



**DLSU**  
**RESEARCH CONGRESS**  
BUILDING IMPACT ON FIRM FOUNDATIONS:  
From Basics to Applications

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Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2018  
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines  
June 20 to 22, 2018

## Liturgizing a Calamity: Breaking the New Grounds in Liturgical Relevance and Praxis in Disaster Context

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**Abstract:** The recent years is witnessed to varying degrees of disasters in the Philippines which makes the country one of the highest disaster-prone place in the world. Its aftermath translates to losses of lives and property and subjecting oneself to levels of vulnerability. The experience of devastation and the grief that comes out of it is common to all and cuts across cultures and religion. This paper articulates a specific kind of intervention using the celebration of the liturgy, specifically the Mass. By employing the framework of the Church: look, judge, act, the paper will propose a liturgical celebration that will somehow address the fundamental question: What kind of prayer or worship will there be after a devastating calamity? The paper seeks to present the stages of grief and how these affect the self, others, and one's relationship with the divine. Then it employs the elements of *lament* and *praise* in an attempt to bring into the surface sound theological reflections from the crushing experience in view of the individual and communal impact calamities bring to people especially to the poor. From these reflections, it hopes to provide the needed anchor to a proposed liturgical celebration where lament is desired to be not only a mere expression of grief and sorrow but also a recognition of the presence of the Divine. This is where one acknowledges pain but also looks into the springs of hope that the various parts of the Mass and the prayers desire to evoke to sustain the community of Christians as they respond to the challenges from the impact of calamities.

**Key Words:** Liturgy; Roman Missal; Lament; Mass Formularies; Collect

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The release of the encyclical *Laudato Si* of the Holy Father Pope Francis On Care for our Common Home has been ascribed *as a call for all people, Christians and non-Christians, for a cultural revolution against the 'treacherous appetites of capitalism', to save our planet from the disasters wrought by over-consumption and a utilitarian approach to the world* (McClure, 2015). This encyclical created various reactions and critical

analyses by experts and gained endorsements from scientists and environmentalists ("What the Environmental Encyclical Means: A Roundup of Expert Analysis", June 2015).

In his encyclical, the Pope argues that the poor are the most affected when calamity strikes. *"Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as*



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*agriculture, fishing, and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited (Laudato Si, 2015)."*

The Philippines, for instance, suffered through 33 disasters in 2011, which is mostly attributed to tropical storms and floods (CRED 2013). Some of these calamities have genuinely ravaged the land that affected millions of people, killed thousands, damaged hundreds of homes and most especially seemingly destroyed hope among families and communities. If one prays for the victim, what is the nature of the prayer? (Axe, 2001)

In the aftermath of a destructive typhoon or an earthquake, institutions such as the government and concerned private entities activate a system that addresses the immediate or long-term needs of the people. The most common are the relief operations that provide food and temporary shelter to the displaced. There are also the debriefing sessions from counselors or psychologists to assist the people to overcome their traumatic experiences. In such realities, Christian social workers and faith-based organizations often form part of the vanguard of disaster management (cf. Furman et al. 2016).

With a wide array of issues and counter-issues on the environment such as, the destructive effects of nature and the social and moral responsibilities the topic on disasters generate, this paper seeks to determine the relevance and the transformative power of the liturgy (community worship), specifically the Mass after a calamity. Hence, the question: If a Mass is to be celebrated for the victims of calamities, what kind of celebration would it be?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

It is essential to note among spiritually-engage disaster workers: what kind of spiritually-based helping activities can ethically integrate into the post-disaster relationship to hasten recovery. After assessing the varying degrees of vulnerability, Christian disaster workers explore the primary strategy of raising the topics of religion and spirituality (Furman et al. 2016).

This hopes to bring the distressed to the celebration of the Mass as human assert the inner desire to be in communion with God (CCC 27). In the liturgy, such as the celebration of the Mass, the community and the individual enter into the presence of the Triune God (Chupungco, 2004). This encounter of faith and life desires to create a worshipping community whose faith-life experience is not detached from the experience of every day. As Margaret Scott puts it: *The celebration of the Eucharist is not a disembodied ritual or religious act disconnected from reality* (Scott, 2008).

Hence, this paper will first take a look at the human experience of grief and pain after a harrowing experience. The five stages of grief presented by Kubler-Ross are briefly discussed with the aim of showing the levels of vulnerability of people faced with such circumstances.

