

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE: THE BAPTISMAL CALL FOR RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

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Thank you for the invitation to be here with you. I'd like to begin by thanking you for your important and often under-appreciated work. My life was transformed as a young adult when I met a Catholic theologian named Jon Sobrino. His integrity, insight, moral courage and shimmering emotional generosity revealed some things to me, including the notion that the Divine can use any vocation for the building up of the Beloved Community. It came to me in a brief visit with him that my life didn't have to be the fulfilling of my parents' dreams for me, or anyone else's for that matter. I've been a bit inclined toward you Catholics and theologians ever since and I have been blessed to know some brilliant ones.

My name is Laurie Larson Caesar, and I serve as Bishop of the Oregon Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I'm not exactly sure how *I* ended up speaking before you, but I have some idea. For more than two decades, a Lutheran–Roman Catholic church called Spirit of Grace nurtured me as a leader and called me “Pastor Laurie.”

At Spirit of Grace in Beaverton, just over those hills, I served alongside some of the finest priests in the Roman Catholic Church. All of them were shaped by the Second Vatican Council, with its commitment to the dignity of all people, to the renewal of our religious institutions, to our profound need for dialogue and understanding across walls that divide us, and to our unity in Christ. All of them taught me more about my own faith, my Lutheran faith tradition and the significance of one baptism than any traditional Lutheran scholar could possibly have. When I would hold an infant, and the priest would pour the water and say, “I baptize you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” there was no clearer sign of our shared faith, our shared life, our shared need for forgiveness and our shared invitation to love what God loves. Holy Spirit was working on us in those moments, I believe, to trust in that final prayer of Jesus: “That they all may be one; ... as you, Abba, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that *you* have sent me” (Jn 17:11b, 21b). When we walk with one another, eat with one another, and take one another seriously on the ground as well as in the rarified air of decades-long ecumenical councils, in other words, we are a manifestation of God's wildest, craziest and more profound hopes for a witness to Jesus' liberating love.

The congregation is a wonder of wonders, really. Every Sunday a lay leader opens the service with something like this, “We are ‘one community with two faith traditions,

Lutheran and Roman Catholic, with members seeking to grow and mature in our relationship with both denominations, and you are welcome here.” The notion of “Synodality” anchors its collective life. The church was born in the moment of rising intentional Catholic communities. But what makes it distinct is that we Lutherans were invited in. It demonstrates, perhaps, what my vet might call “hybrid vigor.”

Forty years later, it still exists and it’s growing.

The lay members of Spirit of Grace interview and vote on all calls of their clergy. They create their own budgets, set their own vision, and try to listen to one another and to Christ in the spirit of St. Benedict, with the “ear[s] of [the] heart.”¹ Through the years, of course, they’ve faced some challenges from the larger institutional church. And yet, they continue to live into Christ’s paschal mystery of life, death and resurrection, grounded in the essentials of a deep and abiding unity in baptism in Christ. In those waters, of course, we are equal before our Creator—neither “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3: 28), Catholic nor Lutheran, but all one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Their fearless faith inspires me still, six years after I have moved on and into a call as Bishop of the Oregon Synod.

Mission of the Atonement, as it was known in its early years, was born in the 1980’s in the afterglow of the Second Vatican Council. The small, intentional community came together out of necessity. The Lutheran congregation, Atonement, was surrounded by larger Lutheran churches to the north, east and west, and, although full of vitality, was shrinking in membership; they could afford a full-time pastor no longer. The Catholic parish down the street, St. Anthony’s Parish, was bursting at the seams, with four services a Sunday, and needing perhaps one more. As things happen, the ecumenical officer of the Archdiocese of Portland was an old friend of the retiring Lutheran pastor. The Lutheran pastor happened to have been raised Catholic, and had attended a Catholic seminary before converting to Lutheranism. Urban legend says that the two of them had a beer together, and Spirit and suds took over and they began to talk and to dream. So a call was put out to St. Anthony’s Parish in Tigard, and the next Sunday, 200 families showed up after morning Mass to learn more about this possible ecumenical venture.

