

# JUBILEUMSTAL VID KOLLEGIETS FYRTIOÅRSFIRANDE

## CREATING A CHOIR – COLLEGIUM PATRISTICUM LUNDENSE IN RETROSPECT

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A former head of our department used to say that to try to direct a faculty of scholars is like trying to conduct an orchestra or a choir in which everyone thinks that she or he is the soloist. It somehow belongs to the essence of scholarship to walk one's own way, to try something else and to disagree with others. We do not want all patristic scholars to talk or sing about Saint Augustine in the same tune and with the same rhythm. Harmony may be beautiful, but neither exciting nor fruitful. We have had enough of attempts to silence dissenting voices in the service of orthodoxy. Thus, the idea of Collegium Patristicum Lundense as a choir is probably not a good one.

But a choir is actually more than a group of people. A choir is also a space, an architectural element with a specific function, a stage. Already Homer uses *χóρος* to designate the stage for the dancers and Pausanias calls the *ἀγορά* of Sparta a *χóρος*.<sup>1</sup> The choir is both the actors and the space, and even the audience. It is the entire performance, the dancing or singing, the actors, the stage and the audience, all drawn together. There is no choir if there is no arena, no singing if there is no listening. The art of singing depends on the art of listening, not simply the listening of the audience, but the listening of the singer herself. We listen

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<sup>1</sup> Pausanias, *Pausaniae Graeciae Descriptio* 3.11.9.

before we speak; it is by listening we learn to talk or sing, by listening to ourselves we understand what we are actually saying.

Looking back at the 40 years since the foundation of *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* I think it is appropriate to call it a choir in this sense, a stage, a performance, where listening and singing meet. Certain voices have been conducive to the creation of the collegium, as well as certain stages and certain listeners. Our involvement, our presence and our listening have shaped our voices. Our singing has developed our voices and our voices inspired others, creating new stages and choirs – new performances as it were.

There were, as far as I can see, four different choirs in this sense that combined in Lund in the late 1970's, personified in the three essential founders of the society and myself, the latecomer. The first was the movement that began in France and was called *nouvelle théologie*, with its impressive series *Sources Chrétiennes*. It attracted young Swedish theologians, the two most influential being Per Beskow, the first *praeses* of CPL, and Lars Thunberg, the first holder of a research chair in patristics in Sweden. The second choir was the ecumenical movement in which several of the professors of theology in Lund took an active part – Gustaf Aulén and Per Erik Persson, to mention two of them. It was Per Erik Persson who was instrumental in establishing in 1979 the research chair in patristics in Lund, and it was his seminar in systematic theology that introduced us to ecumenical theology in general and orthodox theology in particular – and the importance of the Church Fathers in this context. I can still vividly remember when we were gathered in his home listening to Jaroslav Pelikan, and our discussions in the so called Pelikan seminars, which Gösta Hallonsten, our second founding father, organized. In many ways these were the actual forerunners to the patristic seminar in Lund. The third choir consisted of the voices from the Orient, our faculty's interest in Jewish studies and the relation between Hebrew and Syriac literature. An outcome of these was the rather extraordinary fact that two PhD dissertations on Saint Ephrem's use of the Book of Genesis were defended within four years in the tiny department of Semitic studies, the first by Sten Hidal, our third founding father.

I was extremely lucky to be accepted into this trinity and to be able to introduce a fourth choir. To the revival of patristics, the ecumenical movement and Syriac studies I came with a background and deep inter-

est in oriental Christianity. There was no way to study Ethiopic language in Lund, so I opted for Arabic, and trying to understand the traditions of the Ethiopian and Coptic churches I was led to the study of Coptic and of early monasticism.

Looking back at the early activities of the *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* it is not difficult to see how these four streams created a fertile ground for creative exchange and new ideas. Of the four first lectures arranged by us, one was about India, one about Ethiopia, none about the Latin tradition. We wanted to listen to voices that were not usually heard.

Our ambitions were high, and already within a year the tiny society had decided to invite scholars from all Nordic countries to a first Nordic Patristic Meeting to be held in Lund in 1981. The meeting was a success and resulted in the establishment of a Nordic patristic bibliographic database, an impressive bibliography edited by Holger Villadsen, and a research project on early Jewish–Christian relations directed by Oskar Skarsaune. As the patristic conference in Oxford, the Lund conference was to be followed by new Nordic conferences every fourth year. Jokingly we started to call Lund the Oxford of Scandinavia. With the conference becoming ambulant in 2018 and held in a wonderful setting outside Oslo we are happy to share the epithet with others.

In Lund, *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* became the stage, or perhaps rather the home, for the small already existing patristic reading-group and Pelikan-seminar – and a creative arena for a growing group of PhD students writing on early Christianity, among others Gösta Hallonsten himself, Peter Legarth, myself, Sigurd Bergmann, Jan-Eric Steppa, Britt Dahlman, Per Rönnegård, Henrik Rydell Johnsén, Andreas Westergren, Thomas Arentzen and Katarina Pålsson, but also Danish, Finnish and Norwegian guests students like Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Anni Maria Laato, Ståle Kristiansen and Lillian Larsen. The international relations, upheld primarily by a growing Nordic attendance in Oxford, were decisive. We were happy to be visited by many renowned scholars – Peter Brown, Averil Cameron, Robert Wilken, David Brakke, Susan Harvey, Kallistos Ware, Pauline Allen, Philip Rousseau, Gillian Clark, Neil McLynn, Sebastian Brock, Lorenzo Perrone, Sarah Coakley, Christoph Marksches and many more. Nothing of this would have been possible were it not for dedicated students who did not only spend their time listening and reading, but also making coffee, counting money, drawing posters and reminding their professors about schedules and rooms.

