

Roundtable organised by
the Orthodox Church of Estonia
at Nelijärve, 6. VII. 2016

The Christian experience of life in the Baltic States

The Most Reverend Urmas Viilma,
Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

Your Eminences and Excellences, good sisters and brothers in Christ!

First of all let me thank His Honourable Eminence Metropolitan Stephanos for this invitation and opportunity to speak here at this roundtable. This is a great honour and privilege, for which I am very thankful to him as a good Christian brother!

Introduction

I will try in my presentation to share with you the experience of the life of the church in the three Baltic States. However being most familiar with the church today in my homeland, it is perhaps best that, when speaking about the ecumenical co-operation, I will focus more on Estonia. Rushing ahead, I need to mention that in all the three Baltic States the appraising of the situation of the church brings out more differences than similarities.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – so similar, yet so different

From a distance, the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – seem very similar. Looking at a map of Europe they appear to be almost the same size in terms of territory and likewise, they are located geographically near to one another. In terms of history, it is only this past century that events overlap: The gaining of independence as nations between the two World Wars, the following occupations by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany along with the accompanying hostilities, deportations and various repressions. What also unites us is the dismantling of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980's and the restoration of independence at the beginning of the 1990's, which includes the date August 23rd 1989 when the aspirations for independence by the Baltic States drew worldwide attention with the "Baltic Chain", where together hand-in-hand people stood together forming the longest human chain, that is, 600 kilometers long with nearly two million people joining together from Tallinn via Riga to Vilnius. In common has been the road into the European Union, NATO and with small variations in time joining the European Monetary Union (EURO). However, for the three small Eastern European nations there is no common ethnicity nor similarity in identity as one would expect – even when taking into account the Christian and ecclesiastical landscape and context. It is important to emphasize that the Latvian and Lithuanian languages and peoples are part of the same family (Indo-European Baltic languages); however, the Estonian language and people belong to the Finno-Urgic family of languages.

Christianization of the Baltic Region

Differing are the processes and timeline for the Christianization of each of the three nations. Here there is a great overlap in terms of a common history in Estonia and Latvia, with the Lithuanian situation being quite different in terms of Christianization.

Even though there was contact with peaceful Christianization already in the 11th century, the Christianization of Latvian and Estonian territory was organized through crusades and colonization by the Teutonic Order (German Order) in the beginning of the 13th century. Into this period falls the then Latvian and Estonian territory being dedicated to the Virgin Mary by Pope Innocent III in the year 1215. It is said and written of Estonia being the Land of Mary (*Terra Mariana*), which at least the Estonians have taken to be today as a designation

transcending religious borders, as a pet-name. In the Estonian and Latvian territories the religion of the people depended on the denomination to which the rulers belonged (that is the Polish, Danish and Swedish rulers). This meant that Latvia and Estonia until the middle of the 16th century were Catholic and from there-on Lutheran, excepting eastern Latvia, that is *Latgale*, where the Catholic Church retained its position thanks to Polish influences. It is in the 18th century that in Estonia and Latvia under the governance of Tsarist Russia that the Orthodox Church began to play more of an important role.

The Lithuanian people were the last pagan people in Medieval Europe, whose Christianization comes to a close not until the 14th century. Despite having been baptized already in the beginning of the 1250's into the Catholic faith, the Lithuanian Grand-duke Mindaugas, later renounced his baptism. The grand-dukes, kings and nobility of Lithuania-Poland that followed sought for political reasons contacts with Slavic rulers who were Orthodox as well as with Constantinople and Rome. Religious instability with competition between paganism and Orthodoxy as well as the influences of the Reformation and Catholic traditions lasted for a long time. It is with the Counter-reformation that the Roman Catholic Church finally firmly established itself at the end of the 17th century. Lithuania remained untouched by the period of Tsarist Russian government and thus there was no widening of the influence of the Orthodox Church.

The influence of the Soviet occupation on the peoples of the Baltic States

In the 20th century, and in half of this period, the Soviet Union with its atheistic and anti-Christian occupation influenced each of the Baltic States differently, depending on how much each people had taken ownership of Christianity and the church.

Lithuania with the Lithuanian people's self-determination and identity before the occupation by the Soviet Union was already for centuries tied with Catholicism because the Lithuanian rulers were Catholics. To be a Lithuanian meant to identify oneself with Catholicism. Before the Russian Revolution, since Lithuania did not belong to the composition of Tsarist Russia, Russian influences including the scope of influence of the Orthodox Church were weaker also during the Soviet period. The relatively large population of Lithuanians softened the waves of Russification compared with the influences on the other Baltic States. Rather, for historical reasons Lithuania was influenced by Catholic Poland and a unique role was played by the Polish pope's, John Paul II's, active criticism of communism.