When the most interested lay leaders finally came together, in a meeting room in the Benedictine Retreat Center at Mt. Angel Abbey, Lutheran and Catholic folks both called it a discernment gathering. The assumption from all the powers and principalities was that they would use the same Lutheran church building, but gather at different times for two different Sunday services. Yet, God in Her wisdom seemed to have other ideas.

Not insignificantly, no priest, pastor or bishop was able to attend that discernment retreat.

Those who did gather spoke powerfully of how God’s Holy Spirit was so present in that upper meeting room that they knew they *had* to proceed. “It was an Acts of the Apostles experience,” some of them would later say. “We all felt it—called to remember, and to embody, the earliest hopes of the disciples. To be grounded in what is essential and not what is superficial. To gather shoulder to shoulder around a simple

¹ Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, trans. J. Neufvillen (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981, 2019), 15 (v. 1).

table and be fed for the journey together. To baptize our children and our neighbors together, into the same waters of love and grace, of justice and peace.”

But how? They had no Lutheran pastor. (He had retired.) They had no priest. They had vague permission from the Lutherans. (The man who served as the assistant to the bishop at the time in the American Lutheran Church shared with me years later that in their office they thought this experiment wouldn't last five years.) They had tacit permission from the archbishop, and full prayer and support from a few key leaders in the archdiocese. And they had, perhaps, some residual inspiration from prayers and dreams lifted up during Vatican II and in the many ecumenical statements of the Lutheran Church. And so, they gathered many curious, faithful, and fearless members.

These folks stepped in and did God's work. The Catholics joined the Lutherans in their humble sanctuary on Scholl's Ferry Road and weekly reminded themselves that THEY were the church, not the bishops or church authorities. They sang, prayed, were fed the Body and Blood of Christ, heard and held the Word, invited others into small group relational meetings, and realized that they actually *could* become one community with two faith traditions, respecting both denominations and yet maturing and self-differentiating in their relationship with those judicatory bodies.

The interwoven group of Lutheran and Catholic lay leaders found pulpit supply pastors and guests priests for most Sundays of a month, but not quite all—three of four on average. So, after a few months, when they discovered they couldn't fill them all, they simply shrugged: “We can have one lay-led Service of the Word each month, with the homiletical responsibility shared among us lay folk over the course of the year.” Why not? Roman Catholics felt far freer to prepare a homily than the Lutherans did at first, I'm told, with the Lutheran expectation of rigorous exegesis for all sermons intimidating the majority of the Lutherans, but most rose to the challenge. More assumptions were shed and glimpses of liberation tasted and in those homilies they shared stories of faith in daily life and work, or their spiritual ah-ha moments, or the gifts in parenting, or the social justice work they'd engaged in and why, or when their hearts had been broken open and how they'd found healing. After that monthly Service of the Word took hold, they realized that they could gather for a shared meal and “break bread” together after the final Sunday lay-led worship in a common supper. In a way, this could help them live into their understanding of Christianity's earliest house churches and might replicate more closely the Eucharist services of the early church anyway.

One important point: most of those gathering in the early days were not theologians or even conversant in much contemporary theology. They were public school teachers, police officers, postal workers, therapists, nurses, small business owners, government administrators, volunteers. A few were former priests or nuns, but not many. Some were ecumenical families who lived with the heartache of no shared sacraments, and a larger number were not. Many had young children. Most had busy lives. They were incredibly diverse as a group. And yet, they had experienced Spirit moving in their midst and they were willing to listen and to take that seriously. To be one, even as Christ and Creator are one, and not to have to be the same.

