LOYOLA PAPERS

STUDENT AND ALUMNI JOURNAL OF LOYOLA SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 7 | Number 2 | 2026 | Online ISSN 3155-7112 • Print ISSN 2719-1834

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Volume 7 | Number 2 | 2026 | ISSN 2719-1834

Theology and Ministry Program
School of Humanities, Loyola Schools
Ateneo de Manila University
Quezon City, Philippines

www.lst.edu

LOYOLA PAPERS

Online ISSN 3155-7112 • Print ISSN 2719-1834
https://archium.ateneo.edu/loyola/

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Loyola Papers is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal published twice a year by the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, 1108 Quezon City, Philippines, Tel. No. (+63 2) 8426-6430. Revived in 2020 to promote scholarly research among students and graduates, the journal provides a platform for emerging theologians to share their academic work with the wider theological community in the Philippines and beyond.

Originally published from 1971 to 1986, Loyola Papers was described in its front matter as "a series of occasional papers and informative studies on contemporary issues in Christian doctrine and life." During its first run, it featured articles by faculty members, selected student contributions, and documentation of significant ecclesial events. Its revival in 2020 strengthens LST's commitment to forming thoughtful theologians who can engage the Church and society in diverse cultural contexts.

Articles may be submitted in the fields of systematic, biblical, moral, and pastoral theology, canon law, and church history, as well as religious education, pastoral psychology and counseling, spirituality and retreat-giving, integral ecology, migration, and philosophy.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Last May 15, 2026, Pope Leo XIV published the first major teaching document of his pontificate, titled *Magnifica Humanitas*. We reckon it as the first because although the apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* was technically issued under his name, he himself acknowledges that most of its content comes from Pope Francis and in effect serves as an apt completion of what may be called the Franciscan love series: *Laudato Si'* on love for our common home, *Fratelli Tutti* on love for our neighbor, *Dilexit Nos* on the love of God, and *Dilexi Te* on love for the poor. Now, with his first encyclical, our new Pope begins to lay out the principal concerns and directions of his pontificate.

Foremost among these concerns is the emerging technology of Artificial Intelligence, which is transforming many aspects of human life with a speed and reach unlike any technology before it. For Pope Leo XIV, however, the question posed by AI is not simply what machines will be able to do, nor even how rapidly technology will advance. The more fundamental question is what kind of humanity we are becoming in an age increasingly shaped by intelligent technologies.

This concern is particularly significant because *Magnifica Humanitas* approaches AI not merely as a technological or economic phenomenon, but as a profoundly human, ethical, and spiritual question. The development of AI forces us to reconsider what we mean by human intelligence, creativity, work, relationships, freedom, responsibility, and ultimately human dignity. Technology may extend our capacities, but it cannot by itself determine the ends toward which those capacities should be directed. The greater our technological power becomes, the more necessary the exercise of wisdom, discernment, and moral responsibility becomes.

It is in this sense that Pope Leo XIV's reflection on AI must be read within the broader trajectory of Catholic social and moral teaching. The Church is neither called to reject technological development nor to accept it uncritically. Rather, she is called to discern whether technological progress genuinely serves the human person and the common good. AI therefore becomes a test of our understanding of progress itself: whether progress is measured simply by greater efficiency, productivity, automation, and computational power, or whether it is measured by the extent to which technology enables human beings and communities to flourish.

The title *Magnifica Humanitas* itself points toward this deeper horizon. The greatness of humanity is not found in our capacity to create increasingly sophisticated machines, but in the God-given dignity of the human person who creates, uses, governs, and is ultimately affected by them. The challenge before us, therefore, is not simply to develop better AI, but to ensure that the development and use of AI remain oriented toward a better humanity.

At the heart of the encyclical, Pope Leo XIV places two biblical construction images before our eyes in deliberate contrast: the Tower of Babel and the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. Babel represents a project driven by the desire for power, self-sufficiency, and self-glorification: a humanity that seeks to "make a name" for itself through human power and technological achievement that no longer acknowledges dependence on God. Its apparent unity at the onset ultimately ends in fragmentation because uniformity has replaced communion. Jerusalem, by contrast, is rebuilt not through the ambition of one powerful architect but through the shared responsibility of a people. Nehemiah prays, listens, coordinates, and entrusts each family with its part of the wall.

Here, diversity becomes a resource rather than a threat, and the rebuilding of the city made of stone is inseparable from the rebuilding of human relationships.

For Leo XIV, this contrast offers a profoundly important framework for the age of artificial intelligence: the question is not simply whether humanity will develop increasingly powerful technologies, but what kind of world those technologies will actually help us build. We can construct another Babel, where efficiency, power, profit, and technological control displace human dignity and communion; or we can participate in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, where technology is placed within a larger moral and spiritual horizon, serving the common good, protecting the vulnerable, and strengthening the bonds of fraternity.

This provides an important point of departure for understanding Pope Leo XIV's emerging vision of technology. AI is neither simply a threat to be feared nor a solution to be embraced without question. It is a human artifact that reflects our choices, priorities, and values. Consequently, the ethical question cannot be separated from the anthropological one. Before asking what AI can do, we must ask what we ought to do with it—and, even more fundamentally, what kind of persons and society we wish to become through its use.

The future of AI and humanity itself will not be determined by technology alone. It will also be shaped by the moral imagination, institutions, policies, educators, families, communities, and individuals who decide how these technologies are designed, deployed, and integrated into everyday life. The task of discernment is therefore not an optional supplement to technological progress. It is one of the conditions for ensuring that progress remains genuinely human.

In this regard, theologians and pastors play an important role in helping humanity discern the direction it is taking. Their task is not simply to explain what AI is or to enumerate its ethical risks, but to pay attention to these emerging realities of our time and help communities interpret technological developments in the light of the Gospel and the dignity of the human person. Theologians are therefore called to bring the wealth of Scripture, theology, philosophy, and Catholic social teaching into dialogue with the questions raised by AI, while pastors accompany people as they navigate its concrete effects on work, education, relationships, culture, and faith.

We in the Ignatian tradition can contribute in a particular way the method and practice of discernment that Ignatius has bequeathed us. Ignatian discernment teaches us to attend carefully to our desires, to examine the movements within us, and to recognize what leads toward God and the greater good. Applied to AI, this means cultivating the habit of pausing amid the speed of technological change, resisting the desolations of both uncritical enthusiasm and fear, and paying attention to the movements of the Spirit both within and around us today, and how these tools shape our freedom, relationships, responsibilities, and vision. In this way, discernment can help ensure that our technological choices do not simply make us more efficient, but make us more attentive to one another, more responsible for the common good, and more capable of using technology in the service of humanity.

With these thoughts, it is our joy to present another volume of *Loyola Papers* as part of LST's continuing effort to cultivate and advance not just theological scholarship but pastoral sensitivity to the *res novae* of our time.

Carlos Cesar Barbosa Silva, SJ's *Growing Wise: Proverbs 2:1–11 as a Formative Paradigm for Jesuit Formation* presents a sapiential

interpretation of Proverbs 2:1–11 as a theological framework for examining Jesuit formation, focusing particularly on the risks of overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism. Its central contribution lies in framing formation not principally as the acquisition of competencies or credentials but as a progressive movement from active searching, through the reception of Wisdom as a divine gift, toward ethical embodiment and interior integration. The article's strength is its sustained effort to correlate the structure of the biblical text with the stages and purposes of Jesuit formation, while showing how otherwise legitimate goods like care, intellectual excellence, and professional achievement can sometimes become formative distortions when detached from their proper orientation toward mission and conversion. While the correspondence between Proverbs 2 and the stages of Jesuit formation appears somewhat schematic, with an end of formation even posited in Tertianship, the essay offers a coherent and provocative contribution to reflection on the process of formation, emphasizing interior transformation and discernment as the proper measure of a formative process. After all, following his brilliant analogy, the process of formation would necessarily be lifelong, inasmuch as the pursuit of wisdom is.

Next, we have *The Internally Displaced Persons in Fada N'Gourma Diocese, Burkina Faso: A Study on Human Dignity in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching* by **Wendpouiré Améline Kabore, FDNSC**. The article examines the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, through the framework of Catholic Social Teaching and the See–Judge–Act method, highlighting the profound threats to human dignity arising from displacement, poverty, discrimination, social exclusion, trauma, and insecurity. Its principal contribution is the integration of the four dimensions of dignity—ontological, social, moral, and existential—with a concrete account of the Church's

pastoral and humanitarian response, particularly through accompaniment, charitable action, advocacy, the preferential option for the poor, reconciliation, and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). Moving beyond emergency relief toward approaches that recognize IDPs as agents of their own development, Kabore underlines participation, subsidiarity, and integral human development. At the same time, its discussion of the Church's distinctive witness, particularly the insistence that humanitarian assistance be offered without proselytism or partisan political agendas, also provides a significant ecclesiological and pastoral dimension. Thus, the study offers a substantial and contextually grounded reflection on human dignity, demonstrating how Catholic Social Teaching can inform a more participatory, person-centered, and pastorally responsive approach to the crisis of internal displacement in the diocese.

We also have **Andrea Claudia F. Zulueta-Lorenzana**'s *From Dirty Work to Good Work: A Catholic Business Leader's Perspective on Transforming the Social Construct of Dirty Work to Humanizing Work*. Coming from her experience as an entrepreneur, Lorenzana examines the phenomenon of "dirty work" in the Philippine context and its transformation into dignified, humanizing work by applying the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Its central contribution is the integration of Dignity of Work, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity as responses to the three mechanisms of organizational dehumanization: objectification, exclusion, and loss of autonomy. The article insightfully connects sociological analysis with Catholic theology and Filipino cultural values such as *loob*, *kapwa*, *pakikisama*, *malasakit*, and *bayanihan*, making the discussion both theoretically grounded and culturally situated. The extensive case study of Piandré Salon further gives the argument practical depth, especially through its concrete examples of holistic employee

care, the "*walang iwanan*" ethos, spiritual retreats, and the Salon Multi-Purpose Cooperative as an expression of worker participation. Their experience, albeit still very much a rarity in the Philippine setting, shows how Catholic Social Teaching can move beyond abstract principles toward concrete organizational practices that recognize workers not merely as instruments of production but as persons whose material, relational, spiritual, and participatory needs must be respected.

Meanwhile, *Martyrdom and the Call to Daily Witness in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* by **Nguyen Van Tam, BMC** examines the teaching of Saint John Paul II to present martyrdom not merely as the supreme witness of those who give their lives for the faith, but as a broader vocation to daily Christian witness. The article traces the theological, anthropological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions of martyrdom, emphasizing its roots in Christ's Paschal Mystery, the action of the Holy Spirit, the dignity and freedom of the human person, and the Church's mission. Drawing a connection between heroic martyrdom and "daily martyrdom" lived out in the ordinary but demanding fidelity expressed through self-giving, moral courage, perseverance, forgiveness, service, and commitment to truth and justice, it shows the continuity between a martyr's final sacrifice and a life progressively shaped by self-giving love. Hence, it offers a rich spiritual and theological reflection on martyrdom as both an extraordinary witness and an everyday call to fidelity, presenting Christian discipleship as a life in which truth, love, sacrifice, and hope become concrete forms of witness.

This is followed by **Set Paing Tun, SJ**'s *Hope Amidst Desolation: A Socio-Historical and Theological Reflection on Myanmar Catholicism,* where he offers a contextual theological reading of Psalm 23 in relation to the lived experience of Myanmar

Catholics amid the continuing effects of the 2021 military coup, civil war, displacement, economic hardship, and attacks on religious communities. Its central contribution is the integration of socio-historical and literary-theological analysis through the lens of contextual theology, allowing the concrete suffering of Myanmar Catholics to become an interpretive horizon for the psalm's themes of divine provision, protection, accompaniment, restoration, and hope. By grounding biblical interpretation in human experiences and ecclesial responses, including the witness of Church leaders, displaced communities, and the tragic death of Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win, this paper shows how the beloved Psalm can function not as an escape from the realities of war and desolation but as a theological language through which Myanmar Catholics articulate accompaniment, perseverance, solidarity, and hope for justice and peace.

Shimbo Pastory William, CSSp's *Grief, Memory, and Hope: Significance of Ancestral Land in Psalm 137, "By the Rivers of Babylon," in Healing Intergenerational Migration Trauma* offers a timely interdisciplinary reading of Psalm 137 as a theology of grief, memory, and hope, arguing that remembrance of ancestral land is not merely nostalgic but can help preserve communal identity, sustain hope, and contribute to healing intergenerational migration trauma. Making use of historical-critical exegesis, theological reflection, and cultural-memory theory, the study connects the Babylonian exile with the experiences of migrants and forcibly displaced persons today, emphasizing the loss of home, belonging, cultural identity, and security, as well as the importance of lament, storytelling, communal memory, and hospitality in the healing process. Particularly compelling is the paper's insistence that the migrant crisis is not simply a question of movement across borders but also a crisis of belonging and wounded memory. In this sense, today's

migrants can be "heard" as contemporary exiles who "sit by the rivers" of foreign lands, carrying memories of their home and ancestral land. The paper's strength lies in bringing biblical theology into meaningful conversation with trauma studies and contemporary migration realities, presenting the Psalm 137 not simply as a text of exile and lament, but as a resource for understanding the wounds of displacement and imagining a more compassionate response to the migrant crisis of our time.

Last but definitely not least, **Enrico C. Eusebio Jr., SJ**'s *Medieval Canon Law on Catechesis and Christian Formation* offers a valuable reconstruction of medieval canon law on catechesis and Christian formation, opening a field that has received comparatively little attention in canonical-historical scholarship, traditionally focused on sacramental, liturgical, and disciplinary legislation. Drawing principally from conciliar and synodal canons, episcopal directives, penitential manuals, homiletical collections, and catechetical texts, the article demonstrates that the Church was also legislating systematically on Christian instruction well before the Council of Trent. Its central historical insight is the transformation of catechesis following the gradual shift from adult to infant baptism when the comprehensive pre-baptismal catechumenate gave way to post-baptismal formation through preaching, confession, family instruction, memorization of prayers and doctrines, vernacular teaching, and eventually more formal catechesis for children. Particularly illuminating is the paper's treatment of the medieval Christian environment, where liturgy, feasts, art, music, processions, and other cultural forms served as a kind of "social catechumenate," while also showing why such an environment could not substitute for sustained personal formation. By bringing together dispersed canonical sources and connecting juridical prescriptions with the concrete

pastoral realities they sought to address, the paper demonstrates that the history of catechesis is also a history of pastoral governance and canon law, thereby highlighting a perennial ecclesial tension: a Christian culture can transmit the faith, but it cannot by itself guarantee the deeper, intentional, and transformative formation of Christian persons.

Jason Valeriano Hallig's "*Sola Scriptura" as "Prima Scriptura:" A Modern Evangelical Protestant Reflection on the Sufficiency of Scripture: A Response to "A Critical Analysis of the Protestant Principle of 'Sola Scriptura' in Light of Roman Catholic Arguments on the Temporal Precedence of Tradition and the Formal Insufficiency of Scripture*" responds to an earlier article by Fr. Agualada that we published in the preceding volume. The note offers a thoughtful evangelical Protestant reconsideration of *sola Scriptura*, responding directly to Roman Catholic critiques concerning the temporal precedence of Tradition and the alleged formal insufficiency of Scripture.

Hallig lays down the proposal to understand *sola Scriptura* more precisely as *prima Scriptura:* Scripture remains the *norma normans non normata*, the supreme and final norm for faith and practice, while Tradition, the Church, reason, and experience at the same time retain their genuine albeit subordinate and ministerial roles in the reception, interpretation, and proclamation of revelation. He moves beyond a simplistic Scripture-versus-Tradition dichotomy by locating Scripture itself within the historical movement from revelation to apostolic reception, oral proclamation, and eventual inscripturation, while affirming the indispensable ecclesial context of interpretation and discipleship. The discussion also identifies important points of convergence such as the Catholic recognition that ecclesial authority itself is subject to the Word of God. Most significantly, the proposal to reframe *sola Scriptura* into *prima*

Scriptura not only offers a much-needed clarification in terms of the non-exclusivity of Scripture but also highlights the preeminent role of Scripture in the reception of revelation. It would be interesting to know how other Protestant scholars would react to this new formulation, and it is in light of this that we gladly welcome this first correspondence in our journal and hope for many more in the future to advance our academic and pastoral dialogue.

We are also pleased to feature the philosophy synthesis paper of **Bertrand Leong, SJ** titled *Desire for the Good: A Philosophical Roadmap Through Spacetime*. His essay offers an interesting interdisciplinary exploration of time, eternity, and the human desire for the good, using Interstellar as a point of departure. In its creative synthesis of metaphysics, philosophy, cinema, and theology, particularly in its use of accessible images—the line, point, sphere, and tesseract—to illuminate complex ideas about temporality, divine eternity, participation, and the *summum bonum*, the author's central insight is that humanity's participation in eternity may be understood through the desire for the good and the movement toward fuller actualization. As such, the essay provides an engaging itinerary that invites further reflection on time, transcendence, freedom, desire, and humanity's orientation toward the Highest Good.

It is our hope that you find these articles meaningful as well as delightful. We pray that they will somehow embody and further encourage our fulfillment of Pope Leo XIV's vision for philosophy and theology as giving fresh impetus to the Church's perennial proclamation of truth and applying the Church's faith in a manner suited to the needs of our time. As he said in *Magnifica Humanitas*, "in this way, theological and philosophical inquiry will be able to further explore and

support the Church's pastoral journey, and contribute to the Magisterium's task of enlightening the consciences of the faithful and guiding their efforts to make the life of our societies more just and fraternal" (47).

Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo

ARTICLES

GROWING WISE:
PROVERBS 2: 1-11 AS A FORMATIVE PARADIGM FOR JESUIT FORMATION[1]

Carlos Cesar Barbosa Silva, SJ

Abstract. This article offers a theological reading of Proverbs 2:1-11 as a sapiential text on the formation of the human person in the religious life and explores its implications for Jesuit formation. Through attention to the literary and theological movement of the passage, the article identifies four formative movements: the active search for Wisdom, its reception as a divine gift, its ethical expression, and its interior integration. These movements provide a biblical lens for examining three risks in Jesuit formation: overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism. The article argues that in Proverbs 2:1-11, Wisdom is a gift that transforms the heart and becomes a lifelong journey of conversion toward justice, discernment, and mission.