Latvia suffered most heavily from Russification during the Soviet period because it is to Latvia that more people were resettled from the rest of the Soviet Union, rather than to Lithuania or Estonia. Catholic Eastern-Latvia (*Latgale*) held out much better than the rest of Latvia, thanks to moral support from Lithuanian and Polish Catholics.

Estonia also experienced an intensive resettlement of people from regions of the Soviet Union. After the Second World War with those who escape to the West and those who are deported to Siberia there remained only one-fourth of the clergy of the Lutheran-Folk-Church. The influence of the anti-church propaganda of the Soviets was great for it highlighted the violent side of Christianization and on the side of the history of the Lutheran Church, it brought to the fore the governance of the church by mostly Baltic-German pastors who represented the interests of the oppressive owners of the manor-house estates. Between the two World Wars the Estonians were unable to take complete ownership of the church and thus the ties that the Estonians had with the church could easily be severed.

The religious landscape of the Baltic States today

Today, with the aforementioned historical description in mind combined with unique national characteristics and individual traits the religious landscape in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia is very different in each case. To give an objective picture of the situation in each of the Baltic States I am using statistics obtained from the census of 2011:

	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
Population	3 043 400 persons	2 070 371 persons	1 294 455 persons
Ethnic make up	84.0% Lithuanians 6.6% Poles 5.8% Russians 1.2% White Russians 0.5% Ukrainians 1.9% other	61.6% Latvians 25.8% Russians 3.4% White Russians 2.3% Ukrainians 2.1% Poles 1.2% Lithuanians 3.6% other	69.7% Estonians 25.2% Russians 1.8 % Ukrainians 1.0% White Russians 0.6% Finns 1.7% other
Religiousness	77.2% Catholics 4.1% Orthodox 0.8% Old Believers 0.6% Lutherans 1.1% other 6.1% nonreligious 10.1% undefined	34.2% Lutherans 24.1% Catholics 17.8% Orthodox 1.6% Old Believers 1.2% other Christians 21.1% other and undefined	16.15% Orthodox 9.91% Lutherans 0.41% Catholics 0.24% Old Believers 0.98% other Christians 1.62% other 54.14% nonreligious 16.55% undefined

From the statistics presented it is quite clear that an important role is played by history and ethnic make-up of the population in determining religious identity of the population.

Lithuania is dominated by an indigenous population to whom are added Poles who share a common history. Both ethnic groups are predominantly Catholic. The number of Orthodox, mostly belonging under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Moscow, are logically tied in number with the Russian and other Slavic ethnic groups in terms of percentage of the population as a whole.

Latvia has one-third of its total population made up of ethnic Russians and other Slavic peoples which explains their identity being bound with the Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Moscow and their fairly large role in society. It is true, that to this church also belong the Latvian Orthodox. The Latvian-speaking population is almost equally divided amongst Lutherans and Catholics. The stable and conservative influence of the Catholic Church throughout history supports in its own way the Lutherans representing Western Christianity.

Estonia represents a unique picture when compared with the two other Baltic States, since attention is drawn by the non-religious and religiously undefined segment of people which is quite large in terms of the overall population of Estonia, up to 70.69%. With this Estonia is not only different from the other Baltic States but also from other European and world nations. There is a similar situation only in the Czech Republic and in the territory of former East Germany. In Estonia the Russian-speaking population defines itself as part of the Orthodox Church membership under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate and as such it is part of their identity as Russians. Thanks to the change of denomination that took place at the end of the 19th century on the Estonian west-coast and islands, there is also a historical Estonian-speaking Orthodox community under the protectorate of the Patriarchate of Constantinople while retaining autonomous status, the Orthodox Church of Estonia. Still, the most significant and largest denomination for Estonians is Lutheranism.

Estonian religious landscape and its distinction

In trying to objectively compare the Baltic States and Baltic peoples, I have to confess, that the most ruffled has been Estonia with its smallest population where the Christianity of the former centuries has been tied with the colonializing by the rulers of the manor-house estates for whom the indigenous population served as slaves. In the 20th century ethnic and national independence as well as the maturing of self-determined religious belief was ruined by the World Wars, deportations, occupations, atheistic propaganda and Russification. I believe, that a part in lack of enthusiasm in terms of religion on part of the Estonians is played out by the closed-nature, strong individualism, and stubborn grit found in the character of the Estonians. All this has helped this ethnic shard with a population of one million only to survive through the sufferings of the past millennium – but all this has also resulted in reluctance and mistrust towards everything that does not have a clear message: “Made in Estonia”. Unfortunately, there is for no Christian denomination nor is there for Christianity as a whole the right to make such a claim.