A few familiarized themselves with deep years-long dives the Roman Catholic and Lutheran ecumenical agreements. Some wrote new entire liturgies or biblical dramas for the Service of the Word. Some crafted more contemporary and inclusive verses to

traditional hymns. Some made casseroles or babysat the children. And they made their own way, with guest priests and pulpit supply Lutheran pastors for months and months and months. And they grew in faith and understanding to know in their bones that this community was theirs, not the bishops’. “We believe that *we* are the Church, the people of God, and we are called to be Christ’s Body—blessed, broken and given for a hungry world. And we are called to do so, radically and faithfully, together.”

Back to the 1980s: Eventually a Franciscan priest committed to low-income housing stepped in half-time—Father Matt Tumulty. And a Lutheran pastor was called after that - Pastor Dale Jamtgaard, also half-time. The work was agonizingly slow, imagining together what had hardly ever been done before in the history of Christianity. Cultures continued to clash, styles and politics and definitions of things. Volunteer energy waxed and waned, some visions and expectations of the community were not allowed by the larger institutions, and the demands of this “experiment” began to add up. Hopes had been so high in the first months that many of the first few elected presidents of the congregation quit the entire project when their term ended.

Yet, God’s Spirit continued to move and nudge within them. They could anchor their worship on a common Ordo, the unifying Nicene Creed and one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, a growing number of shared hymns and prayers, and the radical Jesus of Nazareth who invites them again and again into the waters of grace, toward a table of life and out into a world of need. As you can imagine, after years of this kind of leadership and engagement with their own faith lives, they still are some of the most theologically fluent, politically active and liturgically sensitive lay people I’ve every met.

Of course there were bumps in the road. The first time the community went away on a Saturday day-long all-parish retreat, for example, the Catholic members took their journals and prayer books, and the Lutherans brought their Bibles and volleyballs. They navigated questions like - What music shall we sing? Catholics would ask, “Do we have to sing every single verse of every single hymn?” Lutherans wondered if guitar was the only instrument any Catholic knew how to play. And, the Lutherans wondered aloud about Catholic things they’d heard about - like transubstantiation and Papal infallibility. The more they encountered the other, the more they understood about one another, and themselves.

For the first ten years or so, mass took place in the sanctuary, with both priest and pastor behind the same altar sharing in the words of institution, and membership lining up in two lines down the aisle to receive from their denominational leader. It was messy, human, embodied and reverent. Both piano and guitar led singing. They sang, “One Bread, One Body” often, with a need to dip into that “one cup of blessing which we bless.”² Confirmation and first communion classes were always held together. (An incredible challenge and gift for me, since much of my own Confirmation instruction in Montana had focused on why medieval Catholics were wrong and how and why Luther was right.)

Baptisms were soaked in the sacred, done in community at a Sunday service with the understanding that Christ, through the entire community, blesses and baptizes the child. On those Sundays, the baptism would anchor the entire service. By the time I

² John Foley, “One Bread, One Body,” in *Wood Hath Hope: Liturgical Music by John Foley, S.J.* (Lake Oswego, OR: The Oregon Catholic Press, 1978).

arrived in 1996, we would begin the baptism rite with a song reminding us of the sacredness of the shared land, water and the other. Promises were made and stories shared about names, birthing, fears and hopes. At the pouring of the water, the pastor not officially baptizing would hold the baby or the hand of the catechumen, and the baptizer would cup water, lead the baptism, make the sign of the cross and impose the oil. Then we would sing a “Welcome, Welcome” song with the entire body welcoming the new Christian as they would be walked throughout the space.

Throughout the years, four archbishops made in-person visits to the community, usually for an evening prayer service. Over coffee, lemonade and homemade cookies, much listening and learning took place. Carefully. The first time, very few Lutherans and a certain number of Catholics had ever met an archbishop, much less asked questions or shared perspectives with one. Synodality, on the ground. Many remember the look of shock and insight on an archbishop’s face when a young Lutheran mother married to a Catholic man looked the bishop in the eye and with wavering voice recounted the pain of years of not being able to commune with her husband and children, side by side.

