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**“Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land and the Decline of Common Meaning”**

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of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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**By**

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Dear Sifers and brothers in Christ: Peace be with you!

“What is the shape of the Church to come? What will the Catholic Church in the United States look like 50 years from now? Who can say? Still, we hear dramatically polarized views about that Future-Church.” It was a sermon that I began with these words in my Cathedral Church on my Golden Jubilee, that prompted Bishop S. John Roth to invite me to address the Central /Southern Illinois Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and I am honored to be with my sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ this morning. My theme is: “Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land and the Decline of Common Meaning.”

I think most of you would agree that the Lutheran and Catholic Churches in the United States are finding it more and more challenging to sing the Lord’s song in western culture in which Peter Berger’s “sacred canopy” of has all but collapsed in what Charles Taylor rightly calls “A Secular Age.” Professor Taylor outlines in his book of the same

title the enormous difficulties mainline Christian traditions are encountering in a demystified culture which ignores or rejects the idea of the holy, the idea of mystery, and the idea of the sacred. Thus, foundational Christian beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, eternal life, the moral authority of the Ten Commandments, the nature of the family, human sexual identity, and the “golden rule” find themselves competing in the marketplace of ideas as only one of many systems of meaning. We are in a strange land.

This has come about because institutional Christianity and the larger secular, American culture have undergone the fragmentation of community caused by the decline of Common Meaning.

I will explore this topic from a moving viewpoint under five headings:

- 1. What is “Common Meaning”?**
- 2. Common Meaning and what it means to be an American**
- 3. Common Meaning and Ecumenism**
- 4. Common Meaning and Vladimir Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine**
- 5. Jesus Christ and Common Meaning**

### **1. What is Common meaning?**

The Lutheran and Catholic traditions are committed to being Christian communities of beloved disciples. These communities, in turn, strive to actively engage the larger world around them in order to enrich and transform the larger secular community, influenced by the paradigms of H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture. The word “community” often suggests a neighborhood, a tight knit group of people who live near one another and share many common interests and activities. But in today’s complex, fast moving society that understanding of community is only one of many. The Internet and the many forms of social communications have created postmodern communities of people who live far apart and never actually meet one another.

Fifty years ago, most Christians lived in their own spiritual “house,” sheltered to a degree from the outside world. Today almost everyone experiences far more diversity in ecclesial life than in the past. Within this context unity can be undone by unprecedented diversity with many Christians experiencing a degree of breakdown in their shared understanding of the very nature of the Christian community. A once familiar world becomes a strange land. This is what Jesuit philosopher- theologian Bernard J. F. Lonergan in “Insight: A Study of Human Understanding” and Method in Theology calls

the “decline of Common Meaning.” The decline of Common Meaning shatters our communal self-understanding which leads to the danger of divisions, quarrels, fragmentation, and breakdown.

Common Meaning is what holds individuals together in what we call “community.” Common meaning is grounded in four shared realities: a) experiences, b) understandings, c) judgments, and d) commitments. The dynamic reality of love animating a family, the loyalty animating the citizens of a country, and powerful faith animating the members of an ecclesial family are all manifestations of community born of “Common Meaning.” If even one of the key elements of shared experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments is removed or significantly changed, the sense of community in a family, state or religious body is deeply shaken.

If young Christians from a traditional Christian family in a small rural town go to a large secular university in a cosmopolitan city and some of them return home as agnostics or atheists, it may well be that their experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments were radically altered in their new environment, resulting in the decline of Common Meaning and the breakdown of religious communion with their Christian family and neighbors. They became separated from their base of *experiences* as people of faith. Gradually, their *understandings* about the meaning of their lives, their *judgments* about the purpose of their lives, and finally their *commitments* about how to live their lives were undone. Their sense of community is now sustained in a world completely alien to their families and friends back home. In that strange land, they found it difficult to sing the Lord’s song.

## **2. Common Meaning and what it means to be an American**

The three hundred thirty-two million citizens of the United States are amazingly diverse. Yet, until recently, we were held together by Common Meaning, the fundamental experience of freedom, pluralism, participatory democracy, and government by law. We asked questions that shaped our understanding of the meaning of this fundamental experience. We made similar judgments about whether our understandings of our experiences are correct or incorrect. And, finally, we made the commitment live by our shared experiences, understandings, and judgments. Thus, no matter how politically conservative or how politically liberal Americans may have been we knew very well what we meant when we said, “We are Americans.”

However, in the last fifty years American citizens, including Christians, have experienced growing division and conflict. The Common Meaning expressed by “We are

Americans” can no longer be confidently affirmed. The evidence abounds: the extreme division concerning the 2020 presidential election, the fierce arguments about murder of Mr. George Floyd and Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter, the racial divide of America’s Original Sin revealed when young men of Color die in altercations with White Police officers over minor offenses.