After that, some theological elements will be taken into consideration specifically that of "lament" and "doxology" or praise as elucidated by a modern-day theologian Barend de Klerk in his article *Enhancing Ecological Consciousness through Liturgical Acts of Doxology and Lament*. This is proposed to assist the people face head-on the levels of vulnerability as a human coping mechanism as well as assess one's spirituality as the person freely pours out deep-seated anger before God.

By using their views, the author hopes to bring into the surface a proposed liturgical celebration that may be used by parishes and Basic Ecclesial Communities as basis. This article aims to enumerate areas in the liturgical celebration where the stages of grief, as well as lament and praise, can well integrate.

The table below presents the framework based on the encyclical of Pope John XXIII, the *Mater et Magistra*, released in 1961.

Table 1: LOOK-OBSERVE-ACT

Human Experience (LOOK)	Liturgical-Theological Aspect (JUDGE)	Proposed Liturgical Celebration (ACT)
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*Denial *Anger *Bargaining *Depression *Acceptance	Lament  Praise	*Mass Formularies for Various Needs *Penitential Rite *Readings & Homily *Prayer of the Faithful
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### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 The Human Experience

The five stages of grief that psychiatrist and visionary death-and-dying expert Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is known for was initially developed to describe the process patients went through when faced with terminal illness. The stages such as, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — were only later applied to grieving friends and family members, who seemed to undergo a similar process after the loss of their loved ones (Feldman, 2017).

In this article, the same psychological concepts are employed as these also might be the same stage/s that one goes through after a calamity. It is seen as not linear and may not all be experienced by a person (Gregory, 2017).

In the *denial stage*, one is not living in ‘actual reality,’ but rather, in a ‘preferable’ reality. Questions such as these would emerge: Why hadn’t we known this would happen? Isn’t it that the water would not get any higher than it had in the past? (Vignette 2: A Century Flood, April 1997) Interestingly, it is denial and shock that helps the person cope with and survive the grief event.

On the other hand, *anger stage* is usually the time to ask questions: Why me? Why my family? Where is God in this calamity? Experts argue that it is crucial for anger to be felt as a natural response and perhaps, a necessary one. Another stage that might be experienced is *bargaining*. A sort of dangerous kind of stage that might falsely lead one to believe that grief can be avoided through a certain type of negotiation. One may hear of statements such as, "If I come out of this alive, I will go to Church often, or I will give more to the needy." Moreover, *depression* as another stage of grief represents the emptiness one feels, the withdrawal from life, the

numb feeling. It is said that traumatic events have the power to inspire helplessness and terror (M.P. Van Hook, 2016, cf. Herman, 1997). Finally, it is the stage of *acceptance* where one's emotions are stabilized, and the person re-enters into the reality (cf. Gregory, 2017).

Dealing with grief and pain can subject one to a crisis of faith. The question such as: “If God loves us why did he allow such calamity to happen?” only seemed natural after experiencing devastation and destructions.

However, positive religious coping strategies appear to help promote healing and reduce the impact of trauma, pain and grief (M.P. Van Hook, 2016). When members of the family or the community gradually passes through one or many of these stages, it is much easier for the person to approach the Divine and surrender everything in prayer and eventually find meaning and purpose after a catastrophic event.

#### 3.2 Its Theology

Can a person truly dispose himself or herself to prayer, more so to community worship after experiencing devastation and destruction? Barend de Klerk in his article *Enhancing Ecological Consciousness through Liturgical Acts of Doxology* speaks of theological flaws that lead to one-sidedness in worship. He pointed out the overemphasis on worship on divine transcendence that eventually strips God of his connection with the world.

However, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines reminds us that worship without the social apostolate is divorced from life and lack the power of Christian witness (PCP II, 1992). Likewise, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy points out that the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows (SC 10). Foremost in the mind of the Church is to create a worshipping community whose life conform to what we celebrate, and that one may bring to liturgy everything that is in life.

With Liturgy regarded as connecting to the experience of one's daily life, there is now the openness to express within the communal act those that cause disquiet and fear, anxiety or even anger



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especially after the shattering experiences brought by a calamity. A 20th-century theologian of the Reformed Tradition Karl Barth asserts that it is actually a sign of faith that a person run to God in prayer with “haste and restlessness.” This is with the knowledge that God takes to heart one’s distress, and humans take to heart his mercy and live by it (Church Dogmatics, 2004).