Eventually, Archbishop William Levada visited and made clear that the Eucharist would need to take place in separate rooms with two separate altars. Even homilies would need to be offered in two different rooms, he declared, since Roman Catholics would be best served by hearing Catholic preaching, and Lutherans, Lutheran preaching.

Eventually, the time of separating or “traveling” became one key part of the overall Ordo. Gathering, Word, Traveling, Meal, Sending. For the Traveling time, after prayers and the Our Father, the congregation would turn and face the central aisle and sing a blessing over one another. “Shalom, Haverim,” a blessing song, or a short hymn about unity, usually. Then one part of the community would travel to the hospitality hall, where a second altar was set and ready to receive them. Both denominations took turns so as to make sure the fellowship hall experience was shared equally. By the time I got there, around the tenth anniversary of the congregation, tears were still not unusual at the time of the separation. We lived on the razor’s edge of unity in Christ, prisoners of reality and pilgrims of hope. The reality of that “already-not yet” proleptic nature of our shared lives escaped very few.

In 1996, when I interviewed through the typical ELCA call process, Fr. Matt and I took a walk and he told me that the community usually stayed together for the homily and traveled, to honor the archbishop’s requirement, but traveled as late into the service as possible. “I thought Archbishop Levada had said that a shared sermon was to only happen on special occasions,” I asked, confused. “Well,” he sighed and smiled, “We have many special occasions.” Every Sunday was indeed a little Easter.

In the process of my call vote, when I was interviewing and we were all discerning, most of the Catholics were thrilled to have a say and to be able to vote on a pastor. Yes, we also had to be careful. Lutheran ballots at the congregational meeting were one color, I’m told, and Catholics’ were another. Many of the members, especially the Catholic members, were excited to call a woman. Of course, a few left because they’d called a woman. The first Sunday I helped lead worship, we gathered with only about twenty-four souls in the sanctuary, including children. I remember the curiosity, the

kindness, the sense of humor, and the sense of DIY about everything, including the omnipresent dust-bunnies.

But I couldn't have had a richer formation site in those early years. Former priests and nuns populated my office with their hopes and visions, and divorced Catholics or traumatized First Communion survivors would join me for coffee or a long walk. Intellectually curious Christians, Lutherans yearning for a more participatory and less clerical home parish, others seeking a rich and meaningful worship experience that sent them into the world to live lives of faith, justice and peace all formed me as a leader. People ask sometimes why my bishop-style is so open. I was formed by the "bored, burned and bitter" of Christ's church, absolutely. Sometimes through clenched teeth or thoughtful sighs, they detailed their stories, their theology, their exclusion, their sorrows, their hopes, their doubts and their faith and their hearts.

I learned much from Fr. Matt Tumulty, my first co-pastor. "Why do you offer private confession, but not every week? Once or twice a year in Lent and Advent. Over coffee at an old church table in a dusty church office. It doesn't seem traditional, yet it does seem traditional."

Matt honestly loved these questions. "I believe that the heart of this sacrament is a confessed life," he said. "The confessional booth itself isn't necessary. Nor the weekly nature. What is important is that no part of our lives goes so far underground that we haven't been able to share it with even one other person. That someone doesn't NEED to be a priest, Laurie, but I'm happy to be that someone when it helps someone." Matt ended up speaking of it so eloquently and meaningfully that Lutherans sometimes wanted to participate in confession. He elevated our shared sacramental lives, reminding us often that baptism and no other sacrament is the primary force that unites us all. In baptism we are equal before our Maker, loved radically by our Redeemer, and invited into transformation and into co-creating a Beloved Community by Holy Spirit.

So what does any this have to do with the baptismal call for transformational unity in Christ? Below, I've identified five themes woven throughout the fabric of my ministry, both in the parish and in the Office of the Bishop, that stand out from my own Lutheran theological perspective.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Theology is Embodied and Relational

Martin Luther was an Augustinian priest and a lover of the Hebrew Bible's gritty, revelatory earthiness. He was formed by that tradition of belief which held that the body and soul are intrinsically linked. He was also a pastor, formed by relationships in a parish, and much of his significant thinking was a reaction against the Scholasticism of his time, with its abstractions, doctrine and dogma.

