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Theological Observer

Faithful Lutheran Pastor Defrocked: Active Persecution by the Church of Sweden

On March 19, 2012, I received notice that my father, Pastor Jan-Erik Appell, was defrocked by the Church of Sweden on account of his relationship to the Mission Province, a group of confessional Lutheran pastors and congregations within the Church of Sweden.

For the past twenty years, the Church of Sweden bureaucracy has pursued a strategy of isolating and marginalizing the small confessional remnant within its ranks. Those in leadership hoped these bothersome “reactionaries” would simply succumb to pressure or die off without others to take up the witness of confessional Lutheranism, largely because new ordinations of confessional men have been blocked since 1993. This strategy was jeopardized by the establishment of the Mission Province in 2005, which reopened a path to ordination for confessional candidates. For seven years, the Church of Sweden, with the cooperation of the Swedish media, largely ignored those in the Mission Province and hoped they would fade away. Lately, partly in response to pressures from impatient radicals, the Church of Sweden has abandoned this hands-off approach in favor of more active persecution.

Some background for these actions that have led to the current situation may be of some help to those not familiar with the situation in Sweden. It is perhaps difficult for Americans who live among a multitude of church denominations to understand why confessional Lutherans in Sweden are so determined to fight for the reformation of the Church of Sweden. In short, until the 19th century the Church of Sweden was the one and the only church in this nation. This dates back to the time when the gospel reached Sweden in the ninth century through the efforts of St Ansgar, archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and missionary to the northern countries. At first, the church was under papal jurisdiction, but she gradually separated from the Roman Catholic Church as the Swedish church adopted the ideas of the Lutheran Reformation. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church that had existed in Sweden since the ninth century became one that was evangelical and Lutheran. It kept its Lutheran identity after the Reformation despite attempts from both Rome and Calvinistic circles to change it. In the 17th century, King Gustavus Adolphus secured the place of Lutheran churches of the North through successful warfare during the Thirty Years War. For centuries our forefathers made great sacrifices to promote Christ’s kingdom throughout the whole country (the so-called folk-church), to catechize the country through the establishment of schools, to defend orthodoxy and Lutheran worship, to build churches, and to make sure there would be a Lutheran church standing for their great-

grandchildren in the 21st century—a mother ready to give birth to a generation of the baptized, to which I myself belong. In Sweden, we consider baptismal water to be thicker than blood. The Church of Sweden is our church—a gift, a responsibility, and nowadays also a tremendous grief.

Especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, the Church of Sweden was “occupied” by less orthodox bishops and theologians and abandoned Scriptural authority on some key matters, specifically on the question on women’s ordination and gender-neutral marriages. Today all sorts of shocking heresies and religious fantasies are allowed. What does not seem to be allowed is confessional pastors. It is impossible for those who oppose women’s ordination to be ordained, to become a senior pastor, or to become a bishop. In some dioceses, this is also the case for those who refuse officiate at the “marriage” of homosexuals. The remnant that held office prior to the introduction of these policies are increasingly marginalized. They are under threat to keep them silent and obedient to the new masters. Very few local congregations would call a confessional pastor, since church boards often are ruled by “politically correct” people.

As part of the effort to save and reform the Church of Sweden, the Mission Province was established to be “a non-geographical diocese in the tradition of the Church of Sweden,” with its own bishops and ordinations of pastors, congregations, and oversight. The purpose was and is to secure the essentials, the marks of the church. The established Church of Sweden refused to acknowledge this “independent diocese,” and the Mission Province was forced out of the structure and hierarchies of the Church of Sweden. Pastors involved in the establishing of the Mission Province were defrocked. Despite being “excluded,” the Mission Province has kept good relations with confessional pastors and congregations in the Church of Sweden, because they see a common mission: being the church for God’s people in Sweden and those not yet gathered into the church.

Now bishops of the Church of Sweden seem determined to end even these relations. They are acting as if the Mission Province is a group of people to be completely avoided. On February 20, the bishop of the Gothenburg Diocese, Per Eckerdal, issued a decree warning “all pastors in Gothenburg Diocese” against conducting services or administering other “ecclesiastical acts” (e.g. weddings, funerals, baptisms) in conjunction with Mission Province congregations or koinonias (i.e., worshiping fellowships that are typically composed of persons who are still members of a Church of Sweden congregation, but who seek more confessional worship and teaching). The bishop declared that such cooperation would constitute a breach of the ordination vows that would be considered so serious as to require that the pastor (or deacon) be defrocked (i.e., authorization to act as a pastor in Church of Sweden is revoked). The Mission Province is specifically singled out by name and is the only church

body targeted. On the other hand, the bishop specifically states that its pastors are authorized to conduct services or ecclesiastical acts in conjunction with member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, the Methodist Church in Sweden, member churches of the Porvoo Communion, and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Many have reacted strongly against this “anti-ecumenical” position from the newly elected bishop and find it contradictory.

