

Swedish Pastor's Call For Unity Criticized

Some observers say charismatic minister Ulf Ekman is opening the door too wide to Catholicism

After stoking controversy through the last 25 years for his Word-Faith message, Swedish pastor Ulf Ekman is again at the center

of debate, this time for his embrace of Catholic and Protestant leaders

who advocate uniting all Christians "under the pope."

In recent years, the prominent pastor of Word of Life in Uppsala has been associating increasingly with Catholic leaders, and

introducing his followers to Catholic and Orthodox theology, in

particular through his teaching magazine, *Keryx*. Yet Ekman insists he is not adopting Catholicism but simply broadening his theology and promoting a "unity of the heart."

"God has spoken to me as powerfully concerning unity as He did concerning the faith message," Ekman told *Charisma*.

"With secularism and Islam taking over in Europe, revival slogans won't

suffice. The need of the hour is a powerful, effective unity including

the historical churches."

Viewing the Roman Catholic Church as the "whore of Babylon" is "untenable," he added. "With so much apostasy and denying of fundamental truths among Protestants, even in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, who are we to point fingers at the Catholics?"

Ekman said. "The whore is present in all denominations. But then again

the body of Christ is also in all denominations and certainly in the Catholic Church.”

Ekman's views are being welcomed by many Swedish church leaders as interest in Catholic and Orthodox spirituality, Catholic pilgrimages and monastery-like retreats grows rapidly in Pentecostal and charismatic circles. The Catholic bishop of Sweden, Anders Arborelius, told *Charisma* that so “many Protestants approach the Catholic Church with high expectations” that he is “barely coping.”

Others are deeply worried. In April and October evangelicals gathered in Örebro, Sweden's evangelical center, to point out that to Catholics unity always meant, and still means, bowing to the pope. Arborelius seemed to affirm that view, saying: “We cannot bypass the personal wish of Jesus that all unity must relate to the apostle Peter,” that is, to the papal office.

The criticism doesn't deter Ekman. He speaks at Catholic charismatic gatherings and is interacting increasingly with Oasis, a hub of the charismatic Lutheran renewal in Sweden. Combining a high church, liturgical profile with a broad ecumenical approach, Oasis may be the largest charismatic movement in the country.

A Lutheran priest before he planted his independent charismatic church, Ekman often sparred with his former denomination in the 1980s

and 1990s because of his prosperity message. But in 2007, Ekman preached at the Oasis Pentecost Conference, and in 2008 he was a guest of honor at the Oasis Summer Conference, taking a seat on the platform during the sermon of the event's most renowned speaker—the pope's "personal preacher," Franciscan monk Raniero Cantalamessa.

Ekman has also invited Arborelius to a "night of exchange" at Word of Life, intentionally not confronting him with controversial questions and hugging him as a brother in Christ. "My heart is to do away with prejudices," Ekman said. "We need to discover and recognize each other. Unity begins at heart, not with theology."

Ekman said he does not feel "under obligation" to address the theological issues dividing Catholics and Protestants—"that is not where we are at." But supporters and critics alike interpret Ekman's new thrust in theological terms.

Arborelius told *Charisma* that Ekman and others are seeing some controversial Catholic "dogmatic accents" as helpful. And though the Catholic position is "not fully accepted," he said, "I think that [Ekman and others] now see the key role of the pope as a symbol of unity and the importance of the Virgin Mary."

As he avoids theological debates with Catholic leaders, Ekman challenges those in revivalist circles to rethink some of their

theology. "The Lakeland, [Fla.], events highlight the need to tie in with classical doctrines and with a stricter understanding of the church offices," Ekman said.

"If anybody can proclaim himself a leader, the result is confusion. We need to develop a consciousness of history. The early church was not [a bunch of] happy charismatics. There was much more order and structure than we have been taught."

Particularly upsetting to many critics is Ekman's involvement with the Östanbäck monastery, located an hour's drive west of Uppsala. Though nominally Lutheran, the monastery's leader, Abbot Caesarius Cavallin, is an ardent advocate for uniting all Christians under the pope, and he publicly refers to Ekman as a "pillar of support."

Ekman has donated money to the new Church of Unity to be built at Östanbäck, and in a sermon at the monastery he referred to Mary as the "eternal virgin"—Catholic terminology signifying that Mary remained a virgin in spite of her giving birth to Jesus and being married.

"That was but one sentence that I threw out to test if there are dogmas that we have let go off," Ekman said of the reference. "I find it very interesting that all reformers up until and including Wesley held the view [of Mary's virginity]. The other interpretation

was first introduced by liberal theologians.”

He said he likes the atmosphere at Östanbäck, and Cavallin is an old colleague. “That is why I have contributed to their new church,” he said.

–Tomas Dixon in Uppsala, Sweden