

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 in the 1980s and 1990s for his Word-Faith message, Swedish pastor Ulf Ekman is again at the center of debate 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.”

He said Pentecostals and charismatics have become “sectarian and elitist.”

“Our understanding of revival is too narrow,” he said. “We make too strict a distinction between revivalist and cultural expressions of Christianity.”

Viewing the 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 caution against the trend and to point out that unity to Catholics always meant, and still means, bowing to the pope. Bishop 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 invites charismatic Catholics to speak in his church. He is also 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 biggest charismatic movement in the country.

In the 1980s and 1990s Ekman was not on speaking terms with charismatic Lutherans. A Lutheran priest before he planted his independent charismatic church, Ekman often sparred with his former denomination 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 Bishop 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."

"It felt good receiving the Catholic bishop in such a manner," Ekman said. "My heart is to do away with prejudices. 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.

Bishop Arborelius told *Charisma*, "Some of the dogmatic accents [of the Catholic Church] that were perceived of as threatening are now seen [by Ekman and others] to be helpful." Even though the Catholic position is "not fully accepted," Arborelius continued, "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 re-think 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 Sweden**

Response from Pastor Ulf Ekman

Charisma published a news article about the ecumenical developments in Sweden and specifically my role in this. The article presents a very narrow and biased view of what is actually happening in Sweden. It implies that I spend my days urging Swedish Christians to bow their heads "under the pope." That is simply not true.

What is true is that we see a development toward a stronger and more deepened unity among pastors, bishops and leaders from all denominations and churches. I am glad to say that this includes the Catholic Church and I strongly endorse this development.

Collaborations, multidenominational gatherings and spiritually warm conversation among leaders are taking place to a degree that has not been seen for decades. I am utterly convinced that this is a move of God, to prepare the church for what is to come. It is not a political controversy.

As always when we see a move of God, there are critics. What is striking in this development of unity, though, is the critics are surprisingly few. Your article gives the impression that the critique against unity is strong and prevalent. To the contrary, most Swedish Christian leaders endorse the development toward unity. It is sad that *Charisma* readers were presented a biased view.

Pastor Ulf Ekman
Uppsala, Sweden