Theology is embodied and relational. When I was pregnant as a young pastor at Spirit of Grace, the Catholics loved to tell their Catholic friends that their pastor was pregnant. When I was breastfeeding that child, my body would remind me at the end of worship with leaking milk, that a certain human body needed me again. And she, Sophia, needed the arms and love of that list of Catholics and Lutherans who signed up to hold her during worship.

Unlike the lawyer John Calvin, Martin Luther found in scripture and even more in his own life the power of paradox, partially because he attended to his body and his everyday life. As he sat at table with his wife Katie and children, for example, while also preparing liturgies, lectures and homilies as a priest, he couldn't help but see scripture and the holy life through a lens of flesh, blood, bone, mucus, friendship, and sexual love.

This emphasis on relationship is reflected in our shared ecumenical work. Nearly all of our shared ELCA Lutheran–Roman Catholic statements on justification, holy communion, baptism, and ministry end with calls to move from remote theological analysis to “active engagement” with one another. Listening. Remaining curious. Seeing in the other the capacity to also be a theologian. In that way, in embodied encounter, our hearts can be cracked open to God's Word.

I found this to be consistently true at Spirit of Grace. One long-term Lutheran member of the congregation told me, “I didn't even realize what it meant to be Lutheran until the Catholics came. We Lutherans really do prioritize community, fellowship hour, and shared singing. Christ meets us in the body. And I've come to love these other Catholic bodies more and more as we've gone along.”

Another, an older feisty Catholic woman who demonstrated pastoral care in her life more than any ordained pastor I've ever met, insisted on breaking with tradition if she and I were to find ourselves in a Catholic Mass together in another parish. If the presiding priest made clear that non-Catholics were not invited to receive the Eucharist, she'd get her hackles up. “You are meant to be at that altar just as much as I am,” she would say as she'd smuggle one-half of her host to me, back in the pew. She knew that Christ's table is a table of unity, diversity and radical love. “Body of Christ,” she'd smile as she gave it me.

Relational and embodied theology.

Crossing Borders for the Sake of the Dignity of the Other

It is no coincidence that our larger culture is fascinated and inspired by stories of crossing borders. There is profound power in being blessed across what we've been told are impassable walls. Christ crossed boundaries constantly, of course: blessing the Syro-Phoenician woman, speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, dining with tax collectors, refusing to stone the sinner or turn away the hungry or the child.

Perhaps the moment of my finest blessing came from a young Catholic girl, maybe eight or nine years old, “When I grow up, I want to be a priest like Fr. Laurie.” No higher praise than this!

After Archbishop Levada required our separating for Eucharist, and Catholics from many places began joining the community as word spread, sometimes we'd have only about one-third or one-quarter of the services congregants at the Lutheran communion after we'd “traveled.” We went through seasons of Catholic influx. One member, a gentle former priest noticed this, and when that was the case, he would make a special effort to travel or stay with the Lutherans. I asked him why. “I don't want you to feel like you are in any way ‘less than’ the priest,” he'd shrug. “I'm happy to travel with you on those Sundays. Christ is fully present at both tables. Your dignity matters.”

Fr. Matt Tumulty and Fr. Neil Moore consistently recognized and affirmed my calling and dignity as well. Both refused to concelebrate or be near a Catholic altar

during mass unless I was invited to be up near the altar as well. Do you how powerful that kind of solidarity can feel like?

Borders crossed. Expectations upended.

Perhaps because things were rarely easy or straightforward at Spirit of Grace, and the responsibility for the collective life is shared, the community has ended up being a cauldron of leadership formation. Encouraged to think for themselves theologically and liturgically, numerous members have felt a call to seminary or to new vocations to something new that is true vocation. It has been clear from the beginning that spiritual practice is meant to lead us to activism in the world, and that action is meant to invite us again to spiritual grounding. And why would the priest or pastor be the only one to see moments of opportunity for that?

