News



Spirit of Grace, a Catholic-Lutheran ecumenical community in Beaverton, Oregon, was established nearly 40 years ago and is possibly the only such community in the U.S. Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland recently told the priests serving the church they could no longer celebrate Mass for the congregation. (Courtesy of Jennifer Trom)



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Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, stating it is his duty to "guard the entire liturgical life" of Catholics in his care, has barred priests from celebrating Mass for what was possibly the only Catholic-Lutheran ecumenical community of its kind in the United States.

Spirit of Grace, located in the Portland suburb of Beaverton, was established in 1986 with backing from local Catholic and Lutheran church leaders. It was permitted by the three preceding Portland archbishops and is listed as a mission of nearby St. Anthony Parish in the 2023 Oregon Catholic Directory, published by the archdiocese.

Members of Spirit of Grace told NCR that Sample's ban, communicated just weeks before Christmas, left them surprised and devastated, yet holding out hope the archbishop might amend his position. They said the decision felt abrupt and came without an opportunity to rectify any problems or engage in substantial dialogue — even after they made repeated requests for discourse.

In a letter dated Dec. 5 and sent to the handful of Catholic clergy currently serving Spirit of Grace, Sample said the priests could no longer celebrate Masses at the church following the Dec. 10 Sunday liturgy.

The decision, said the archbishop, was the result of discerning "the needs of the Catholic faithful of the Archdiocese, the key principles governing the sacred liturgy, and how best to promote Christian unity."

Many members didn't learn about the letter until Saturday, Dec. 9.

"The next day, Sunday morning, was the last chance to have Catholic Eucharist at our amazing community," said Michael Gettel-Gilmartin, a member of Spirit of Grace for 34 years. "There were tears."

A longtime Lutheran pastor of the congregation, Laurie Larson Caesar, became the first female Lutheran bishop of Oregon in 2019.

"I am shocked and I am grieving with the community," said Larson Caesar, who said she has reached out to the archbishop requesting a conversation. "We've tried hard to live into our commitments to both denominations. They would say at Spirit of Grace every Sunday, 'We are one community with two traditions.' "



Frs. Jack Mosbrucker and Neil Moore pose with Lutheran Pastor Robyn Hartwig in the foyer of Spirit of Grace in a 2023 photo. (Courtesy of Spirit of Grace)

Fr. John Henderson, pastor of St. Anthony Parish, explained in an interview with NCR that he'd composed an earlier letter to the congregation's present Lutheran pastor, Robyn Hartwig, expressing concerns and alerting her to the archbishop's forthcoming pronouncement. Hartwig and the parish office manager, however, said they never received the communication.

Henderson told NCR he wasn't sure what happened and that the letter was mailed Nov. 21, 2023, the day it's dated.

Once Hartwig learned of the letter's existence from NCR, she asked for and obtained a copy. The mix-up added another frustrating, painful layer, she said.

On Dec. 13, the director of Catholic ministries at Spirit of Grace, Vinci Halbrook-Paterson, left a message with the archdiocese requesting a meeting with the archbishop. Two weeks later she said she had not received a response.

Tim Leslie, a member for nearly three decades, said he prays there can "remain some kind of Catholic presence."

"We are a unique community of believers trying to live out the good news as best we can, and the idea that we are now silenced or split apart — that's the deep sadness," he said.

In his Dec. 5 letter, Sample wrote the church emphasizes "the centrality of the diocesan bishop" in discerning all matters related to ecumenism, especially divine worship.

"Accepting this duty, which complements my obligation to 'moderate, promote, and guard the entire liturgical life,' as articulated by the Second Vatican Council," said the archbishop, "it is my judgment" that Mass "is not to continue at Spirit of Grace or for that community."

Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic M

Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, speaks July 7, 2022, during the Catholic Media Conference in Portland. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"No priest is permitted to offer Mass there or for that community gathered elsewhere henceforward," wrote the archbishop.

Sample said he wants to promote the Catholic members' participation in the sacraments at their local Catholic parishes, "so that they may help build communion with their Catholic brothers and sisters."

"I hope they will discover their local churches as sacred places where participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice is the anchor of the community, something unique and profound," he said.

NCR asked the Portland Archdiocese for additional information about the decision. Douglas Markwell, evangelization strategist and director of marketing and communications for the archdiocese, said there would be no comment.

Spirit of Grace was founded nearly four decades ago by the Lutheran Oregon Synod and the Archdiocese of Portland as a mission of St. Anthony, at the time a Franciscan parish, according to a 1998 history written by Franciscan Fr. Matt Tumulty, a priest who served Spirit of Grace for 15 years. In more recent years a small group of retired Catholic priests have ministered to the community.

Portland's auxiliary bishop at the time, Kenneth Steiner, spoke at St. Anthony's Masses, inviting interested parishioners to "accept this ecumenical mission," according to Tumulty's account.

