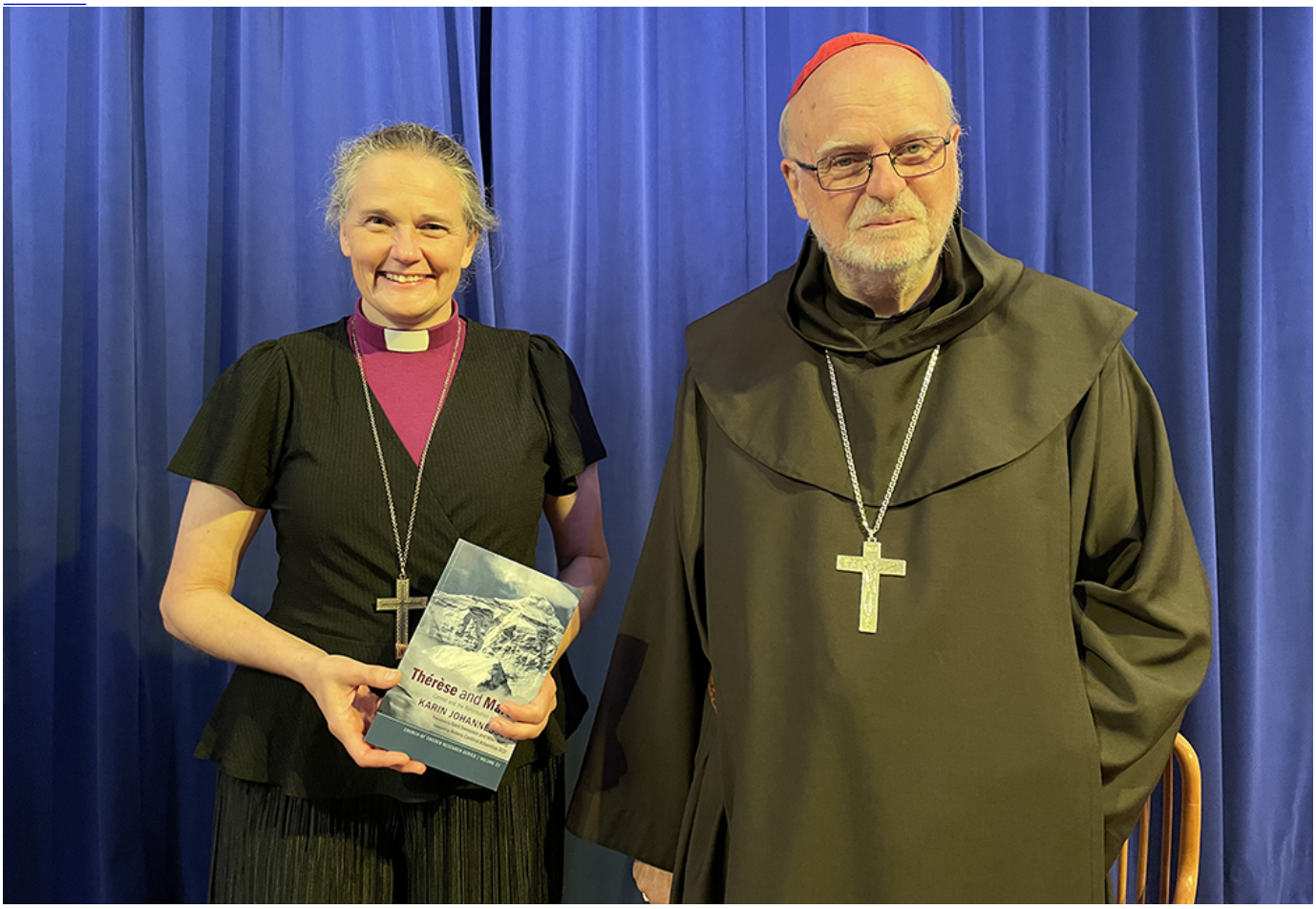
News



Bishop Karin Johannesson, an assistant bishop in the Lutheran Archdiocese of Uppsala, and Cardinal Anders Arborelius (Courtesy of the Catholic Church in Sweden/Catholic Diocese of Stockholm)



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Sweden's only Catholic cardinal came to the U.S. for a brief visit in late August. But he did not come alone.

Cardinal Anders Arborelius, who has led the small Catholic community in Sweden since 1998, came to Washington, D.C., alongside Bishop Karin Johannesson, an assistant bishop in the Lutheran Archdiocese of Uppsala.

The two prelates, who share a devotion to Carmelite spirituality, took part in an ecumenical dialogue on the 19th-century St. Thérèse of Lisieux, held at the St. John Paul II National Shrine.

In separate NCR interviews after the event, Arborelius and Johannesson expressed hope that their collaboration might be a sign for how Christians of different denominations can work together. They also spoke about their expectations for Pope Francis' upcoming Synod of Bishops, which will hold its first assembly in Rome next month.

"The synodal process is very exciting and an important development for the Catholic Church," said Johannesson. Arborelius said he hoped the assembly would "help people to a more profound encounter with Christ and to follow him more faithfully and serve those in need."

Following are NCR's interviews with Arborelius and Johannesson, presented together and lightly edited for length and context.

