanie* education with academic studies.

RTE: With full-time students living here and many more commuting to study part-time, you must have a close sense of community, and I notice that you have three periods of community prayer. What else would bring about *obrazovanie*?

DR. HJÄLM: For the first year we teach the students a living asceticism: to humble themselves and to let the Church's voice speak. But once you have listened, then you also must speak as well. Also, the professor cannot just be

teaching about a subject; he represents the idea of being something. That is formation. Being a teacher at the seminary is different than teaching at a purely academic institution because your own life is a resource to guide the students into the world of the Church Fathers.

If I am good at this, we will encounter St. Basil in the classroom through his own words, followed by my perspective on his writings, and, if the students are engaged, then through their perspective as well. If we don't have this three-fold model, then St. Basil is not real for them—it will just be a discussion between me and the students without relating to St Basil himself. And if you only have students and a teacher, the risk of falling into some kind of wrong teaching is very obvious. You need good studies and good scholars to establish an education of enlightenment.

People sometimes believe that our institution is critical of academic studies. It isn't. Academics are very necessary, but they are not everything. A young person needs the help of a teacher in the beginning, but in the end it should be a dialog, and not just the teacher's lectures.

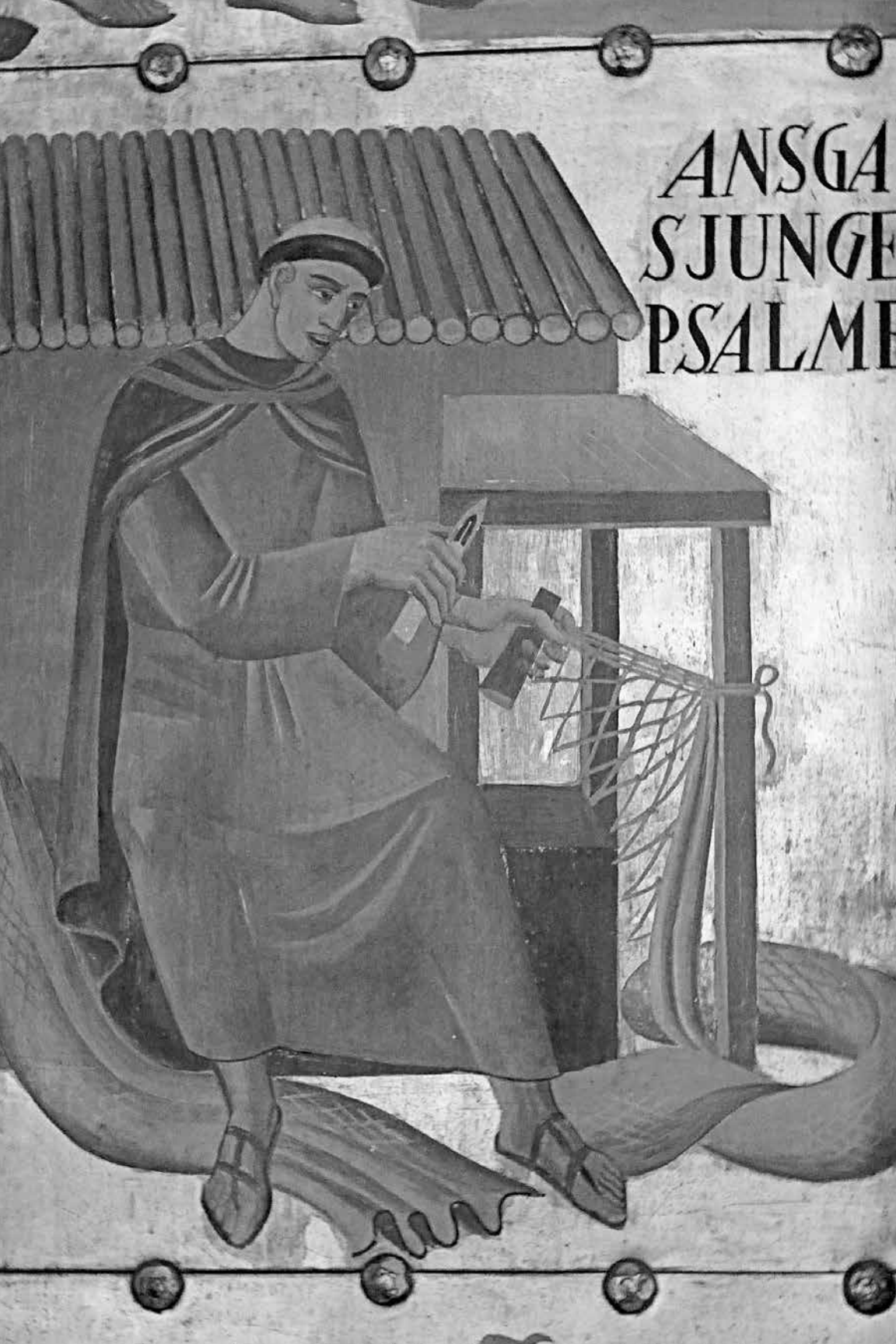
So, in the first year we have academic studies, but we also have discussions about life, separate from studies. The first-year course includes Church History, Apostolic Scriptures, Patristics, Ecclesiology with Canon Law, then Spirituality and Liturgics. For now, we send everyone in the second year abroad to different institutions, although we will probably change that in the future. Monastic candidates can stay here for a second year of study as volunteers.

