



## Response to Keynote Address

*Kathryn Lohre (ELCA)*

Grace and peace to you, siblings in Christ Jesus.

Prof. Halik, you have declared the imminence of a new reformation, one that demands our discernment, reflection, and response to the “signs of our times.” We are encouraged by your emphasis on Luther’s theology of the cross as the lens for the church’s discernment. As we bear witness to the sufferings of this world, we begin to see God’s redemptive purposes for the whole of creation. *We are standing at the foot of the cross.*

But are we willing to “touch the wounds” as your latest book urges us to do? Are we willing to touch the wounds of the COVID-19 pandemic – and the endemics of gender-based violence, economic injustice, racism and white supremacy, polarization, and ethnonationalism it laid bare? Are we willing to touch the wounds of Palestinians, who cry out for solidarity and liberation while living under occupation, violence, and the unabated expansion of settlements on their land? Are we willing to touch the wounds of Dalits, wounds salted by the Hindu nationalist destruction of houses of worship and gender-based violence? Are we willing to touch the wounds of Indigenous people, whose identities have been erased through violence and repression, and whose lands and livelihoods have been stolen with the church’s blessing? Are we willing to touch the wounds of people living amid armed conflicts – whether in Sudan or in the Ukraine, or elsewhere? Are we willing to touch the wounds of the generations to come, whose common home we are destroying by our greed as a climate crisis looms larger than any other threat?



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This Assembly is an opportunity to touch each other's wounds. Even – perhaps especially – when it is too much for us to bear. You have reminded us that the unbearable intimacy we experience at the foot of the cross is also the crossroads of the entire cosmos. The place where Christ's suffering elicits sighs too deep for words is also where we can hear, if we listen closely, the groans of God's good creation, of life emanating from death. We must look up and move out beyond ourselves: to follow Christ beyond the cross to the grave, to the tomb, and beyond until we find ourselves on the Road to Emmaus, unable to recognize the living Christ in our midst, but confident it is *Emanuel* – God with us - always.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis extols all people – not only the Catholic church, or the church catholic – to consider the cosmic implications of Christ's suffering. He writes, "One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross" (paragraph 99). The text goes on to say that "the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: 'Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world.' (paragraph 236)."

Christ's incarnation is a reminder to us of the necessity of being incarnate – *in-person* – with one another. While we can be spiritually formed as we gather in communion we are spiritually transformed in our participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion. There we come, side by side with each other, and face to face with Christ's incarnation. We participate in the communion of saints in all times and all places, and in the incarnation – the *real presence* of Christ – extended throughout the cosmos.

What, then, of our separation? To be reminded of the cosmic presence of Christ in the means of grace is to be reminded also of ecclesial, theological, and even sometimes cultural divisions that keep us from enjoying this cosmic feast as God



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intends. While we assert that our unity is a gift, already accomplished once and for all in Christ, we persist in rebuilding the dividing walls that separate us from God and from each other. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. Our fixations with ourselves – what you call our inhibiting forms, and what Luther called *incurvatus in se*– are keeping us as individuals, churches, and a global communion, from living out the dynamic invitation of the living Christ.

In my own North American context of church decline, we are captivated by corporate models that confuse organizational innovation with spiritual transformation. We have deceived ourselves, ex-culturating the Christian faith while insisting that we are inculturating it. We have obscured the Gospel with strategies that put *who* needs to be reached over and against proclaiming the good news that reaches out to all people by the power of the Holy Spirit alone. As Lutherans, we claim our baptismal vocation to the free course of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world, and our freedom to love and serve our neighbors. But do we believe it? Do we live it?

We need the LWF to be reminded that Christ is at the center of our life together, and indeed at the center of the cosmos. We will not always agree, nor should that be the goal. Mutual accountability demands both our mutuality with one another, and our accountability to each other through Christ. For nearly forty years, the LWF has claimed its self-understanding as a global communion. We are bound together not by the banner we bear, but by the One whose life, death, and resurrection binds us to one another, so that we might live, love, and move beyond ourselves, as one body, one spirit, with one hope.

To be called to a wider ecumenical endeavor is at once necessary and daunting. Isn't it already difficult enough among those of us within the LWF? Between Lutherans and other Christians? How, then, do we move beyond ourselves toward unity with those of other religious and spiritual traditions and none, the creatures and the creation, the depths and the heights of the universe? When we only glimpse the



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surface of creation, how can we begin to ponder the cosmos? The Psalmist, too, wondered about this. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps. 8:3-4). We are obsessed with our position in the grand scheme of God’s story. We are afraid, as you said, of losing our place, our identity, and our very souls. Yet, the powers of this world exploit our fear, and so we restrict our forms out of self-preservation and risk our credibility as people who proclaim God’s salvation through Christ. Your call to self-transcendence – to *kenosis* – is one we need to hear and embrace.

In closing, I would like to put Rabbi Pinchas in conversation with American Sikh theologian and activist, Valarie Kaur. She published a book in 2021 entitled, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, borne of her experiences as a third-generation Sikh-American, a minority-religious community that has faced bigotry, racism, Christian nationalism, and violence. She describes how Guru Nanak, the founder and first teacher of the Sikh religion, had an ecstatic vision of the Oneness of humanity and of the cosmos, *Ik Onkar*. “I see no stranger; I see no enemy,” he said. This wisdom, she writes, is echoed throughout the generations by Indigenous leaders, religious and spiritual teachers, and social reformers – and endorsed by modern scientific findings. She concludes, “We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say – as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: You are a part of me I do not yet know.”

All of you are a part of me I do not yet know, and I am a part of you, too. Realizing and embracing this truth need not be perfected before we look up and move out beyond ourselves. One body, one spirit, one hope is at once who we are, and who God calls us to be. You have challenged us to follow Christ beyond our limits to the vast expanse of God’s Eucharistic act of cosmic love, and in doing so to return to “the living Christ” whose victory of life over death is all we need to account for our hope. Thanks be to God.



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The [Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation](#) takes place 13-19 September 2023 in Krakow, Poland. The theme of the Assembly will be “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” It will be hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.



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