(In contrast, when the 18-year-old White gunman Payton S. Gendron, entranced by the white supremacist ideology, replacement theory, opened fire at Topps supermarket in Buffalo on Saturday, May 14, killing 10 African American people, in one of the deadliest racist massacres in recent American history, and when Dylan Roof who, proclaiming racist screeds, slaughtered nine African American people in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., on June 17, 2015, both were apprehended by the police without a shot being fired.)

And when nineteen children and two teachers were murdered in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24, and last night’s urgent plea by President Biden, “Enough is enough!” American elected officials are still unable not agree on basic, common sense gun safety laws that would save lives. Add to that the intense disputes about border walls and comprehensive immigration reform, capital punishment, the ever-increasing debate about the very nature of marriage, the family, human sexuality, sexual orientation and identity, and the polarized political and social response to the coronavirus pandemic- all reveal the decline of Common Meaning.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the decline of Common Meaning in America is the seismic national quarrel sparked by the leaked Associate Justice Samuel Alito’s draft of a possible Supreme Court ruling which rejects the 50-year-old decision of *Roe v Wade* and the 1992 decision *Planned Parenthood v Casey* and proposes to strike down the long-held precedent that the Constitution guarantees a mother’s right to an abortion because of the right to privacy.

Those who oppose legalized abortion generally do so because they think it is immoral since it puts an end to developing, innocent human life in the womb. Those who support legalized abortion generally do so because they believe it is the prerogative of the mother to terminate her pregnancy because it is her body, and no one should take away her reproductive rights. In the abortion debate, which will become even more strident once the court rules later this month, there appears to be no possibility of affirming Common Meaning unless one side accepts the other side’s definition of the nature and value of developing fetal life. The fracture is exacerbated by the fact that the Christian Churches are not of one mind on this critical moral issue, which has now led to a loss of

confidence in the Supreme Court. It is becoming more and more difficult for citizens to affirm “We are Americans” and mean the same thing.

### **3. Common Meaning and Ecumenism**

When the Christian members of a family, or a church congregation do not share, at the most fundamental level, the same essential experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, ecclesial life and discipline, moral principles, social outreach, or the intellectual compatibility between the world of religious belief and the world of scientific inquiry, Common Meaning may begin to decline, and community is likely to be fragmented.

The centuries old divisions in Christianity have many causes: debate about the role of Scripture, ministry, and hierarchy, political conflict, corruption, and much more. But at the foundation these divisions are dramatic examples of the decline of Common Meaning concerning the very nature and structure of the Church, leading to the fragmentation of community and breakdown.

Lutherans and Catholics have been in serious dialogue about this fragmentation since 1964 with the changing Catholic attitudes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council and the initiatives of the World Council of Churches. The Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue within the United States, an example of the slow complex process of attempting to reestablish Common Meaning, has been particularly productive with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This dialogue has produced several important joint statements including: One Baptism for the Remission of Sins (1966), Eucharist and Ministry (1970), Papal Primacy and the Universal Church (1973), Justification by Faith (1983), Scripture and Tradition (1995), the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries (2004), and the Joint statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation (2016).

These landmark statements are the result of ongoing dialogue and slow, painstaking scholarly research clarifying differences and pointing to areas of greater agreement. Many have hailed these as historic ecumenical steps that contribute to rediscovering common meaning. Unfortunately, they are almost unknown to the Lutherans and Catholics who go to church on Sundays. Some critics argue these are only paper agreements concealing old differences and affirming false consensuses, which show little promise of structural unity between the two traditions. At the grass roots levels, many in pastoral ministry and their congregation seem to have abandoned Pope

John XXIII's vision of actual Christian unity and become content with annual joint prayer services during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and grass roots collaboration on issues of social justice and peace.

Of course, the visionary Pontiff would say it is unreasonable to expect the breakdown that caused the decline of Common Meaning centuries ago could be repaired by only sixty years of serious dialogue, collaboration, and prayer. He would say: "Do not give up. Keep singing the Lord's song!"

#### **4. Common Meaning and Vladimir Putin's Invasion of Ukraine**

A tragic current example of the fragmentation, breakdown of community and the decline of Common Meaning is Vladimir Putin, immoral, and unjust war against the people of Ukraine. The Catholic Bishops of the United States recently were privileged to have a confidential ZOOM meeting with His Beatitude, Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. He shared remarkable accounts of the courage of local clergy who stand with their people never considering fleeing the onslaught.

