

# Pentti Laasonen

\* 24/12/1928 † 14/10/2016



**FINLAND'S LEADING** church historian, Professor Emeritus Pentti Laasonen, died suddenly in Helsinki on 14th October 2016. He was born into a farming family in Kitee on 24th December 1928. In his last book *Kadonnut isoäiti ja Pietarin vetovoima* ("The Disappearance of my Grandmother and the Lure of St. Petersburg", 2015) he alludes to a clerical family background.

Laasonen entered the University of Helsinki in 1949 and earned his first degree in theology in 1954, after which he began his career as a teacher of religion, psychology and philosophy at Outokumpu Secondary School. Later he continued teaching at Savonlinna Lyceum, his old school. One of the achievements in his long career in teaching was a textbook on Church History which he wrote together with professor Kauko Pirinen. Since it was first published in 1969, the book has run to more than ten editions.

His pedagogical experience and talents also won him an incredibly high reputation in the university world, where few professors could claim similar prowess. Laasonen held positions in the Faculty of Theology from 1973 onwards, culminating in the chair of Finnish and Scandinavian church history in 1980–1991. The thing that most students remember him for was the relaxed

and unhurried atmosphere that prevailed in his lectures and seminars, although "the subject matter moved forward all the time".

In the preface to his doctoral thesis Laasonen thanks his teacher professor Aarno Maliniemi, who "even when I had left Helsinki to take up a new position, encouraged me most warmly to continue my studies". That kind of encouragement was rarely heard from Maliniemi. Laasonen began his postgraduate studies in 1962, at the legendary licentiate seminars directed by Maliniemi's successors, Kauko Pirinen and Mikko Juva. He gained one of the first doctorates to be awarded under these scholars, with a thesis on church life in Northern Karelia during the period of Swedish rule which was presented for discussion in 1967. Later, in 1971, he extended the time scale of his theses up to the beginning of the Winter War. His book *Novgorodin imu* ("The attraction of Novgorod", 2005) was an attempt to answer the question of why a large group of Orthodox believers moved from the province of Käkisalme to Russia in the 17th century, and in it he refutes the commonly held and stubbornly repeated theory that the Lutherans indulged persecution and forced conversion of the Orthodox population. His last book is also con-

cerned with Eastern Finland, being a masterly demonstration of how history should be studied and written about.

The old-fashioned view that is frequently put forward asserts that during the Age of Orthodoxy, the church in its desire for doctrinal correctness and internal discipline, was practicing a “dead” form of religion. Laasonen showed this to be erroneous and provided a more complete picture of that period, when he wrote the section on the 17th and 18th centuries for *Suomen kirkkohistoria* (“Finnish Church History”), his biographies of Johannes Gezelius the Elder and the Younger, and numerous papers on the Age of Orthodoxy and Pietism in Germany and Finland. He also led a research group working on the early history of education in Finland, which achieved groundbreaking results regarding the history of books and university history.

Laasonen was at home in a German research environment, which led to his appointment to the advisory board of the Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Pietismusforschung der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg and to his regular writing the sections on the Nordic countries and Finland for the standard work on this subject, *Geschichte des Pietismus*. His extensive research at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel resulted in his account of discussions between German Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholics entitled *Luterilaisuus Rooman ja Geneven välissä 1577–1690* (Lutheranism between Rome and Geneva 1577–1690). These discussions were not usually hostile in nature but took place in a spirit of conciliation, so that at times they were not far from actual accord. This could be achieved, as the negotiators

explained, “when the discussion is prepared so thoroughly that all the other side can do is admit that they were mistaken”. No such discussion has yet been arranged, however. Laasonen put forward his own views on the Lutheran identity in his book *Yhteisellä tiellä: luterilainen kirkko jakamattoman perinteen kantajana* (“A Common Road: the Lutheran Church as the Bearer of an Undivided Tradition”, 2011). This book contains more information than in many of the documents produced by ecumenical committees and presents the core issues more clearly.

Laasonen was invited to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1983. He also served one office term as the dean of the Faculty of Theology, and took a turn as the chairman of the Finnish Historical Society and similarly as the chairman of the Finnish Society of Church History, consenting to become an honorary member of the latter, although he did not generally approve of the honours that befall professors, such as medals, commemorative volumes or portraits. Most of the time he would disapprove of them and even laugh at all the pomp that was to be found in the academic world and in the national churches, both Lutheran and Orthodox.

The friendship that he formed in his schooldays with Aino (née Larikka), who later became a teacher of Finnish, led to a marriage that lasted 64 years. If he had lived until the 2017, he certainly would have taken part in the Conferment Ceremony 2017 celebrating 50 years of his degree of Doctor of Theology.

Pentti Laasonen will be remembered as a warm, humane, modest and easily approachable teacher and colleague.

*Obituary by  
Simo Heininen and Kyllikki Tiensuu*

*Picture: Mikko Ketola*