RTE: Your prefect was telling us that St. Ignatios' professors have to be knowledgeable in both eastern and oriental orthodoxy.

DR. HJÄLM: The dean must have a doctorate. The main teachers are to have a Master's Degree and some are finishing up now. For example, the lecturer in Byzantine Studies is now getting his second Master's, an Orthodox degree. In Church history we teach Byzantine, Coptic (including Ethiopic), and Syriac Church history. We also have two required languages, Greek and Syriac.

RTE: Is there enough common dogmatic ground between the Chalcedonian and Oriental Orthodox churches that these classes satisfy everyone?

DR. HJÄLM: We've agreed to adopt the old Antiochian study model that was used, among others, by the Studite Monastery in Constantinople, and which the Ethiopian Church still uses. It is called “The Four Wells.” “Well”



or “spring,” and “eye” are all the same word in Arabic and Ge’ez, and these four “wells or “eyes”—sources of tradition—were used in the early Church and are still a good path to understanding. The early Church Fathers interpreted scripture through their own experience of God, so our Apostolic Scripture course is really about the early Church’s encounter with God as a community. Next we teach the Church Fathers and their reflections upon this encounter, which becomes a part of Tradition. This is followed by the organization of the Church in different phases of history, and finally, reflection upon what the Church is through the liturgy. The Ethiopians say that when you encounter a theologian who has understood the four ways of tradition, whether he speaks about liturgics, apostolic scriptures, the Church Fathers, or ecclesiology, you realize that it is one and the same reality with four perspectives, four eyes.

RTE: What allowed the Chalcedonian Orthodox, Syriac, and Coptic bishops to come together in this way? Is it a fruit of the late 20th-century dialogues?

DR. HJÄLM: Two outstanding church leaders and scholars, Mar Pavlos Ghevargese of India and Nikos Nissiotis of Greece, perceived the possibility of unity between the Oriental and Eastern Churches and convinced the church leaders to begin an unofficial dialogue in 1963 in Aarhus, Denmark, organized by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The result was very positive—even in the first round they reached a common agreement on Christology, using the formula of St. Cyril of Alexandria of the one incarnate nature of Christ. Interest continued and moved forward as an official dialogue between the churches, headed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s Met. Damaskinos of Switzerland. By the time Met. Damaskinos stepped down due to illness, agreement had been reached among the hierarchs, but what is needed now is local and popular support. The problem of understanding doesn’t lie in the Middle East, but mainly in Eastern Europe, Mt. Athos, and in Greece. The problem is one of isolation. We don’t know each other well enough to take each other seriously.

The previous patriarch of the Serbian Church, the saintly Patriarch Pavle, wanted to know more about the Oriental Church, so he arranged a meeting with Pope Shenouda to ask him about Coptic Christology. When he explained it, Patriarch Pavle said, “This is the same Christology that I have.”

Opposite: St. Ansgar, Apostle of the North. St. Ansgar’s Chapel, Birka, Sweden.