Keywords: Proverbs 2:1-11, Wisdom Literature, biblical theology, discernment, Jesuit formation

Introduction

How does one grow wise? This question has interrogated humanity for ages. In ancient Eastern cultures, the search for Wisdom embodied an ideal for living prudently and

1 This article was originally drafted mainly in Portuguese and translated into English with the assistance of *DeepL*. Revisions to grammar, style, and formatting refinements (footnote styling) were made using *Grammarly* and *Gemini*. The use of these AI and language tools was limited to linguistic and structural refinement; all theological arguments and exegetical analyses are entirely the author's responsibility.

successfully.[2] However, nowadays we can easily reduce Wisdom to a mere accumulation of technical skills or to the number of degrees someone holds. Biblical revelation confronts this understanding. The prophets in the Bible, for example, often condemn self-sufficient Wisdom that strays from God's Word. (cf. Isa 5:21; Jer 8:8–9; 9:23–24). For them, genuine Wisdom can come only through God and the divine Spirit.[3]

In the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, the Book of Proverbs aims to guide young people from immaturity to Wisdom.[4] Compared with other sections of the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs stands as provocative humanistic literature, emphasizing the human quest for knowledge and the moral demands of daily life.[5] It challenges the heart's immaturity by presenting the moral demands of daily life as the very ground on which knowledge is forged. Within this pedagogical framework, Proverbs 2:1–11 emerges as an itinerary that mobilizes the disciple to abandon passivity in favor of an active and relentless search for Wisdom.

This itinerary should not be abstract when we talk about religious formation. This goes beyond merely an academic idea, especially for me, who is currently in formation as a Jesuit. It

2 Since ancient times, wisdom literature has appeared in the form of compilations of maxims that convey principles of living, from the Egyptian Wisdom of Ptah-hotep (c. 2500 BCE) to the Hebrew texts of Job, Proverbs, and the Wisdom of Solomon. See Brand Blanshard, "Wisdom," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 2nd ed., edited by Donald M. Borchert (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 793-794.

3 André Barucq and Pierre Grelot, *"Sabiduría,"* in *Vocabulario de Teología Bíblica*, 6th edition, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour, (Barcelona: Herder, 1981), 717.

4 Bernadus Dirgaprimawan, *The Inexperienced Person and the Journey to Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs* (Rome: GBPress, 2022), 8–9.

5 Samuel E. Balentine, "Proverbs," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*, edited by Will Kynes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 511.

has become the very texture of the years I am living, permeating my daily life and, currently, my theological studies. In this paper, I abandon the distance of a clinical observer to inhabit the text as one who wrestles with the same risks I intend to criticize in this text. From this vantage point, I interrogate Proverbs 2:1–11 as a critical lens through which to describe and disrupt our current formative structures. By placing biblical pedagogy and the Jesuit formation side by side, this article seeks to echo the sapiential Jesuit roots while confronting some drifts that may pull someone away from them.

I view these drifts through the lens of a spiritual and institutional crisis that requires rethinking many processes in light of contemporary demands. The Society of Jesus, like many other congregations, faces significant formative challenges, a decline in vocations, and significant pressure to renew formation processes to meet the demands of the time.[6] With this in mind, this paper proposes understanding formation as a path of life in which Wisdom finally converts the heart.

Jesuit Formation: Structure and Risks

Jesuit formation is a long journey structured into five stages: novitiate, first studies, regency, theological studies, and tertianship.[7] Each stage carries its own intentionality, leading the Jesuit to progress in "letters and virtues," as Saint Ignatius desired.[8] This progress happens through an integration of

6 Society of Jesus, *De Statu Societatis Iesu* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2023), 133–135.

7 Although Jesuit formation follows a structured itinerary culminating in the solemn profession of final vows, it does not thereby conclude. The Society of Jesus offers and encourages a "Permanent Formation" for its members, understood as a lifelong and continuous process that constitutes an integral dimension of both personal and apostolic development.

8 Inácio de Loyola, *Carta à Comunidade de Coimbra*, in *Cartas*, ed. António José Coelho, S.J. (Braga: Editorial A.O., 2006), 120-121.

four dimensions: spiritual depth nourished by the Spiritual Exercises; solid intellectual formation; community life understood as mission itself; and active apostolic engagement with the realities of the world.[9]

As a lifelong path, this formation also carries its risks. I have chosen three of them to analyze here. They are not selected arbitrarily. I draw them from a continued magisterial concern of Pope Francis, who, even before the conclave that elected him as Pope, warned that "when the Church does not go out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then sick." He also emphasized that there are "two images of Church: the evangelizing Church that comes out of herself, or the worldly Church that lives in herself, of herself, for herself."[10] Although the word "overprotection," which I will use here, does not appear in that intervention, its logic does. A formation that never sends the *formand* out produces exactly the self-referential Church and leaders Bergoglio feared.

In *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis speaks about "spiritual worldliness." He identifies the roots of that in two specific distortions: a gnostic fascination with ideas detached from life, and a self-sufficiency that trusts only in its own powers.[11] Both

9 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1996), n. 64–71, 340–342, 516–522.

10 Vatican Radio, "Bergoglio's Intervention: A Diagnosis of the Problems of the Church," *Ecumenism in Canada*, March 27, 2013, https://ecumenism.net/2013/03/bergoglio-intervention.htm, quoted in Idelfonso Camacho, SJ, "Either an Evangelizing Church or a Worldly Church," La Civiltà Cattolica, https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/either-an-evangelizing-church-or-a-worldly-church/ (Accessed May 2026).

11 Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortations, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, n. 93-94.

categories provide the magisterial foundation for the risks examined here. While the gnostic fascination fuels a "sterile intellectualism," self-sufficiency fuels "careerism." These two risks, alongside the logic of "overprotection," exemplify a formation that has turned inward.

This inward turn often begins with a distortion of an institution's first instinct: the desire to provide a safe environment for growth. Overprotection arises when care and protection, which are genuine formative values, are divorced from the sapiential requirement of risk. When this happens, the shield becomes a form of protectionism that infantilizes the person, depriving him of the experiences needed to develop discernment and apostolic autonomy. Already in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius insists that those in formation be guided so that they may learn to "face the challenge of moving across the whole world and dealing with all sorts of peoples."[12] A formation that insists on keeping the *formand* inside the protective bubble of the formation house, shielded from struggle, dissension, or failure, may complete every stage of formation without ever having been genuinely sent. We must acknowledge that a person who has never been sent cannot learn what only sending can teach.

Yet, even when a Jesuit is sent into the world of "letters and ministry," the danger of turning inward does not vanish, but it can simply change form. If overprotection stunts growth by shielding the *formand* from external friction, careerism (clericalism is under it) corrupts that growth from within. It is perhaps the most insidious of risks because it rarely presents itself as an open and healthy ambition. Often, it masks itself as "dedication to work" or "academic and apostolic zeal." A subtle professionalization of the vocation takes place, and the Jesuit

12 Ignatius of Loyola, *Constitutions*, n. 414.

may reorganize his life around accumulating status, forgetting that the final goal is always to "help souls." Careerism can also be seen as the idolatry of the credentials and titles one may earn. It represents a second "premature exit" from the sapiential journey of formation. Studies can become a ladder to personal prestige, and, in this distortion, titles and positions are valued more than the service they are meant to sustain.

The betrayal of the sapiential journey does not end with the pursuit of status. If careerism uses knowledge as a ladder for the ego, sterile intellectualism treats it as a fortress of isolation. Then another risk emerges when studies become an end in themselves, detached from spiritual depth and the demands of the apostolic mission. The Society of Jesus insists, since its origin, that its aim is always to "help souls," and the study is very necessary for that purpose, but never sufficient on its own.[13] In one of his letters, Ignatius warns against "slackness, tepidity, and lethargy in studies."[14] This warning runs in both directions: against laziness, and against learning that has lost its purpose.

The most concrete form of this risk is the *formand* who accumulates theological or any other erudition without ever allowing it to disturb him. One may articulate the "option for the poor" without ever having a real encounter with the poor or speak about inculturation while not being truly unsettled by another culture, for example. The Jesuit tradition has never been anti-intellectual — quite the opposite. But the Society of Jesus has always insisted that the mind is formed for mission; when it is not, the mind can turn only to the mirror.

13 Ignatius of Loyola, *Constitutions*, n. 307.

14 Inácio de Loyola, *Carta aos Padres e Irmãos de Coimbra*, in Cartas, 122–124.

The Formative Progression of Proverbs 2:1–11

The literary architecture of Proverbs 2 is a pedagogical framework designed to capture the whole person and can offer a counter-model to the drifts mentioned. The entire chapter consists of a single, elaborate conditional "if/then" that unfolds across all 22 verses, a number corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet that suggests completeness.[15] This structure reinforces that the search for Wisdom must leave no dimension of human life untouched. Within the exordium of verses 1–11, this itinerary functions as a disruptive force, specifically crafted to move the heart from passivity into active engagement.

The text reads as follows:[16]

[1]My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,

[2]making your ear attentive to Wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;

[3]if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding;

[4]if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures —

[5]then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

[6]For the Lord gives Wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

[7]he stores up sound Wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,

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15 Bernd U. Schipper, *The Hermeneutics of Torah: Proverbs 2, Deuteronomy, and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 39.

16 *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

[8]guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

[9]Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path;

[10]for Wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

[11]prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.

Michael Fox reveals the profound symmetry governing this passage, highlighting how the disciple's active search triggers a divine response that, in turn, reshapes the soul's interior architecture: If *you attend to my teachings (vv. 1–4)*, then *you will attain true piety (v. 5),* because *it is God who gives Wisdom (v. 6)*, and this *will protect you (vv. 7–8).* Then *you will know the right behavior (v. 9)*, because *you will receive Wisdom (v. 10)*, and this *will protect you (v. 11).* This double *if/then* movement is the formative progression that this paper follows.

Active Search (vv. 1–4)

The sapiential itinerary begins with the intimate address "my son," "my child" (בֵּן), revealing the relational context in which Wisdom is transmitted, evoking the father-son bond.[17] The first verbs, "accept" (לָקַח)[18] and "treasure up" (צָפַן), suggest reception and retention in a relationship. By verses 3–4, the rhythm shifts from passive to active search, calling, raising

17 Hebrew terms reproduced here with their vocalization as displayed in the Hebrew text of Proverbs Sefaria and are not transliterated. Lexical meanings are verified against the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB), accessed through Sefaria.

18 Francis Brown, S.R.Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), accessed through Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/BDB.

one's voice, seeking, and searching.[19] Here, we see Wisdom as something not readily available or attainable; this active search requires effort and taking risks. To mine for silver is to go underground, into the dark, with no guarantee of finding anything. Also, the search for buried treasure assumes that what you need is hidden, that the surface will not give it to you, so that you might dig, even in the wrong places. These metaphors in verse 4 are instructive and evoke raw exposure.

Overprotective formation quietly sabotages these conditions, especially because it rarely announces itself as overprotection. Often it presents itself as care. Yet, when the formative path is made so safe that the journey itself becomes unnecessary, the process has failed. When we shield a *formand* from pastoral failure, or from contact with the real challenges and real people of the world, for example, he is not being "protected;" he is being kept from the very friction through which Wisdom takes shape.

Wisdom as Gift (vv. 5–6)

In verse 5, the sapiential itinerary shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency. The human "if" of the search finally meets the decisive "then" of divine promise. After four verses describing active human search, the text speaks of what God does: "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." The causal particle "for" (v.6) clarifies that verse 6 grounds verse 5. It establishes a non-negotiable interaction: formation is neither a purely human project nor a passive waiting. Formation is called to be a sacred space where the "sweat" of the search meets the gratuity of the divine gift, and this gift is an entry into a relationship.

19 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 45–48.

This relationship rests on two pillars: the "fear of the Lord" (יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים) and the "knowledge of God" (דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים). In the Hebrew mind, the "fear of the Lord" does not mean terror but faithful devotion and love for God expressed in obedience to the divine commandments.[20] The "knowledge of God," as seen in verse 5, points to an inner, experiential knowing that comes from relationship.[21] Looking at this architecture of verse 5, and at the apparent dichotomy between human effort and divine initiative, Dave Bland emphasizes that the theocentric ("fear of God") and anthropocentric ("knowledge of God") dimensions do not collide. They function as complementary poles, synthesized through the formation of moral character, ultimately leading to harmony between human and divine wills.[22]

This "logic of the gift" in verses 5-6 confronts the very foundations of careerism, which I have called the idolatry of the credential. When Wisdom is received and reframed as a gift from God rather than as a personal achievement, and the goal is a relationship with God rather than the accumulation of credentials, the careerist mentality loses its foundation. As Bland observes, while the formative itinerary demands active human initiation, God provides the spiritual resources needed for its completion.[23] For that reason, one cannot grasp or control what is received as a gift from God; one can only seek (vv. 1–4) and receive (vv. 5–6). This understanding protects formation from becoming a competitive system in which effort

20 Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 110.

21 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 45–48.

22 Dave Bland, "The Formation of Character in the Book of Proverbs," *Restoration Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1998): 226-227.

23 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 227.

automatically yields status, or in which each stage becomes simply a credential to be earned.

Ethical Wisdom (vv. 7–9)

Verse 7 uncovers a profound reciprocity between the seeker and the Lord through a resonant grammatical echo. The same verb used for the person "treasuring up" commandments (וְצָפָן) now mirrors God's own action: God stores up sound Wisdom for the upright, the correct, the right one (לַיְשָׁרִים).[24] It is no mere linguistic coincidence. Again, this highlights the collaboration between human responsibility and God, or, as Bland says, between "anthropocentric focus" and "theocentric foundation."[25] The act of receiving corresponds to God's act of storing. In that sense, Wisdom is, from the beginning, a mutual event. The term (תּוּשִׁיָּה), "sound wisdom," "success," or "resourcefulness," denotes practical Wisdom, the ability to create effective strategies in real-world situations.[26] By promising to "guard the paths of justice" and "preserve the way of his faithful ones," God extends this ethical horizon to the "upright" (חָסִידָו), already named in verse 7. The ethical dimension here is that Wisdom is a gift reserved for those whose lives are anchored in moral integrity. Verse 8 confirms that God is not a distant observer of this integrity; He is a companion who walks the path alongside the faithful, guarding the very justice they seek to embody.

For Jesuit formation, historically defined by academic rigor, this biblical standard confronts our intellectual idols with a

24 The root צָפַן is the dictionary citation form (as it appears in BDB). The verb forms that actually occur in the text differ by verse: verse 1 תִּצְפֹּן (second person, "you treasure/store," referring to the disciple), and verse 7 has יִצְפֹּן (third person, "he stores," referring to God).

25 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 228.

26 Fox, "The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2," 239.

truth that cannot be softened: God stores Wisdom for the upright, not for the brilliant. Verses 7–9 point out that intellectual excellence is sterile when disconnected from moral conversion. If a formative model neglects to integrate intellect and integrity, it fails to prepare those genuinely called to serve; it produces "specialists" who inhabit a residence of ideas rather than "men for others"[27] who inhabit the mission. In the Regency stage, this movement is very important. It is the time when the abstractions and theories of the "First Studies" must survive the friction of the apostolic field.

Integration (vv. 10–11)

In verse 9, the sapiential itinerary returns to the "then" of consequence, of the previous movements, but with a shift: the verb "understand" (תָּעַד) now takes ethical categories, such as "righteousness," "justice," "equity," "every good path," and not religious categories as before, such as "the fear of the Lord," "the knowledge of the Lord." The movement has been from piety to ethics and from the interior reception of a gift to its external expression in action.

The theological foundation for this shift is found in verse 10: "wisdom will come (בּוֹא) into your heart (לֵב), and knowledge will be pleasant (נָעַם) to your soul (נֶפֶשׁ)."[28] The movement inward is decisive because Wisdom is no longer something known externally but a quality of the person. As Bland underscores, this represents the transition from passive memorization to writing instruction "on the tablet of the

27 Pedro Arrupe, "'Men for Others: Training Agents of Change for the Promotion of Justice,' address to the International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe, Valencia, Spain," July 31, 1973, *Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, Portal to Jesuit Studies*, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1973_arrupemenforothers/ (accessed September 3, 2026).

28 Schipper, *Hermeneutics of Torah*, 51–53.

heart."[29] Consequently, as verse 11 promises, "prudence (מְזִמָּה) and understanding (תְּבוּן) become internalized guardians. The discipline no longer depends on external policing, constant surveillance, or even protective institutional shields, because a mature moral character now guides it from within.

This movement presents the most interrogative and demanding criterion of the entire formative process. It shatters the illusion that completing a program equals being formed. The biblical text insists that formation that produces compliance without interiority or erudition without desire has failed its mission. Regardless of the stages completed or the degrees earned, if Wisdom has not entered the heart, the process remains a mere technical training.

When we apply this criterion to the previously identified risks, the diagnosis is clear. In contrast to overprotection, the integrated Jesuit no longer relies on the "aquarium" of institutional shields or the comfort zone of a formation house's walls. He has developed inner discernment that enables him to navigate danger and failure. Verse 10 provides the ultimate "ego-test." If knowledge has become "pleasant to the soul," the *formand* has stopped collecting credentials to worship his own prestige and has begun to be internally transfigured by what he learns, going against careerism. Continuing, the text does not argue against the intellect. What the text does is confront its coldness, or, as I have been calling it here, sterile intellectualism. An intellectual formation that produces sophisticated discourse but no delight in the soul has, by that very measure, failed to reach the heart.

29 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 231.

Proverbs and Jesuit Formation: A Sapiential Dialogue

We must move beyond the notion that the wisdom-based integration described in Proverbs is a private or isolated achievement. Although the biblical text addresses the individual, the Jesuit tradition confronts the *formand* with the demand that this inner transformation enliven the body of the Society of Jesus for the mission. The Wisdom that enters the heart is an apostolic imperative and cannot be seen as a personal trophy. In a Jesuit understanding of formation, if it does not "go out into the world"–embodying Arrupe's ideal of being "men for others"–it fails in its fundamental purpose. This practical Wisdom (חָכְמָה) allows us to convert theoretical knowledge into an inner guide for encountering our neighbor, ensuring that our individual integrity sustains the Society as a community of discernment in mission.

