

The Sacred Heart Priests and the Catholic Church in Finland

Jan Koolen, scj

INTRODUCTION

1 Our Congregation during these last hundred years, that is from its foundation, has served the Church in various apostolic undertakings and has dedicated itself to the evangelization of different countries.

2 Finland was among the countries that our Founder took interest in. On the occasion of our jubilee, we would like to give an outline of our apostolic work in Finland and of the Church's history in this country¹.

THE INITIAL PERIOD AND THE CHURCH'S PAST IN FINLAND

3 The Catholic Church in Finland has a long tradition. In the Medieval times it exercised a remarkable influence in the country's development. In 1155, at the time of the Swedish crusade. Bishop Henry came to Finland with King Erik. The Bishop endeavoured to remain in the country to strengthen the establishment of the Church. In a relatively short time, he succeeded in realizing his aim in such a way that we can rightly call him the apostle of Finland.

4 In XVI century, King Gustav Wasa (1523-1560) imposed Lutheranism on his country, Sweden and in Finland, making it the state religion. In spite of the fact that many Catholic traditions remained rooted in popular customs, as well as in their structures, one can say, however, that Catholicism was practically obliterated for three centuries. In 1550, Gustav Wasa founded Helsinki and confiscated all ecclesiastic property.

¹ Let us begin, enlarging the study found in the Annals, 124 (7th September 1957).

5 In 1809, Finland was conquered (with the Treaty of Hamina) by Alexander I Czar of Russia, who established the grand duchy of Finland. An intensive campaign of Russianization was began in the country after a period of relative independence. Furthermore, this brought about the extension of the Orthodox Church. Hence, today alongside Lutheranism, there is the Orthodox religion which, especially in the Eastern part of the country, has been raised to the rank of the state religion.

6 At the beginning of XIX century some possibilities were open to the catholics, too.

7 Already in 1799, they had opened an unpretentious Church at Viipuri. In this ancient Hanseatic town controlled by Petersburg (the present Leningrad), there lived a group of Catholics. It happened too that there were Polish and Lithuanian Catholics in the Russian Army then in Finland. Some Polish chaplains began to enlarge their field of apostolate starting from Viipuri as far as Helsingfors (now named Helsinki). Their liturgical worship was celebrated in a temporary wooden church. The present S. Enrik Church was constructed for the military garrison in 1860.

8 Unconditioned freedom of worship was granted to all in 1905, with some restrictions regarding conversions. In 1906, Wilfried von Christierson became the first Catholic priest. His father was a Protestant pastor and his mother a Catholic. He was converted to Catholicism in France at the age of eighteen. He was educated at Saint Sulpice in Paris, where he was ordained in 1903. It was at that time that he met Fr. Dehon. Henceforth, their relationship was maintained by means of correspondence. He became a parish priest in Helsinki, where he was in charge of a small community composed of 300 people of different nationalities. Faced with the difficult problem of communication, he wrote to several people in central Europe asking collaboration from priests who could speak different languages. He also wrote to Fr. Dehon who made a survey trip to Denmark, Finland and Russia in July and August 1907. "The nice young parish priest, Wilfried von Christierson, is waiting for me - shall we start a foundation?" wrote Fr. Dehon in his diary, (NQ XXIII, 100).

9 After passing through Bohemia, Fr. Dehon embarked from Stettin with Fr. Gotzes for Sweden and Finland. They arrived at Helsingfors (Helsinki) at six o'clock on the morning of August 3rd. "We are going to remain three days here. The city is very nice. It is as wonderful as the new sections of our big cities. A beautiful Cathedral with a golden dome recalls the period of Russian dominance. Another Cathedral, built during the Lutheran Renaissance, shows the principal cult. The small catholic chapel is unpretentious and lacking in style. It is situated in a nice place between the Observatory and Brunn park. The young priest, Wilfried von Christierson is very cordial. He has good apostolic plans. I am assisting him... There are about 300 Catholics

