

The inclusion of Roma: Breaking the invisible wall

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The Church of Sweden is an old majority church, reshaped by a gradual Lutheran reformation during more than seventy years in the 16th century. It was thoroughly inculturated and indeed shaped a homogeneous culture of the land – both before and after the reformation.

The Nordic societies have an egalitarian profile. This was surely underpinned by the Lutheran tradition of not seeing good deeds as something God would reward. Good deeds are simply the answers to the reciprocal rights humans have to call upon each other to serve each other, through our vocations, in a wide sense. A relation to God makes this clear – and gives us perseverance and hope, as we realize that God constantly gives us what is necessary for life, love and grace. The Lutheran reformation also made room for a wide acceptance of a strong central power, not primarily linked to the thin layer of nobility, but relating directly to the vast farming majority. This acceptance marginalized minorities.

The combination of a homogeneous culture, a high appreciation of hard and stable work and of accepting the rules from the king or central power made the situation of Roma people very difficult. When the first Roma came to the land in the 16th century the majority was pushed to the then poor and remote very eastern part of the land, which was later to become a part of Finland. Officially the church, at times, said Roma people should not be served by the Church at all, but instead expelled. Praxis obviously was different in a number of cases, but still. A second influx of Roma came during the 19th century and that group forms the old group of Roma present in Swedish society.

From the 1920s until 1954 Roma people were actually, by law, not allowed into Sweden. Fear and resentment of the unknown ruled. After that period many Roma came from Finland and an ongoing in- and outflow between these countries continues. The next and present period is similar to that of several EU-countries. The fall of the Soviet empire and the disintegration of Yugoslavia meant a large influx both of actual Roma immigrants and of Roma asylum-seekers, many of them Muslims, Roman Catholics or Orthodox.

The majority church, Church of Sweden, is the church that most Roma with a longer history in Sweden have turned to for baptism and funeral services. Those who go more regularly to church mostly do that in Pentecostal congregations – but still practicing infant baptism. Ordained priests are held in high esteem though actual recurring personal contacts are scarce.

Roma people who have arrived during the last twenty years have often come in contact with the diaconal work of Church of Sweden, as the church has been heavily involved in receiving, protecting, assisting and sometimes also hiding asylum-seekers. Children and young people have become involved in congregational activities, at least for periods of time, and some very few Roma people have been working in congregations.

During the 1990s a respected member of the Roma community approached Church of Sweden, by mail. He himself had a back-ground in Finland and had been inspired by the Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland at that time, Dr John Vikström. He had taken important initiatives to have the Finnish society attend to the situation of Roma people. This letter led the central board of Church of Sweden to react and try to start a process, which eventually led to the publication of a small book *Ja Devlesa!* Romani chib for Go with God, distributed to all congregations, and a service of reconciliation in Gothenburg Cathedral, led by my predecessor. Here I should insert, that most of the observations and experiences from that process are not my own, but handed on from people who actively took part.

The fact that the initiative came from the Roma community proved very important for the sustainability of the process. Initiatives like this from the church can always be accused of having a hidden agenda. No, this concern had its origin among those affected.

Roma communities share experiences of deceit. Representatives of the majority society have often let them down. Every Roma individual has experiences of discrimination and exclusion. That fosters suspicion against “the others” and easily leads to divisions among your own, as you might differ in judging the honesty of those representing “the others”. There were several problems of that sort. Promising developments were hindered. Agreements were interpreted differently or nullified. The fact that one representative of Church of Sweden on the working group was not able to attend at a couple of meetings made him lose his credibility. Tensions within the Roma community were also transported into the working group and delayed and complicated the work.

What was the content of the work and what did the Roma representatives want? They wanted to speak and tell about their and their elders’ experiences but they also wanted to gain perspectives and hear from the majority about their interpretations of historical situations, experiences, circumstances and guilt. The representatives of the church were called upon to listen and to really take in what was told, and to confess, that what had happened, actually had happened, and acknowledge facts. Then the publishing of the book was planned and the process was discussed and monitored.

The service at the Cathedral was an important and very public moment. Reconciliation processes easily become narrowed down to an act of asking for forgiveness. My predecessor, Archbishop KG Hammar, had difficulties with the anachronistic idea of people living now, asking for forgiveness on behalf of people long dead, and then thinking that we, living now, had put things right and should be honored for something which has not cost us much. It was necessary to find a way of repentance that aimed at what is present and ahead of us!

Mature clergy know that forgiveness should not be asked for and given too quickly. Then it might turn out to be just a thinly white-washed gravestone. Some of that problem remains with the process. It seems as if the reconciliation process which led up to the service was thorough, honest and ripe. On the other hand other processes ought to follow, with other people involved. Furthermore: Institutional memories seldom work and life-spans of people involved are short. The follow-up process has not been strong enough. Some congregations work hard and with endurance, especially those with large work among immigrants and asylum-seekers, but the great bulk of congregations do just as little as the used to.

Sweden has a tradition of being strong to condemn discrimination elsewhere, while having problems with what is close at hand. We are in a process with the Sami people, which is longer and deeper, but it is obvious that the tradition of homogeneity is far stronger than the rights of minorities and original populations in the minds of the majority.

The church has committed members when it comes to the rights of minorities. Therefore the church can be of importance in the public debate and also when forming opinions locally. We see some encouraging examples in the form of seminars on Roma issues and the situation of Roma people where congregations and dioceses have been able to be inviters, brokers and mediators, guarding the rights of Roma people to be represented by them, themselves. We see good examples of congregations actually having space for Roma children and youth, working, with them, not only for them, although problems of dropping-out from school early also leads to difficulties in finding a place in this part of greater society.

An article on the discrimination of Roma people written by me and the Commissioner of Human Rights at the European Council, Thomas Hammarberg, in the leading newspaper in Sweden last fall, had a great impact. That was also the case with a public statement by the General Synod of Church of Sweden (and those are rare) on the discrimination of Roma people not being given their rights as EU citizens.

And then lastly, another observation. Holocaust Memorial Day, January 27, also belongs to the Roma people. This year, at the commemoration in the synagogue in Stockholm, also Roma representatives took part as contributors. That was an important act of acknowledgement and sharing of fate.