The four movements- search, reception, ethical Wisdom, and integration- can correspond to the major stages of Jesuit formation. However, we cannot see them as a mechanical checklist. Rather, it is a living rhythm where each movement of Proverbs names a grace we must seek and a distortion we must fear. For that reason, these movements reveal that our formation is much more than a program to be completed.

The first movement, the *search stage* (vv. 1–4), corresponds to the Novitiate. Everything in the Novitiate begins with learning to listen to God through prayer, the Spiritual Exercises, community life, and experiments that expose the novice to the real world.[30] The metaphors of verses 1–4 are instructive here: one does not find silver or hidden treasure by remaining in safe spaces. The verbs "seek, search, and cry out" depict Wisdom as

30 Society of Jesus, "General Congregation 35, Decree 2: 'A Fire That Kindles Other Fires: Rediscovering Our Charism,'" *Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies*, 2008, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/2008_decree2gc35/ (accessed October 26, 2025), n. 4.

risk-taking engagement. When formation shields the *formand* from conflict, pastoral messiness, or the demands of genuine community, it runs counter to what Proverbs commends. The *formand* who never faces conflict does not develop the art of apostolic dialogue, and the one never exposed to pastoral failure does not develop practical Wisdom. If the novice's search remains within the "protective bubble" of the institution, he risks an exit into permanent childhood. To avoid this, the search must evolve into the second movement: the vulnerable reception of knowledge as a gift from God, which defines the period of First Studies.

As the Jesuit enters First Studies, he may face the idolatry of the credential. If he confuses the "collar for the call," he turns Wisdom, which Proverbs defines as a gift from God (v.5-6), into a trophy won by merit. The credentials earned in First Studies are not the end of the journey. They prepare for the third movement, where the "brilliant" *formand* must become the "upright" regent.

The Regency stage resonates in the transition to ethical Wisdom (vv. 7–9). It is the moment when the abstractions of early studies leave the realm of ideas to encounter "pastoral messiness" and concrete human needs. The biblical text offers a warning our tradition cannot ignore: God reserves true sound Wisdom (תֻּשִׁיָּה) for the "upright," not necessarily the most "brilliant" intellectually. During the Regency period, this means that academic excellence, once acquired, loses its meaning when disconnected from a profound moral and pastoral conversion. A Jesuit may articulate complex philosophical and theological concepts, but if he lacks integrity in his daily dealings with people, he has not yet received the Wisdom that God "stores up" for his faithful ones. Here, study ceases to be a sterile intellectual exercise and becomes truly formative when

tested by commitment to others' pain and hope. Having faced this ethical testing in the "friction" of the apostolic field, the Jesuit does not return to Theology to collect more data. He can enter the fourth movement, where knowledge ceases to be textbook reference and becomes "pleasant to the soul."

The final arc, theology studies, priestly ordination (for scholastics), and the integration stage (vv. 10–11) mark the culmination of this sapiential journey. At this stage, we seek a mature synthesis in which Wisdom no longer needs to be retrieved from an external manual, having been internalized as an inner guide. This is why Tertianship comes at the end of formation, after ordination and initial ministry. Ignatius understood something Proverbs 2:10 promises: Wisdom enters the heart through experience. Notably, this echoes how Jesuits often call Tertianship the "school of the heart."

What this sapiential reading suggests is a truth that structural analyses of formation tend to miss: the three risks – overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism – are not failures of intention. They distort genuinely good things. Care is good, but when it removes risk to ensure safety, it ceases to be care and can become a tool of control. Ambition is good when it seeks the *magis*,[31] however, when measured by the "idolatry of credentials," it loses the fundamental question of what Wisdom is for. The love of learning is good, but when it produces sophistication without conversion, it fails to be formative.

We must emphasize that the biblical text does not condemn these goods. What Proverbs 2:1-11 teaches is that they must be received in their proper order: searched for, given, embodied,

31 The Latin term magis ("more," "the greater") is a key concept in Ignatian spirituality, expressing the Jesuit disposition toward seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*) and the greater service of others.

and integrated. Short-circuiting this order is precisely how formation loses itself. When we fail at that, a lifelong path becomes a hollow structure that resembles formation but lacks the converted heart Proverbs demands.

Conclusion

Proverbs 2:1–11 does not offer a comfortable theory of formation. The text traces a disruptive movement–from the effort of the search to the surprise of the gift, and from embodiment to final integration. None of these steps can be skipped without a profound cost to the soul. There are risks–overprotection, careerism, and sterile intellectualism–that can be both structural flaws and premature exits from the formative journey. These risks also sabotage the journey: overprotection strangles the search before it can face the friction of reality; careerism corrupts the gift by enthroning the ego; and sterile intellectualism insulates the mind, ensuring knowledge never makes the difficult journey to the heart.

In this paper, I have placed Wisdom as a category for theological reflection on formation. In doing so, it questions the contemporary preoccupation with professional competencies, outcomes, and measurable skills, which are also important. However, the sapiential tradition destabilizes this framework with an uncomfortable question: competent at what, exactly, and for whom? This contrast points to a deeper tension within ecclesial formation itself. As Dave Bland notes in his analysis of Proverbs, during a time of severe socio-historical transition in which Israel lost its primary institutions of identity (the temple, the monarchy, and the land), Wisdom functioned as a "transitional philosophy."[32] Without traditional institutional structures to rely on, Israel's survival and identity depended

32 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 222-223.

on decentralized formation, shifting from external institutions to consolidation of moral character at the individual and domestic levels.[33]

These historical shifts mirror the current formative challenge. When external ecclesial and religious structures face dismantling or crisis, a vocation cannot survive on professionalized credentials only. What matters more is the density and depth of the person's interior life, which runs counter to overprotected life, careerism, and sterile intellectualism. Consequently, Proverbs 2:1-11 does not respond with a checklist of skills. It answers in terms of ontological conversion; that means, the kind of person the *formand* becomes: someone in whose Wisdom has become interior, whose knowledge brings genuine joy, and whose prudence guides from within.

This sapiential integration, however, is not something to be kept in protective isolation. The true test of this correspondence lies in the tension of real communities and the apostolic situations that no paradigm can fully anticipate. A formative proposal that cannot withstand contact with reality is not yet Wisdom; it may be only the beginning of the search.

Then, I turn to the same question that opened this text: how does one grow wise? Not by completing a technical program, but by allowing the itinerary of the Spirit to reach the place where it was always meant to go: in the vulnerability of the heart. By naming the heart in verse 10 as the destination of this spiritual journey, Proverbs 2:1-11 places the core of formation where biblical revelation has always demanded: in the person's radical and relational transfiguration.

33 Bland, "The Formation of Character," 223-224.

THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN FADA N'GOURMA DIOCESE, BURKINA FASO: A STUDY ON HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE LIGHT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING[1]

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Abstract. This study explores the experiences of the Internally Displaced Persons in the Diocese of Fada N'Gourma in Burkina Faso amid terrorism. It uses the See-Judge-Act method of Catholic Social Teaching to investigate the challenges to IDPs' dignity. The observations reveal an IDP population victimized by discrimination and neglect within the host communities, emphasizing the moral imperative to uphold dignity. The research contributes to theological reflection on displacement and dignity while highlighting the Church's unique faith-based humanitarian assistance, free from proselytism and political agendas despite the structural and practical limitations and difficulties.

Keywords: Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), terrorism, dignity, rights, Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

Introduction

Prior to 2015, Burkina Faso had not experienced the phenomenon of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). IDPs are defined as "persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular

1 GenAI Disclosure Statement: This paper used Grammarly to correct the spelling of words and check the structure and clarity of sentences.

due to or to avoid the effects of armed conflicts, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed internationally recognized borders."[2] Since then, extremist Islamic groups—*Jama'at Nusrat Al-Islam wal-Muslimeen* (JNIM), affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), affiliated with ISIS—have claimed responsibility for numerous attacks across the country. These violent incidents have generated widespread fear among the population and have led to the depopulation of villages and towns, resulting in a significant loss of human capital. According to official data published by the *Conseil National de Secours d'Urgence et de Réhabilitation* (CONASUR), as of March 31, 2023, the total number of IDPs nationwide had reached 2,062,534.

The Diocese of Fada N'Gourma is among the regions most severely affected by the IDP crisis. According to data collected by the *Organisation Catholique pour le Développement et la Solidarité Caritas Burkina Faso, Secretariat Exécutif Diocesain* (OCADES/Caritas/SED) of Fada N'Gourma, the number of IDPs in the diocese had reached 219,719 as of March 2025. The visible plight of the IDPs has drawn the attention of various state, private, secular, and faith-based humanitarian organizations, prompting efforts to provide immediate relief. Addressing the needs of IDPs necessarily includes the provision of basic human necessities. However, such responses must go beyond the temporary emergency assistance. A more comprehensive approach is required, since "human rights show our respect

2 UNHCR, "The UN Refugee Agency, Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons," https://www.unhcr.org/media/guiding-principles-internal-displacement (accessed March 23, 2025).

for the dignity of the human person as an agent, not just as the passive recipient of others' agency-as a means to their end."[3]

This paper examines the lived experiences and challenges that reflect the violation and neglect of the dignity of IDPs within host communities, focusing on the specific context of the Diocese of Fada N'Gourma. Employing the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), further proposes practical actions and strategies aimed at safeguarding their dignity and rights, while fostering their active participation in social life.

The Internally Displaced Persons' Struggles and Difficulties

Living Conditions of the Internally Displaced Persons

"We have all become beggars, day after day." "I cannot feed my family. I am ashamed of myself." "As IDPs, we have reduced our food rations." "We have borrowed lodging, and on top of that, we have become beggars." "We no longer have dignity because every day we beg for food." These statements reflect the poignant testimonies and heartfelt appeals from the IDPs. Food insecurity remains a more pronounced reality among the IDPs. The influx of IDPs has placed significant pressure on the already limited food resources of host communities, with IDPs bearing the brunt of this scarcity due to their heightened vulnerability. In fleeing violence, many were forced to abandon essential means of livelihood, including millet stores, cooking utensils, farming tools, livestock, and clothing, in order to either seek refuge or join their current community. The necessity of begging for food—for themselves and their families—constitutes one of the most distressing aspects of their experience and represents a profound violation of their

3 William O'Neil, *Catholic Social Teaching: A User's Guide* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 25.

human dignity. Moreover, adjusting to urban or semi-urban life presents additional challenges. Their reduced food intake is not the result of voluntary discipline, such as dieting or fasting, but rather of sheer necessity due to lack of access. At the same time, some IDPs demonstrate a capacity for self-reflection, drawing lessons from their displacement and expressing a renewed sense of gratitude. They have come to value aspects of well-being that were previously taken for granted in their home villages. Nevertheless, experiences of inequality persist. One displaced mother recounted her difficulty in accessing water, noting that residents in the surrounding neighborhood do not face the same challenge—an indication of the injustice and discrimination to which IDPs are often subjected.

Access to adequate housing is not a matter of luxury but a basic necessity. For individuals seeking safety, having a roof over one's head is a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, a significant number of IDPs still lack proper housing. Many families now experience overcrowded living conditions, with all members sharing a single room. As one head of an IDP household assisted by *Caritas* reports, "We sleep with our mothers, wives, and children in the same room." In a cultural context where, by the age of eighteen, young men are initiated into adulthood and are expected to build their own homes, such conditions can be both traumatizing and deeply humiliating. Current data indicate that 46% of IDP households reside with host families, 51% live in rented accommodations, and 3% stay in makeshift tents. IDPs who have no relatives in the host communities are forced to rent despite significant financial constraints. In some cases, landlords exploit this vulnerability by increasing rental fees, further exacerbating the precarious living conditions of displaced families.

Challenges and Struggles

Economic Difficulties

In the context of forced displacement, IDPs often become entirely dependent on government assistance, humanitarian agencies, and the charity of host communities. However, the increasing number of IDPs at both the national and diocesan levels does not allow them to provide adequate assistance to all. Government resources remain limited, and host families are increasingly overwhelmed. As a result, securing the means to rebuild lost livelihoods has become a significant challenge for the IDPs in Fada. Temporary settlements and housing insecurity hinder opportunities for long-term enterprise to achieve eventual economic stability. Consequently, many IDPs remain at a survival level. One of them declared, "I was a merchant. The jihadists broke into my store and collected all my merchandise. I fled, leaving behind my house, food, and animals." In order to survive, many are compelled to accept any available work, often in fields for which they have no prior experience or preparation. More importantly, access to stable employment remains limited. One mother confided that since they arrived at her host community, her husband had left for the gold mining site and has not returned, leaving her to care for their children alone.

The appalling issue of internal displacement due to terrorism in the *Gulmu* particularly affects women and girls. Women and children represent 80% of the IDP population, with many being widows and orphans. Economic desperation and the lack of other viable alternatives forcibly lead women and girls to prostitution as a means of survival. They are compelled to provide food for their children and younger siblings, support their education, and meet basic expenses such as rent. Phrases like "We are forced to do work that we do not want" the extent

to which circumstances—and, at times, individuals—coerce them into degrading and exploitative practices. This statement also reflects the difficulty female IDPs face in articulating the full extent of their suffering. The host community members have observed and confirmed the prevalence of prostitution among displaced women and young girls. Even prior to the current displacement crisis, such practices were present in the *Gulmu Region*, especially in localities around the mining sites. However, displacement has exacerbated women's vulnerability, rendering them even more susceptible to exploitation and prostitution.

Scholarly studies support these observations. Diana Therese M. Veloso, in *Gender-Based Violence in (Post) Conflict Zones: The Experiences of the Internally Displaced People from Zamboanga City*, demonstrates how broader social conditions shape the specific experiences of gender-based violence—both private and public— encountered by IDP women as they move through temporary settlements and transitional housing.[4] Sadly, in this context, displaced women—especially widows, single mothers, and young orphaned girls, some below the age of eighteen—often become targets of exploitation by men who take advantage of their precarious situation.

Difficulties for Social Integration

For individuals who have fled their homes to save their lives, social integration is crucial for rebuilding a new life. Displacement entails not only the loss of material possessions but also profound disruptions to family structures, including

4 Diana Therese M. Veloso, "Gender-Based Violence in (Post) Conflict Zones: The Experiences of the Internally Displaced People from Zamboanga City," in *Displacement and Disqualification: Asian Feminist Theological Perspectives*, ed. Mary Mee-Yin Yuen and Regina Wentzel Wolfe (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc, 2022), 119.

family dislocation. In the chaos of fleeing terrorist brutality, many families become separated, and members often lose contact with one another. Some remain unaware of the whereabouts of their siblings, parents, or relatives. Unfortunately, in the case of IDPs in Fada N'Gourma, integration into host communities is not always easy. Many continue to struggle for full acceptance. While they depend on the support of host communities, they also struggle to trust people around them. This lack of trust is mutual, affecting both IDPs and host populations and shaping their daily interactions. To express his experience, one displaced individual said, "We have been through a lot. Seven months after our arrival, our neighbor closed his latrine to us—something I could never have imagined."

The economic burdens resulting from the unexpected influx of IDPs into communities have intensified competition over work opportunities, basic necessities such as food, and even natural resources like water. Local infrastructures, including schools and hospitals, have become overcrowded, further exacerbating tensions between IDPs and hosts. Prior ethnic tensions in the *Gulmu* region, combined with ongoing security concerns and competition for resources, have contributed to the social stigmatization of certain groups of IDPs, especially those belonging to the Fulani ethnic group. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the root causes of terrorism, the Fulani group is often suspected of being associated with the terrorist armed group. This makes the integration of innocent Fulani IDPs difficult, despite the government efforts to end ethnic discrimination. The government has taken steps to address these issues, including conducting investigations and arresting individuals who are propagating hatred against particular ethnic or religious groups on social media.

Psycho-Spiritual Struggles

The circumstances leading to the displacement are deeply traumatic. The methods used by the terrorists leave lasting psychological scars on survivors. Although many have escaped the violence that devastated their villages, they continue to carry within themselves the profound impact of witnessing such atrocities, as well as the persistent fear of being killed. These past traumatic experiences remain present in their daily lives, contributing to ongoing emotional struggles and psychological stress. While images of terrorist attacks reported in the media can evoke strong reactions, internally displaced persons are direct witnesses to such violence and often attribute their survival to divine miracle. Many recount having to step over the dead bodies of parents, siblings, or friends whom they were forced to leave behind without proper burial. One displaced individual reported losing six members of his family. Such experiences have a profound and lasting impact on their mental health.

Uncertainty can be the biggest problem for IDPs who are dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the hardships that they endured before and/or during the process of their flight to the host community.[5] The causes of the psychological problems of the IDPs are not simply due to a single event or a sequence of catastrophic terrorist attacks that drove them from home. It is a situation embedded with threat, uncertainty, deprivation, oppression, and suffering.[6]

5 Sander Kramer, "Getting Closer: Methods of Research with Refugees and Asylum Seekers," in *Forced Migration and Mental Health: Rethinking the care of Refugees and Displaced Persons*, edited by David Ingleby, (Boston: Springer US, 2025), 129, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/b99490.

6 David Ingleby, ed., *Forced Migration and Mental Health, Rethinking the care of Refugees and Displaced Persons*, (Boston: Springer US, 2025), 11.

When will I return to the place I once called home? This question resonates with all the displaced persons. In the context of conflict-induced displacement, Horst maintains two sources of uncertainty: imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future.[7] This is true for our IDP population. The lack of perfect understanding of what happened in the past and what is happening, the speed at which their lives have been dramatically affected, and the lack of control over their life choices[8] create a sense of unpredictability within themselves, which can affect their psychological health. There is uncertainty about what to eat or drink. Moreover, there is uncertainty about safety.

The lament questions such as "what have we done to deserve this?" "Lord, why did you allow the terrorists to attack us?" or "Lord, are you not the father of orphans and defender of widows? How long will you take to save us?" The IDPs cry to God not because they do not believe, but rather their belief itself is shaken. They do not pretend to force God's hand but humbly entrust themselves to the One they love and trust.

Catholic Social Teaching on Human Dignity

Life and Dignity of the Human Person: Ontological Dignity

Dignity at its most constitutive level arises from one's very existence. Early CST connects human dignity with the soul

7 Cindy Horst and Katarzyna Grabska, "Flight and Exile: Uncertainty in the Context of Conflict-Induced Displacement," *Social Analysis* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 4, https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2015.590101.