from every nation, Italians, Poles... What a difficult ministry..." (NQ XXIII, 119-122). On the evening of August 6th, he left for Petersburg (Leningrad); here the Founder admired the riches of the Hermitage museum. On the morning of August 9th, he arrived at Moscow. The Holy Oriental City, the new Byzantium... I have never seen anywhere before such external manifestations of religion (NQ XXIII, 127-128). On August 14th, the Founder returned to Brussels, and on the 17th, he met with his Council. "The religious foundation in Finland is definite and Fr. van Gijssel will leave in a few days..." (NQ XXIII, 148).

10 In September 1907, Fr. van Gijssel (1877-1953) definitely settled in Finland. He was our first religious to work there. Fr. Michael Hugo Buckx (1881-1946) also was appointed to serve in Finland. He arrived in Finland via Petersburg in 1909 after spending several months in Krakow studying Polish. In 1908, our Founder was in Rome looking for a statute which would give our Fathers a certain religious autonomy in Finland. The biggest problem was to get Archbishop of Mohilev to renounce his jurisdiction over Finland. On April 22nd, 1908, Fr. Dehon writes: "Msgr. Benigni offers me a temporary solution for Finland. We have to establish ourselves as apostolic missionaries receiving orders from Rome. There will be obstacles. We shall be acknowledged neither by the civil authorities nor by the Archbishop of Mohilev. It does not matter, let us wait" (NQ XXIV, 24). In Petersburg, Fr. Buckx obtained permission from the Archbishop of Mohilev to settle temporary at Viipuri where he arrived on Easter Saturday to begin his ministry.

11 In 1910, Fr. Meijerink and Fr. T. van Heugten (1875-1935), who had already worked in Brazil from 1901 to 1909, arrived as helpers in Finland. At this time, there was also a request from Countess Julia Ledochowska for a chaplain for Merentähti Retired Home, run by the Ursuline Sisters of which she was the Founder². An agreement was made between the Congregation and the Ursuline Sisters, offering the Father and his collaborator (a Brother), a pension of 300 rubles per year with board and lodging. Fr. van Heugten was appointed for this office. As he was feeling lonely, he wrote to the Superior General asking for a collaborator. Fr. John van Hommerich later went to exercise his ministry in the vicinity. From Fr. Dehon's letters, it seems that the Ursulines were planning to found a hostel, mainly for Polish youth at Helsingfors. Difficulties, however, took an upper hand!

² Mother Julia Ursule Ledochowska (1865-1939) was Mother Mary Teresa Ledochowska's sister (1863-1922). She was the Founder of the Missionary Sisters of S. Peter Claver, beatified in 1975. In 1919, she had founded the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus. Her brother Fr. Ledochowska, was Superior General of the Society of Jesus from 1915 to 1942. Their cousin Cardinal Ledochowski was Prefect of Propaganda Fide from 1892 to 1902.

12 Problems of all kinds arose, hindering Catholic worship from the very beginning. It was necessary in this country to obtain citizenship, as it were, for the Catholic Church. This became possible only in 1929. At this time every act of proselytism aiming at conversion was prosecutable by law. It was in fact a period of intense Russianization which meant that, it was necessary, above all, to establish the Orthodox Church.

13 In this political context there came, in 1911, the expulsion of all foreign religious clergy. The Founder in his diary wrote: “Russia persecutes and drives away our missionaries in Finland. It is an incorrigible country. She promises religious freedom without keeping her word. Providence will intervene” (NQ XXXIV, 15th June, 1911). During the General Council held on the following 6th of August, it was decided to accept the offer of help made by the Swedish Apostolic Vicar. As a result, some Fathers went to Sweden while others remained. Accordingly, Fr. Dehon had written to Fr. Provincial in Holland asking not to recall Fr. Buckx as Rome had recommended. However, it was necessary to surrender and Fr. Buckx had to leave Viipuri on 2nd October, 1911, his place was being taken by Fr. G. A. Carling, a Finnish priest, who was ordained in Rome that very year.

