

The Great Discovery

Ulf Ekman y Birgitta Ekman
Escritores y conferenciantes

When my wife Birgitta and I announced publically that we would become Catholics, on March 9th 2014, it was the end of a long process over many years. I was the senior pastor of a Charismatic Non-denominational church, Word of Life in Uppsala, Sweden. We started this church in 1983 and it had grown locally over the years and now also had a large network of new churches in many nations, especially in the former Soviet Union. We had been deeply involved in missions and church planting and had done many different outreaches in Europe, Russia and Asia. We had started Christian Schools, Bible-schools and published books by the thousands in 30 languages.

To stand in the pulpit in our 4000 seat church building and announce to our dear congregation that we now, after 30 years as their pastors, had come to the conclusion that we would become Catholics, was not easy. For some of our members this hit them like an emotional Tsunami, for others it was suspicions coming true after all, for others, who knew us better, something they had suspected must come at last.

This was the end of a long development that had been going on for around 15 years. It was not a hasty decision even

though for many it came as a big surprise, for some even a shock.

I had met my wife Birgitta as I studied to become a Lutheran minister at the university of Uppsala, Sweden in the middle of the 1970s. In May 1970 I had come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ through strong conversion from a secular lifestyle. Birgitta had a Methodist background. Her parents were Swedish Methodist missionaries in India. When we met, we both had an evangelical background and had experienced the Charismatic movement. We loved Jesus and wanted to serve Him with all of our hearts.

After completed studies I was ordained a Lutheran minister in 1979 and became a student chaplain at Uppsala University. This gave me an opportunity to continue to do what I had done throughout my studies, to lead Bible studies and to evangelize among students. I loved it!

During this period we decided to take a year off in the early 1980s, to study more about the Charismatic life at a Charismatic Bible school in USA. This was certainly a step of faith for us and we had to trust the Lord for all our provision. I learned a lot about the Christian life that I never learned at the secular state University back home, with its rather liberal theology department.

When we returned to Sweden we started a Bible School open for all denominations and we became heavily involved in this new ministry that we called Word of Life. Eventually I resigned as a Lutheran pastor because our activities involved church planting and our way of working was more Pentecos-

tal/Charismatic in style and theology. The ministry, the Bible school and the newly started church grew. Many, mostly young people, were attracted to it. There was a real hunger in Scandinavia after being more grounded in the Word of God and a desire to follow and serve Jesus. We started to send out many evangelistic teams and eventually long-time missionaries.

At this time, in the end of the 1980s the Iron Curtain collapsed. Living only two hours by flight from Moscow, we were able to engage heavily in missions into the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. From 1989 and onward it was an amazing time with an unprecedented opening for the Gospel into these Communist nations. It filled us with joy and purpose as we shuttled in and out for several years, preaching and teaching. Atheism had been the norm in Russia for 70 years but now we saw thousands of people turning to Jesus, new congregations being formed and many Bible schools started to train and equip these new Christians.

During this adventurous and busy time I visited Albania. It was in the beginning of the 1990s. We had a unique opening there and I was able to preach at the main stadium in Tirana, the capital of Albania. We had brought with us our big choir and 20 000 people filled the stadium. Our program was aired by state television, in spite of the fact that Albania still had a Communist regime. It was amazing to see how people responded to the Gospel and how they clearly were so hungry for Jesus Christ.

Next year the Communist regime fell and I came back to Albania and met the President-to-be. His elderly male secretary seemed so glad to see me and greeted me with these words: "I am also a Catholic." This jolted me a bit and I thought: "I am not a Catholic, I am a protestant." And in my mind these thoughts raced quickly. "In justification I am Lutheran, in holiness more of a Methodist, in baptism more of a Baptist, but not just a Baptist because I do believe baptism actually confers the Holy Spirit. In believing in the Holy Spirit I am more of a Pentecostal but not just a Pentecostal but also a Charismatic." All this; really the history of the developments and divisions in the body of Christ, was racing through my mind in a few seconds. As I clearly did not know how to communicate all this to a happy Albanian that thought I was a Catholic, I just said "God bless you, brother!"

However, I could never forget this experience and I felt at that moment that I was certainly not in the center of the Church, but more on the peripheries, influenced by divisions and constant new movements who splinter from one another. Although I had seen so many wonderful things I was still part of these divisions and I knew enough of what the Bible taught on unity, to understand that this was not the fullness of what Jesus wanted from his Church. From this moment in Albania something started to grow in me. The question of unity now became urgent for me.