After that he always prayed for Copts at liturgy when a priest prays for the church leaders. He was very strict and traditional, but he never spoke of the Copts as heretics, or as a different church. He said, “You must reflect on and understand why we are not united, and if you can’t explain why, you have to take a step forward to unity.”

In regard to St. Ignatios Academy, as I said earlier, the Orthodox and Oriental churches were thrown together by the Swedish government, which decided to financially assist the churches that call themselves Orthodox as one group. We either had to reject this plan, saying, “You’ve misunderstood everything,” or use the opportunity we were offered. Thanks to the Serbian bishop, who said, “Now that we are here, let’s make something good out of this,” we are still working together, although none of us would have consciously chosen it. We are caught in this situation, and are not free now to take another path.

RTE: Do you feel that this is from the Holy Spirit?

DR. HJÄLM: Eventually we will see if it is from the Holy Spirit. For now, I am convinced that if we took another path, it would be a sin.

RTE: What about the acceptance of each other’s centuries of saints, who sometimes believed they had differing Christologies?

DR. HJÄLM: If we look at the Ecumenical Councils in the usual framework that the Church is a living tree, and that some branches have separated themselves, died, and fallen off fruitless, we will never come to unity. It will be hopeless. Instead we need to see the Councils as an event, the event of Christ, in which each council participates. Ultimately it is a participation in the heavenly church. Viewed in this way it is one Council and not many earthly councils on a timeline. It is an event that actually happens with the saints. It’s not seven councils, its seven perspectives on one Council. The individual councils were always an attempt to heal something that had been broken; they were a continuous work by the Holy Spirit to heal and strengthen the earthly Church. If you take that divine presence away, the individual councils will be meaningless.

If we are able to convene a true Eighth Ecumenical Council, it will recapitulate and affirm all of the earlier councils. It will also explain what went on in 451 at Chalcedon and define the dogma even more clearly. If we see this as

an event of Christ together with the saints, as a holy council with an eternal perspective on the councils and not simply a linear time-line, reunion will happen. Without that perspective I don’t think it will be possible. I do believe it can come about.

The Reformation, the Swedish Lutheran Church, and Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue

RTE: At the Arlanda Airport in Stockholm we saw a sign that said, “Heliga Rum—184 churches from before 1150!” Driving through the Swedish countryside, I’ve been amazed to see old churches everywhere. Obviously, many were originally wooden churches rebuilt in stone after fires and so on, but every page of the guidebook lists another 12th-century church. How did these churches fare after the Reformation?

DR. HJÄLM: In Sweden the Reformation was primarily a political decision. King Gustav I Vasa was convinced that he was acting according to the will of God. At the same time, the state needed more revenue to pay off war debts and many believe that the material needs of the state were the real reason the king embraced the theology of the German reformers. The Reformation in Sweden was very peculiar. The king appointed Laurentius Petri as the first Lutheran archbishop of Sweden, who believed that the Reformation was a continuation of the Catholic Church. Although he discarded the idea of the papacy, saints, relics and monasticism, he retained the liturgy and other practices. As with the Anglicans in England, it continued to resemble the Catholic Church to some degree, but once fundamentalist Lutherans took charge in the 17th century, we lost even more. Later, some traditions were regained but they created a tension inside the Church of Sweden. Today I would say we have a church that is trying to find its identity, a modern Lutheran-Catholic identity. This is not easy, and from my perspective as an Orthodox Christian, almost impossible. If you lose the tradition it is very hard to recover it.

RTE: As a visitor, it is interesting to see icons in almost every cathedral, particularly in the older historic parts of the churches such as the crypts. There is also well-displayed literature in these Lutheran churches on local saints and pilgrimage, particularly to the St. Olaf Festival in Norway, now the largest single annual cultural event in Northern Europe. People seem to want to reconnect with their own saints and history.



Processional cross from 1220. Enamelled copper, wood. Bärnfendal Church, Bohuslän. Swedish State Historical Museum, Stockholm.



12th-century statue of vested bishop from Hjortsberga. Swedish State Historical Museum, Stockholm.

DR. HJÄLM: These icons are a recent phenomenon in Sweden. Icons were completely forbidden in the 17th century because they were connected with the idea of Russian veneration and “idolatry” and Lutherans burned every icon they could find. It was a period of real iconoclasm, although they did sometimes spare the frescoes and the mural paintings in the churches.