One Saturday retreat of the leadership board, held at the now-closed Franciscan Renewal Center, was led by a Lutheran church consultant, and within an hour he said, “I’ve been doing this for a long time and have worked with more churches than I can count. You are an unusual group. When I ask you a question about your congregation, all eyes don’t go to the priest or pastor. You think for yourselves. If you believe that what makes you unique is that you’re both Lutheran and Catholic, you don’t have the full story. You are up to something beautiful and rare. You are forming real Christians with real agency in their spiritual lives.”

Borders crossed. Expectations upended.

Holy Envy

The Lutheran New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl was a mentor of mine at Harvard Divinity School, and he spoke often of “Holy Envy”—the exquisite sense of finding yourself admiring in another’s tradition something so profound that in that moment you wish you could claim it as our own. In walking alongside another, serving the world and attending protests with the ecumenical neighbor, coming to love them as we love ourselves, really, and encountering their ways and liturgies no longer as strangers, we are also invited into a fresh perception of our own faith. This, of course, invites a deeper articulation of our personal theology and wider lens on our daily lives of discipleship.

Through years of coming to love a huge, colorful variety of God’s people who call themselves Roman Catholic, I came to love learning about the saints as they shared the stories, and Mary as they shared her often intimate meaning for them, and the power of a wider number of sacraments as they spoke of the freedom and also the discipline embedded in that. I saw in my Catholic friends an assumption that the Gospel has social and political implications, when so often my Lutheran siblings held a much safer political quietism. The humility required in acknowledging the authority of the Pope, or the poverty and celibacy vows of my ordered friends, inspired and astounded me.

Catholics at Spirit of Grace, on the other hand, would talk about how much they admired Lutherans’ familiarity with scripture, and our expectation of a polity of collegiality in crafting budgets and calling pastors—or, in the primacy of the individual conscience. And, of course, our seemingly endless love of Baroque hymns and four-part harmony.

Holy envy.

I'll never forget one Reformation Sunday, the final Sunday of October in which Lutherans remember Martin Luther's nailing of the Ninety-five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg. It has become through the years one of the high holy days for Lutherans - a blend of Lutheran theology, Reformation history, Bach hymnody and sometimes overly sweet nostalgia. It frequently serves as Confirmation Sunday for a worship as well.

One year, with the final Sunday of October approaching, a Catholic lay member named Linda offered to preach and construct our Reformation Sunday worship service. "I'm so honored," she offered. "Growing up Catholic, and going to Catholic school, I was taught almost nothing about Martin Luther—except that he was a heretic. Dangerous! A man whose teachings were NOT to be explored" she shared. "And yet, in the lives and passions of my friends in this congregation, I have discovered this saint I love! Luther's affirmation of the body and elevation of marriage has helped me see more clearly Christ in my own marriage, my aging body, my friendships. I knew growing up as a Catholic girl in the 50s and 60s that I would never be invited to offer a homily or receive much theological formation. Yet here, alongside Lutherans, because of Lutherans, I've discovered my voice as a preacher and a theologian. I WANT to encounter scripture, to think about grace, to read church history and theology, to attend to my spirituality so that I can better listen for Christ's voice in my messy miraculous life. I would never have found these gifts without my Lutheran sisters and brothers, and without the love they've shown me in the name of a Christ who loves all of us!"

Holy envy.

Mutual Accompaniment

The Lutheran theological tradition was born out of schism, with all the intensity and high emotion of a Taylor Swift break-up. I've learned over the years that one primary challenge within an ecumenical parish is that most of us have been, as Fr. Matt Tumulty would say, "catechized to be right." For myself, I know that my first instinct is often to argue, judge, find new ideas inadequate or wanting.