However, Estonia’s distinctness has from the Christian perspective some peculiar and unique positive sides as well. In Estonia no church in terms of law has an advantage over others. In the Estonian Constitution there is no Estonian state-church nor state-religion. This means that churches in their decisions in terms of finances, administration as well as doctrine are totally autonomous. The state does not even contribute in as much as to collect church fees as it does in many other European nations. Estonian statistics mirror a better picture of true ties with the church when compared with Scandinavian countries or Central European states. It could be claimed that the picture in Estonia is a manifestation of what is to come in the future of Europe! The churches of Old Europe are still far from this situation; however, in my mind, they are moving in the same direction if moral deterioration continues and Christian traditions are cast aside with intentional and planned secularization of public life.

Ecumenism Estonian style

Since only barely a third of the total population belong to any of the Christian denominations present in Estonia we need to acknowledge to ourselves that practicing Christians are a minority in Estonian Society. Obviously we are dealing with a large minority, but still a minority. This means that Estonian Christians do not have the obligation nor the responsibility to represent the majority of the people or society of Estonia. This explains why in Estonia churches are ecumenically very active in terms of co-operation: because one is trying to co-ordinate a united representation of the message of Christians and churches to society. Thus our context provides a clear answer to the question, why no church in Estonia varies in terms of ethical and moral questions from another and why one tries to speak “with one voice and one mouth” using traditional language also in those questions that touch upon legislative changes that the government is preparing. This includes approving and enacting of legislation pertaining to the Civil Partnership Act, the right of minors to independently decide to have an abortion, the right of adoption of children for same-sex partners, euthanasia as well as other questions related to ethics and morals. If one church departs from the ecumenical coalition, then it fractures or disseminates the united voice of Christians in Estonian society!

The lack of a majority church means that no church in Estonia dominates in terms of religious arrogance toward the lesser of one’s brothers-sisters in the faith. In the world and even in Europe there are places where one church uses its preferred status within the state as an excuse to ignore other denominations, pretend a co-operation or outright negate other churches. Estonian Lutherans and Orthodox in comparison to other denominations have one difference, that is, when it comes to dealing with historical properties. The churches have the use of invaluable riches, but also carry a very great responsibility as well as financial burden. The state supports the restoration and conservation work done on these properties only to the extent that the roof does not cave in, the towers do not collapse or that the art-works within are not destroyed. One has to confess, that the Estonian Lutheran Church has preserved in society, in a certain sense, the status of a Folk-Church, which comes from a parochial network of parishes throughout the territory of the country and a historical background. This is expressed also in the wish of the state to entrust to the Lutheran Church the celebrations on national and state occasions involving worship services such as on Independence Day or Victory Day as well as the acts of remembrance on memorial days.

Since there is no majority church co-operation between all Christian denominations is ultimately very friendly and good, dare I say, brotherly. In 1989 the Estonian Council of Churches (Eesti Kirikute Nõukogu – EKN) was established to unite ten Christian denominations represented in Estonia: Lutherans, two Orthodox Churches, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Adventist, Pentecostals, the Armenian Church and Charismatic Episcopal Church. The leaders and representatives of all these churches meet with each other regularly at a roundtable ten times a year and in addition, active visitation with one another takes place on important occasions and at worship services.

Through the council of churches there is good co-operation with the Estonian state in terms establishing and developing ecumenical chaplaincy structures. Clergy work as state-paid chaplains in the defence forces, prisons and police. Negotiations are taking place to have state-supported hospital chaplains.

Last year the churches celebrated together the anniversary “the Land of Mary 800” recalling the organized Christianization of Estonia in the 13th century. Before us lie celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, 100th anniversaries of the Estonian Republic, independent Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) and autonomous Orthodox Church of Estonia (OCE).

In addition to this amongst the various churches there are bilateral forms of co-operation in various fields. Here I would very much like to bring to the fore the already several years of theological dialogue between the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Orthodox Church of Estonia in a joint-commission chaired jointly by the leaders of the churches – the metropolitan and the archbishop. A unique event took place between the same two churches in December 2014 when an agreement of co-operation was signed by the Theological Institute of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the St. Platon Seminary of the Orthodox Church of Estonia which brought together energy and resources so that both churches can prepare clergy for service providing mutually the strength, energy and resources needed. I don't know if there is anywhere else in the world a theological school of higher education that belongs to one denomination with a chair of studies for another denomination. In Estonia this has come about because of the warm and active relations between churches becoming a reality, being at the same time an example of up-building ecumenicity. There are in Estonia many good examples of official reciprocal relationships, yet personally I value it very greatly, that we on the level of leaders of churches – metropolitans, archbishops, church presidents and chairmen – can engage with one another as Jesus expected of His apostles, when He said: *“My command is this: That you love one another as I have loved you!”* John 15:12.

Summary

In the modern world, new challenges lie before all churches. In this kind of situation one is always asked about changes. Does the church need to change? The answer to such questions can be only tied with the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments. The contemporary world expects that in the focal point of every change are people with their needs, wishes and rights. Scripture however teaches that the focal point of every change needs to be Christ. If the focal point of the church's work and proclamation is no longer Christ, then we are no longer Christ's church.