In the Diocese of Lund, Bishop Antje Jackelén, a former professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, investigated my father, Jan-Erik Appell, who is serving congregations in the Mission Province, and defrocked him on March 19. My father had served as a pastor in the Church of Sweden for 35 years before taking a call to this congregation in the Mission Province. He was defrocked on the charge of dual loyalty (i.e., loyalty to both Bishop Jackelén and the Mission Province bishop). The inquiry was delayed due to the fact that there are several other pastors in the Church of Sweden who have two ecclesiastical supervisors, one who is the state church bishop and the other from the Mission Province or other organizations/leaders/bishops. Some of the delay may also have taken place because my father is a loyal and long-serving pastor who is also the chairman of Kyrkliga Förbundet (The Church Federation), which sponsors the Lutheran School of Theology in Gothenburg, the Gothenburg Lutheran High School, the confessional weekly magazine *Church and People*, and other leading confessional Lutheran institutions in Sweden.

Fredrik Sidenvall, rector of the Lutheran High School in Gothenburg, is quoted in the weekly newspaper of the Church of Sweden saying that Bishop Eckerdal’s actions are signs of a dying organization. In the life cycle of an organization, Sidenvall said, “The last phase is focused on conflict and turf wars.” A small but faithful group of confessing Christians is treated as less important than the larger society. Although the Church of Sweden has conformed itself to current Swedish social attitudes, confessional Lutherans within her are increasingly feeling misled and betrayed.

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**A Whole New Can of Worms:
A Statement of the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary
on Religious Liberty**

Standing before an assembly of princes at the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther famously said, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against my conscience. May God help me. Amen." When he spoke those words, the blessed Reformer knew that his life was on the line. His strong defense embodies not only the courageous spirit of Lutheranism but of Christianity throughout the ages. Indeed, the apostle Peter himself, upon threat of imprisonment and death proclaimed, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This means that while we honor those in authority, our first allegiance must be to our Creator. Christians understand their duty is to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25).

Christians gratefully recognize that temporal authority is a gift from God. We heed well the words of St. Paul who writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13:1). Our Lord Himself did not come to establish an earthly kingdom but a heavenly one. While the government bears the sword, our only weapon is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Christians did indeed come to "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:18), but their purpose has never been to foment revolution. Rather, we come to preach a message of forgiveness, a crucified and risen Savior, who has won for us salvation and who has taught us that every human life is precious to God.

Thus, as Christians and in accordance with Scripture, we pray for those in authority. We thank God for the gift of governance, and in all things we strive to act in accordance with the law. We seek in every way to be good citizens of this land and to fulfill our civic duties. Still, we must also say to our leaders and to the world that we are also subject to another law and answer to a higher court. We confess that on the last day Christ will come to judge us all according to His holy law. This law manifests itself in our conscience by which all people act according to their perception of what is right and wrong (Romans 2:14-15). The conscience is the internal law, as it is written in our hearts. It is our perception of God's will. Now, it is true that our conscience may be uninformed or ill-informed. As Christians, we recognize that the conscience can err and, therefore, must be informed by God's Word so that it may conform to God's will. It is true that on certain ethical issues people of good will come to different conclusions. In the New Testament, we see instances of some who thought that eating meat sacrificed to the idols was a sin. Whether or not such eating was a sin was open to debate. What was not open to debate

was the fact that to go against one's conscience is always a sin. To go against conscience is to say within oneself, "I will disobey God. My will, not His, be done." For this reason, we must be especially respectful of conscience, for in doing so we show respect for the integrity and dignity of one another.

Now we come to the present day debate brought on by the "women's preventive care" mandate from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius issued this mandate with the endorsement of President Obama. According to this mandate, Roman Catholic institutions, including hospitals, schools, and charities, will have to pay for both contraceptives and abortifacients. Some have tried to turn this into a debate on women's rights and their access to reproductive services. And yet, we should be clear, this is not the issue.

This has been made clear by our Synod President, whose bold words echo those of Martin Luther. Appearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on February 16, 2012, Dr. Matthew Harrison, President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), testified, "The conscience is a holy thing," and then added, "We fought for a free conscience, and we won't give it up without a fight."