The tradition of a shared potluck once a month after the Sunday morning Service of the Word, and soup suppers during the seasons of Lent and Advent, surely helped build our unity in Christ as relationships grew and the fabric of the shared communal life thickened. As we broke bread regularly, year after year, we learned one another's stories, sat with one another's children, celebrated one another's successes and grieved one another's heartaches.

A friend of mine visited Spirit of Grace once for a Mother's Day worship service. The homilist, a lay leader, shared about her own journey into motherhood after surviving a childhood with a narcissistic mother of her own. She briefly offered details of abuse and neglect, and how the Holy Spirit of Life and Hope helped her find counseling, friendships, a supportive spouse and enough healing to eventually want to mother children herself. "That was absolutely unlike any Mother's Day worship service I have ever experienced," my friend announced afterward. "Not a lot of saccharine."

One Sunday a former priest married a Catholic woman whose first husband had at some point begun to deal with gender dysphoria and had come out as trans after years of their marriage. As the glorious middle-aged couple smiled their way down the short

central aisle, her ex stood to the side in an elegant dress and high heels, serving as the official wedding photographer.

Isn't that the kind of accompaniment, mutuality and openness to radical transformation that Christ calls us to? Is not this the baptism which John the Baptist offered Jesus of Nazareth? Real. Earthy. Full of impossible love.

In this we are transformed.

Mutual accompaniment.

CONCLUSION

Everything I've been about in my role as Bishop of the Oregon Synod has been shaped or influenced by my accompaniment of a congregation united in their one baptism. Transformed by their encounters with one another. Empowered by their belief that God's call is first to tend seeds of life and hope and truth and not first to tend institutions.

My audacious dream from the beginning of my call to serve as *obispa* is that our work can help people across the state and across faith traditions to find their most prophetic and authentic voice—in whatever institution best becomes their home. We have a lot of people who love to call themselves Lutheran-adjacent. I am so grateful to serve a synod full of people of faith who understand me when I say that.

About a year and a half ago, in the early winter of 2023, the current Archbishop of Portland informed the five Catholic priests regularly saying Mass at Spirit of Grace that they must cease doing so. Without warning, this effectively excommunicated Spirit of Grace from the larger Catholic communion after almost forty years of ministry. We all found ourselves completely disoriented. The lay and ordained leadership of Spirit of Grace reached out to the chancery, in shock and anger, and were told that a letter had been sent to the congregation but that it must have been lost in the mail. My phone calls to the archbishop were not returned.

Since that time, Spirit of Grace has had to discern its Catholic identity anew. Who are we now? Who have we been? Who are we called to be? Through more than a year of intentional conversation, prayer, education about other alternatives and more, the entire membership was invited into the conversation. How important to us is our Catholic identity? Should we become simply a Lutheran congregation, with its wider range of liturgical freedoms, and release our other identity? What about the Old Catholic Church, or other independent communions? Or something more contemporary like affiliated with the Roman Catholic Women Priests?

Just last month, May 3, 2025, after more than a year of discernment on her part as well, the faith community officially ordained their Director of Catholic Ministries, Vinci Halbrook-Paterson, a Roman Catholic Woman Priest. I was honored to participate. Streams of women priests from all over the Pacific Northwest joined with tributaries of progressive Catholics and Lutheran clergy from the Beaverton area and members of Spirit of Grace and beyond, and again, God's Spirit was there.

It is so clear to me: the future of our Christian faith is lay-led. The future is ecumenical and interfaith. The future is international. The future is likely to be what Douglas John Hall has said - a chance to learn from our Jewish neighbors in the US how to be a faithful remnant.

It is then and only then, I believe, with beautiful holy envy, deep accompaniment, messy stories, hard truths, and hidden prayers that we can be open to God's dream for us. Together, we are such a shimmering tapestry capable of a lot. And I've come to believe that our more radical call to transformation in Christ is made known to us in baptism—called to be ministers of the impossible, walking Christ's Way of radical transformation together.