After a number of years I also encountered a number of challenges in different parts of our large missions work. I started to search for necessary answers. My questions concerned

authenticity in leadership and the need for some form of authoritative magisterium (although I did not use this term at that time). In situations of theological and moral problems, who had the right to decide? Who had the last word and on what basis? How are authentic pastors put into office? Can anybody start a group and just call himself a pastor? In what relation did our pastors stand to other leaders, to be helped and corrected?

When everything was going well it seemed like the independent and congregational view worked fine and was practical and effective. But when things started to go wrong it was much harder. Who could interfere into a local congregation or into a leader's life and ministry - and with what authority? These reflections and actual experiences in several places in our missions work led me to start to study and reflect deeper about what the Church really is.

So these thoughts stuck in my mind and in the end of the nineties they seemed to constantly challenge me. It was like the Lord was urging me with these words: "Get to know the essence of the Church." I felt compelled to search, not only for the most effective strategies and activities for the church, the missions and the evangelization. And not just for the building up of congregations and the training of leaders. I simply felt it necessary to go deeper, to try to get to know the very *essence* of the Church. I realized more and more how weak I was in ecclesiological understanding and how pragmatic and in many ways quite shallow my understanding of the Church really was.

This led to a gradual change of my theology. There were ideas that were prevalent within our particular Christian circles that I never really reflected too much over but still believed and taught. Among these was a definite lack of respect of the past, of history. Progress, growth and “visions for the future” occupied us at the expense of tradition and going back to the historic sources. We were anti-institutional because institutions were seen as threats to evangelical and spiritual freedom. A suspicion about leadership and its perceived misuse was prevalent and the idea of obedience was not a popular concept. Personally I saw the need for the strengthening and training of pastors and leaders and even wrote a book about it. But in our charismatic culture “authority” was often viewed as a hindrance to the initiatives of the ordinary believer. There was an understanding of the common priesthood but not really of the special priesthood, at least definitely not in any Catholic sense of the word.

Step by step, I started to see the need of all the things we actually had rejected. They seemed to be needed after all. I started to study more about the historicity, the continuity, the authenticity, the authority and the sacramentality of the Church. It was here that I really found the answers I was looking for, although I did not at first want to admit it.

I started to see that many of the activities we had engaged in were good and needed, but they were still not enough. I realized we did not have to “invent the wheel” in every new generation. Continuity was stronger than discontinuity and we were supposed to build on something that was before us

and not just depart from it or disdain it as old fashioned, outdated or dead. This was a very sobering and uncomfortable challenge for me but also, in the end; it became very satisfying because of all the treasures we started to discover. Even more uncomfortable at this time was the fact that the answers to my ecclesiological questions came from a place and source that I did not wish to turn at this point in time. It came from the Catholic Church.

While these questions were going on in my mind, my wife was busy reading about St. Birgitta of Sweden (St. Bridget). In 2003 the 700th jubilee of St. Brigitte's birth was celebrated. At that time she was the only saint canonized by Rome in Sweden and there was a renewed interest in her. While my Birgitta was studying about her, she came upon a number of problems. This saint was certainly strongly used by God and loved Jesus dearly. St. Birgitta heard from the Lord but she also, and this was troublesome, talked with Mary and even more troublesome, Mary talked to her! We certainly thought she must have mistaken these experiences with Mary and were convinced she confused Mary with the Holy Spirit. We spent much time to reflect and discuss about these things. Surely and steadily this lead us to have to reconsider the place and purpose of the Virgin Mary, which up to now was so unfamiliar to us as Protestants. For us the question about Mary was not the last nut to crack, but the first we had to deal with, in our quest about Catholic faith. In this way the Virgin Mary did become the entryway for us into the Catholic Church.

At this time we were sent by our church (Word of Life) to start a Study Centre in Israel and we moved eventually to the village of Ein Kerem on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Ein Kerem is the village of John the Baptist and the meeting place for Elisabeth and Mary. For us too, it became a meeting place with Mary.

The three years we spent in Israel gave us a much deeper respect for our spiritual roots and for the continuity of the faith and we discovered so much. It was also a place where the division in the Body of Christ became very visible and painful to us. Christian unity became a deeper concern for us than ever before.

Wherever we were in Israel we bumped into Catholics. In Sweden we rarely met them but here in Israel they were present everywhere. And they were so nice, so open and loving, with such a great love for Jesus, as we got to know them. This made an impression on us. So much of our ignorance and inherited prejudices crumbled in this atmosphere and in communication with our Catholic brothers and sisters. We had the usual questions, and they were important for us; questions about the Pope, Mary and the Saints and of course Purgatory. We needed answers.

