

**A RESPONSE TO BISHOP LAURIE LARSON
CAESAR’S “THAT THEY MAY BE ONE:
THE BAPTISMAL CALL FOR RADICAL
TRANSFORMATION”**

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Thank you, Bishop Laurie, for your prophetic witness. Let’s see what vision of catholicity emerges from a conversation between a queer Puerto Rican Catholic theological ethicist and a female, formerly pregnant, Lutheran bishop.

In response to your remarks, I want to offer four points.

First, I am struck by the title and central theme of your remarks: That they may be one. The topic of unity is contentious in our church and was a hot button issue during the last papal conclave. On the eve of the conclave, several conservative cardinals called for a pontiff that would promote unity in the Church. As reported by *The New York Times*, these prelates were juxtaposing the concept of unity against the concept of diversity (a false dichotomy in my opinion). Cardinal Gerhard Müller, a sharp critic of Pope Francis, described Pope Francis’ reforms with these words: “That is his style, to divide. All dictators are dividing.” Similarly, Cardinal Sarah warned, “if we introduce ruptures and revolutions, we destroy the unity that governs the holy church across the ages.”¹ In last year’s Ecclesiological Investigations conference at Chicago Theological Seminary, Bryan Massingale asked the following questions: “At what price do we preserve ‘unity’? Who is being asked to pay the price and shoulder the burden of unity while we wait for a consensus to appear?”²

As a queer Catholic in solidarity with women priests, those who are divorced and remarried, and many others who are marginalized in the church, I am suspicious about these calls to unity. Unity here, is code for uniformity—specifically uniformity under a Eurocentric, patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisnormative vision of church. This unity manifests as the smaller purer church that has never and should never exist.

¹ Jason Horowitz, “As Cardinals Prepare to Elect a Pope, One Motto Is ‘Unity.’ That’s Divisive.,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2025, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/27/world/europe/cardinals-church-conclave-pope.html>.

² Bryan N. Massingale, “Unity at What Price? And Who Pays? LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Catholic Church and Lessons from African Enslavement” (Plenary Address, Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network Fifteenth International Conference, Chicago IL, June, 27, 2024).

Similar calls for unity have echoed the halls at CTSA (though much more well-intentioned). I have heard folks lament that certain theologians “from across the aisle” do not feel welcome here. It’s all very triggering to me because, frankly, no one is kicking conservatives out of our academy—and Pope Francis was not dividing the church. What is happening is that the church and the academy are gradually becoming more welcoming spaces toward people like me, like us. And some people have a real issue with us. I am all for unity amidst disagreements, but, in the words of Robert Jones, Jr., “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”³

It seems to me that Catholics are in need for a model of unity that does not seek to erase differences or compromise values of justice. And here, I express gratitude for your testimony. Because in your ecumenical community, Unity is not about sameness—but about togetherness. Unity is grounded in the fundamental recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of every person. At Spirit of Grace, unity under dignity gives way for a celebration of diversity—diversity of identity, of religious affiliation, and of theological viewpoint. And when we prioritize dignity, God’s grace flows in abundance, as evidenced by the fruits of solidarity and spiritual insight that Lutherans and Catholics derived from each other through their shared baptism.

This is the heart of synodality. Synodality is not just about the walking together; but rather, it’s about the wonders that we begin to grasp when we open ourselves up to learning what God is communicating to us through each other. In the words of Polish theologian Grzegorz Strzelczyk, “In its very essence, synodality is associated with the possibility of an epiphany of the Holy Spirit. . . . Moreover, expectation of this epiphany should be the reason for such a gathering.”⁴

The real bravery of the synodal way is not so much in being able to walk with someone who is different. (That only seems like bravery for those who are part of a dominant group—as if it is so mind-blowing to suddenly realize there is diversity in our Church.) The real bravery of the synodal way is the openness to being radically transformed by the Holy Spirit through encounter.

This is what your community experienced over the course of forty years—synodality. And it is something I believe our Synod on Synodality attempted to articulate in its final document when it talked about pluriversality.⁵ Unfortunately, the reason synodality often fails is because we can fake it. We can walk together with diversity and refuse to let ourselves be radically transformed by it. However, if we can let ourselves be transformed by the diversity of the *sensus fidelium* that surrounds us, we can begin to celebrate it. As a Catholic, I am grateful that your Lutheran Church exists—because I am happy to witness a community with leaders like yourselves. I am

³ Ryan Williams-Jent, “Robert Jones Jr. Cultivates Community with ‘Son of Baldwin,’ ‘The Prophets,’” *Watermark Out News* (blog), February 25, 2021, <https://watermarkonline.com/2021/02/25/robert-jones-jr-cultivates-community-with-son-of-baldwin-the-prophets/>.

⁴ Grzegorz Strzelczyk, “Synodality: An Epiphany of the Spirit,” *Studia Teologii Dogmatycznej* 5 (March 28, 2020): 144, <https://doi.org/10.15290/std.2019.05.12>.