One typical reaction after a devastating experience is to question. People tend to raise the most troubling questions, such as: How can a faithful God whose mercy fills the earth allow such destruction to happen? Does the God of creation go deaf to the cry of the parched land and its dying species? Has God forgotten the suffering poor who bear the disproportionate share of the misery? De Klerk suggests the practice of lament. The biblical tradition of lamentation offers contemporary worshipers models of how Israel and early Christians responded to personal and social calamity by engaging with God in a dialogic practice of complaint, protest, rage, and mourning.

These biblical prayers of pain and protest showed how ancient people candidly express their anger and disappointment toward God when faced with crushing circumstances. As a result, the prayers helped worshipers confront the reality of their situation and enabled a process of hope and healing (De Klerk, 2014).

However, “dialogic” must be understood as both a process and a product. As emphasized by Beau Harris in his article *The Silent God in Lamentation*, a dialogic conversation is different from a monologue because authentic dialogue introduces all participants to new ideas, experiences, and insights that are brought to the dialogue by the participants (Harris, 2013). In this case, God and people. In this dialogue, God allows his people to rage uninterrupted. His silence is a respectful silence, a silence that listens, but nevertheless a silence that speaks volumes. (Harris, 2013).

‘When the denial of guilt and grief and loss has been penetrated, the liturgy has a new task. It may move through judgment and grief to hope-filled possibility’ (Brueggemann 2011, Cf. De Klerk 2014). An article on *Spirituality as a Potential Resource for Coping with Trauma* articulated some of the faith-related

activities, such as *prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, attending church services* that may assist one in dealing with the aftermath of calamities or disasters. These were samples of essential positive coping strategies for survivors of the hurricane that may help overcome the feeling of grief and anxiety. (Cf. Van Hook, 2016).

These activities may not undo the damaged, fear and anxiety that one may experience after a calamity, it may even intensify the pain and distress, but a sense of control may start, and the likelihood of normalcy may be achieved. This could hasten healing and recovery.

### 3.3. Its Liturgical Aspect

Liturgy literally means public worship carried out by the People of God, the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. The usual celebration wherein the community gathers for public worship especially on a Sunday is the celebration of the Eucharist. It is from the Greek word *eukaristia* which means thanksgiving. This is the technical term for the Mass. During its institution at the Last Supper Jesus gave thanks and thus He, in sacrificing His life, offered the supreme act of Christian gratitude to God (Lang, 1989).

Liturgical celebrations are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church which is also called the “sacrament of unity” meaning the people united and gathered under a certain leadership (SC, 1963).

Hence, efforts must be made to encourage a sense of community in the celebration of the Mass.

In this communal act, the Eucharist is placed at the center of the people’s private, ecclesial and societal lives and not at its fringes, where it is only considered as mere devotion or obligation or merely as a means of gaining favor (PCP II, 1992). After all, to Christians, the whole of human life must be an act of worship. St. Paul points out in his letter to the Romans, that one cannot worship God in churches and shrines and then disregard him in one’s daily life or with what is happening in the person’s life (Rom. 12:1).

In this light, Christian liturgy must develop and incorporate prayers of lament to assist the community express their experiences of loss, grief, anger, and fear in relation to the ecological





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destruction, which is also a personal and social calamity (De Klerk, 2014).

Below are proposed areas in the Mass where lament can be best expressed:

### *3.3.1 The Collect (Opening Prayer) for Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions*

Suffice it to say that the Church is not remiss with her duty to take good care of her children. The introduction to the *Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions* in the Roman Missal (Hope, 1992) articulates: "Since the liturgy of the Sacraments and Sacramentals has at its effect that for the faithful who are properly disposed almost every event in life is sanctified by the divine grace that flows from the Paschal Mystery, and because the Eucharist is the Sacrament of Sacraments, the Missal provides examples of Mass formularies and orations that may be used in the various occasions of Christian life for the needs of the whole world or for the needs of the Church, whether universal or local (ICEL, 2010).

The sample Collect below expresses the utmost cry of the people:

O God, who set the earth on its firm foundation, spare those who are fearful and show favor to those who implore you...  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ...

It is in the nature of Collect that the presider of the Mass observes a brief silence so that the people gathered may become aware of God's presence and may call to mind their intentions. Since Collect is only recited by the presider, the lament of the people is lifted up to God in this brief silence through the ministry of the ordained priest leading the celebration and through the use of the official prayers provided in the Roman Missal for Masses for Various Occasions.