These questions were rooted in our protestant belief of “Sola Scriptura”, in which we were steeped. Step by step I started to see that “Sola Scriptura” was really not so scriptural after all. Nor was it true that Catholics put Tradition, the Church and the Pope over the Bible, or that they never read the Bible. Another Protestant misconception was that the Catholic

Church tried to keep the Bible away from the lay people. There was propaganda and myths that we had more or less instinctively inherited from the time of the Reformation and it was prevalent in our culture.

Instead I realized there was another term that seemed much more in line with Scripture and how the ancient Church actually understood Scripture, i.e. the term “the primacy of Scripture”. I also started to understand that understanding true Tradition was basically the key to how to read Scripture. I began to see that there is a real need of a Magisterium, which with the help of the Holy Spirit can discern the true interpretation of Scripture in times of arguments and disagreements. We were not just left to ourselves - so it was not just about “me, Jesus and my Bible”. This was actually a great encouragement. It was a tremendous help in discerning that there is an objective truth in Revelation and this was deposited in the Church, which has safeguarded it and handed it on safely to coming generations.

One day we took a walk in the Yemenite valley outside Ein Kerem. As we past an old Olive tree I felt a question from the Holy Spirit, and it seems like he tricked me into this situation. “Look at this olive tree, it is dead, isn ’t it?” Looking at it casually it really looked like it was dead. It had holes right through the trunk. So I thought: “Yes, it is.” Then I sensed: “Look again.” And, looking again a little closer, I did see many, many small green leaves all over the branches. It was not dead at all. And on the inside of me I heard what I will never forget: ”Don ’t you ever call anything dead again.” I understood it clearly to

refer to the criticism and scorn I from time to time had felt and expressed towards the traditional, historical churches. I had to repent from my sin of pride then and there.

Through the years we had the opportunity to travel quite a bit and this also took us to Rome. Rome made a deep impression on us. The first time we went there together was before we lived in Israel. It was in 1999 and we spent a week looking at churches and ancient monuments and we also discovered very good religious bookstores. We prayed and read a lot and discussed many subjects.

On the Wednesday audience Pope John Paul II came quite close to us in his Pope mobile. My wife took the opportunity to give him a loud greeting and shouted happily: "God bless you, Brother!" I realized I wasn't quite sure if he was a brother or not and when I discovered my own thoughts I actually felt rather ashamed. Of course he was a brother in the Lord, but I had to admit there had been times when I had not been so sure about this. In that moment a young man next to me turned to me and asked me: "Who is the Holy Father for you?" I was very surprised and answered diplomatically: "The Bishop of Rome." Then he said, with serious eyes looking at me: "Is that *all* he is?" I had no answer but I felt caught, and I clearly felt uneasy, with a guilty conscience over my resistance. I knew instantly, as I was fumbling with the answers, the Lord was trying to say something to me.

From Israel we travelled several times to Rome and discovered more and more. Once, when we were in the St. Peters ba-

silica we had the opportunity to go down into the Scavi under the sanctuary, where some bones of St. Peter apparently have been found. For me this was astonishing. I stood there and looked at these pieces of bones that very well could be from the buried body of Peter the Apostle. And as we climbed up the stairway to the sanctuary again I realized that right above this grave, was the high altar in the center of this magnificent church, where the successors of St. Peter always celebrate the Eucharist. The unbroken line from the ancient Church until today overwhelmed me at that moment.

The reality of this unshakeable faith and unshakable Church, built by Christ on his Apostle Peter whom he called “the rock”, came crashing down on me. As we walked out my mind was completely filled with questions and wonderings about all this. Is this really and actually the Church that Jesus founded? As I stepped out on the stairs outside the church together with my wife and a friend, all three of us in an instant saw the exact same thing - the sky was as usual filled with birds flying back and forth. But now, suddenly, from high up in the sky and down over the great square, a gigantic exclamation mark was formed by the birds, perfect in shape, with a perfect dot underneath it. It look like all the birds stood absolutely still for a moment. And all three of us saw this independently of one another. It was quite astonishing, almost a bit surrealistic. But in my mind, all my question marks turned into a huge exclamation mark too. It was like the Lord was saying. “Haven’t you heard and seen enough now to believe?”

Grace turns our questions into answers, not by our own independent intellectual strength but by Him revealing truth to us. We can only receive by faith and believe.

We started to realize more in depth that the Catholic Church is the original, authentic and true Church. That did not mean that we didn't see other Christians in other denominations as brothers and sisters. Of course they are. It meant that there is something about the Catholic Church that every Christian needs and actually has a longing for, even though we often reject it. It means coming into the fullness of what God wants to give all his children. He gives it in and through His Church.

One thing that divides basically all Christians in two distinct camps is the Sacraments. If it is true that the Sacraments actually confer grace and are not just symbols of the grace God is willing to give us, then many questions arise. In what way is grace conferred? How is the Church safeguarding the sacraments, for grace to come to us? When are the sacraments valid or invalid?