For most of Spirit of Grace's history, worshippers participated jointly in the Liturgy of the Word with a Lutheran pastor and Catholic priest both presiding. Lutherans and Catholics would then separate into two different areas for the celebration of the Eucharist.

Since returning to in-person services following the pandemic, the liturgies have alternated between Catholic and Lutheran Eucharist. So the Eucharist was available to Catholics only every other week, though several members told NCR they had hoped to return to the previous model soon.

Joe Hromco, a member of the parish steering team, said the alternating schedule "was a good example of something that if the archdiocese said they had a problem with, we would fix the problem."

"Our intention has never been to squeeze by," said Hromco. "We take our Catholic identity very seriously."



Worshippers gather at Spirit of Grace in 2016 to celebrate renovations on their church building. About 50% of the members are Catholic, 40% Lutheran and 9% are from other denominations. (Courtesy of Spirit of Grace)

Hartwig said Henderson had made some efforts to strengthen the relationship between St. Anthony and the ecumenical community over the years and met with members once in 2018.

"But promises he made to me and my two predecessors to help deepen the relationship were never followed through on," according to Hartwig.

In 2021, Henderson and Fr. Todd Molinari, vicar of clergy for the Portland Archdiocese, had a meeting with Hartwig and Halbrook-Paterson, both new to their positions, and shared concerns about Spirit of Grace not being sufficiently Catholic.

"The meeting concluded with the two of them agreeing to my request for a letter, so the community could discuss how to address the concerns," said Hartwig. That was more than two years ago.

She said it is devastating to the community "to only now finally receive a letter and be given no opportunity to review the concerns and address the complaints."

Henderson states in his letter to Hartwig that Spirit of Grace is no longer aligned with the Catholic Church.

The priest told NCR he is not "putting any blame on anyone" and acknowledged that given his many obligations as pastor, "for my part, I haven't really done any kind of real participation."

"I know people are hurting, and I definitely understand that," said Henderson. "I hope that they have a discussion with the archbishop, because I'm not trying to destroy anything. But it's difficult because there's no real dialogue as was originally intended."

He added that his views and the archbishop's decision should not be perceived as "an issue over ecumenical ministries."

"At St. Anthony we are very engaged in ecumenical outreach," said Henderson.

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In his letter, the priest said he has "no ill will" toward Hartwig or Spirit of Grace, but that he had reviewed the community's website and "must express my thoughts honestly."

"It saddens me to see that our shared relationship, which started as a meaningful dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, seems to have eroded with time," said Henderson, who copied Sample and Molinari on the letter.

Henderson said Spirit of Grace had taken on "more of a nondenominational identity" by accepting not only Christian but all faith traditions. (According to figures provided by parish leadership, there are some 200 members, with nearly 50% identifying as Catholic, 40% as Lutheran and 9% as part of other denominations.)

Some Catholics in the archdiocese, Henderson continued, have been offended by what they see on the website, though he did not elaborate in the letter.

For more than a decade, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has allowed LGBTQ individuals to marry and be ordained as clergy. The Spirit of Grace website clearly displays an LGBTQ-affirming stance and has featured posts critical of Sample's guidelines on gender identity.

"As Catholics, we have a responsibility to be … affiliated with a local church community that is recognized and approved by the leadership of the Catholic Church," said Henderson.

"Spirit of Grace is not affiliated with the Catholic Church," he said, before concluding the letter. "I realize this will be difficult for the Catholics who attend your church and I know that each Catholic will have to examine his/her heart to discern next steps."



Kimberly Belcher, associate professor in the theology department at the University of Notre Dame (Courtesy of Kimberly Belcher)

Kimberly Belcher, an associate professor in the theology department at the University of Notre Dame, specializes in sacramental and liturgical theology and ecumenism and has served as a representative for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to three national ecumenical dialogues.

Belcher said she doesn't know of any other Lutheran-Catholic communities like Spirit of Grace but that she'd place it in the context of what she calls "experimental ecumenical communities," which exist throughout the worldwide church.

Among the best known is Taizé in France, and a few such communities exist in the United States, for example an Episcopalian-Catholic parish in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

"It's important to stress they are all exceptional, all unusual," said Belcher, and all are configured "a little bit differently."

"But each of these communities also has their own charism of working toward and praying for Christian unity," she said. "Each of these plays an important role in helping us think about the future of the church."

Catholic members Spirit of Grace said they are discerning what to do and where to go for Mass.

"The letter says we all need to go back to our local parishes," Gettel-Gilmartin said, "but I have no relationship with other parishes because I've gone to Spirit of Grace since I was 20 years old."

Belcher said the Catholic Church is "very, very good" at ecumenical dialogue at the institutional level, both within national bishops' conferences and in Rome and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

"What we struggle with is, on a local level, how do you make those ecumenical commitments real?" she said. Spirit of Grace "seems to me like a church that was trying really hard to think about how to make those ecumenical commitments real, and that's the part that I hate to see lost."

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 19-Feb 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: Portland archbishop bans Mass for rare Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical community.