8 Horst and Grabska, "Flight and Exile," 5.

created in the image and likeness of God.[9] Sacred Scriptures affirm that "God created humans in his image, in the image of God, he created them"(Gen 1:27). This is the foundation of dignity. Among all other species of creation, God crowned humanity with glory and honor (cf. Ps 8:4-5). The *imago Dei* confers ontological dignity on every single human being. It is that dimension of human dignity that "belongs to the person as such simply because he or she exists and is willed, created, and loved by God."[10] But what does it mean to be created in the image of God? The Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith substantially answers: "To be created in the image of God means to possess a sacred value that transcends every distinction of sexual, social, political, cultural, and religious nature."[11] John XXIII argues that God is the only real source of justice, truth, and love, as he says, "let men make all the technical and economic progress they can, there will be no peace nor justice in the world until they return to a sense of their dignity as creatures and sons of God."[12] Human beings can flourish to their full potential only within a family, a community, or society; as the saying goes, no one is an island. *Ubuntu* (African Philosophy of humanness) affirms that all humans possess equal dignity by virtue of their capacity for communal relationships. Even those who misuse this capacity through immoral actions retain the ability to

9 Pope Leo XIII, *Encyclical Letter Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor*, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/l13rerum.htm, no. 40.

10 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Dignitas Infinita on Human Dignity 2024*, Documents, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html, no.7.

11 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 11.

12 Pope John XXIII, *Encyclical Letter, Mater et Magistra, On Christianity and Social Progress*, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/john23/j23mater.htm, no. 215.

act otherwise; thus, they do not lose their inherent dignity.[13] Human dignity rests, above all, on the fact that humanity is called to communion with God, who created them out of love and for love.[14]

Though the tragedy of sin in human history has cast a shadow on human dignity, affecting their capacity to remain in communion with God, the neighbor, and the rest of creation, Jesus elevated human dignity through the incarnation and redemption, for believers and for the entire human race.[15] God raised human beings to a greater dignity. They are ransomed by the blood of Christ (Eph 1:7) and made children and heirs of God through grace in the Holy Spirit (Rom 8: 16-17). The goal of Hasan Musa's presentation on *Learning to Speak Human Rights as Human Dignity in Nigeria: Towards a Trinitarian Theological Reflection* was really to show that "the Trinitarian encounter surely opens us to God's miracle of transforming the world in which we live, through the presence and action of a new community, namely the Church."[16]

Applied to the situation of the IDPs, ontological dignity remains intrinsic, universal, and non-negotiable, even in the context of internal displacement caused by terrorism. It is indelible and endures regardless of circumstances.[17] God fearfully and wonderfully knitted every person (cf. Ps 139: 13-14), giving them dignity beyond any social, economic, or political

13 Thaddeus Metz, "*Ubuntu* as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa," *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11, no.2 (2011): 544, https://www.ahrlj.up.ac.za/metz-t.

14 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), no. 19.

15 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

16 Hasan Musa, *Learning to Speak Human Rights as Human Dignity in Nigeria: Towards a Trinitarian Theological Reflection*, 11.

17 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no.7.

status. Every IDP uprooted by terrorism in Burkina maintains their sacred value. Amid the suffering of IDPs—manifested in hunger and inadequate shelter—the image of a loving God continues to shine forth. The salvific merits of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, transcending time and space, embrace them in their plight. In serving IDPs, the Church serves Christ Himself. The recognition of human dignity thus becomes the foundation of genuine humility, love, and justice.[18]

Economic and Human Development: Social Dignity

The ontological aspect provides the basis for the manifestation of dignity in social conditions and relations, shaping how individuals are recognized in society. *Dignitas Infinita* defines social dignity as "the quality of a person's living conditions."[19] Similarly, *Rerum Novarum* addresses the living conditions of the working class, calling upon civil authorities to intervene whenever employers degrade their workers "with conditions repugnant to their dignity as human beings."[20] This principle is directly applicable to IDPs seeking employment to support their families. Beyond being direct victims of violent and inhumane attacks, they also suffer from the consequences of structural injustice, including selfishness, shortsightedness, misguided political decisions, and imprudent economic policies. These conditions reflect a world marked by structures of sin, in which neo-imperialism and exploitation prevail over interdependence and solidarity.[21]

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18 Albert Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 106-107.

19 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 8.

20 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 36.

21 Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter, Solicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concerns*, December 30, 1987, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html, no. 36.

Limited access to basic needs and services offends human dignity. Homelessness or inadequate housing constitutes a serious assault on human dignity and limits IDPs' opportunities to realize their fundamental human rights and responsibility of building God's kingdom on earth. Overcrowded living conditions and inadequate shelters fall short of what is required for a dignified human life. Having lost their livestock and sources of livelihood, many IDPs are now compelled to beg for food—an outcome contrary to the Creator's intention for human flourishing. Similarly, the lack of access to adequate healthcare services represents a further violation of their dignity. Moreover, reliance on host families and humanitarian assistance often renders IDPs voiceless, excluding them from decision-making processes, even in matters that directly affect their own future. Such exclusion deepens their social marginalization. Social dignity, therefore, cannot be reduced solely to economic conditions but must also include participation, recognition, and agency.

Development programs for the IDPs should not and cannot be limited to economic growth alone. To be authentic, development must be complete and integral. It must promote the good of each person and the whole person.[22] IDPs' spiritual, social, and cultural development should not be neglected nor left underdeveloped. Excessive economic inequality among persons undermines social justice, equity, dignity, and peace.[23] Economic development is the new name of peace.[24] But this development, synonymous with peace, is possible only if

22 Pope Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter, Populorum Progressio*, March 26, 1967, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html no. 14.

23 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 29.

24 Pope Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter, Populorum Progressio*, no.76.

society adopts the common good of all as its norm rather than individual greed.[25] From this perspective, Pope Francis recasts the concept of dignity in terms of universal fraternity and social friendship, two inseparable and equally vital poles in every society."[26] The IDPs deserve special care and friendship within the society. God himself reminds the Israelite community of them being displaced in Egypt and commands that the stranger living among them be treated and loved equally as their native-born (Lev. 19:33-34). God loves the foreigners and provides for their basic physical needs (Deut. 10:18-19). God's providential care is realized through the community, which must hide and be a shelter for the fugitives and displaced persons (Is. 16:3-4). God's own concern for the IDPs reminds the Church that solidarity is an integral part of discipleship to Christ who identified himself with the stranger and the displaced (cf. Mt. 25:35-40).

Participation in the Common Good: Moral Dignity

Social recognition of fundamental dignity is essential, but it is not enough on its own. Dignity also has a moral dimension, which calls IDPs to act in ways that respect both themselves and others. The dignity of the human person involves the right to active participation in public affairs and in contributing to the common good of society.[27] Jeremiah exhorts displaced persons to seek the peace and prosperity of their host communities actively. Scripture gives a good example of a displaced

25 Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no.10.

26 Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter, Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, October 3, 2020, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, no. 142,

27 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, April 11, 1963, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html, no.26.

person who actively made a living with dignity (cf Jr. 29:7). Ruth, a displaced woman, worked in the field to provide for her family rather than just waiting for alms (Rt 2:7). According to *Gaudium et Spes*, "the common good is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as individuals or as groups, to reach their fulfillment more easily and more fully."[28] Suzanne Mulligan observes that the Council's definition is a positive statement that does not limit "the common good to minimal conditions necessary for subsistence, but points to an understanding of the human person that is vibrant and full of possibility."[29] Within this framework, work emerges as the primary means by which a person attains social dignity, as well as economic and human development. Indeed, a person's "life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity."[30]

The IDPs' struggle for economic integration reveals various obstacles to their participation in the economy and to fulfilling their vocation to continue the work of creation (Gen 1: 28-29). The inability to fulfill their ethical responsibility vis-à-vis their families and the community harms parents' moral conscience. Relying on humanitarian assistance, they are not autonomous and free to lead their lives as they would. IDPs, especially women and children, are exposed to coercion and exploitation. When IDP women and girls turn to prostitution as their way of survival, they are acting in a way that is "undignified."

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28 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no.26.

29 Suzanne Mulligan, *Dwelling with Dignity: Catholic Social Teaching and Homelessness* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2025), 44.

30 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, September 14, 1981, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html, no. 1.

Option for the Poor: Existential Dignity

Ultimately, dignity extends beyond ethical obligations. In the context of displacement—where the human worth of IDPs is severely tested—the existential dimension of dignity becomes especially significant. Existential dignity refers to a person's lived experience of dignity. It is the type of "dignity implied in the ever-increasing discussion about a 'dignified' life and one that is 'not dignified.'"[31] One of the most cherished and defining principles in Catholic social thought to address the existential dignity of the IDPs is the "option for the poor." The "poor" here refers not only to the economically destitute but also to all those who have lost meaning in life. While the slogan "preferential option for the poor" originated and gained popularity through the Latin American Liberation Theology, it is deeply rooted in the Scriptures and in the Church's longstanding social commitment. For a credible imitation of Christ, the Church's tradition has borne and continues to bear witness to an "option or love of preference for the poor, a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity that embraces the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and above all, those without hope for a better future."[32] The option for the poor in the context of internal displacement restores the IDPs' existential dignity by prioritizing their needs and rights in every aspect of their lives. The justice of a civilized—that is, well-ordered— society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members and attends to their needs. God's preferential option for the poor, aimed at establishing a kingdom of justice, fraternity, and solidarity through concrete, compassionate actions, serves as

31 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 8.

32 Pope John Paul II, *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42.

the foundation of the Church's commitment to the poor.[33] It calls for both a deep sense of compassion and tangible expressions of solidarity with displaced and marginalized persons. Accordingly, CST exhorts the faithful to prioritize the needs of the IDPs because "when there is a question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim of special attention."[34]

Stripped of their sense of belonging, the IDPs, day by day, feel their dignity crumbling. It is not a surprise that people who have been exposed to violence and trauma feel stripped of their own humanity. Psychological and emotional factors affect their sense of self-worth. Their perception of ontological dignity is blunted by the hardships of their undignified living conditions and difficulties of fulfilling their ethical obligations toward the self, family, and society. Consequently, trauma, neglect, exclusion, and discrimination wound the existential dignity. Psalm 38:18 comforts and assures all those who are heavily burdened and losing all purpose in life that "the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." The life and ministry of Jesus is a testimony of how God "has dynamically engaged and critically addressed all the existential issues of humanity."[35]

Contemporary authors enrich the reflection on dignity and the corollary principles. Åsbjørn Melkevik and Bjarne Melkevik identify four theories of dignity based "on value,

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33 Pope Leo XIV, *Apostolic Exhortation, Dilexi Te: On the Love for the Poor*, October 4, 2025, Apostolic Exhortations, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html, no. 16.

34 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 37.

35 Hasan Musa, "On Learning to Speak Human Rights as Human Dignity in Nigeria: Towards a Trinitarian Theological Reflection," *BTSK Insight* 19, no. 1 (October 2023): 11-12.

honor, agency and welfare."[36] The value theory teaches that every human being has intrinsic and non-negotiable worth. The honor theory of dignity, though it initially referred to those in high ranking, argues that dignity is above any price and cannot be traded for any material good. The agency theory stipulates that, based on their capacity for free will, people possess dignity. In Kantian thought, "all rational beings stand under the law that each of them is to treat himself and all others never merely as means but always at the same time as ends in themselves."[37] According to the welfare theory, dignity belongs equally to all human beings. Therefore, dignity is the foundation of the states' causal, moral, and remedial responsibilities towards forcibly displaced persons.[38] Regardless of the circumstances, "people must be able to develop their capacity to act on reason and on the basis of prudence or efficiency and their capacity to develop their own goals."[39] David Guretski rightly highlights that "dignity is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace."[40] The Church works for justice to enable the human capabilities of the IDPs. In his first encyclical, Pope Leo

36 Åsbjørn Melkevik and Bjarne Melkevik, "Two Concepts of Dignity: On the Decay of Agency in Law," in *The Inherence of Human Dignity: Foundations of Human Dignity*, Volume 1, edited by Angus J. L. Menuge and Barry W. Bussey (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2021), Ebook Central, 138,

37 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 41.

38 Megan Bradley, *Refugee Repatriation: Justice, Responsibility and Redress* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013), Ebook Central, 29.

39 Åsbjørn Melkevik and Bjarne Melkevik, "Two Concepts of Dignity," 143.

40 David Guretzki, "May Critics of 'Inherent Dignity' Be Answered? Rejoinders From Christian Anthropology," in *The Inherence of Human Dignity: Foundations of Human Dignity*, Volume 1, edited by Angus J. L. Menuge and Barry W. Bussey (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2021), Ebook Central, 165.

points to IDP individuals and communities among the most vulnerable that social justice requires to pay more attention. Justice for the IDPs "is not merely about the fairer distribution of resources or the correction of current injustices, but also assumes a restorative dimension. It aims to mend their broken bonds and their reintegration."[41]

Responses and Strategies

Presence and Accompaniment: The Church's witness of Christ's presence to the IDPs

In an article, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) draws on its experience of mission among the refugees and IDPs in Africa and Asia to share the values of accompaniment. The ministry of accompaniment offers companionship, active listening, and solidarity, with a focus on individual needs and concerns. Accompaniment, JRS fundamentally believes, is a process that echoes divine presence in the lives of the IDPs.[42] The primary aim of Catholic pastoral care for refugees is to nurture their inner well-being so that they can regain a sense of meaning in life. Through the pastoral care of physical presence and accompaniment, she carries out the priestly office of spiritual guide. In the context of the IDPs in Fada N'Gourma, this pastoral care becomes more complex, given the religiously pluralist composition of the population. How can the Church fulfill the Lord's mandate to go and make disciples of all nations (Mth 28: 19 – 20) while responding to the needs of an IDP population from

41 Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, May 15, 2026, Encyclical Letter, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html, nos.78 & 79.

42 Joe Hampson SJ, Thomas M Crea, Rocío Calvo, and Francisco Álvarez SJ, "The Values of Accompaniment," *Forced Migration Review* 48 (November 2014): 7-8, https://www.fmreview.org/faith/hampson-crea-calvo-alvarez/.

various religious backgrounds? The internal displacement calls the Church in Fada N'Gourma to reflect on its mission of evangelization. On one hand, the mission of the Church is the explicit proclamation of the Gospel message; on the other hand, it includes living out the faith authentically. The most effective way of ministering to the IDPs would be through Christian witness. The resurrected Jesus, before ascending to the Father, also promised his disciples, they will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon them, and they will be his witnesses... to the ends of the earth (Acts 1: 8). How the Church as an institution and a people of God can make visible the reality of Christ to the IDPs while respecting their freedom of religion? The truth of Jesus is that he treated every human person he encountered with respect and dignity.

The first action is for the Church to be physically present with the IDPs. Every individual IDP thirsts to be welcomed, recognized, and acknowledged as a person. Being in solidarity with the IDPs is an opportunity to offer them the Good News of the Gospel, not to convert them to the Catholic Church, but simply in line with how Jesus himself perceived his own mission: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4: 18 - 19). Being present with the IDPs even without words is in itself a witness to Christ who walked among his people, sharing their suffering and freeing them from undignified conditions.

In practical terms, this may involve religious communities and priests, and members of the Catholic community organizing regular visits to IDPs' families or local families hosting IDPs. In such times of suffering and uncertainty, the

presence of priests and religious men and women can be a source of encouragement and a sense of belonging for the IDPs when they feel seen and not forgotten. The religious congregations can make it part of their own community apostolate on behalf of the Church. Nevertheless, the witness will have a significant impact if the parish priests organize the visits. One can envision a group composed of a priest, religious man and woman, catechist, and other lay persons visiting an IDP's family. Regardless of the family's religious beliefs, the group of visitors goes there to be with them and makes them feel part of the community. It is an apostolate of loving presence that every human person going through difficult times needs. All parishes in the Diocese are rich in Catholic Action. Movements such as *Mouvement Eucharistique des Jeunes* (Eucharistic Youth Movement), *Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique* (Catholic Working Youth), and the Association of Catholic Women, to name a few, are very dynamic and could help carry out the Church's mission of offering a consoling presence to the IDPs. Of course, each Catholic Action movement already has its specific vocation in the Church and elaborates its activities in accordance with its objective. But every movement, group, or association can include visits to the IDPs as part of its activities. To make the kingdom of God present in the world, the Church responds to the signs and the needs of the times. Reaching out to our brothers and sisters who have been displaced from their homes for a visit of comfort is a new apostolate that congregations, parishes, Basic Christian Communities, and Catholic Action Movements must embrace if they want to be faithful witnesses of Jesus. The gentle presence of the Church should not be limited to the IDPs living in the host community. It should be extended to those in IDP camps whenever security restrictions allow. In this way, the Church does not wait for the IDPs to come to her. She goes out to meet them where they are.

Welcoming and reaching out to the IDP is the only antidote against individualism and isolation that they suffer from. Acts of presence from the Church embody its witness to Christ's compassionate love, which respects the dignity of the IDPs.

The next step that follows the visit is psycho-spiritual accompaniment. From the start, IDPs may not be open to talking about their traumatic experiences. Visits may be quiet or focus on the reality of the country, including the terrorism. Some IDPs may spontaneously discuss their immediate material needs in the hope of assistance. Once Church members start visiting the IDPs and build trust, naturally, they will share their stories and struggles. To offer emotional and psychological support to the IDPs, those who commit to visiting them should have a listening ear. Therefore, priests, religious, and lay pastoral care givers should be trained in basic counseling skills. To each IDP family or host family who opens their door, visitors need to introduce themselves. Even if it is evident that they are priests, religious, catechists, and lay Catholics, it remains essential to introduce and explain the purpose of their visit. The Church has heard that they arrived in the area following the insecurity in their village of origin and has come to visit them. The act of accompaniment, which creates a safe space for IDPs to share their stories, restores dignity and inner well-being. If it is a Catholic family, a visit can be concluded with a prayer, only with the family members' agreement. It can also be an opportunity to gently and prayerfully correct inauthentic images of God in IDPs who have experienced violence and suffering, which have distorted their images of God. To non-Catholic IDP families, introduce yourselves, but let them know that you are not here for a prayer session or bible study, as some Christian denominations and Jehovah's Witnesses present in the diocese are doing. The Church has come to let them know that she hears their cry.

