



One of our favorite Lutheran pastimes beyond the potlucks and the hymn-singing and the Confirmation-learning, is doing our absolute best to give a hard time to our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ, as if there is this complicated history between us or something dating back for half a millennia. Never mind that they remain the largest faith expression in the world with over a billion of them around. Never mind that their vast array of charitable groups continues to impact local

communities and beyond. Never mind that there's actually much more in common between us Lutherans and those Catholics, but that's obviously not nearly as captivating to talk about as the few differences that have emerged over the centuries since a Reformation came along and shook the whole church up.

So yes, one of the differences we Lutherans love to harp on with those Catholics is our Communion practice. We pesky Lutherans love to tell the stories of how when we went to a funeral or wedding or any other service in one of their parishes, and the priest did his usual song and dance about hoping for the day when all the world will be brought into their faith tradition so that all people may then partake of the body and blood of Christ; but, in the meantime, only those actual adherents to the Mary-praying and the Pope-following can taste and see the goodness of the Lord in front of their altars. Of course, there are those pesky Lutherans who scoffed at the instruction of folding your arms to receive a blessing and went up and took the Communion elements anyway, as if the priest was going to check membership cards or something anyway. It is one of our favorite pastimes for us Lutherans, to give the largest faith expression in the world the hardest time imaginable.

Of course, not all us Lutherans are on the same page in how welcoming we should be at Communion, let alone how hospitable we should be with the church in general with the world. Some of us descendants of that Roman Catholic Church are still debating on whether we should stick to our guns and require Confirmation completion before they taste and see the goodness of the Lord, while others may cave ever so slightly and insist on at least a Communion class, and others will just be okay with baptism, and even others want to open the floodgates and let them all come in and just let God sort out just how far grace and love and compassion can go on any part of someone's journey with the Divine.

But amidst this on-going learning experience, one of the commonalities between us just as scared-of-change Lutherans as those Catholics is the hymn *All Are Welcome*, shockingly sung by both sides. But I want to share with you one take on this song that should be relatively straight-forward with the title alone, but a former Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Rhode Island in Thomas Thobin, had this to say, starting with quoting the first verse:

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

[Bishop Thobin continues,] Sounds pretty benign, even warm and comforting, doesn't it? Despite its rather positive themes, however, I can't think of any [Christian song] that causes as much debate and division, anger and angst, as "All Are Welcome."

For some, the song has become an anthem to open doors and hospitality, admirable virtues that should characterize every Christian community.

Some take its inclusive theme to an extreme and abuse the well-meaning song as a protest against traditional Christian values.

For most Catholics, who find themselves in the neutral zone...the song is simply a pleasant way of beginning the Mass and setting a positive tone for the gathering of the community.

Some critics, however, find the song to be rather misleading, heretical even, convinced that it betrays the nature of the Church, minimizes her teachings, and leads to a watered-down expression of the faith marked by [indifference]...

When we say, "all are welcome" it can legitimately reflect an enthusiastic spirit of evangelization in the Church as we reach out to others to share the "Joy of the Gospel." As a Catholic community our membership is not closed; neither are our doors. We should be inviting others, even recruiting others, to be part of our Church.

When we say "all are welcome" it's a reminder that the educational and social services of the Catholic Church are available for all, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. In providing heating assistance, inviting guests to our homeless shelter, settling refugee families, or opening the doors to food pantries and soup kitchens, we never ask for a baptism certificate or budget envelopes. In fact, the words "all are welcome" express some of the finest instincts...of the...Church.

On the other hand, the well-meaning words can be misinterpreted and abused too...When we say "all are welcome" it does not indicate that everyone is invited to march up in the Communion line to receive Holy Communion without being properly disposed. In practice that requires those who receive Holy Communion to be a member of the Church, be free of mortal sin, and intend to receive the Holy Eucharist with proper decorum, respect and reverence.

The hard truth is, that while all are welcome, not everyone is suited for the Catholic community. If they cannot freely accept the faith and teachings of the Church, if their conscience or lifestyle leads them elsewhere, so be it. We will wish them well and pray that God accompanies them in their journey of faith.

So yes, indeed, all are welcome. Go ahead, sing the song with faith and fervor. But, please, don't forget the asterisk ().*

It's a favorite pastime of us Lutherans to give our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ the hardest time imaginable, but sometimes that just makes us more aware of the moments of putting in our own asterisks. We have our moments of not minding the idea of an ancient Psalm 15 in emphasizing the blameless life before they dare enter our holy sanctuary space. And yet, as much as we give the hardest time to our neighboring priests and beyond, more and more are becoming just enough hospitable to even the peskiest of Lutherans. And more and more of the Lutheran pastors are growing in their hospitality too with the refrain spoken around their Communion tables, that they are not the hosts, for that lies with God alone. God who insists on the words spoken through Jesus Christ that still drives people in all faith expression absolutely nuts: that this is the new covenant shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin, and sometimes the forgiveness of doubting just how far grace can reach in everyone's life. So, yet again, today, God hosts a meal for those Catholics, for the peskiest of Lutherans, for the Methodists and the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians and the child of God who isn't so sure where they are on their journey of faith, but this little holy something might just reel them in to the greatest assurance that nothing can ever happen in their life to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Maybe God is still renovating houses where love can dwell and all can safely live. Maybe God is still reforming places where saints and children tell how hearts

learn to forgive. Maybe God still has even more hopes and dreams and visions, with rocks of faith and vaults of grace. Maybe the love of Christ in spite of all our differences that we thoroughly obsess on, can still live in this place and in their places, too, and time and time, again, give us all the sweetest taste of victory over sin and death to last for all eternity. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

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