He praised the leadership of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine and their citizens. He agreed with those who believe that the world is in a state of crisis not equaled since the end of the Cold War. The United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, the governments of Ukraine and of the United States have all expressed urgent concern in the face of President Putin's full scale war on a sovereign nation with such violent force that suggest that it was his intention to make Ukraine a part of Russia, as it was a part of the former Soviet Union as he did with Crimea in 2014. Mr. Putin is destroying cities and killing scores of innocent children, women, and men. Such violations of international law would be in opposition to the clear international justice and peace declarations of the United Nations and the teachings of the social encyclicals of the recent Popes and other Christian leaders.

Mr. Putin's war has shaken the stability of Europe and caused the United States and NATO to impose massive sanctions against Russia causing suffering for the Russian people but having no impact on Mr. Putin's czarist ambitions. The sanctions have already had a negative impact on the economy of the United States, shaking the stock markets, increasing inflation, and causing higher gas prices that impact us all, especially the poor. Lutherans and Catholics alike are praying with all earnestness for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution to this dangerous, unnecessary war, which, with talk of chemical, cyber and nuclear weapons could take the world to the brink of World War III.

How is it possible that one man can hold the world hostage, slaughtering innocent human beings for all to see on the evening news? The answer, I believe, is rooted in the decline of Common Meaning. Mr. Putin's blind aggression blatantly rejects the experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments that affirm the dignity and value of every human person without regard to ethnicity, race, religion. He and those who support his reign of terror are able to pursue primitive warfare because they do not see the people of Ukraine as their sisters and brothers, fellow human beings. Sadly, even Kirill, Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, has blessed this war rather than challenging Mr. Putin with the truth of the scripture. "You shall beat your swords into ploughshares, and your spears into pruning hooks. Nation should not lift up swords against nation. Nor should you train for war again!" (Isaiah 2:4) Common Meaning is required to comprehend, accept, and embrace Isaiah's words. As we all know, President Putin is not alone. We have only to look to the Middle East, South America, Asia, Africa, and some voices in the United States to find the same attitudes of authoritarianism and tyranny.

### **5. Jesus Christ and Common Meaning**

His Holiness, Pope Francis, echoing the idea of paradigm shift in Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions has urged Christians to consider the possibility that the world is not experiencing an era of change, but a change of eras, stressed in his *Urbi et Orbi* ("to the city and to the world") address on Easter Sunday morning that the world's need for Jesus Christ is greater than ever.

"We need the risen Lord so that we can believe so we can believe in the victory of love and hope for reconciliation. Today more than ever, we need him to stand in our midst and say: "Peace be with you!" Today Jesus alone has the right to speak to us of peace. For he bears our wounds. His wounds are indeed ours. They are ours because we inflicted them upon him sins, by our hardness of heart, by our fratricidal hatred. They are also ours because he bore them for our sake; he did not cancel them with his glorified body; he chose to keep them forever. They are the indelible seal of his love for us."

I believe Jesus of Nazareth articulates a critical foundation for societal Common Meaning throughout the gospel and preeminently in the sermon on the Plain in the gospel of Luke when He announces the moral imperative: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." This imperative is a call to conversion.

Bernard Lonergan argues persuasively that breakdown and the decline of Common Meaning can only be overcome by "conversion," a transformation of individual and group horizons. Conversion is manifold. It is religious, theistic, Christian, ecclesial,

moral, intellectual, and aesthetic. These complex, overlapping forms of conversion are born of new experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments that lead to seeing the world with new eyes. Yuval Noah Harari in his book, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, notes that a wide spectrum of beliefs, practices, and experiences is available to communities and individuals at different moments in history. However, most individuals and communities only embrace a small portion of the choices that are actually within their horizon of possibilities paying little attention to the wide spectrum of possibilities hidden from view due to cultural and other limitations. This is not unlike Lonergan's understanding of "conversion," not to be confused with Catholics becoming Lutherans or Lutherans becoming Catholics! (Much more should be said about this.)

It might seem naïve to suggest this, but these challenging words of Jesus express a central moral principal to address the decline of Common Meaning at the foundation of fragmentation and the loss of true community in our country and in our world, if only individuals, the Kremlin, and others would take them seriously. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Do not lie about other people, if you do not want others to lie about you. Do not threaten to harm other people if you do not want others to threaten to harm you. Do not endanger the lives, safety, and well-being of your neighbor's children, if you do not want others to endanger the lives, safety, and well-being of your children. Do not treat people unjustly because of their religion, nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, or social status, unless you want others to treat you unjustly because of your religion, nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, or social status. Do not imperialistically presume to cross the borders of an independent country, declare that it has no right to exist, bomb maternity wards, schools, family homes, residences for the disabled, and evacuation routes and kill numerous innocent citizens with the intent to overthrow the government, if you do not want other countries to imperialistically cross the borders of your independent country and do the same to you. This moral imperative has long been called The Golden Rule, the principle of treating others as one wants to be treated.