RTE: In Anglican England we’ve noticed that women priests, particularly, are trying to reclaim the iconographic tradition and prayers to local saints. Do you see a similar tendency among Lutheran women priests?

DR. HJÄLM: I think this is a kind of spirituality that is common among female Lutheran and Anglican priests that focuses on using the icons as a tool, a social trend that has spread to different countries. In Sweden, I believe that female priests have felt questioned, and instead of making excuses for why they are priests, they are trying to find the truth of tradition, to regain it, to be true adherents to the Christian faith. Now we have a generation of young female priests who are interested in tradition.

RTE: How do you interact with Lutherans, especially women priests, when Orthodox are such a small percentage of Swedish Christians?

DR. HJÄLM: I personally have doubts about women being priests, but we have to be very careful as Orthodox because we don’t have an ecumenical council behind us that has ruled on the idea that female priests are wrong, nor do we have really convincing theological arguments. So, whenever I encounter the question in Sweden, I have to say that we have not yet discussed this issue in depth. This doesn’t mean that we Orthodox will ever have female priests, but that we need to come to a clear and studied explanation of how we explain this as a Church.

RTE: How interested are today’s Lutherans in the early Church and patristic writings? That would surely lead to a deeper sense of tradition.

DR. HJÄLM: The Lutheran Church of Sweden is very interested in the early Church. What concerns me in the Orthodox-Lutheran dialogue are our divergent views of tradition. The Lutheran Church of Sweden usually emphasizes the rational side of theology, with the idea that you have to explain this to ordinary people. But if you try to explain theology to ordinary people, many of whom are not believers, you will adapt your explanation to their

understanding, and suddenly you have instrumentalised the message that should be an end in itself. The message has been subordinated to help people reach a goal, such as getting them interested in the Church, but this also endangers our understanding of tradition.

In its outer form you may have a rational explanation of tradition, but the inner side of tradition is the love of Christ. When you enter into the inner core of tradition, it’s not something you can explain. You share it with the saints of all times, and with your brothers and sisters in communion. You identify yourself with the one Church, beyond explanations. You can explain the Orthodox position on many things, but tradition is not so simple.

I was recently at a conference whose theme was: “Justification by Faith, Justification by Faith and Deeds, or Justification by Theosis?” I suggested that instead it should be “Justification through Christ,” because there are no methods for justification or redemption. Redemption in the final end is the personal decision of Christ. It is a Person who takes us into heaven, not a method, a theory, or fulfillment of laws. It’s *economia* by Christ. Just as we talk about bishops giving *economia* to people, the true *economia* is Christ saying, “I love you,” and receiving our love.

So when we talk about salvation or redemption or justification through theosis, the idea of theosis is simply that Christ is in our midst and that if we simply love Christ and receive His love in return we will be saved. This is what all of the spiritual fathers are trying to explain—how to receive the love of Christ; because in the end, even with all of these theological explanations, we still have to do the work. This becomes problematic when we are in dialogue with Lutherans and Catholics. I think we should just abandon the discussions on how we are saved and say instead that Christ makes a personal decision for our salvation. At the Final Judgment, when He says that we are saved, no one will be able to say, “Why? Why did you save him?” Christ is not constrained by any law or method. We simply hope that, in the end, He will make a personal decision to save us.

RTE: Doesn’t our relationship with the Mother of God also reveal this? Our prayers to her have the meaning, “At the dread and final judgment, just out of your sheer arbitrariness, intercede for and deliver me.”

DR. HJÄLM: I think your emphasis on the Mother of God is very important because she is the image of what salvation really means. Her presence makes you aware that God is beyond everything. She reveals the possibility of what

it means to be loved by God. She has an ocean of grace, but still she is not God. Someone has given her that ocean of grace.

RTE: As an Orthodox Christian, how do you deal with the growing secularism that we all see in the West. I've heard some Christians say that this may be the sign of something good because people are no longer obliged by social custom to attend a church that they feel doesn't really affect their life. They are looking for something more.