Of course, here Christians differ a lot in opinions. We started to understand that God's grace was truly present in the Sacraments. The real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist became very important to us. So, if the Catholic Church taught this and we believed this, we were yet still outside and could not partake fully in this grace. To be able to receive God's grace in its fullness we had to partake in the Sacraments and to partake in the Sacraments we had to be in full communion with the Catholic Church. I felt like someone standing outside

a bakery shop. There was a glass window between the good things that were stored inside the shop and me. I saw them and I wanted them, but I could not participate in them. We had to come into the Church, to be able to partake in its fullness. This became frustrating.

From this point on it became increasingly important how to treat and value these truths and treasures deposited in the Catholic Church, instead of doubting the Church. Now it became a question of communicating what we up till now had discovered and to share it with our dear brothers and sisters in a good and proper way.

This journey of discovery, as I said earlier, took several years. Inside of me, over and over again, I heard four short exhortations. “Discover! Appreciate what you discover! Draw nearer to that which you have discovered! Unite with what you have discovered!” The last sentence I put on the backburner for a long time. I was not at all ready for that, yet. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I would ever become a Catholic. However, I did appreciate the Church and was very attracted towards it. By now my criticism was melting away.

In the midst of all this and after three years in Israel we moved back to Uppsala, Sweden, in 2005 and I continued as pastor of Word of Life. My views had changed, my teaching and preaching changed and I started to share what I was beginning to be convinced of. Many liked it but not everybody. And I was still searching; I was open but still not sure of where this would lead.

During this time we organized several tours to Rome with pastors and leaders from our international network. For many it was a very profitable time and a real eye-opener that helped them to confront ignorance and prejudices in their own lives. It felt good to be able to share this ecumenical openness with others and sometimes it seemed like this would be enough. But the question of the meaning of the word “unite” that lingered in the back of my mind was still not solved. I also thought, being in a position of pastoral leadership, with all the responsibilities this entailed, I just could not forsake the sheep and leave. Over the passed thirty years we had built a community of a couple of hundred thousand Christians in many nations.

My wife Birgitta would once in a while ask me a simple but very compelling question: “But Ulf, what is the *truth*?” The truth, not convenience, not fear, nor the opinion of others should be the principle guiding us. But we did not want to hurt our people. Sometimes this equation looked impossible.

As I was more and more open in my preaching and teaching with what I was convinced of, I also started to get more resistance and criticism. This openness towards the Catholic Church was not what some people wanted to hear of. The more I was open the more the deep-seated criticisms of the Catholic faith surfaced. It was quite astonishing how deeply this was rooted in Sweden and all of Scandinavia. Since the Reformation in the 1500s, it is in our culture, even in our DNA, it seems. People who for sure never had studied the subject still could become furious when they perceived I came to

close to Rome. Emotions started to run high and we had to take the heat.

Step by step some people started to accuse me of having a hidden agenda and rumors came out, especially on the Internet, that we already were Catholics. Some blogs were running wild with rumors. We were accused of trying to collectively affiliate the whole of Word of Life with the Catholic Church and there was a lot of murmuring. But the truth was that we, at that point, were not ready and not totally sure and did not have answers to all questions ourselves yet. So I stated what I was convinced of, not more. Eventually we started to see that this position was not acceptable for anyone. I was praying a lot to try to understand God's will in these things and how to handle the criticism.

At this time we talked to the Catholic Bishop of Sweden to let him know where we stood. As I was a well-known public figure it was arranged that we could receive the RCIA classes privately, with no strings attached. We could make up our mind either way when the course ended. A very kind and loving Jesuit priest met with us once a month for a year.

One night, at 2:00 in the morning I was suddenly wide-awake and heard in my heart: "It is time to step out into the water. You can do it in the way of the prophet Jonah or in the way of the Apostle Peter." Well, I did not want Jonah's way, running away from God's calling and getting in all kinds of trouble, so I said; "OK, I want to do it in Peter's way."

After that I feel asleep very peacefully. I knew I had been dragging my feet and procrastinating this important decision, but now that time was definitely over.

My wife and I finally made up our mind in total unity and shortly afterwards told our congregation that we now were convinced that we needed to be joined to the Catholic Church. A media storm erupted and went on for months, but now our hearts were at peace. With great joy and thankfulness in our hearts, on a beautiful spring day, the 21st of May 2014, we were received into the Catholic Church in a small Brigettine chapel. We have never since doubted this decision for a moment, and every day we are thankful to God for this grace and privilege.

Jesus said: If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. John 8:31,32

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