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," which is not unique to Christianity, may be the greatest, the simplest, and the most important moral guide than the human family has ever devised. It is easy to understand. The basic idea is very clear. But it is NOT easy for individuals or nations to live by in a consistent manner, especially in complex interpersonal and political circumstances. But the personal and communal appropriation of this moral imperative is essential for the restoration of Common Meaning. Different forms of conversion relate to different issues and circumstances. For

example, at a minimum, moral conversion is essential to change the egocentric world view of the President of Russia.

Before we do anything, which might harm another person, or another country, we should imagine ourselves, or our country in their position and ask the simple question. How would we feel if someone, or some country did to us what we are thinking of doing to another person, or country? If we would not want this deed to be done to us or our homeland, it should be fairly obvious that no one else and no other country would want it to be done to them.

Because of universal human empathy, we realize that this unwanted act should not be done. Understanding this is the beginning of the Common Meaning that could help find paths to greater unity among the American people, a higher regard for human life, a renewed commitment to ecumenism among Christians, and, yes, the rejection of war among nations.

Rebuilding Common meaning is a high and distant goal. Individual and communal efforts to restore Common Meaning are not easy, nor do they lead to easy resolutions. It can only be accomplished by trial and error. Christians working to restore Common Meaning in a church congregation, on the national or international level must persevere in the face of obstacles in the manor of Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership. But Christians, ever mindful that God is not God the way we would be God if we were God, committed to the hard work of rebuilding shared experiences, understandings, judgments, and commitments should not grow weary in our efforts. With the strength of the Holy Spirit, whose Pentecost Lutherans and Catholics celebrate on Sunday, our strength may be renewed making it easier to sing the Lord's song, even in a strange land!

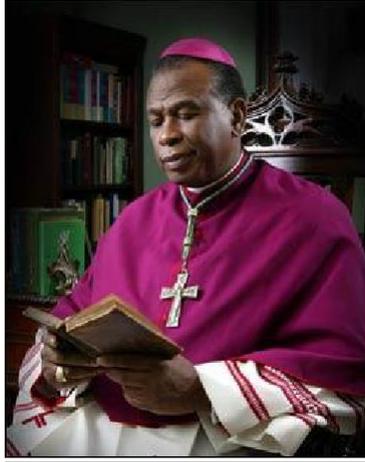
Then our Christian communities will stand as living witnesses to truth and freedom, to peace and justice. So that all people may be raised up to a new hope!

So that all people may be raised up to a new hope!

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever. AMEN.

**Thank you. Thank you very much.**

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### **His Excellency, The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.**

Bishop Edward K. Braxton, originally a Priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, earned his Ph.D. and an S.T.D. *summa cum laude* from the Pontifical Faculty of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. He has served on the faculties of theology at The Pontifical North American College in Rome, The Catholic University of America, The University of Notre Dame, and The Harvard Divinity School.

He was consecrated Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Louis in 1995. He later served as Bishop of Lake Charles, Louisiana and Bishop of Belleville, Illinois, where he now serves as Bishop Emeritus.

The Bishop is the author of numerous theological articles that have appeared in The New York Times, The Harvard Theological Review, Louvain Studies, Theological Studies, The Irish Theological Review, *Seminarium*, *Commonweal*, *America*, and other journals. His books The Wisdom Community and The Faith Community are well known in Catholic circles. He is an active member of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

His most Recent book, The Church and the Racial Divide in the United States has added to his reputation as a leading voice in the Catholic Church on racial division in this country. Bishop Braxton lectures nationally and internationally on a wide range of pastoral and theological topics. His current studies and writings are focused on the tensions between the biblical affirmation of the mystery of the resurrection, popular Christian devotional belief in “life after death,” and secular, scientific culture which brands such beliefs as fantasy.

Bishop Braxton’s sister, Mrs. Patricia Braxton Wills, died suddenly just weeks ago in her home in Duarte, California. His sister is the dearest of the dear in his life. He spoke with her EVERY day. Because he and his family are experiencing unspeakable sorrow at this time, the Bishop was unsure that he could prepare this address for the Lutheran Synod or that he would be able to deliver it. He told Bishop Roth that he might have to cancel his presentation which was just days after he celebrated the Liturgy of Christian Burial for his sister in Chicago. As a kindness to Bishop Roth, he made the special effort to persevere. He and his family would appreciate the support of your prayers. [ekbraxton@charter.net](mailto:ekbraxton@charter.net).