

What can the church offer trans people right now?

Baptism and Eucharist should rework all of our ideas about identity.

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Illustration by Claire Merchlinsky

If you have been paying even the lightest attention to public discourse, you will know that trans people are hurting right now. When I transitioned back in 1993, the traditional media in both the United Kingdom and the United States barely mentioned us, except for occasional mockery. We were just too hidden. Then trans people grew in confidence, and things got better for us. I thought it would just keep going that way. It has not.

What can faith communities offer at a time when trans people face an uncertain future? Well, if the church is to model a vision of holy delight that makes for the cherishing of trans folk, I think we must learn to dwell deeper in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist—for they are fundamental realities for the church.

If we wish to live in Christ, we must pass through the waters of baptism and then feast on God's holy food, Christ himself. The sacraments should rework all of our patriarchal and hetero/cis-normative ideas about identity. Baptism and Eucharist are depth charges in the complacent waterways of the church, disturbing settled sediment and creating new channels. These disruptions take us, I think, far beyond either mere inclusion or a half-hearted welcome for the gender variant.

Consider baptism. Baptism is no entrance exam or initiation ceremony; it is the fundamental unpicking of human reality and its re-threading into the life of the trinitarian God. It is the washing clean of what is into what will be, what can be, and what ever shall be in God's eschatological reality. Which I think is a fancy way of saying that baptism is a divine mystery that should draw everyone up short. If we are to properly appreciate trans and nonbinary people as cherished children of God, we must embrace the ground-zero nature of baptism. This is no partial death of self or of inherited identity or the presumptions of the natural body. It is a total end of what was, in our sinful state.

I can already hear some interlocutors saying, *That's exactly why you trans people have got it all wrong. You cling onto your constructed identities. You're too scared to give them up. If only you would let them go, then you'd see who God actually wants you to be.*

I hear that, but it sticks in my craw. Those who come hardest against trans identities are precisely those who are not prepared to throw their patriarchal-naturalistic presumptions on the fire of God's refiner. They want trans people like me to go all in

on the death of our presumably fake identities, yet they reserve their own identities for themselves—their presumably natural or eternal notions about masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and so on.

The point is this: we are all called into the waters of death, and we can find on the other side a more beautiful and demanding way than that often modeled by a frightened church. I think we've all barely begun to grasp the implications of what life in Christ might look like. It is a journey into absurd and unquenchable love, into the radical demands of justice and mercy revealed in the reconciliation offered in Christ's resurrection. Imagine, just imagine, what that life might look like, and I think we might be on the way to cherishing trans lives. We might begin to appreciate God's cherishing of a half-holy, half-healed, bewildered pilgrim people.

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If baptism is the holy unpicking of our unredeemed lives and their beginning in a new world, then Eucharist is the feeding of the new. It is both the desperate food of the half-starved and a feast for those who think they have tried everything and are replete. It exposes our emptiness and our fullness. It is the holy food for a mature church, bread and wine that is absurdly indulgent yet better than any health kick. It is detox and intoxication. And it is the cherishing of the new creation, which holds a table huge enough for cis and trans and, frankly, everyone. It is the conversion of one to another in the company of the one who is host and who also offers himself for all. It is the ongoing con-forming of our baptized bodies into Christ's eternal body.

Most of all it is an act of resistance to theorizing. There are many theories about what happens in the Eucharist, and there is a place for such theories. It is important that we reflect upon our faith. Doctrine matters. But there are also theories about trans and nonbinary people, an urge for explanation—especially among those who want to talk my kind away or box us into crass pathologies. And I get it. Many people want to know if trans identities are natural or God-given; sometimes I want to know that, too. But what I want more is Eucharist and its wondrous mystery. For the key moment in the Eucharist is a mysterious encounter that outruns the desire for understanding. It is an encounter with gift.

It is in baptism and in Eucharist that the truest longings of our heart are held. They are held in the One who was in our midst as one of us. Christ shows us in

incarnation, in death, and—finally, wonderfully—in resurrection the picture of the body that is the picture of the soul: the pierced, risen, and ascended body. This is the queerest, strangest, most real body of all, and we are called to join our bewildered, beautiful, precarious bodies to it. This body is a picture of the church I can commit to, in which trans lives and bodies will not be inconveniences or oddnesses to be accommodated but sites of joy and solidarity.