Witness through Charity Work

Hearing the cry of the poor and listening to their stories is good, but not enough. The Apostle warns that simply offering kind words to the poor without meeting their immediate material needs is inadequate (Cf James 2: 14 –17). After paying visits to the IDPs, listening to their stories and struggles, how does the Church's faith become concrete in service? The answer is through works of charity for: "... faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2: 17). As a Humanitarian actor, the Church exercises its kingly office of service. Caritas, the Church's primary instrument for humanitarian response to the IDPs, is encouraged to continue its work: distribution of food, clothing, shelters, and micro-initiatives. However, *Caritas*' actions are visibly confused with secular social work. To be a witness to Christ's love, it is essential to involve all parish entities in the new ministry on behalf of the IDPs. Instead of centralizing all humanitarian aid at *Caritas* as it has been done so far, we can imagine parish committees in the diocese organizing weekly food distribution. Creative activities, though small, if real, contribute to addressing the root causes of terrorism-induced displacement and the struggles of the IDPs. Establish parish-based welcome centers as safe spaces where IDPs can access immediate assistance and pastoral care, and are treated with dignity and compassion. Youth groups can run trauma healing workshops through dance, music, and art as part of the psychological support, affirming the IDPs' worth and documenting the lived experience of the IDPs to prevent their stories from being forgotten. Storytelling, art, and media humanize their experiences and help keep alive the memory of displacement to build a more just society.

Every IDP has the right to food, shelter, safety, and responsibilities to contribute to community life. Gillian MacNaughton

remarks that human rights mysteriously disappeared from the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Development Agenda, even though the resolution's introduction stated that it is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[43] The Diocese's moral power manifests itself in these circumstances through advocacy for the government protection of the IDPs' rights. Helping IDPs obtain or replace the lost identification papers, for example, will contribute to community safety and facilitate IDPs' social integration. A practical witness of God's love for humanity is to stand as one family with the IDPs by gathering the parish's vital resources and partners. Parish networks gather goods to share with IDPs. The Burkinabe proverb says that "when there is for one, there is for two." No one is poor enough to have nothing to share with the most unfortunate. Awareness campaigns in parishes and schools to cultivate empathy and solidarity. For community integration, pairing IDP families with local families for mutual support can reduce isolation and stigmatization. Encourage volunteerism among IDPs to strengthen community bonds.

While the preferential option for the poor —by which the needs of the most vulnerable are given priority—serves as a guiding principle, it can also function here as a viable strategic framework in the Church's interventions. Within vulnerable populations, certain groups are especially at risk. A targeted approach to assistance, therefore, prioritizes the most vulnerable groups in the distribution of goods. Children, women —particularly widows—and persons with disabilities (PWDs), are more susceptible to discrimination and often lack access to basic necessities for survival. From a strategic perspective, the

43 Gillian MacNaughton, "The mysterious disappearance of human rights in the 2030 Development Agenda," in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Rights: History, Politics, Practice*, eds. Rajini Srikanth and Elora Halim Chowdhury (New York: Routledge, 2019), 131.

Church must first direct its assistance to these groups within the IDP population. In doing so, it deliberately structures its humanitarian aid around the dignity and rights of those most at risk in the context of displacement. In the field of education, for example, Catholic schools, known for their quality formation, can play a vital role. Partnerships with these institutions could facilitate the waiving of fees or the establishment of scholarship programs for the children of IDPs. Catholic school teachers may volunteer to organize literacy or tutorial programs for IDP children. Similarly, to address healthcare needs, Catholic clinics can establish parish-based medical teams that provide mobile services, delivering basic medical care to IDPs in host communities and camps. For those unable to access hospital care due to financial constraints, the Church is called to reach out and care for the wounded, following the example of the Good Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:16). The preferential option for the poor, when applied as a strategic framework, also serves as a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of the Church interventions. Ultimately, the key question remains: to what extent have the Church's interventions impact the lives of the most vulnerable IDPs?

In responding to the plight of IDPs in the diocese, the Church's humanitarian action must be firmly rooted in the principles of dignity and human rights, prioritizing the human person as highlighted in the Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Social, political, and economic structures exist to serve the human person—created in the image of God and endowed with inherent dignity—not the other way around. Accordingly, aid efforts, especially those from Church-led initiatives, must not be reduced to mere logistical operations or abstract policy goals. Rather, they must be guided by a personalistic ethical approach that places the needs, rights, and dignity of each IDP at the center. While the distribution of emergency relief goods

is essential, respect for human dignity requires a careful evaluation of the community reality. In this regard, conducting participatory needs assessments involving both IDPs and host communities is crucial for identifying their most urgent needs (clothing, food, shelter, healthcare, education).

By prioritizing the person, the Church's humanitarian and pastoral workers ensure that their interventions respect the cultural identity. They ensure that all interventions foster participation and integral human development of the IDPs. This person-centered approach, which is a moral imperative, will be an effective way to restore hope, rebuild communities, and respect the sanctity of human life amid the crisis of displacement in the Diocese.

One method that can help the Church avoid transforming IDPs into passive recipients is the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). Developed by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann, it is an approach that, when applied through the lens of CST, will transform IDPs from being passive recipients of the Church's charity to active agents of renewal. Yet, problems and needs revealed in the "see section" are overwhelming. But from an ABCD approach, the Church does not come as a savior to solve the community's problems and needs. The ABCD follows five key practical principles that foster the dignity and rights of IDPs and contribute to the common good of the community tied in solidarity and sustainable development.

First is an asset mapping rooted in dignity. The ABCD approach holds that a community thrives when it recognizes and uses its own resources. It focuses on assets rather than problems. So, this method begins by identifying the existing assets within the IDPs, the host communities, and the local Church. It spots the strengths, skills, and resources that the IDPs possess. In the vision of respecting the intrinsic dignity

of every individual IDP, the Diocese ensures that no IDP who has found refuge in its jurisdiction is left out of its charity programs. At the parish level, this can be easily done by establishing a parish-based registration system to identify all IDPs living there. After locating all the IDPs, the next step is mapping the assets. Among them are farmers, artisans, teachers, nurses, and even traditional healers. In fact, aside from vocational skills, IDPs also carry cultural and spiritual assets such as songs, rituals, and resilience practices.

Second is IDP-led actions. Development is most effective and sustainable when community members drive it. Once the mapping of assets is complete, always rooted in dignity, the Church encourages IDPs to take the initiative to solve the challenges they face in daily life. Let IDPs now initiate small-scale livelihoods such as gardening, crafts, and poultry projects that they themselves will lead. Decisions should be made at the most local level. Create IDP leadership councils to voice their needs and participate in project design. Local parish committees coordinate directly with the IDP communities. Partnership with local NGOs and the government to avoid duplication and maximize the impact. Subsidiarity is thus achieved through empowerment of local action in building the Capacity of both IDPs and the Church and community volunteers. At the diocesan, parish, and BEC levels, the Church can mobilize resources by forming "IDP Response Committees". The role of these committees would be to organize fundraising, collect goods for the IDPs, coordinate aid distribution, and monitor the needs.

Third, building relationships among individuals and groups strengthens collective action. Following previous discussions, the lack of social cohesion is at the same time a cause of the spread of terrorism and a consequence of it. To safeguard the common good, harmonizing society is indispensable. This

can be concretized through dialogue forums. Organizing dialogues between IDPs and members of host communities will contribute to reducing the legitimate tensions of fear. Discrimination and tensions generally arise from resource scarcity. Organizing joint activities between IDPs and the host community members helps increase local economic activity and build solidarity. They can share some farming or artisanal projects. Cultural festivals get people together and strengthen relationships. Opening parish structures like the parochial schoolyard or parish hall, as venues for collective events and activities, brings people together and enriches the Church's witness. *Erga Migrantes, Caritas Christi* provides guidance on the use of Church facilities by refugees and migrants from other religions.

Fourth, external organizations should play a supportive role and not lead the activities. To strengthen the Church's pastoral response to IDPs, this phase of the ABCD involves partnering with Caritas, local government structures, and NGOs. These partnerships aim to support IDP initiatives by leveraging technical expertise to exploit their available skills. The partners provide financial and logistical support, which parishes alone cannot sustain. The vision of institutional support for the common good also requires the design of initiatives that benefit both IDPs and the host community. Inclusive projects solve the competition over scarce resources within the community.

Fifth is a shift of perspective. The mindset impacts how a person or an organization works. The language the Church uses to describe IDPs, whether in discourse and in program design, reflects the mindset toward them, whether they are burdens and problems to solve or brothers and sisters to love. ABCD mindset moves away from a need-based approach to an

asset-based approach. It recommends not starting from what is missing but from what is already present. The church can deliberately change its mindset and practices towards the IDPs.

Prophetic Witness, Speaking the Truth

Terrorism and displacement are now giving substance to fake news in various media. The narratives of the IDPs are sometimes unheard at certain times and are manipulated. They need prophets who speak the truth and make their voice heard. From its Greek roots, prophets are persons who "speak *out* because they are boldly critical of their world; they speak *before* because they foresee the future; they speak *for* God as God's messengers."[44] Every baptized person in the Diocese has the mission to denounce violence, injustices, and structural causes of displacement. But for a more tangible impact, the public denunciation must come from Church leaders as representatives of the moral institution.

The example set by Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, through his message in Seoul, Korea, shows how boldly speaking out is a powerful witness of Christ's love for the IDPs and all the victims of terrorism. Requested to deliver a message on "The Church in Burkina Faso, Witness to Hope in the Face of Persecution by Violent Islamist Extremism," during the meeting of the Pontifical Foundation Aid for the Church in Need, held in Seoul, in July 2025, the Cardinal gave a prophetic witness. He prophetically unmasked the false narratives about terrorism and displacement in the country. His message was clear and strong: "The current conflict is not religious. It is political, economic, identity-based, and geostrategic. It disguises itself

44 Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair*, 89.

as religion to legitimize itself, but in reality, it betrays it."[45] This clarification of the nature of the conflict prevents manipulation of religion for selfish interests. It contributes to creating an atmosphere for peaceful co-existence and protects the IDPs from stigmatization and scapegoating. As the IDPs, the Church itself "is wounded, but she is standing. She is a witness of hope."[46] Even with no sign or very few signs of hope on the horizon, the Church remains hopeful, "hoping against hope" because God and God alone is the source of Christian hope. As a Church, our hope can become a sign of hope that strengthens IDPs and witnesses to the values of putting all one's trust in God. In times when everyone desponds, such a message of hope strengthens the Church itself and reassures the IDPs that they are not alone. When the Church acts and speaks with hope and confidence, she encourages IDPs to act boldly and confidently, and helps them not to lose hope.[47]

The Cardinal knew that, having an international audience, his message would have global appeal and call for solidarity with the IDPs. So, he gave an in-depth analysis of the situation and a cry for solidarity in the humanitarian crisis that millions of IDP families are facing. It was not the voice of any activist. It was the moral authority of the Church that Cardinal, with humility and courage, represented. This is exactly the role of biblical prophets: to confront injustice and point to God's justice.

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45 Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, "The Church in Burkina Faso, Witness of Hope in the Face of Persecution of Violent Islamist Extremism," Address to the participants of the Meeting of the Pontifical Foundation Aid to the Church in Need, Seoul, July 2025, https://www.iesuscaritas.org/en/documentos/el-terrorismo-en-burkina-faso-no-es-una-cuestion-religiosa-philippe-ouedraogo/ (Accessed December 10, 2025). .

46 Ouedraogo, "The Church in Burkina Faso."

47 Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair*, 119.

At the diocese level, the prophetic witness means bringing to light what many Burkinabe ignore about the reality of the IDPs: their suffering and denied dignity. Undeniably, everyone knows that they are victims of attacks and have lost their belongings. But few are aware of the mistreatment they receive from host communities. The Cardinal has spoken globally. The bishop and priests can speak locally with the same humility and courage. A strong yet gentle pastoral letter from the bishop to all his flock and all people of goodwill living in the Region is a good means of calling public attention to the IDPs' struggles for dignity and survival. Sunday preaching and teaching that connect the Gospel with the lived experience of the IDPs single out priests and catechists as prophets for their people.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Given the depth of the losses, the trauma, and the damage terrorism has caused, forgiveness and reconciliation are as urgent as challenging. The goal of forgiveness is the personal emotional and psychological well-being of the victims for, "the open wound that was never cured, the offense that was never forgiven, the rancour that is only going to hurt me, are all instances of a struggle that I carry within me, a little flame deep in my heart that needs to be extinguished before it turns into a great blaze."[48] Admittedly, forgiveness is hard but not impossible. The usual attitude of victims is to expect the guilty party to come and ask forgiveness, because society perceives forgiveness as a sign of weakness. No, on the contrary, forgiveness demonstrates the victim's inner strength to overcome hatred. It is a personal internal decision that does not needfully require the participation of the wrongdoer. IDPs can forgive

48 Pope Francis, "Revolution of Tenderness," Video Message, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), April 28, 2017, Weekly Edition in English, 6.

even the terrorists and the hosts who have mistreated them during their integration into the community. Church pastoral workers who accompany IDPs may journey with them toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness is unconditional, even "in the face of something that cannot be forgotten for any reason, we can still forgive."[49] The usual reason evoked to hold a grudge against the offender is that "we are humans." Only God can forgive unconditionally. God also commands humans to forgive each other their evil deeds, and he gives the grace of forgiveness. Forgiveness demands justice, but justice is not revenge. The IDPs are not healed from traumatic experience by claiming the execution of terrorists. Nurturing revenge and hatred destroys one's inner peace.

> Revenge never truly satisfies victims. Some crimes are so horrendous and cruel that the punishment of those who perpetrated them does not serve to repair the harm done. Even killing the criminal would not be enough, nor could any form of torture prove commensurate with the sufferings inflicted on the victim. Revenge resolves nothing.[50]

The witness attitude of the pastoral worker is to recognize with the IDPs that they are humans, and it is difficult to forgive the terrorists who have killed their family members and destroyed their homes. The church stands to teach them to ask for the grace of a free and heartfelt forgiveness. Amid their suffering from loss and injustices, God's grace will make it easy for them to bear the burden and heal their hearts. The grace of forgiveness does not remove the pain they have suffered. It renews their strength, restores hope, and gives peace to move forward. At times, memories of the events and losses may trigger pain again. The forgiveness they have offered

49 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 250.

50 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 251.

transforms them into witnesses of God's love even in the face of recurrent hardships.

Whereas forgiveness is the individual's decision not to seek revenge, reconciliation is a mutual process of restoring a broken relationship after conflict. Albert Nolan identifies three common mistakes that Christians often have about reconciliation: 1- the assumption that all conflicts are based on misunderstanding and that blame exists on both sides; 2- assuming that a person can be neutral in all cases of conflict; 3- the belief that Christians should always seek harmony and a middle way in every dispute, assuming that tension and conflict are worse evils than injustice and oppression.[51] In other words, what he tries to explain is that reconciliation is not an absolute principle to be applied in all cases of conflict. For example, thinking that both IDPs and the hosts who discriminate against them are just misunderstanding each other. For the sake of peace, the Church cannot take both IDPs and the host members who take advantage of their situation of vulnerability as equally right or equally wrong. It has to take the side of the oppressed. Trying to stay neutral would be siding with the oppressor.

By employing the ABCD method in its charitable work, the Church already contributes to improving the relationships between IDPs and host communities, who, in one way or another, have discriminated against them. Hosts need to acknowledge the injustices and bad treatment that they inflicted on IDPs, even if it was unwillingly. The Church does not call IDPs to forgive seventy times seven (Mth 18:22) when this involves renouncing their own rights, allowing the oppressor to keep oppressing the victims.[52] Conflicts with host communities must be seriously resolved through open dialogue among

51 Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair*, 65.

52 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 241.

the real parties. In this context, "Social forgiveness" that fails to identify the real individual oppressors has to be avoided. Facing conflict, not burying it in the past, is the best way to move on together. Reconciliation with the terrorists who have shattered their lives is not necessary. It is not the place to tempt some forgiveness ritual where victims are demanded to forgive the invisible persons and institutions behind the terrorists and the terrorists themselves, who may have neutralized.

With respect to the innocent IDPs, the Church, on one hand, claims justice and, on the other hand, works for reconciliation. Justice and forgiveness are not contradictory. Dialogue of Life nurtures everyday encounters. When priests, religious, laypeople, and the Church's institutions share the burdens of the IDPs, listen to their stories with a compassionate heart, and extend them the hospitality they need, the Church opens the doors of forgiveness and reconciliation. Through simple acts of solidarity that build relationships within the communities, the Church becomes a living witness that forgiveness heals and leads to reconciliation. Messages of peace are crucial for reconciliation to happen. Peace, being the number one requirement for the common good, must be preached to all. Sunday homilies and diocesan radio programs can promote non-violence, reconciliation, and unity during these difficult times. Interfaith collaboration with leaders of Traditional Religion and Muslims builds peace and mutual support. Our actions have the power to inspire hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and bring about positive changes in IDPs' lives and to the whole community.

Limitations and Difficulties Faced by the Church

In its efforts to promote the integral human dignity of the IDPs, the Church of Fada N'Gourma faces multiple limitations and challenges. Despite all its goodwill, there are structural

constraints which the Church can hardly overcome. For example, the Diocesan Caritas has mentioned that resource scarcity is the main limitation in their responses. The influx of IDPs continuously strains the already limited resources of the Diocese. The financial means to provide food supplies and infrastructure are very limited compared to the scale of IDPs in the Diocese. The demands for food, shelter, and medical care exceed the Church's capacity. The Church depends on Caritas, which in turn relies mostly on international partners and donors. The Church then has no full autonomy in responding. The growing global silence about the severe humanitarian crisis in the Sahel leaves the Church's actions and projects underfunded. Additionally, the high security risks because of the ongoing terrorist violence and instability restrict the Church's pastoral outreach and humanitarian assistance in the most affected areas. Some remote IDPs' host communities are inaccessible due to armed groups or poor roads. Despite all the projects, IDPs' inability to secure farmlands or stable employment traps them in perpetual dependency. Hence, obstructing the CST principle of active participation and the dignity of work.