14 Sweden became our field of apostolic activity, in spite of the Founder’s plans, and this in agreement with the Holy See to enter Serbia, where two oriental chaplains had not been accepted while the Dutch ones instead might have been welcome. However, this project was never realized. And thus, we lost Finland although only for a time. Ten years later we returned for the second time.

THE SECOND PERIOD, UP TO THE WORLD WAR II

15 During the Russian revolution, Finland finally obtained independence and proclaimed itself a republic in 1919. Russia acknowledged it by the Treaty of Turku in 1920. The Catholics hoped for a better future. They were still a small number guided by only two Finnish priests, namely Fr. Wilfrid von Christierson and Fr. G.A. Carling. After the proclamation of independence, the two priests sought all the legal benefits for the Catholic Church. Above all, this meant obtaining the ecclesiastic autonomy after a long subordination by the archdiocese of Mohilev. Hence, they simultaneously contacted both the government and interested the Roman Congregation. The Holy See, in fact, was among the First states to recognize the independence achieved by Finland, and shortly after sent a representative to get in touch with the country’s authorities. Nevertheless, negotiations went on for some time even though the Reverend W. von Christierson was sent to Rome in 1920 as a special diplomatic envoy. He also met Fr. Dehon who openly advised him to be prudent and cautious in the matter. In the meantime,

Rome sent the Finnish government a project to erect in the territory an Apostolic Vicariate under a religious congregation. The government expressed the desire to have a Finnish priest in charge of the Catholics, if it were possible.

16 On 8th June, 1920, Finland was raised to an Apostolic Vicariate, and Msgr. Diepen, the Bishop of Bois-le-Duc (Holland), became the Visitor. Fr. Dehon, who was closely following the happenings, informed the Finnish Superior about Msgr Diepen's appointment. For a time, it was feared that the Vicariate would be assigned to the Monfortians. However, this was a misunderstanding and there were many others at that period. The decision came from Rome in 1921. Fr. Dehon writes in his diary, "On 4th March... Cardinal van Rossum handed over the Finnish mission to us. It is an unpleasant and difficult work but we must respectfully accept it. The heretics refuse to be converted. There are more consolations from the emerging countries like the Congo and Cameroun..." (NQ XLIV, 6).

17 The Founder recalled Fr. Buckx, who was then Superior in Holland to Brussels, appointing him Apostolic Administrator in Finland. His nomination came about one year after the erection of the Apostolic Vicariate in Finland.

18 Fr. Buckx chose Fr. Van Gijssel, one of the oldest fathers, as his collaborator. After some preparations, Msgr. Buckx and his companion arrived in Finland in the beginning of July 1921, he was warmly welcomed by the numerous Catholics who were very happy to have their own Prelate. To welcome him a big feast, to which representatives of other Churches participated, was organized. Two years later Mons. Buckx was appointed Apostolic Vicar. Fr. Dehon wrote, "On 15th August (1923) in Helsingfors, consecration of Msgr. Buckx by Card Van Rossum Our little congregation has the trust of the Holy See" (NQ XLIV, 80). The consecration took place in S. Henry's Church.

19 The construction of some buildings for Catholic worship began with great enthusiasm. Three workshops were opened and Catholic works were well organized. Catholic press was also begun. The fact that Finland was a land, of Christian tradition had to be kept in mind, and it was necessary to continue with precaution when adaptations or change were in question.