⁵ Francis, “Final Document – For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission” (October 26, 2024), §43, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

grateful to the Spirit of Grace Community—for being a witness of unity under dignity and for being witnesses of the bravery of the synodal way.

Second, I am inspired by the active lay leadership of your congregation. I was raised in the Marianist Order. I attended a Marianist High school in Puerto Rico and am a proud graduate of the University of Dayton and Chaminade University of Honolulu—both Marianist universities. The founder of the Marianists, Father William Joseph Chaminade, sought to revive the church in post-revolution France but, since priests had been either exiled or killed, he relied on lay leadership and lay communities to jumpstart the church. The Blessed Mother became a model of leadership for these lay communities.

Lay leadership in the church is grounded in our baptism. And taking seriously our common baptism means recognizing that lay Christians are active participants in the church through our common call as priests, prophets, and kings (well, “queens” in our case—Happy Pride Month, CTSA!). In the words of Ormond Rush, “Full and active participation of all the faithful means appropriate participation by the laity in the teaching, sanctifying, and governing of church life, and in the mission of the church in the world, since the whole People of God, ‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ share in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of Christ.”⁶

To me, lay leadership also rests on a particular power—and that is the power of authenticity, which we heard shine clearly in your testimony. Not only do lay people have a profound sense of the daily lives of diverse Christian communities, but we also have the ability to take up space in the church and transform it through our witness even in the face of rampant clericalism. As a lay leader myself who advocates for queer inclusion in Catholicism, I obviously face a significant number of obstacles ranging from condemnation to erasure and to lukewarm partial welcome with an expectation that I accept something less than full inclusion in the church—which I consider my right through the one baptism. In those moments, I dwell on the words of the founder of the Marianists, Fr. Chaminade, who said “I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper and after a while it overflows the obstruction and flows along again. This is how I am going to work.”⁷

As a queer lay person, the greatest power I have is authenticity. When I am held up as a brook is held up, all I can do is simply be myself in place and force the oppressors to contend with my humanity and my dignity. This is what the Blessed Mother did: she stood as a witness throughout Christ’s life even at the foot of the cross. The Spirit of Grace Community does the same. Despite the archdiocese attempting to pull away its male priests, you continue to authentically live into your ecumenical mission and your one baptism. You are a witness of the Roman Church as it should be. Your witness powerfully overflows any obstruction. Perhaps that’s why the Catholic archdiocese ignored your calls—because they couldn’t contend with the powerful authentic witness of your community.

⁶ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2004), 82–83.

⁷ William Joseph Chaminade, “I Am like a Brook,” NACMS, September 8, 2010, <https://www.nacms.org/epubs/i-am-brook>.

Third, I admit to constantly feeling holy envy. I felt holy envy when I saw two gay friends getting married in an Episcopal Church. I felt it when I heard the sermons of a trans Methodist pastor and a female Lutheran bishop. I feel it at Pacific School of Religion, when I see my students freely craft beautiful liturgies that come from their hearts. And I feel it when I see church structures that incorporate synodality by giving governing power to lay leaders. In those moments, I am grateful for our one baptism that allows me to participate in these inclusive communities. Thankfully, as a Catholic I don't always feel envy, but sometimes I do.

As you well said, I wish our church had the humility to utilize our holy envy as a compass for learning and growth.

I do feel holy envy when I see you, Bishop Laurie. I envy your congregation because they get to listen to you and be led by you. I envy all of those denominations that get to listen to the wisdom of women from the pulpit on a regular basis. As a sidenote, I ask that you join me in congratulating Bishop Laurie for being elected to another six-year term as bishop. After several rounds, the election required a two-thirds majority vote of the body of delegates, in which lay people must comprise at least 60 percent of all voters. Bishop Laurie was elected by 74 percent of the delegates. Talk about synodality. And talk about holy envy!

I have arrived at my fourth and final point, which is holy anger. I am very angry at my church leaders for how they have hurt your community. I am angry at how they ignored you and separated you. I am angry that they ignored the oneness of our baptism and the commonality of our creed. I am angry at their misguided belief that they somehow know better than your community about what is good and right, and I am angry that they chose liturgical rigor over ecumenical unity. I am angry that they became the proverbial fools who, as Confucius warned, looked at the finger when the wise persons in your community were pointing at the moon.

As I hear you, I am even angry because someone like you would not be allowed to serve as bishop in our Roman Catholic Church (if it's any consolation, a gay man like me wouldn't be allowed to do so either). While holy envy can operate as a compass, holy anger can become the fuel for hope-filled action. Anger is problem-solving energy; it is sometimes a gift from God in the face of injustice. So, I encourage everyone here to, every once in a while, lean into your holy anger. And, then, develop the courage to do something about what angers you. Neutrality in the face of injustice is complicity. In the (perhaps apocryphal) words of St. Augustine, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and the courage to ensure they do not remain as they are."

Thank you, Bishop Laurie for being a beacon of hope, of holy anger, and of courage to our Catholic Theological Society of America. One last time, please join me in expressing gratitude to the incomparable Bishop Laurie.