Other obstacles are practical challenges that can be addressed even though they require more effort, creativity, and perseverance. The Diocese has difficulty in creating and aligning parish-level initiatives with NGOs and Government agencies. The issue of cultural sensitivity remains relevant even in the context of displacement. The Church has to navigate among the ethnic tensions. The mistrust between the displaced groups hinders the Church's response to their urgent needs and efforts for justice and peace. The pressures of social cohesion pose serious obstacles to the Church's aid effort. Developmental programs are conceived to include host families and to avoid conflict over resources. Nevertheless, tensions

of this nature are not lacking. Often tensions between depleted host communities and IDP populations challenge the local Church to carry out its mission as an instrument of universal friendship and social unity. The current situation of people living day to day, unsure of their basic physical needs, makes it difficult for the Church to sustain long-term psychosocial rehabilitation and human promotion. Even formal education of children and vocational training for adults become difficult when IDPs are just struggling for survival. Dignity constantly calls on the Church to move beyond emergency relief to sustainable strategies for dignity.

Distinctiveness of the Church Charity Aid

Spiritual Witness free from Proselytism

The Church's mission is holistic. She engages in integral human development through her threefold mission: proclamation, celebration, and charity. The celebration of the sacraments underscores the uniqueness of the Church's charitable activity among the IDPs since the liturgy is "the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and also the font from which its power flows."[53] The liturgy, especially the Eucharist, animates the life of the Church and sanctifies all her deeds. Daniel G. Groody's reflection on the foundations of migration and the Eucharist describes the latter as "the summary of the entire message of Jesus because it recalls all that Jesus stood for, all that he stood against, and all whom he stood with in his proclamation of the kingdom of God."[54] Church's human-

53 Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), no. 10.

54 Daniel G. Groody, *A Theology of Migration: The Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 208.

itarian actions are a prolongation of the Mass in response to the final sending out to love and serve one another. Indeed, when the Church remembers Jesus' institutional words of the Eucharist, she also "remembers his outreach to those who had become dis-membered from the body of the community."[55] The eucharistic vision of communion does not end at the door of the Church. Those who have partaken in the body and blood of Christ and become what they ate are sent out to be bread for the world, especially for the hungry IDPs. Despite being done outside the context of public worship, the Church's charity work is rooted in and leads towards an active participation in it. In feeding the IDPs, sheltering them, and caring for their needs, the Church recognizes the real presence of Jesus in the poor, a real presence that is no less than Jesus' presence in the Eucharist. Eucharistic witness is faith in action. Rooting responses in the Eucharist calls believers to unity and service for the poor.

However, the Church's practice of charity is not a means for proselytizing. The Church, as a beacon of justice and equality, seeks to defend the dignity of every IDP regardless of religion. Christian love is free and unconditional, and it does not have a hidden religious agenda of converting people. However, God and Christ must not be set aside, since the deepest cause of suffering is the absence of God. The church can and must take the initiative to provide pastoral care to IDPs with an inter-religious approach.[56] Followers of Christ recognize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom

55 Groody, *A Theology of Migration*, 213.

56 Faith Encounters in Social Action V (FEISA V), "Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees: A New Way of Being Church – From Distrust to Respect... Rejection to Welcome," Study Days, in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002-2006*, edited by Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, vol. 4 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007), 117-126.

they believe, which drives them to love in return God and the neighbor.[57] Charity should not be used to coerce or persuade the vulnerable IDPs to embrace the Catholic faith. It would be an abuse and a violation of their rights. In contrast to some Christian denominations present in the Diocese that turn their distribution times into occasions for preaching, the Church does not impose on non-Christian-Catholic IDPs to attend liturgical service or catechism before they can receive any emergency relief assistance. The local Church, as God's family, becomes a place where people from the BEC to the diocesan levels are trained to serve those outside her confines who need help.[58] The Church wisely takes into consideration the diverse factors, mainly, "the Christian duty to Christ, the life-giving word which must be proclaimed, the right of the human person (religious freedom), and the measure of grace granted by God through Christ to men who are invited freely to accept and profess the faith."[59] "The poor who are often rich in faith and hope,"[60] whether Christians or not, become evangelizers.

Humanitarian Aid Free from Political Ideologies

The intersection of the Church's mission with governance, policy, and cultural influence raises questions about alignment with the State or donors' priorities. The faith-based

57 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, no. 31c.

58 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 32.

59 Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae: On the Right of the Person and Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious*, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html, no. 14.

60 Pope Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter, Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World*, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/paul06/p6evan.htm, no. 76.

humanitarian assistance to the IDPs risks becoming political because the prophetic witness of speaking out the truth on an important topic, such as displacement, places the Church in political debates. The essential point that differentiates the Church's humanitarian aid from others' is that Christian charitable activity is, or must be, uninfluenced by parties and ideologies, and instead must be a way of making present here and now the love that men and women always need.[61] In response to Christ's invitation, "go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37), the Church loves and serves without any hidden political agenda. Even though the Church's commitment to the option for the poor requires critical opposition to unjust economic and political systems, she remains a non-partisan institution. "When animated by charity, commitment to the common good has greater worth than a merely secular or political stand would have."[62]

Secular funding organizations that support the Church in her mission are embedded in global norms. International frameworks in themselves reflect political choices regarding values, rights, and modes of governance. A humanitarian organization that relies on government or intergovernmental funding to realize its plans becomes an instrument to implement the political ideology of the governing body in place. Unintentionally or not, humanitarian structures align with political ideas of the local or foreign states' donors. These agencies tend to impose their political goals as conditions for financing projects on behalf of the IDPs. On several occasions, Pope Francis did not fail to warn rich nations that use their humanitarian and development programs as vehicles of

61 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no.31b.

62 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, no. 7.

ideological influence on poor countries, especially in the areas of reproductive health, family planning, abortion, and gender theory. The Pope calls such aid conditionalities "ideological colonization." It undermines human dignity and the cultural autonomy of the poor nations. Aid must respect the local values and traditions.

Areas for Improvement

The above-mentioned distinctive characteristics set the Church's aid apart from other actors involved in the crisis' resolution, but that does not mean that the Church's response is perfect. No human or institutional response to the problem of internal displacement caused by terrorism can be flawless. So, no Church's response to the IDPs' dignity is perfect. Its intervention reflects the core tenets of CST, including dignity, solidarity, preferential option for the poor, and common good. Yet some flaws are noticeable in the implementation of these principles. The first area necessitating immediate address is the coordination gaps. Sometimes, the Church's programs parallel those of other NGOs and government. Coordination with others would prevent the Church from unnecessarily duplicating efforts while neglecting some urgent matters. The lack of coordination shadows the realization of the preferential option for the poor because the Church cannot accurately identify those IDPs who are most in need. Sometimes the assistance from the Church to the IDPs is misdirected and unevenly distributed. If other religious groups and local or international NGOs do not come to the Church, the Church, by virtue of its mission, must take the first step to strengthen collaboration to avoid inefficiency in its actions. Working in isolation from local associations undermines synodality and the spirit of solidarity. A concrete partnership with local government and religious

agencies could expand the Church's pastoral outreach program and would be a vivid witness to interreligious dialogue.

The Church is also facing the difficulty of providing a holistic pastoral accompaniment that balances spiritual and psychological support amid trauma and material aid. Emphasis is often put on material needs, neglecting the psychospiritual aspect. Or oftentimes the IDPs easily open up their material needs rather than their spiritual and/or psychological struggles. The ministry of presence as a sign of God's presence to the IDPs is good, but it needs more professionalism. It should be accompanied by more structured professional trauma counseling and systematic accompaniment programs for the mental health of the IDPs. This would help them rebuild strong resilience faster. Instead of centralizing the Church's assistance to IDPs at the level of the Diocesan Caritas as it is done now, the Diocese could empower lay leaders, catechists, and local youth volunteers to take responsibility for the IDP ministry. The Church could consolidate the practice of subsidiarity by investing more in training the local communities to ensure that the responses at the parish level do not overly depend on the clergy.

Conclusion

Despite their inherent and inviolable dignity, the displacement puts IDPs in a less dignified situation at the social, moral, and existential dimensions of dignity. These aspects of dignity that are denied to IDPs are reflected in their living conditions and their daily challenges and struggles for socio-economic and psycho-spiritual integration. Grounded on the ontological dignity of the human person, the Church intervenes in emergency humanitarian relief and development programs to uphold the dignity of the IDPs. The concentration of the Church's contribution at Caritas, which has NGO status, risks

gradually obscuring the distinctiveness of Catholic charity aid from secular humanitarian assistance, since any direct and explicit proclamation of the Gospel message to the IDPs under the cover of charity is to be avoided. Initiating parish-led activities would equally risk dissociating the faith aspect of Christian charity. Consequently, the Church's aid tends to be more focused on dole-out activities and some development projects.

The Church has a social mission that is not limited to Catholics but is extended to all. It cannot fulfill this significant mission by remaining closed to itself. Catholic Social Teaching offers foundational principles for a Christian witness that does not impose Christianity on the IDPs, beneficiaries of the Church's aid. By presenting feasible actions and strategies that enable the Church to implement the moral and ethical principles into its response to the IPDs' plight, this bridges the gap between theory and practice. To achieve the bridging between theory and practice, the lived experiences of the IDPs have been scrutinized through the lens of the four aspects of human dignity.

FROM DIRTY WORK TO GOOD WORK: A CATHOLIC BUSINESS LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSFORMING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF DIRTY WORK TO HUMANIZING WORK[1]

Andrea Claudia F. Zulueta-Lorenzana

Abstract. In December 2024, the Philippine employment rate exceeded 95%, yet 57% of Filipinos still considered themselves poor. High employment conceals the prevalence of "bad jobs" marked by low wages, informality, and social stigma—what sociologist Everett Hughes termed *dirty work*—work society deems disgusting or degrading. This article examines *dirty work* through the lens of the Catholic business leader seeking an integrated life of faith and stewardship guided by Catholic Social Teaching (CST). It asks: How does dirty work evolve into dehumanization? Which CST principles respond to it? And how can these guide Filipino business leaders toward humanizing work? CST offers a counter-cultural vision rooted in the *imago Dei,* expressed through three themes: the Dignity of Work (addressing objectification through just wages and rest), Solidarity (healing exclusion through community), and Subsidiarity (restoring autonomy through participation). A case study of a Philippine company, Piandré Salon, demonstrates how these values can be embodied in business. When CST principles unite with Filipino virtues and authentic leadership, stigmatized work is transformed into dignified work.

1 This paper used GenAI for the following components: sentence improvement, to search for repetition and check bibliography. The following GenAI technologies were used: ChatGPT, NotebookLM and Claude.ai.

Keywords: dehumanization, dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, work

Introduction

In December 2024, the Philippine unemployment rate was posted at 3.2% representing 1.66M unemployed individuals, an achievement considering it was 6.5% ten years prior. Paradoxically, in the same period, 57% of Filipinos perceived themselves as poor, a record high since 2003.[2] According to Ibon Foundation,[3] the wage gap between the minimum wage and a family living wage in the National Capital Region in 2025 is 64% (minimum wage of ₱695 versus family living wage of ₱1,228), with the highest gap in the BARMM region at 82.3%. These figures underscore that high employment rates mask the widespread inadequacy of jobs that provide insufficient income for human flourishing.

Beyond these employment figures lies a systemic problem. According to a World Bank study, most jobs in the Philippines are considered "bad jobs" - either low-paid, under-employed (part-time work) or informal.[4] These informal, low-paid positions often fall into a broader category that sociologist Everett Hughes termed 'dirty work'—occupations that are "viscerally

2 Brian James J. Lu , "Poverty, Employment in PH – Unpacking the Contradiction," *Philippines News Agency*, https://www.pna.gov.ph/opinion/pieces/1002-poverty-employment-in-ph-unpacking-the-contradiction (accessed October 8, 2025).

3 Ibon Foundation, "Minimum Wage and Family Living Wage per Region, as of July 2025," 2025, https://www.ibon.org/flw-regl-2507/.

4 Jan. J. Rutkowski, "Employment and Poverty in the Philippines," 2015, *The World Bank*, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/33135e40-ba91-5c7b-bcc3-dac445253e8e/content, 1.

repulsive" or carry social stigma despite being necessary for society to function.[5]

Because our identity is so linked with our work, the stigma carries from the work to the worker, producing dehumanization through three mechanisms: objectification (workers treated as tools), systematic exclusion (rendered invisible even when seen), and loss of autonomy (denied control over their work).

This problem takes on particular significance in the Philippines, where almost 80% of the population identifies as Catholic,[6] creating an urgent challenge for Catholic business leaders who employ workers. While Catholic Social Teaching affirms that work is part of God's design and the activity for human flourishing, what happens when work dehumanizes rather than dignifies?

This article examines that question through studies of dirty work, Catholic Social Teaching and the lived practices of Piandré Salon, a Philippine company founded in 1987.

Dirty Work: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of "dirty work" was first articulated by Everett Hughes in his reflections upon visiting post-war Germany in 1948.[7] Hughes' central insight was that every society organizes itself into in-groups and out-groups, allowing repulsive or morally troubling tasks to be assigned to out-groups to preserve

5 Everett C. Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (Glencoe, Ill. Free Press, 1958), 49.

6 Abigail Marie P. Yraola, "Catholics Make up Nearly 79% of Philippine Population," February 22, 2023, *BusinessWorld Online*, https://www.bworldonline.com/the-nation/2023/02/22/506351/catholics-make-up-nearly-79-of-philippine-population/ (accessed October 22, 2025).

7 Everett C. Hughes, "Good People and Dirty Work," *Social Problems* 10, no. 1 (1962): 7–8, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/799402.

the social order of those in the in-groups.[8] (For purposes of this article however, we will not include occupations that are morally questionable, as in the Catholic definition of work, it is not considered "work".)[9] The delegation of undesirable tasks to out-groups persists across time and cultures. Contemporary examples reveal how Hughes' framework continues to explain occupational stigma in modern society. Prison guards, for instance, perform tasks considered cruel or degrading while the public turns a blind eye – they carry out society's need for control and punishment while remaining invisible to those who benefit from their work.[10] Similarly, service workers essential to community functioning – sanitation workers in sewage systems, garbage collectors, parcel delivery riders – perform invisible work that society barely notices unless the service breaks down or ceases to operate.[11] In each case, the "in-group" (the public) delegates necessary but stigmatized tasks to an "out-group" (the workers) maintaining social distance while depending on their labor.

According to Hughes all occupations contain elements of dirty work, though prestige can mitigate stigma. A doctor, for instance, may encounter blood, excrement, or death, but the dirty aspects of their work are offset by the prestige that comes from saving lives. By contrast, a janitor who works in the same hospital confronts similar physical dirt as the doctor but without the compensating prestige, and so their work

8 Hughes, "Good People and Dirty Work," 8.

9 Ferdinand Tablan, "Catholic Social Teachings: Toward a Meaningful Work," *Journal of Business Ethics* 128, no. 2 (2014): 301, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2104-0.

10 Hughes, "Good People and Dirty Work," 7–8.

11 Verónica Caridad Rabelo and Ramaswami Mahalingam, "'They Really Don't Want to See Us:' How Cleaners Experience Invisible 'Dirty' Work," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 113 (October 2018): 108, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.10.010.

remains stigmatized.[12] Thus, dirtiness is not inherent in the tasks themselves but in how society puts value on the worker performing them.

Dirty Work as a Social Construct

Researchers Blake Ashforth and Glenn Kreiner assert that dirtiness is not inherent in tasks but is instead socially constructed – dependent on a particular group's context. What might be considered dirty in one place or time may be neutral or even positive in another. This context – dependency operates across three dimensions: historical (when), cultural (where), and demographic (who).[13] The meaning of "dirty" shifts as societies change, as cultural values differ across locations, and as different demographic groups interact with the work and workers.

The Philippine context provides a compelling illustration of this process, revealing how history, culture, and economic patterns converge to create and maintain the category of the "dirty worker."[14] While many factors contribute to this construction, three factors stand out for their pervasive influence: the legacy of colonialism, the cultural orientation toward high power-distance, and the racialization of Filipino workers in global labor markets.

A Colonial History

In 19th century America, dirt became a powerful cultural signifier. Cleanliness shifted from being primarily about preventing disease to being a way of affirming one's identity

12 Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 52.

13 Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner, "Contextualizing Dirty Work: The Neglected Role of Cultural, Historical, and Demographic Context," *Journal of Management & Organization* 20, no. 4 (2014): 424, https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.38.

14 Ashforth and Kreiner, "Contextualizing Dirty Work," 427–33.

as an American—those handling waste, excrement, or bodily fluids—became visible symbols of low status.[15]

When the Americans colonized the Philippines, they brought this framework with them, applying it to justify colonial control. Colonial authorities frequently characterized Filipinos as filthy and incapable of proper hygiene.[16] Over time, some Filipino elites such as Dr. Vicente de Jesus challenged racial explanations for disease and uncleanliness, arguing instead that poverty – not inherent Filipino characteristics – explained public health disparities. He noted that urban Filipinos in Manila had successfully adapted to American sanitation laws, while their rural, poorer counterparts lacked the resources to do so.[17] By shifting the language from race to class, educated Filipinos could distance themselves from the stigma of the "dirty worker" while simultaneously reinforcing class hierarchies.

High Power-Distance Society

In *Contextualizing Dirty Work,* Ashforth and Kreiner contend that cultures with high power-distance – where hierarchical differences are accepted and reinforced – view dirty work more negatively than cultures with a low power-distance.[18] In high power-distance cultures, hierarchies are seen as natural and just, authority goes unquestioned, social mobility is limited, there is nepotistic advancement and large gaps between rich

15 Ashforth and Kreiner, "Contextualizing Dirty Work," 425.

16 Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 71.

17 Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies*, 191.

18 Ashforth and Kreiner, "Contextualizing Dirty Work," 430.

and poor. Not surprisingly, the Philippines scored high, 94 out of 120 on the power-distance index, ranking #8 globally.[19]

Race and Ethnicity of Filipinos

One study of Philippine workers in Hong Kong showed that Filipinos make up 55% of foreign workers in the country with most of them working as domestics. [20] They do the dirty work of cleaning, cooking, and caring for the children of their employers. They are preferred as a race as they are seen as hardworking, docile and do not complain against abuse for fear of being sent home. At the same time, they are seen as "cheap and disposable goods," unskilled and poor from a less developed country.[21]

These three factors - colonial history, high power-distance orientation, and the racialization of Filipino workers in global labor markets – reveal how dirty work is actively constructed through historical, cultural, and economic forces. The Philippine context demonstrates that occupational stigma is neither natural nor inevitable, but rather the product of specific social arrangements that can, in principle, be transformed.