Two of these students deserve a special mention: Anna Näppi and Kristina Alveteg.

Of course, the Collegium needed to make its voice heard. We founded an annual called *Meddelanden från Collegium Patristicum Lundense* (i.e. *Messages from CPL*). It began as a few sheets of paper, but grew every year, and some years ago it turned into a peer-reviewed academic journal called *Patristica Nordica Annuaria*. The journal not only publishes scholarly articles and reviews, but still also reports on ongoing Nordic patristic research and recent publications and dissertations. The arena and audience have, however, been much larger than the membership and subscribers. Perhaps the most influential and lasting impact of the *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* are the many translations into Swedish of texts from the early Church. When the society was founded there existed almost no translations into Swedish, not even Augustine's *Confessions* had been translated in full. Now translations of seminal works by Eusebius, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, Ephrem the Syrian, Augustine and John Chrysostom, just to name some of the most important, were produced, not all emanating from the Collegium, but inspired by our work and for a market prepared by it. The enthusiastic publisher Per Åkerlund of Artos Publishing – now an honorary doctor of our Faculty of Theology – repeatedly called us and claimed that the Swedish people are longing to read the fathers of the Church. Since not all texts could be translated and published in full, the Collegium initiated a series of thematic anthologies, the *Swedish Patristic Library*, an ongoing project in which volumes VI, VII and VIII are in preparation.

As mentioned already the first Nordic Patristic Meeting resulted in a research project. Many more have followed – some in Lund, and some in other places, yet with a connection to *Collegium Patristicum Lundense*. Significant are a number of Norwegian projects on early Christian themes, which were led by such members of the Collegium as Thomas Hägg, Einar Thomassen, Halvor Moxnes, Turid Karlsen Seim and more recently Hugo Lundhaug. Here in Lund we were fortunate to receive a huge funding for a project on Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia, which is in a way continued by a project on the medieval reception of monastic wisdom.

If we are to look somewhat closer at the profile of the Collegium and its publications, it seems to me that there is a clear correlation between the interests of the scholars involved and the interests in the churches

and the society. In the *Swedish Patristic Library*, the first volume was on liturgy and church canon, the second on hagiography, the third on letter-writing, the fourth on biblical interpretation and homiletics, and the fifth on asceticism and monasticism. Only now are we working on the dogmatic literature that once was seen as the only important early Christian material. Looking at other translated texts we can observe the same. It is the spirituality and practices, the biographical texts, and not least the literature of early monasticism that dominates. The first and probably most spread of the translations was Per Beskow's *Ökenfädernas tänkespråk* (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*). It is thus not surprising that the major ongoing translation activity is the collective attempt to translate the entire systematic collection of the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, labeled "the Paradise".

The history of *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* is, I think, as much a history of the creation of an audience, and a stage as of a group of scholars. And maybe it is also true that the audience and stage has to a large degree determined our history. Although the activities of the Collegium have attracted a rather limited and specialized group of people, students and scholars, each one of us has been visible and audible in different ways outside of these and most certainly brought into the collegium the voices and reactions from outside. One should perhaps say that the *Collegium Patristicum Lundense* has created not only an arena for encounter but even a context on different levels – personal, communal and ecclesial. Over the years a large number of students have listened to and worked with the voices of the early Church, carrying these with them into ministry in the Church. For a few of them, the collegium almost became their home in a foreign land. Their impact on the parishes they now serve should not be neglected in the history of *Collegium Patristicum Lundense*.

I would like to end with a reflection on Rowan William's question "Why study the Past?" Why do we spend our energy on writings and events of the early and formative centuries of the Christian tradition? Why do we need to listen to and give voice to those silenced by time, why do we need an arena and cultivate the art of listening to those dead so long ago? With the suggestion that Swedish mandatory education should stop listening to anyone born before the year 1700 we need to find convincing answers. And I do not think the answer is that they were right, that they can tell us what to do today. We are living at a time in which many see the solutions in returning to a glorious past, be in

national or ecclesial. For some, the early church manifests the ideal, an undivided church where truth was taught and morals were high. But, as anyone who has done patristics know, there never was an undivided church, a unanimous voice, an ideal followed by everyone.

It is not because the past is the ideal that we need to know it. It is because it is alive. "The past is not dead; it has not even passed away. We separate it from ourselves thereby alienating ourselves", as Christa Wolf writes in her *Patterns of Childhood* (Kindheitsmuster). Busy with what is present we silence what does not fit the present, silencing the voices that could help us to be free from the limits of the present by preserving difference. Having grown up in a very different cultural context, exposed to a form of Christianity that had no resemblance to the one I was brought up with, I have tried throughout my life to make sense of difference, of how what is totally different can be the same. I have come to realize that although I am familiar with myself, I am also a stranger to myself, and although my neighbour is total stranger she is also familiar. As Rowan William says, it is by listening to what is strange to us that we learn to encounter strangers with love, that we get to know and are able to love what is strange in ourselves.

*Collegium Patristicum Lundense* has been and is still created and re-created by hundreds of students and scholars listening to the past and lending their voices to make others listen. Even when emanating from the same persons – from Origen and Augustine, Jerome and Athanasius – the voices are constantly new. Their replies to our eternal questions about life and death, evil and good, faith, hope and love – although the same – always sound different. As in music, each performance is unique, each of our encounters and conversations are unique. The roots of a tree do not only talk about the origin, but also of the constant search for nourishment. Our roots do not only tell us something about where we come from, they also assist us in finding our way into a future, a future we are only able to see through our past.