DR. HJÄLM: First of all, secularism is not a threat to me. I think it is very good, for example, that you can divorce if you must. I think it's very good that we have freedom. This freedom is something that the Orthodox Church has to accept. It is part of a new society and no one wants to go back. People are fed up with religious struggles and conflicts, they see them as childish and they back away. Now we Orthodox have a new challenge. If you can choose between many religions, suddenly we have not faith from above, but from below, from each heart. We have to talk to one another; we have to communicate to understand each other.

RTE: One of the characteristics of this secular society is an almost frenzied emphasis on work. The US, for example, is famous for its work ethic, but many Americans feel that they are on a treadmill that is only speeding up. This is sometimes attributed to a Calvinist notion of salvation, but Sweden doesn't seem to be Calvinist, though people work very hard. Is it something more positive?

DR. HJÄLM: We don't have a fear of losing everything because we have been at peace for centuries. To put it simply, we have more equality because we are spoiled. The spoiled are more harmonious, more able to communicate. Although there is a popular saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," it's not necessarily the case that if you have a tough life you will be a better human being.

Early Swedish Christianity: An Overview

RTE: Can you tell us now about early Christianity in Sweden during the Viking era?

Opposite: Viking graffiti on the top floor of the southern gallery of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The runic inscription depicts the carver's name, "Halfdan," and may have been part of a longer phrase, "Halfdan carved this."

DR. HJÄLM: It's a bit of a myth that Vikings were the first Christians in Sweden. Vikings were Scandinavian men who went abroad, perhaps when lack of arable land or economic hardships forced them abroad to trade, plunder or find new lands. Many of them certainly became Christian, but most of them never returned; only a few individuals came back. Vikings traveled throughout Europe, and also to the east, where the most important community was that of Rurik, the chieftain of the Rus'. *Rus'* comes from a Swedish word *Roslagen* which referred to the coastal areas north of Stockholm. These "Rus" established a community of Vikings near Novgorod, and later close to today's Kiev, where they became Christian because of their contact with Constantinople. In fact, on the top floor of the southern gallery of Hagia Sophia there is Viking runic graffiti. I tease the Russians saying, "We made you Christian, now you have to make us Christian."

It is interesting, though, to see how these early Rus' communities understood Christianity. They had an ancient Scandinavian pagan belief that when the world was established, in the center of the world was a tree. In Old Swedish it was called *Yggdrasil*, the tree of life and death. From this tree came forth life, and under the tree was the kingdom of Death, *hel*. So when the Vikings came to Jerusalem, entered the Holy Sepulchre and saw Golgotha where the cross had stood, and beneath it were shown the "grave of Adam," they immediately identified the Cross with Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life in the old Swedish religion. When they returned, they said, "We have seen Yggdrasil and we have seen the holy places where the gods live." Whether this Varangian interpretation also affected the Eastern Orthodox faith in Russia we don't know because we don't have this part of the story, but we do know that the idea of the life-giving Cross became extremely important to the Russian Orthodox faith, and perhaps also influenced the faith in Constantinople. The Armenians also have the understanding of the life-giving Cross, but in the Viking faith the image was so strong that the Cross was sometimes imagined as a tree with fruit.

RTE: We recently saw the Jelling Stone in Denmark, the huge 10th-century memorial stone known as the "baptismal certificate of Denmark" with an image of Christ crucified, but rather than being on a cross, He is surrounded by the brambles of a tree.

DR. HJÄLM: Certainly, all Scandinavians have this strong connection. When Greek Christianity first came to Russia it met this older Christian community, but one with this very peculiar understanding of the life-giving tree.

RTE: So there were Christians in Russia before Sts. Olga and Vladimir?

DR. HJÄLM: We have the common tradition of St. Vladimir in Kiev choosing between Islam and Christianity, but there was already an impure Christianity present from this Viking strain, a Christianity with syncretistic beliefs. When the Greek priests were brought in they set about purifying the faith and making these people into real Orthodox Christians. The Russians are now beginning to study the culture and faith of these early Viking communities. For example, in these early centuries in Russia, the Rus' buried their dead in a boat, which is not an Orthodox Christian tradition, but Viking. Saint Olga buried her relatives in boats, and she herself was buried in a boat, so we have these influences in early Christian Rus'. Even today Russian has common words with Swedish roots, such as *gord*, in Russian "gorod," meaning "city." And, as I said, the word *Rus'* (Russia, Russian) came originally from Swedish.