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19 World Population Review, "High Power Distance Countries 2025," http://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/high-power-distance-countries.

20 Bohan Wei, "Inequality and Transnational Dignity of Foreign Domestic Workers: The Case of Philippine Foreign Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences* 186, no. 1 (2025): 184, https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/2025.BL23692.

21 Mary Ann B. Bolante, "Master and Servant: Contradictory Roles of Migrant Filipina Domestic Workers," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 163, https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1038.

Organizational Dehumanization: Real Effects of Dirty Work Perception

Roberta Rosa Valtorta and colleagues argue that occupational stigma isn't just an issue of perception but often progresses into a deeper psychological harm: dehumanization. Dehumanization occurs when someone who is human is treated as non-human - the denial of humanity and subjectivity. In the workplace, Organizational Dehumanization is defined as "the experience of an employee who feels objectified by his or her organization, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or instrument for the organization's ends."[22]

Objectification of the Worker

When workers are reduced to mere instruments for organizational profit rather than recognized as persons with intrinsic worth, they experience objectification – the most generic form of organizational dehumanization.[23] In the book, *Nickel and Dimed*,[24] activist Barbara Ehrenreich conducts a social experiment to understand the plight of the dirty worker by taking on various minimum-wage jobs across different states in America. She chronicles her experiences with physically exhausting work in housekeeping, waitressing, and hospice

22 Florence Stinglhamber and Gäetane Caesens, "Organizational Dehumanization," *ResearchGate*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Florence-Stinglhamber-2/publication/375801182_Organizational_dehumanization/links/655dd493b1398a779da80fa3/Organizational-dehumanization.pdf, 3, citing Chris M. Bell and Careen Khoury, "Organizational De/humanization, Deindividuation, Anomie, and In/Justice," in *Emerging Perspectives on Organizational Justice and Ethics*, edited by Stephen W. Gilliland, Dirk D. Steiner and Daniel P. Skarlicki (Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2011), 168.

23 Stinglhamber and Caesens, "Organizational Dehumanization," 3.

24 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, 1st Edition (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), Kindle Ebook.

care — all kinds of dirty work - jobs that many people usually avoid.

Ehrenreich laments the situation of the working poor, calling them the "major philanthropists of our society"[25] because they accept low wages to keep inflation and prices low. Ehrenreich validates that the stigma she felt as a dirty worker was not just a perception but real experiences of indignity, feelings of unworthiness, and low self-esteem.

She talks about the systemic dehumanization that is prevalent in the type of work that she did such as taking random drug tests, the repetition of instructions for simple tasks, and the uncomfortably close supervision at work as elements designed so that "*if you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you're actually worth.*"[26]

When workers perceive or sense that profits are prioritized over people these may result in deviant or retaliatory behaviors towards their organization. These behaviors can range from an active retaliation like stealing, littering, sabotaging, or passive retaliation such as withholding productivity and absenteeism.[27] If an employee's level of perception of the abuse was great, then the behavior might also be at that same level of aggression. Retaliatory behaviors however are mitigated by an employee's strong sense of compliance and keeping smooth

25 Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, Kindle Loc. 2847, p. 221.

26 Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, Kindle Loc. 2707, p. 211.

27 Florence Stinglhamber, Nathan Nguyen, Marc Ohana, Constantin Lagios, Stéphanie Demoulin, and Pierre Mourage, "For Whom and Why Organizational Dehumanization Is Linked to Deviant Behaviours," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 96, no. 1 (2022): 22, https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12409.

interpersonal relations. If these are high, then the tendency is to forgive and less likely to develop into deviant behavior.[28]

Locally, the Filipino virtue of *pakikisama* prioritizes harmony in interpersonal relationships because they value unity. When abused, however, *pakikisama* reinforces the silence and tolerance of employees.[29]

Organizational dehumanization hits at the core of another Filipino virtue, *kapwa*. *Kapwa* is the word that "implies that others should be treated as equals and with dignity."[30] To be considered without a sense of *kapwa* is an insult to Filipinos who realize their humanity through relationship with the other.[31]

Exclusion from Society

Belonging is a fundamental human need. In the context of dirty work, however, interpersonal relationships are fractured most clearly through exclusion. If we consider that humans are inherently social, then dehumanization functions as "a range of practices that function to remove certain people from that kind."[32] To be labeled as a dirty worker is, in effect, to be excluded from respect, from reciprocity, and often from recognition as fully human.

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28 Stinglhamber, et al., "For Whom and Why Organizational Dehumanization Is Linked to Deviant Behaviours," 8.

29 Jef Menguin, "*Pakikisama*: The Filipino Value of Social Harmony," June 16, 2023, The Filipino Beat, https://jefmenguin.com/pakikisama.

30 Ferdinand Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," *Humanities Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (2021): 23-24.

31 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 23-24.

32 Suzy Killmister, "A Metaphysics of Dehumanization," *Philosophers Imprint* 23: 22 (2024): 14, https://doi.org/10.3998/phimp.2610.

The stigma of dirty work is co-constructed by multiple agents. External to the organization, clients who interact directly with dirty workers are particularly powerful in reinforcing stigma, precisely because their reactions validate society's broader judgment about the worker's worth.[33]

Clients reinforce stigma through both explicit rudeness and implicit denial of the worker's presence. Direct abuse is perpetuated by the uncritical belief that the "client is always right," which dehumanizes workers by expecting them to absorb unrealistic demands and disrespect.[34] When management consistently upholds the customer's side regardless of circumstance, this organizational stance compounds the lopsided treatment.

More damaging than rudeness, however, is invisibility. Dirty workers frequently report feeling invisible – and crucially, this invisibility occurs even when they are physically seen and heard.[35] The act of rendering someone invisible requires first noticing them, then deliberately ignoring them. Female janitors report male clients unzipping to urinate in their presence, performing normally private acts as if the worker were not there.[36] Cleaners describe greeting people with "good morning" and receiving no acknowledgment, despite eye

33 Anna Milena Galazka and James M. Wallace, "Challenging the 'Dirty Worker'— 'Clean Client' Dichotomy: Conceptualizing Worker-Client Relations in Dirty Work," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 25, no. 4 (2023): 6, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12330.

34 Galazka and Wallace, "Challenging the 'Dirty Worker'— 'Clean Client' Dichotomy," 8.

35 Rabelo and Mahalingam, "'They Really Don't Want to See Us,'" 107.

36 Rabelo and Mahalingam, "'They Really Don't Want to See Us,'" 108–9.

contact. Taxi drivers become privy to intimate conversations in their vehicles as if they were not there.[37]

This invisibility is what Maren Scull calls a "loss of mattering."[38] Mattering – the sense that others notice us, rely on us, and value us – plays a vital role in human self-concept. When workers feel they do not matter, they experience depression and isolation, often distancing themselves further from the very clients whose recognition they need. For dirty workers, client interactions thus become a repeated reinforcement of exclusion from the basic reciprocity that marks human community.

Within organizations themselves, abusive supervisors are particularly effective at fostering dehumanization. Observable behaviors such as directed anger, yelling, and rudeness, neglect and thoughtlessness are part of workplace mistreatment.[39]

Exclusion, whether from clients or from within the organization, strikes at the heart of the need for human beings to belong. When dirty workers are systematically denied inclusion, recognition, reciprocity, and respect, they are pushed to the margins not only of organizations but out of society itself.

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37 Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner, "'How Can You Do It?' Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity," *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3 (1999): 417, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.2202129.

38 Maren T. Scull, "The Self-Concept as a Side Bet: How Stripping Enhances the Self-Views of Men Who Dance for Women," *Deviant Behavior* 36, no. 11 (2015): 897–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2014.977197.

39 Gaëtane Caesens, Nathan Nguyen, and Florence Stinglhamber, "Abusive Supervision and Organizational Dehumanization," *Journal of Business and Psychology* 34, no. 5 (2018): 712, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-9592-3.

Loss of Autonomy

Studies have shown that organizational dehumanization primarily undermines employees' sense of autonomy and competence by stripping them of their ability to make meaningful decisions about their work. When workers are denied control over their tasks, they begin to feel mechanical and interchangeable, as though their contributions have no value beyond their instrument-like function.[40]

In the workplace, this denial of autonomy manifests through both job design and organizational culture. Repetitive work reduces employees to extensions of machines, performing the same motions without thought or creativity. Work given piecemeal, where employees see only fragments of a process without understanding the whole – prevents workers from finding meaning or taking pride in completed tasks.[41] Excessive bureaucracy compounds this problem: when employees face unnecessary rules and approval chains, they lose the ability to exercise judgment. This is particularly evident in government work, where red tape is often accepted as inevitable rather than questioned as dehumanizing.[42]

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40 Constantin Lagios, Gaëtane Caesens, Nathan Nguyen, and Florence Stinglhamber, "Explaining the Negative Consequences of Organizational Dehumanization," *Journal of Personnel Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2021): 2, https://doi.org/10.1027/1866-5888/a000286.

41 Herbert G. Kelman, "Violence Without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers," *Journal of Social Issues* 29, no. 4 (1973): 46, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1973.tb00102.x.

42 Constantin Lagios, Gaëtane Caesens, Nathan Nguyen, and Florence Stinglhamber, "Dysfunctional Rules in Organizations: The Mediating Role of Organizational Dehumanization in the Relationship between Red Tape and Employees' Outcomes," *European Management Journal* 41, no. 5 (2023): 802–13, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2022.06.002.

The consequences of lost autonomy extend beyond the workplace. Research shows that when employees lack decision-making latitude at work, they experience increased depression that affects their family relationships. Autonomy serves a protective function: workers who have some control over their tasks are better able to manage both workplace stress and family conflict.[43] Conversely, employees who constantly experience this loss of control report exhaustion manifesting as anxiety, stress, headaches, and fatigue. Their motivation diminishes, their loyalty disappears, and their physical and psychological health suffers – often leading them to leaving the organization entirely.[44]

For dirty workers, the denial of autonomy compounds existing stigma. Not only are they performing work society devalues, but they are given no control over their work – how to perform it or exercise judgment, thwarting a basic psychological need.

Filipino Cultural Values and Worker Vulnerability

The mechanisms of organizational dehumanization described above—objectification, exclusion, and loss of autonomy—are universal patterns that affect dirty workers across cultures. In the Philippine context, however, these mechanisms are amplified by two specific cultural values. *Hiya* and *pakikisama* illustrate this dual nature: as authentic virtues they promote temperance and solidarity, but when distorted within

43 Yuan Zhang, Alicia G. Dugan, Mazen El Ghaziri, Sundus Siddique, and Laura Punnett, "Work–Family Conflict and Depression Among Healthcare Workers: The Role of Sleep and Decision Latitude," *Workplace Health & Safety* 71, no. 4 (2023): 10, https://doi.org/10.1177/21650799221139998.

44 Gaëtane Caesens and Florence Stinglhamber, "The Relationship Between Organizational Dehumanization and Outcomes," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 61, no. 9 (2019): 702, https://doi.org/10.1097/jom.0000000000001638.

hierarchical work structures, they enforce silent submission and acceptance.

Hiya[45] is commonly translated as "shame," but operates more complexly as a sense of social propriety and awareness of how one's actions affect community standing. In its positive expression, *hiya* promotes temperance, respect, and consideration for others. However, in its passive form *hiya* becomes a silencing mechanism within exploitative work contexts. Workers who experience abuse or injustice often do not speak up because doing so would cause "*kahihiyan*" (shame) to themselves and their families. The fear of being called "*walang hiya*" (shameless) is one of the worst moral condemnations in the culture.

Pakikisama[46]—the cultural imperative to maintain smooth interpersonal relationships and group harmony—similarly has dual expressions. In authentic community contexts, *pakikisama* builds solidarity. But in a high power-distance context, workers are expected to show *pakikisama* by not complaining about low wages, excessive hours, or poor treatment. To demand better conditions is to be "*hindi marunong makisama*" (someone who does not know how to get along), marking oneself as a trouble-maker who threatens group cohesion.

The result is that Filipino dirty workers face a double bind: they experience the same universal mechanisms of dehumanization that affect dirty workers globally, but they possess cultural values that – when distorted through excess or misapplied within hierarchical workplace contexts – condition them to accept dehumanizing conditions as everyday realities.

Sociologically, for business leaders, the dehumanization of work has far reaching detrimental effects on the worker,

45 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 31.

46 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 24–25.

workplace culture, the organization itself and the rest of society. For Catholic Business Leaders, we look towards Catholic Social Teaching to give us the impetus to provide for humanizing work in our own spheres.

Catholic Social Teaching's Response

The Christian vision of work acknowledges both its consolation and desolation. It is universal that everyone who works experiences toil and hardship - whether the work is physically backbreaking or exhausting at the intellectual workbench, suffering accompanies work as a consequence of sin. Pope John Paul II reminds us that this is transformative: through work, the human being becomes "more a human being."[47] The movement of work is not only to produce good work externally but there is also an internal transformation happening in the worker- a moral perfection of the worker as image of God.[48]

Jesus himself lived as a carpenter—a *tekton*—sanctifying humble labor through his own hands. When people carry their cross in daily work, they reveal themselves as true disciples of Christ. Work thus serves as a path to sanctification and a means of infusing earthly realities with the spirit of Christ. For the Catholic business leader, this theological vision reframes the challenge: employees are not merely workers but persons in the image of Christ and called to participate in God's creative work through their labor.[49]

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47 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 14 September 1981, Encyclicals, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html (accessed October 10, 2025), 9.

48 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 6.

49 Opus Dei, "What Does It Mean to Sanctify Work?" October 8, 2021, https://opusdei.org/en-ph/article/what-does-it-mean-to-sanctify-work/.

Dignity of Work

The principle of the Dignity of Work directly confronts the dehumanization of objectification by establishing a theological truth: work has dignity not because of the work itself but because of who performs it.

Gaudium et Spes emphasizes that human work is meaningful because it is a human being doing the work.[50] Since the human being is the subject of the work, human beings cannot be objectified or considered as means towards an end. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, writes that "development must include not just material growth but also spiritual growth, since the human person is a 'unity of body and soul,' born of God's creative love and destined for eternal life."[51]

Leaders should recognize that employees might not have the opportunity to choose meaningful work due to necessity or a lack of choice. Therefore, they can choose to provide meaningful work by crafting jobs and structures that promote human flourishing, or at the very least, provide the basic environment where the human being can flourish at work or outside of it.[52]

Material Dignity

The material dimension of dignity addresses the physical conditions of work—wages, rest, and protection from

50 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, 35.

51 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, 76, citing Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, 14.

52 Christopher Michaelson, "Whose Responsibility Is Meaningful Work?" *Journal of Management Development* 30, no. 6 (2011): 552, https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711111135152.

harm—that enable workers to sustain themselves and their families with security and stability.

The concept of a Family Living Wage (FLW) was first introduced in *Rerum Novarum* and further developed in *Quadragesimo Anno.* Pope Pius XI emphasizes that giving a wage that allows a family to live a decent life is not charity but justice.[53] *Gaudium et Spes* talks about a family living wage with enough to spend not just on necessities such as food and housing but also to have opportunities for activities on a social, cultural, and spiritual level.[54] *Laborem Exercens* reiterates that just wages should provide security for the family on a single income.[55]

Filipino researcher Vivencio Ballano compared the family living wage (FLW) as prescribed by the Catholic Church and the minimum wage laws of the Philippines.[56] In 2025, the National Capital Region (NCR) minimum wage is P695 while the FLW calculated by Ibon Foundation is P1,228.[57] The legal minimum wage is based on the barest minimum for economic survival while the Ibon Foundation's FLW is based on the cost of living that includes expenses for social, cultural, and spiritual development, as well as savings for emergencies and retirement. Like the Church's recommendation, Ibon Foundation adheres to the principle that one income should be sufficient to support a

53 Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1931, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html, 71.

54 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 67.

55 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 19.

56 Vivencio O. Ballano, "Law, Morality, and Catholic Social Teaching on Family Living Wage: Analyzing the Adequacy and Morality of the Minimum Wage in the Philippines," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 5–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.2023253.

57 Ibon Foundation, "Minimum Wage and Family Living Wage per Region, as of July 2025," August 9, 2025, https://www.ibon.org/flw-regl-2507/.

family of five. Ballano concludes that the legal minimum wage remains immoral according to CST's criteria.

For the leader employing dirty workers—many of whom earn minimum wage or less—this teaching presents a clear moral obligation. Just wages are not merely a matter of legal compliance but of recognizing that each worker is a person whose dignity demands more than bare subsistence.

Aside from just wages, one of the more important aspects of providing dignified work is the right to rest. Article 82 of the Labor Code of the Philippines specifies a maximum of 48 hours of work per week, with 24 hours of rest after every 6 days of work. However, this excludes government and managerial employees, field personnel, domestic helpers, and persons who provide personal service to others.[58] Security guards are given notable exceptions allowing 12-hour shifts with continuous work and no regular rest days, though with special pay.[59]

These conditions violate CST. In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII states: "A workman ought to have leisure and rest proportionate to the wear and tear of his strength... for waste of strength must be repaired by cessation from hard work."[60] Rest is not merely absence from work but space for worship

58 Kittelson Carpo, "Working Hours," October 2022, https://kittelsoncarpo.com/labor-employment/working-hours/.

59 Harold Respicio, "Inquiry Regarding Security Guards' Working Hours in the Philippines," November 2024, https://www.respicio.ph/dear-attorney/inquiry-regarding-security-guards-working-hours-in-the-philippines.

60 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, May 15, 1891, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html, 42.

and contemplation of God's work in our daily lives. Only when we rest are we able to receive.[61]

Ensuring genuine rest—not merely legal compliance—becomes an act of restoring dignity to those whom society has objectified as mere instruments of production. Yet just wages and adequate rest address only the physical dimension of human dignity. Workers are embodied spirits searching for transcendence.

Spiritual Dignity

Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* writes that working only for material gain may lead to over-consumption and greed in the pursuit of power, avarice and a "soul-stifling materialism."[62]

The concept of Workplace Spirituality emerged in academic literature in the 1990s as people sought meaning beyond materialism and community outside traditional religious institutions.[63] It came about as employees who spent much of their waking hours at work, were seeking more meaning and purpose in their work, and were also looking to integrate their personal and spiritual values within their work. Workplace spirituality recognizes that employees are both body and soul – and that as workers, nurturing the inner life through spiritual practices can lead to a more productive outer life.[64]

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61 Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection* – 5th Edition, n.d., https://www.humandevelopment.va/en/risorse/documenti/vocation-of-the-business-leader-a-reflection-5th-edition.html, 70.