20 Soon reinforcements arrived, Fr. Hartwijk, for example, was very useful because of his knowledge of the Finnish literature. He was also a musician. There was also a Finn named Peter who in 1929 became a member of our organization, taking the name of Erik. Then Brother Laurent Vink, who had worked for some years in Sweden, came to Finland. In 1922, a Dutch secular priest, Laurent Holtzer, joined us; at first he was the parish priest in Viipuri, then in Turku, and gathered funds for various constructions. He retired in 1977. Some sisters' institutions, such as the Caterinian Sisters of East Prussia,

the Sister of Our Lady of Angels, who arrived from Belgium and the Ursuline Sisters mentioned above, dedicated themselves to teaching in Finland; however none of them remained. In 1922, Msgr. Buckx succeeded in obtaining, through Msgr. Diepcn, a lasting help from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart (from Moerdijk and then from Velhoven). The Sisters arrived in Finland on 1st September 1922 guided by the missionary Fr. Finke. The Sisters were in charge of teaching and the direction of nursery schools, at first in Helsinki, then in Viipuri, and lastly in Turku and Jyvaskyla.

21 Likewise in 1925, two Catholic periodicals, were published, one in Finnish: the *Uskon Sanoma* (messenger of Faith) and the other in Swedish, the *Vox Romana* in 1930. The situation was more complicated because of the bilingualism in the country. This historical heritage was due to Swedish domination which, however, regressed both in culture and in language. Swedish is largely spoken along the coast. After gaining its independence, some friction arose, although we cannot speak of a linguistic war. The knowledge of the two languages was not required for the teachers serving under the Vicariate. Furthermore, the Finnish language is rather complicated and not everyone had the possibility of learning or speaking it well. Also, at the beginning, almost the whole catholic population was speaking Swedish.

22 A rather broad interpretation of the holiday precept was in order because the customary for the people to spend the summer in the countryside. Working with the two Finnish priest was not always the most pleasant; sometime it was possible to hear Msgr. Buckx grumble: "It seems to me that here I'm in purgatory."

23 During the years 1933 - 1934 the first apostolic workers started to retire from their duties. Fr. Van Gijssel was the first to leave. He was a first class worker as all the people readily agreed. He continued working as a spiritual assistant to the priests in Holland until his death on 25th July 1953 at Maastricht. Mons. Buckx presented his resignation to Rome and Fr. Cobben, who was in Finland since 1926, took his place. He was consecrated Bishop on 19 March 1934 at Bergen op Zoom by Msgr. Buckx in the presence of the President of the Council, the Minister of education, the President of the Municipal Council and all the catholic members of the Diplomatic Corps. Msgr. Buckx returned to Holland on 2nd June. He resumed teaching Moral Theology at S. Joseph's School for some years, and died at Sittard on 22nd September, 1946.

24 The new Apostolic Vicar applied himself with enthusiasm to his pastoral duties. He took to heart the problem of understanding better the Catholic Church in Finland and to drop prejudices in his confrontations. The number of apostolic workers, priests, brothers and sisters, increased steadily. Two secular priests belonging to the Oriental rite joined the Vicariate. Naturally, Finland had some Catholic families who belonged to the Oriental rite;

therefore, the two priests who were well motivated did not attempt conversions. Later, a more ecumenical concept was followed in order to reach an accurate inquiry about the general service of parish work.

25 It is worthwhile noting the arrival in the summer of 1939, of the first Precious Blood Sisters, from O'Fallon, Missouri (North America). The numerous Italian emigrants in Finland were assisted by our Fathers from Italy, first by Fr. Natale and Fr. Tritta and in 1947 by Fr. Nespoli.

26 There was the Russian invasion in 1939. After three month's heroic fighting and resistance, Finland, with the Treaty of Moscow, had to suffer the loss of large territories, which included Carelia and a part of Lapponia.

27 And so, the Catholic Church lost two of its centres; Viipuri and Terijoki. Many religious missionaries left the country for an undetermined time as the uncertain circumstances in which they lived forced them to evacuate. The end of the war left the country diminished and ruined (for there were huge amounts to be paid), though it did succeed in achieving its freedom. Msgr. Cobben did his best to give life and help to the country during the war and was decorated with a title of honour. It is necessary to mention here Msgr. Holtzer who contributed to rebuilding the Vicariate both during and after the war. To compensate for the loss of Viipuri and Terijoki, a Catholic Centre with an Orphanage was established at Lahti.