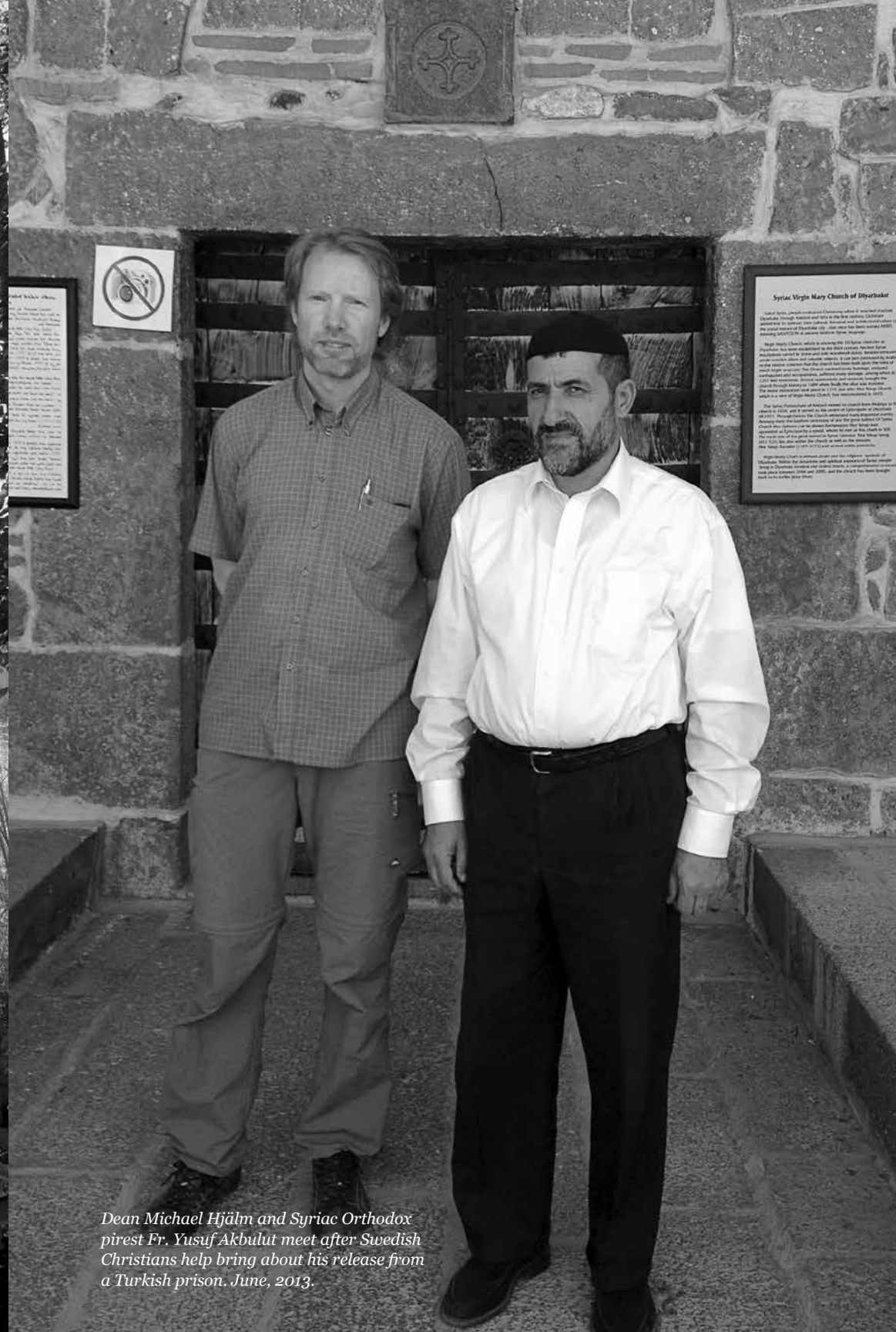
The idea of some Orthodox that the first Christians in Sweden were Eastern Orthodox is not true. What is true is that some of these traveling Swedish Vikings found Christianity outside of Sweden, and they helped make the Rus' Christian. There were a few small Eastern Christian communities in Sweden, such as that on the island of Gotland where many foreign traders congregated, but the real missionary impact came from the West, first from missionaries from Great Britain, though their influence was minimal. We have the tradition of St. Ansgar from Germany as the "Apostle to the North" in the 9th century, but his influence was very local, and Christianity died out after he left. The first Swedish Christian king was Olaf Skötkonung, and his daughter was Ingegärd (Irina). This was a process with many influences, including the political unification of Scandinavia.