### *3.3.2 Kyrie Eleison (Lord, have mercy)*

Part of the penitential act of the Mass by which the faithful acclaim the Lord and implore his mercy (GIRM, 2010). It is intended to evoke God's grace and compassion. Here, lament can entail a personal confession of sin which flows from the experiences of vulnerability and loss of control over

everything. However, it also should take place with a view to the suffering of the world (De Klerk, 2014). When the Kyrie Eleison is sung, chanted, or recited as part of the Penitential Act, a trope precedes each acclamation. Below is an example:

Presider/Cantor: For our indifference and apathy to the abuses committed against the earth's natural resources. Lord have mercy.

### *3.3.2 Liturgy of the Word*

The central part of the Liturgy of the Word is made up of the readings from Sacred Scripture together with the chants occurring between them. In the passages, as explained by the Homily, God speaks to his people opening to them the mystery of redemption (GIRM, 2010).

Likewise, since God himself is the one who speaks in the Liturgy of the Word, the readings from the scriptures in its designated moment give the needed silence and the opportunity to listen to him who speaks. The dialogue between God and his people taking place through the Holy Spirit at short intervals of silence, suited to the assembled congregation, is an opportunity to take the word of God to heart and to prepare a response to it in prayer (LM, 2002).

Below are some texts as options during Masses after or before a calamity:

\*Job 3 – Job's Complaint

\*Lamentations 3:17-26 – it is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord.

\*Daniel 3:25, 34:43 – Deliver us by your wonders.

### *3.3.3 Homily*

In the homily, God speaks to his people as the readings are explained and so become an opportune time for a dialogue as people bring the devastating experienced into the open.

### *3.3.4 The Prayer of the Faithful*

As a response to the Word of God which the community has received in faith, and exercising the



office of one's baptismal priesthood, the gathered community offer prayers to God for the salvation of all, especially those weighed down by various needs or more specifically those that are weighed down by the pain and loss caused by a calamity.

### *3.3.4 The further experience of silence in the Mass.*

Liturgy calls it Sacred Silence. It is part of the celebration to be observed at its designated times. Its nature depends on the moment when it occurs in the different parts of the Mass. For instance, in the penitential act and again after the invitation to prayer before Collect is recited, etc (GIRM, 2010).

The further experience of silence in particular moments in the Mass, as previously articulated can be an opportune time to develop in the faithful deep sensitivity and respect for the pained voices calling out to us from the text in the readings and prayers and the anguish of people in the community or even in the world.

### *3.3.5 Hope to Troubled Hearts (An Occasion to Praise God)*

In the same article *Enhancing Ecological Consciousness through Liturgical Acts of Doxology and Lament*, De Klerk asserted that liturgy is also an enactment of hope in the contexts of loss and grief. Hope is grounded in God's promises, and his promises bring amazement that leads to praise. The prayers uttered as may be found in the parts of the Mass already mentioned and the songs that may be sung during the celebration, though may contain the anguish of the people can give way to radiant joy, to genuine optimism, and to a recognition of the power of God at work in the whole of creation.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* asserted that given the complex nature of the ecological crises, there is a higher need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and

transforming reality. Respect must be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, and if the world is genuinely intent on remedying the damage, no branch of science should be left out. This includes religion and the language particular to it (*Laudato Si*, 2015).

This paper has presented significant points articulating the importance of communal worship especially after an experience of calamity. The liturgical celebration conveys the pastoral support of the Church to the anguish of her flock. This gathering of people to celebrate the Eucharist opens an opportunity to express the collective grief, anger, and fear or with what was asserted early "the uninterrupted rage."

It is good to remember that at all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel if she is to carry out her task. This framework was strongly emphasized in the encyclical: *Mater et Magistra*. Okonkwo elucidates: The Church in her liturgy has a responsibility towards creation, and she asserts this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of the creation of God that belong to everyone. She must above all protect humanity from self-destruction. It is the desire of liturgy that God's newness will break the cycles of self-destruction, which is where abuse of creation leads, and make new life possible.

Moreover, the language of lament and the language of hope present in the communal worship after a calamity are flip sides of the same coin (De Klerk, 2014). Without the counterbalance of lament, praise becomes smug satisfaction. On the other hand, lament can also be misunderstood as a perpetual denial of grace. God's future is already at work in the world, and we are invited to engage with God in the work of healing and regeneration until the final transformation of all things in Christ when God will "be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28)

## 5. Acknowledgments

I wish to convey my profound gratitude to De La Salle University for the opportunity to share this study with the participants of the DLSU Research Congress 2018.



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