AFTER THE WORLD WAR II

28 Msgr. Cobben generously set to work assisted by his priests, brothers and the religious community... Apart from the material re-building special care was paid to the spiritual interests of Catholics. The work of approaching non-Catholics or lost Catholics who had abandoned the faith was begun with the hope of regaining them for the Catholic Church. Some years later, close attention was taken by all in what concerned ecumenism.

29 The pastoral needs obliged in 1949, the transfer of the See from Lahti to Jyväskylä, a more central area in the diaspora. It is where now S. Olaf's Parish stands. In 1954, the parish of Helsinki was divided and Assunta was created and saw its Church's consecration on 6th December of the same year. In 1957, a parish centre was inaugurated in the industrial city of Tampere under the name of the Holy Cross. This territory was served before by Assunta (Helsinki) and Jyväskylä parochial centres.

30 However, we must note that some of the existing centres were reinforced and the construction of new places of worship begun at Jyväskylä (1962), at Turku (1966) and at Tampere (1969), where the parishes are under our control.

31 Many forms of parish activities were started at the same time. In 1950, some Dominican Fathers opened a cultural centre and a large Catholic

library. For sixteen years, they also continued to publish a cultural periodical known as Documents. They also helped in the parishes with their special sermons. In the meantime, they kept in touch with the Helsinki University. Here in 1972, Fr. Aarts SCJ defended his Doctorate Thesis on *Martin Luther's Teachings Regarding The Church's Public Duties*.

32 In 1945, Sisters from O'Fallon opened an English School, first at Helsinki and later at Tampere. The school, which enjoys a good name, is attended by about 500 students composed of sons and daughters children diplomats and of numerous catholic children.

33 The Little Sisters of Charles Foucauld arrived from France in 1953. They settled and formed their communities at Kotka, Hamina and Helsinki, then at Tampere and Jyvaskyla... Their brotherly contacts with the working class has produced good results for the Catholic Church.

34 In 1976, the Ursuline Sisters arrived from Poland. It was the same institute that was expelled before 1911. They followed the work of the Sacred Heart Sisters at Jyvaskyla.

35 Since 1963, the oriental rite priests have created a new centre encouraging ecumenical interests. One of them has generously dedicated himself to the House of Emmaus, like that of abbe Pierre.

36 On 6th May, 1962, our Congregation opened a centre of Catholic information with a library. It was here that in 1965, correspondence courses were started for converts and other interested persons. After Vatican Council II, various publications were printed including the principal Council documents. In 1974, a beautiful book was published on *Our Catholic Faith*, and in 1976, a Finnish version of the Dutch Catechism entitled *Introduction to our life of Faith*. The same centre publishes liturgical editions, the diocesan paper *Fides*, *Kellojen Kutsu*, *Katt* and a magazine on Catholic life documentation and information.

37 Consequently, the Catholic Church has completely taken a new form. On 8th June, 1920, an autonomous Apostolic Vicariate was established. The Catholic Church was officially recognized as a religious society on 24th November, 1929. On 28th March, 1955, Pope Pius XII raised the Vicariate to the rank of diocese, now known as Helsinki. The Decree was promulgated on Pentecost day, whereby. Msgr Cobben became titular of S. Henri's Cathedral as its residential Bishop.

38 On 14th May, 1964, the *Osservatore Romano* published the nomination of Fr. Paul Verschuren as an auxiliary Bishop of Helsinki, with the right of succession. Msgr Cobben had asked for an auxiliary Bishop because of his poor health. Msgr. Verschuren was consecrated Bishop at Helsinki on 16th August, 1964. He took up the episcopal See on 29th June, 1967, when Msgr Cobben retired from his office. During the Scandinavian Episcopal Conference in preparation of the *ad limina* visit, Msgr Verschuren proposed

to ask the Holy See the *ius commune* for his respective dioceses. This came into effect only on 9th May, 1977, by the Decree of Pope Paul VI. Consequently, it passed from the Evangelization of the Peoples Congregation and acquired a Statute on the same level as the other European bishops. All this made a good impression on the Northern Countries showing, as it did, that the Catholic Church was a Church fully constituted in a Christian country.