Once Sweden's kings became Christian in the 11th century, religious life became more organized and the Roman Catholic Church, particularly from Germany, took charge of this organization by sending in monastic orders—the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Cistercians. Organized Christianity came to Sweden through the Roman Catholic Church approximately around the time of the Great Schism in 1065, so here in Sweden there was never an awareness of the schism and it was almost invisible until they began warring with the Russians.

Another difference is that because we were missionized by the Roman Catholic West we had clerical celibacy almost from the beginning, although some Christian priests took wives and had families, but without officially marrying



Wooden boat reminiscent of those in which the Rus buried their dead. Moored on St. Ansgar's island of Birka.



Dean Michael Hjälm and Syriac Orthodox priest Fr. Yusuf Akbulut meet after Swedish Christians help bring about his release from a Turkish prison. June, 2013.

them. It was an unorganized life and the Reformation tried to correct this by mandating marriages for Lutheran ministers, but this went too far and ended in expelling the monastic orders and destroying relics and reliquaries.

RTE: Since Scandinavia and Russia are relatively close geographically, and Constantinople was such a draw for ambitious Vikings, weren't the practices of Eastern Christians at least known?

DR. HJÄLM: Scandinavian texts about the Eastern Orthodox Church ended when the earlier trade routes were disrupted, and awareness of the East gradually slipped away. This awareness only returned during the 16th and 17th-century wars with Russia. In 1617, when King Gustav II Adolph was crowned, he received a document called, *Acta et Scripta* containing a dialog between Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople and the Lutheran theologians of Tübingen. The dialog was examined by Lutheran divines here in Sweden, who concluded that, "Yes, they are Christian, although with some peculiarities about saints and relics..."¹

In 1617, after a Swedish-Russian military alliance against the Poles, a treaty called "The Peace of Stolbova" included an agreement that Russians would be allowed to have their own services on Swedish soil. These were the first known Russian Orthodox services here, and from this we have the oldest Russian parish outside of Russia, still existing in Stockholm. The parish was established in 1648 at the Russian trading center in the old city of Stockholm, and only Russians were allowed to participate in these services. Swedes found attending could be imprisoned. This 1648 parish of the Holy Transfiguration is still an important part of Orthodox life here in Sweden, though now it is located at a different location from where it started, which they were given in 1907. In general, I would say that rediscovering history "in terms of our Orthodox past" is romanticizing it.

RTE: Yet the Orthodox recognize saints such as St. Ansgar, St. Olaf II of Norway, and St. Ingegärd/Anna of Novgorod as their own. Surely there is a pre-schism claim to the universal Church, even if Scandinavia was missionized by the Roman West?

DR. HJÄLM: Yes. If you are saying that the Church was still undivided, even if the ecclesiastical influence came from the West, this is true. But again, there was almost no knowledge of Eastern Orthodox practices in Sweden, nor was Sweden ever a part of the Byzantine or Russian Empires. Instead

you see people leaving Sweden, encountering Orthodoxy in Constantinople and the Holy Land and bringing it back to Russia. They usually didn't return to Scandinavia, but it is still the same people.

RTE: What are your hopes for the future of Orthodoxy in Sweden?

DR. HJÄLM: In the city of Södertälje where St. Ignatios Academy is located, we now have 25,000 Orthodox, many of whom are Syriac-speaking. We are the roots of Orthodoxy in Sweden for the future. If we want to build a sustainable Orthodox church in Scandinavia it has to be founded on the meaning of Orthodoxy and not on national identity or mere culture. We have to Christianize national identities and their cultures once again. We have to bring the meaning of being Christians to the multitude of nations, not outside of Scandinavia but within Scandinavia. It is not about abandoning nations and cultures but fulfilling them through the Christian faith and Orthodox tradition. That is the mission of St Ignatios. ✝

For more information on St. Ignatios Theological Academy, write:
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