To some it may seem unusual to hear such words offered up by a Lutheran pastor in defense of a presumably Roman Catholic teaching. Now, we should say without hesitation that as Lutherans we stand firmly against abortion and recognize it as a grave evil and a national tragedy. On this position we are in full agreement with the Roman Catholic Church. We who proclaim Christ as the life of the world hold all life precious, from conception to natural death. Yet, there is still another issue which is at play, namely, that of conscience and of the religious liberty proclaimed in the Constitution of the United States.

As LCMS Lutherans, we operate preschools, elementary schools, and high schools. We take pride in our university system as well as our seminaries, and we perform countless works of mercy through our many charitable organizations. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's World Relief and Human Care brings needed supplies and resources to victims of famines and floods. At the grass roots level, Lutheran congregations operate food and clothing banks, provide shelters for the homeless, hope centers for the abused, and medical care to the indigent. Through these and so many other ways, we express our Christian faith and bring Christ's love to our neighbor.

According to this new ruling of the HHS, all employers will be forced to provide not only contraceptives but also drugs that induce abortion. Churchly institutions that do not serve primarily members of their own church would be subject to this new ruling, except with one "accommodation." This accommodation would allow churchly institutions to opt out of paying for this

service, with the proviso that their insurance carriers would then pay for these things themselves, providing them at no cost to those covered by the institution's policy. Christians must recognize that this accommodation is not enough. Rather than an expression of freedom, the mandate is coercive. Indeed, the very idea of an "accommodation" is troubling. Thomas Jefferson asserted that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights. Unalienable means that these rights cannot be given, given up, or taken from us. According to our nation's own founding documents, the government has no right to pass laws that would abridge the exercise of our religious freedom. As Christians, we recognize that religious liberty is a gift from God. Our own church, the LCMS, was founded by men and women who left their homeland so that they could exercise their religion freely and in accordance with their conscience. And we are grateful for all the men and women who have fought to preserve this same religious freedom.

According to this unconstitutional mandate, Christians who own insurance companies will be forced to offer contraceptives and abortifacients. Christian institutions will be forced to buy insurance from companies that will also have to provide their workers contraceptives and abortifacients. While we do not share with the Roman Catholic Church the same teaching on contraceptives, we do honor their right, according to the First Amendment, to practice their beliefs according to their conscience. Furthermore, we do stand with them entirely on the matter of abortifacients, which we hold to be the taking of human life. We fear that human life itself is being treated like a commodity. We are concerned with a mindset that thinks of human beings as a commodity, rather than as a precious good and a source of blessing in and of itself. At stake is the very dignity of our humanity.

Furthermore, this mandate from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is by no means an isolated incident, but is part of a troubling trend in which governmental entities are demanding that religious institutions abandon their own biblical principles or else discontinue their works of charity. For instance, Christian adoption agencies are already being coerced into providing adoption services for same-sex couples. Due to conscience informed by biblical values, some agencies refuse, and as a result, adoption agencies are closed down, children are not adopted into loving families and the whole of society suffers. Terrible precedents have been set and, if allowed to stand, will forever alter the landscape of our society. Accordingly, we must ask some fundamental questions as to what type of society we wish for our children and grandchildren. Do we want to live in a world where social activities informed by religious conscience are systematically exterminated? Do we want to live in a world where the social fabric is torn apart, and an overreaching government harasses the very people who knit together our society through acts of charity and mercy? Do we want the public landscape

wiped clean of religious hospitals, schools and charitable organizations?

The situation is critical. If this mandate is allowed to stand, the world will become a poorer place, those in need will needlessly suffer, and our own message of Christ's love will be silenced. This mandate, and others like it, must be resisted.

What then can we, as Christians, do? For one, we must stand in solidarity with those under assault. As citizens of this nation, we must remind our leaders of the First Amendment, which states that Congress shall make no law that prohibits the free exercise of religion. We must teach our people that we have a right to life that comes not from the government, but from God. We must support those who put themselves on the line in defense of this liberty. And we must ourselves also be willing to stand up and pay the price of our convictions, whatever that price may be. While we do all this, we will continue to be good citizens. We will continue to engage in acts of mercy. We will continue to offer up prayers and supplications on behalf of our nation and its leaders, even as we pray that they would rescind this mandate. So, finally, we say with St. Paul, may we "always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" (Acts 24:16). May God grant us wisdom and courage in the days ahead.

[This statement was adopted by the Faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on February 21, 2012. The Editors]