39 Since 1959, the Scandinavian countries have an Apostolic Delegate in Finland. Finland has its official representative at the Vatican (as well as Iceland, but not in the other Scandinavian countries).

40 In conformity with Vatican Council II directions, from 1967 a presbytery council has been created in Finland with the participation of all the priests working in the country. All this shows the great effort the Finnish Church is making for its betterment.

41 The Catholic Church does not want to enclose itself as in a shell; rather it wants to reach out every Christian as a universal Church, fully conscious of its catholicity. We are conscious of being able to give much and also to receive much. Our ecumenical contacts are ever increasing. In many cities the catholics are a dispersed unit, we can use for our liturgy the Orthodox and Protestant churches. Since 1968, the Bishop became a member of the ecumenical Council in Finland. This has aroused some difficulties. In fact, the so called free Church has withdrawn from the Council partly because of the Catholic Church's presence.

42 The Congregation has sent numerous religious men whenever possible, to help the Church in Finland for all the above activities. Sometimes, there were as many as twenty men of our Congregation working in Finland, although the number has dropped to about fifteen in these last years. It is a good number if we keep in mind that there are only about 3200 Catholics in Finland. However, the diocese is still a diaspora. All this require occasional transfers, multiplying catechisms and individual preparations for anyone joining the Catholic Church. There are other difficulties which Msgr. Verschuren listed in his speak in *Missionalia* in December 1973. Nevertheless Finland is a bilingual country, therefore, it is a real enterprise translating and publishing the various liturgical books. We must keep in mind the different aspects of each problem. In Helsinki, religious teaching has achieved by utilizing all the free Saturdays as the catechism school day. Courses on Catholic faith are also held for convents. Other initiatives are on the way, thanks to the activities of the information centre in collaboration with the various councils, where the lay people are really interested and employed both on the parish and diocesan levels.

43 There is also another fact which increases our hope in Finland. Finnish priests, of whom we spoke above, Von Christierson and Carling (who died

respectively in 1945 and 1966), and Brother Henry (died in 1963) have been replaced. In 1961, a Finn M. Voutilainen was ordained as a Dominican priest; he is working in the cultural centre and collaborates as well in other pastoral sectors in the preaching ministry.

44 There are some Finnish women and girls who are undertaking the consecrated life. In 1974, a Finn, Teemu Sippo took perpetual vows in our Institute. On 8th January, 1977, he was ordained deacon, and in the same year a priest by Msgr Verschuren on the Pentecost eve. Another Finn, Jukka Palm, is at the Dominican novitiate.

45 And lastly, let us remember all our brethren who died after having dedicated their best works to the Church in Finland. Fr. Schwering, Brother S. de Greef and U. van Dam are buried at Turku, the only Catholic Cemetery in Finland.

46 The work began by the Sacred Heart Fathers in Finland, now continues with the help of other Congregations: Msgr. Verschuren's wish, that is, the foundation of a contemplative Order in the country, may one day come true. It could certainly be a stimulus for the deepening of the spiritual life in the Christian community.

(Translation by Thomas Maingi)

FINNISH REGION

Statistics for the last 25 years: 1953 – 1977

47

	Total S.C.J.
1953	14
1954	15
1955	
1956	15
1957	18
1958	18
1959	18
1960	18
1961	19
1962	19
1963	20
1964	20
1965	21
1966	23
1967	21

1968	19
1969	19
1970	18
1971	17
1972	17
1973	17
1974	17
1975	16
1976	14
1977	14