***NCR*: Why was it important for you both to come to the U.S. together? What witness do you think your collaboration gives about the importance of ecumenical relationships?**

Arborelius: In Sweden, the ecumenical dialogue is very much related to spirituality. Our experience has taught us that we come closer to each other when we pray together and try to live in God's presence following in the footsteps of Jesus. If we are really united in Jesus, we will also look upon each other with more affection and understanding. We will have more respect for each other even if we have different dogmatic and ethical standpoints. We wanted to share this attitude with American Christians.

Johannesson: Cardinal Arborelius and I have known each other for many years, long before I was ordained priest and consecrated bishop. I think that friendship is vital and necessary when we talk about ecumenism. The generosity between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church in Sweden is unique and we have much to learn from each other, especially concerning spirituality and spiritual life.

Many Catholics are anticipating the first session of the Synod of Bishops in Rome this October. Cardinal, can you describe a bit what it has been like for the Swedish Catholic Church to prepare for the synod? Bishop, how has the Lutheran community in Sweden experienced the synod?

Arborelius: We have a very diversified Catholic population in Sweden, because most faithful are first- or second-generation immigrants of various nationalities. Many belong to the Oriental Catholic Churches. Most of the participants in the dialogue saw the need for a deeper unity between the faithful. There is a tendency to come together only with people of the same language or national background. For us it would be very important to show that we are one in Christ and give witness to this fact in a quite segregated society, where native Swedes and immigrants often live apart.

Johannesson: I have personally been invited by the ecumenical Taizé community in France to prepare an ecumenical gathering in Rome during the coming synod in October. The synod also has an ecumenical dimension, and it is important that various churches participate. Ecumenism is about relationships, so a shared journey often bears fruit in deepened friendship and healing community. Synodality is about walking together.



Bishop Karin Johannesson, an assistant bishop in the Lutheran Archdiocese of Uppsala, speaks during an Aug. 27 event in Washington at the St. John Paul II National Shrine, as Cardinal Anders Arborelius looks on. (Courtesy of the Catholic Church in Sweden/ Catholic Diocese of Stockholm)

Are there items that either of you personally hope the synod might discuss?

Arborelius: Evangelization in a post-Christian world is a most urgent subject. To help people to a more profound encounter with Christ and to follow him more faithfully and serve those in need.

Johannesson: The synodal process is very exciting and an important development for the Catholic Church. The synod's working document is very interesting, and I can recognize many issues that are common for all our churches. I really hope that the synod will take time to discuss how a synodal church can fulfill her mission through a renewed ecumenical commitment. We have so much in common and we have to

cooperate for the mission of the church today. I also hope that the theology about "the priesthood of all believers" that is not unknown in Catholic theology but very dear for us Lutherans can be used in the synodal process.

In the U.S., there is a lot of focus on the possibility for some sort of recognition or role for women in ordained ministry, or perhaps the reinstitution of women serving as Catholic deacons. Do you have any thoughts or hopes in that regard?

Arborelius: It is of utmost importance to find more possibilities for women to take part in the work of evangelization on various levels. At the same time, it is important to see that there are other ways than ordained ministry. It would be very frustrating if the discussion was limited to this issue that cannot lead further, as priestly ministry is reserved to men in Catholic and Orthodox doctrine.

Johannesson: I welcome such a discussion within the Catholic Church. In the Church of Sweden, as in most Lutheran churches, there has been a long theological study about women in ministry. We have had women as priests in the Church of Sweden for a long time and it is not an issue any longer. For us, it has been a natural development of having women and men as deacons, priests and bishops. The Lutheran World Federation took a decision in 1984 to encourage all member churches to have at least 40% women, 40% men and 20% youth in all decision-making bodies. Not all Lutheran churches have been able to reach that goal.

Are there things you think the Catholic Church could learn in looking at women's ministry in other Christian denominations?

Arborelius: Bishop Johannesson is the Assistant Bishop of Uppsala and a very respected person, especially as a spiritual leader and authentic witness of what it means to follow Jesus in our secular society of Sweden. Of course, we as Catholics can be very much inspired by her and what she is doing.

Johannesson: It is not my task to speak about how another church should decide, but I can only see from my perspective that the issue of women in office is a theological and anthropological issue. Of course, it was not easy for many to accept when the Church of Sweden took the decision in 1958 to introduce women as priests, but today only small groups would question this decision. We are several churches who have had women in ministry for decades which has enriched our church.

More broadly, as you look back at the ministry of Pope Francis over the past 10.5 years, how do you evaluate his legacy, especially in terms of ecumenical relationships?

Arborelius: Pope Francis has helped us to be more faithful to Jesus in his humility and poverty, in his kenosis. He has inspired us to serve those in need and not look for privileges and influence in society. He can help us to convert and be more humble and joyful just as St. Francis of Assisi was. He reminds us of our obligation to live in dialogue with people of other faith communities and with non-believers. He has shown us the way to remain hopeful even if we are fewer Catholics and accept to live as a creative minority without any power, but strong in faith, hope and charity, close to Jesus and Mary.

Johannesson: We had the privilege to host Pope Francis in Lund, Sweden, for the joint Catholic-Lutheran commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the reformation in October 2016. It highlighted the ecumenical developments between Catholics and Lutherans and the joint efforts for dialogue. Today we have an important document, "From Conflict to Communion," which is a common foundation for further ecumenical collaborations. Francis is showing great openness for dialogue and is very popular even among Lutherans in Sweden.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.