62 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, March 26, 1967, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html, 18.

63 Christopher G. Beehner, *Workplace and Organizational Spirituality,* in *Palgrave Studies in Workplace Spirituality and Fulfillment* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 80–81, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47643-3_3.

64 Beehner, Workplace and Organizational Spirituality, 85.

Dignity of Work in Practice

For Filipinos, the concept of dignity is deeply rooted in two foundational virtues, *Loob* and *Kapwa. Loob* is the "person's interior truth since this is the ultimate, organizing center of human reality. It is the very center of his humanity where his ideas, beliefs and behavior lie and the true worth of a person is situated."[65] *Loob* is the whole self – intellect, emotion, spirit. Understanding that each worker has *loob* means recognizing their inherent value as whole persons – body and soul – independent of external circumstances or productivity.

Kapwa expresses the relational dimension of dignity. Literally meaning "both" and "fellow," *kapwa* implies that "others should be treated as equals and with dignity. It is more than just a respect for the other but it is a unity of self with the other."[66] Together, *loob* and *kapwa* provide a Filipino understanding of what CST proclaims: every person possesses intrinsic dignity that must be honored in both material and spiritual dimensions.

One core value from Ignatian Spirituality which is *cura personalis*—care for the whole person—addresses a dimension of material dignity often overlooked in transactional employment relationships: the recognition that workers' physical well-being cannot be separated from their life circumstances. When employees face medical crises, most organizations treat such disruptions as liabilities. Piandré's practice demonstrates an alternative: recognizing that caring for employees' bodies and material needs, embodies respect for their inherent dignity as persons with *Loob*.

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65 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 23, citing Sheldon Ives G. Agaton, "Vantage Points of *Utang na Loob,*" *Social Ethics Society of Applied Philosophy* 3/1 (October 2017): 60.

66 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 23-24.

One of these stories from Piandré is that of Cecil Avila. In 2025, Cecil was among the recipients of a silver loyalty award for 25 years of service. She tearfully recounted her health challenges that began 15 years ago. She went through a brain tumor and then, a few years later, ovarian cancer, going through chemotherapy while also caring for three young boys on her own. Throughout her medical challenges, the company was there for her, footing the bill as her complicated procedures exceeded the limits of her medical insurance. Beyond financial help, Cecil shared the times when Francisco was in the waiting area of the operating room or on the other side of a phone call.[67]

The care for each employee resonates with the Filipino virtue of *bayanihan* – the spirit of communal cooperation most powerfully expressed through physical presence during crisis. With *bayanihan* money and other substitutions cannot replace the act of showing up.

Spiritual Dignity

Each year, the company invites all employees to a three-day retreat that is held during the months of June to August. The retreats are voluntary, and the company sponsors all expenses, food, transportation, and lodging. Everyone is invited to attend the same retreat, from the laundry women, drivers, maintenance crew, to supervisors and management. At the retreats, conducted entirely in the local dialect, there is zero talk about work, the salon, productivity, money or business.[68]

One long-time employee said,

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67 Piandré (director), "Cecil at 25," *Piandré Salon* (YouTube), 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_48snKMfikE, 19:28.

68 Piandré, "The Business of Spirituality - The Piandré Story - YouTube." *Piandré Salon* (YouTube), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUSsleLtcWo&t=2s (accessed September 29, 2025).

> One thing that changed me and had a big impact on me is when I experienced the retreats. (I asked myself), 'what am I', 'who am I?,' 'what is my purpose?' (The answer was) 'I am important.' It was there that I realized that I am not just an ordinary person. That I am a big blessing to everyone. So it became clear what my purpose in life was. These were the things that I cannot forget. It was during that time when I accepted myself, I learned how to love; I love who I am.[69]

These spiritual practices counter the "soul-stifling materialism" of dehumanizing work—the reduction of work to mere economic transaction. By creating space for prayer, sacrament, and retreat within the rhythm of work life, Piandré acknowledges workers as embodied spirits whose dignity demands both material provision and spiritual nourishment. The employee testimonies reveal the spiritual dignity operationalized—the recognition that persons with *loob* require not only just wages and rest, but also spiritual nourishment through prayer, sacrament and communal worship.

Solidarity

Dirty workers are rendered invisible by clients even while being seen, ostracized by supervisors, denied the recognition and reciprocity essential to human community. This "loss of

69 Piandré (director), "Francis Quinones Celebrates 25 Years!" *Piandré Salon* (YouTube), 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-CmIpoAf0a0, 7:15: *"Isang bagay na nakapagpabago sa akin at nagkaroon ng malaking impact sa akin noong ma-experience kay mga retreats. Ano ba talaga ako? Sino ba ako? Ano ba ang purpose ko? Ako pala ay mahalaga. Doon ko natagpuan ang sarili ko na ako pala ay hindi ordinaryong tao lang. Isa pala akong malaking biyaya sa lahat. So naging malinaw at naging maliwanag kung anong purpose ko sa buhay. Yun ang mga bagay na hindi ko makakalimutan. Kaya nga noong time na natanggap ko ang sarili ko, natuto ako magmahal; minahal ko ang sarili ko."*

mattering"[70] severs workers from basic human belonging. The principle of Solidarity responds to this exclusion by calling persons in authority to build genuine community where workers are recognized, valued, and treated as equals towards communion in the common good.

John Paul II reminds us that through our common fatherhood of God and brotherhood in Christ, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit, a new humanity should emerge that is in solidarity with one another. Solidarity then is not a feeling but a commitment to the common good – "the good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all."[71]

Solidarity makes us consider the "other" as our "neighbor," "our helper," it is a humanity where the needy Lazarus can sit at the same banquet as the rich man,[72] "to be made a sharer, on par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God."[73] The Church holds a special primacy for the poor, because God himself became poor. Pope Francis calls this travesty the economy of exclusion, where the poor and marginalized are not only isolated and alienated but no longer part of society and completely excluded.[74]

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70 Scull, "The Self-Concept as a Side Bet," 897, citing Leonard I. Pearlin and Allen J. LeBlanc, "Bereavement and the Loss of Mattering," in *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research*, edited by Timothy J. Owens, Sheldon Stryker, and Norman Goodman (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2001), 288-299.

71 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30 December 1987, Encyclicals, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (accessed October 11, 2025), 38.

72 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 47.

73 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39.

74 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, 53.

Pope Benedict calls it the *principle of gratuitousness* to act in a fraternal communion to follow the lead of God-who-is-Love. He continues that we must go beyond the transactional nature of the world and use the logic of Gift. He cautions that while the minimum model to aspire for is justice, for us to have an authentically human development, there has to exist an element of love. While this logic sounds lofty for the business person, Pope Benedict calls on a new humanism of people that are open to *reciprocal gift.*[75]

For Filipinos, solidarity finds natural expression in three interrelated virtues. *Pakikisama* means "a willingness to subordinate one's own interest in favor of others, in the spirit of harmony, friendship, cooperation and deference to majority decision so that group goals can be easily achieved."[76] It builds trust and prioritizes collective good over individual advantage. *Malasakit* is "the virtue of selfless concern for others' well-being through caring, emotional involvement, compassion, and commitment without demanding anything in return."[77] Unlike *pakikisama*, *malasakit* does not involve reciprocity and can be directed to anyone, even strangers and enemies—it is treating others the way you would like to be treated. Finally, Family Orientation recognizes that "nothing is more important to Filipinos than the family—no other institution in the Philippines commands as much commitment, sacrifice and affection."[78] To treat someone as family is the highest expression of *kapwa*—recognizing them as "*hindi iba*" (not a stranger) but one of us.

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75 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, 39.

76 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 25, citing Felipe Landa Jocano, *Growing up in the Philippine Barrio* (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1997), 65-66.

77 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 27.

78 Tablan, "Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work," 29.

In the first few days of the lockdown during the pandemic, when tensions and insecurity were high, Mrs. Francisco announced that the staff would be paid their daily wages even if the salons remained closed. In the Philippines, the common practice for the dirty worker is "no work, no pay" but Mrs. Francisco pledged to continue salaries despite the pronouncement of the government to put employees on furlough.

This arrangement continued for two more years when restrictions eased. Employees were put on three and four day a week work shifts, and yet they continued to be paid the full salary as if they worked for 48 hours a week. The mantra of the company was "*walang iwanan*," no one gets left behind.[79] One employee commented,

> I said to myself, it is good that I am here at Piandré, because I keep on thinking that if I'm at Piandré, I feel secured. I feel confident. Because I know that there are people there that support me always.[80]

This practice embodies *pakikisama* in its authentic form—management subordinating economic concerns in favor of workers' collective welfare. In a context where dirty workers are often treated as dispensable, Piandré's "*walang iwanan*" directly countered exclusion by affirming: "we will not abandon you, when you need us the most."

Through practices of *pakikisama*, *malasakit*, and Family Orientation, Piandré demonstrates how Filipino virtues naturally

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79 Andrea Zulueta-Lorenzana, "A Yearlong Reflection on Life and Death," *Manila Bulletin*, April 23, 2021, https://mb.com.ph//2021/04/23/a-yearlong-reflection-on-life-and-death/.

80 Piandré (director), "Larry at 30," *Piandré Salon* (YouTube), 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVUVAKj4z7k, 03: 23: *"Sabi ko nga, mabuti na lang din dito ako kasi parang yung iniisip ko lagi na pag nasa Piandré ako, parang secured ka. Alam mo yun na kampante ka eh. Kasi alam mo may tao na nandyan lagi sumusuporta sa yo."*

embody solidarity's call for genuine community. The following theme, Subsidiarity, however, presents a different challenge.

Subsidiarity

The principle of Subsidiarity addresses the loss of autonomy by insisting that workers must have genuine participation in decisions that affect them, exercising their capacities as rational, creative beings made in God's image.

In an organization, Subsidiarity entails training employees at lower levels to be treated as partners and co-owners. This allows persons to exercise their freedom and autonomy to flourish at work.[81]

Pope Francis explains that the principle has a double directional movement, from the top down and from the bottom up. Leaders cannot work towards the common good without the assent of those at the bottom, while those at the bottom must also participate and contribute also to society's good. "Everyone needs to have the possibility of assuming their own responsibility in the healing processes of the society of which they are a part."[82] Sometimes however, Pope Francis laments, the poor are marginalized or excluded and cannot participate because they are "economically or socially suffocated."[83]

The Vocation of the Business Leader gives suggestions for the business leader: define roles so employees can work with autonomy with significant contribution within clear boundaries;

81 Domènec Melé, "Exploring the Principle of Subsidiarity in Organisational Forms," *Journal of Business Ethics* 60 (2005): 297, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-005-0136-1.

82 Pope Francis, *Catechesis "Healing the World:" 8. Subsidiarity and Virtue of Hope*, 23 September 2020, Audiences, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200923_udienza-generale.html (accessed October 19, 2025).

83 Pope Francis, *Catechesis "Healing the World:" 8. Subsidiarity and Virtue of Hope.*

equip employees with tools and knowledge to carry out their work; establish a culture of trust so those entrusted with work can freely make decisions. It is sincere engagement of each one so that everyone is encouraged to grow and be accountable for their part. For the business leader, this requires restraint and sharing of control and responsibility.[84]

Of the three principles of CST discussed in this paper, Subsidiarity presents a particular challenge in the Philippine context. The Philippines ranks high on the power-distance scale. In the workplace, this manifests in a top-down approach from management where there is a "command and control" environment where leaders "lead" and employees "follow." While this approach has proven beneficial in stable years, the COVID pandemic revealed that employees experience greater psychological safety and effectiveness when they are engaged and participate in decisions that affect their work.[85]

The Filipino virtue of *bayanihan*—communal cooperation where communities unite for specific projects—might seem to embody subsidiarity. However, *bayanihan* emphasizes collective action toward shared goals with no mention of participatory structures that align more closely with solidarity rather than subsidiarity. The challenge for Piandré is to create genuine worker participation within a cultural context that traditionally values deference to authority and collective harmony over individual assertion.

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84 Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection* – 5th Edition, 51.

85 Alice Williams, "The Art of Breaking Down Hierarchies and Nurturing Psychological Safety in Philippine Workplaces," *Great Place To Work Philippines*, April 2, 2024, https://greatplacetowork.com.ph/blog/the-art-of-breaking-down-hierarchies-and-nurturing-psychological-safety-in-philippine-workplaces/.

Piandré addresses this through a structural innovation: the Salon Multi-Purpose Cooperative (SMPC), a cooperative comprised of salon employees that has been an official member of the Cooperative Development Authority of the Philippines (CDA) since 1990. In the Philippines, cooperatives are the most easily accessible financial instrument for the poor. In 2024, all 20,000 cooperatives in the country made a net surplus of 27 billion pesos divided among 13 million members.[86]

The cooperative model embodies subsidiarity because it requires participatory structures in the management of the cooperative's business. As a multi-purpose cooperative, SMPC owns two franchises of Piandré Salons. At the CDA, they caution that a cooperative's business cannot be the same as that of the principal company to avoid conflict and competition. However, if management of the parent company allows the same business type, there is no violation.[87] Since Piandré management granted this permission, SMPC benefits from the strength of the principal's brand, management's expertise, and preferred pricing with suppliers.

Through this arrangement, cooperative members, now co-salon owners, have access to the financial statements of each branch, allowing them to know explicitly – every year during the general assembly – the amount each branch earns after taxes and expenses. Consequently, when they see how much each salon is making, they realize that profit margins are not what they might have perceived them to be. This transparency helps cooperative members understand issues

86 Cooperative Development Authority, "FY 2024 Cooperative Statistics," *CDA*, May 8, 2025, https://cda.gov.ph/updates/fy-2023-cooperative-statistics-2/.

87 Marge C. Enriquez, "Salon Chain Gives First Franchise to Employees' Cooperative," *INQUIRER.Net*, July 23, 2017, https://business.inquirer.net/233699/salon-chain-gives-first-franchise-employees-cooperative.

about compensation, the importance of saving on electricity and product costs, and the impact of emergency repairs and broken equipment on the bottom line.[88]

The cooperative's savings and loan component further operationalizes subsidiarity. The board of directors has sole discretion over the cooperative's business decisions. One of its primary duties, through its credit committee, is reviewing and approving loans. Through practice and deliberation, they determine whether requested loans will help or burden the member employee even more. They also make decisions about where to invest their income, which opportunities to pursue, and which trainings to attend. They can decide to release funds for emergencies, adjust interest rates to facilitate calamity loans, and initiate restructuring of the loans to alleviate pressure on their members.[89]

The cooperative model demonstrates that subsidiarity can be operationalized even within high power-distance cultures when structures create genuine participation. While Filipino culture tends toward deference and collective harmony, the cooperative's formal structures—board elections, credit committee deliberations, general assemblies with financial transparency—create spaces where workers exercise real autonomy and bear authentic responsibility.

These three principles work together as an integrated whole, each requiring the other two to function properly. All three must be present simultaneously for work to be truly humanized. Without Dignity as the foundation, both Solidarity and Subsidiarity lose their theological grounding—they become mere management techniques rather than expressions of the

88 Gerry Sena Urbino, Jr. and Lito Gagni (hosts), "NEGOSHOW," *DWIZ* 882 (YouTube), January 9, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg9UfogNZnc (accessed October 7, 2025).

89 Urbino and Gagni (hosts), "NEGOSHOW."

imago Dei. Without Solidarity to build authentic community, both Dignity and Subsidiarity remain individualistic—isolated workers may have worth and decision-making power, but lack the communion essential to human flourishing. Without Subsidiarity enabling genuine participation, both Dignity and Solidarity risk paternalism—workers may be valued and included, but denied the agency that makes them co-creators rather than dependents. Together, they form a coherent vision of work as it should be: persons exercising their God-given capacities in community toward the common good.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

In conclusion, dirty work, being socially constructed, is malleable and can be transformed. Catholic Social Teaching provides the framework through three integrated principles—Dignity of Work, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity—that directly address the three mechanisms of organizational dehumanization.

The **Dignity of Work,** where the primacy of the human person is established, is operationalized through both material provisions (protection from abuse, the right to rest, holistic care) and spiritual nourishment (formation in identity as *imago Dei*, daily prayer, spiritual encounters and retreats). These practices counter objectification by recognizing workers as integrated persons with *loob*—embodied spirits requiring both physical and spiritual care.

Solidarity is expressed through Filipino virtues of *pakikisama*, *malasakit*, and Family Orientation, creating genuine community where workers are recognized, valued, and supported. The "*walang iwanan*" commitment of management during the pandemic, mutual care among employees, and transformed client relationships directly counter the exclusion and invisibility that characterize dirty work.

Subsidiarity presents the greatest cultural challenge in the Philippines' high power-distance context, but the Salon Multi-Purpose Cooperative demonstrates that genuine worker participation is possible when formal structures are put in place to enable autonomy and decision-making. The cooperative model shows the theme of subsidiarity inculturated—not imposed as a foreign principle, but adapted to work within and transform Filipino cultural patterns toward genuine participation in the common good.

When CST principles are integrated with authentic Filipino virtues, organizations can create environments that transform stigmatized work into dignified work, as intended by the Creator.

For the Catholic business leader in the Philippines, this opportunity is particularly significant. With nearly eighty percent of the population identifying as Catholic, the familiarity with gospel values and openness to their application in organizational life reinforces workers and supervisors who want to live more authentic lives. Filipino virtues, when practiced authentically, naturally embody CST principles. Catholic business leaders in the Philippines are uniquely positioned to create transformative workplaces that honor both faith and culture. This article serves as a starting point for business owners who employ "dirty workers" to gain confidence in creatively practicing Catholic Social Teaching principles in the workplace. By demonstrating through concrete example that dirty work can be transformed into dignified work, it offers hope that the counter-cultural version of the gospel is within reach.

MARTYRDOM AND THE CALL TO DAILY WITNESS IN THE TEACHING OF POPE JOHN PAUL II[1]

Nguyen Van Tam, BMC

Abstract. This article explores Pope John Paul II's understanding of martyrdom and its meaning for Christian life and witness today. Drawing especially on the cathcal *Veritatis Splendor* and post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, it presents martyrdom as the fullest expression of fidelity to Christ, rooted in his Paschal Mystery and sustained by grace, truth, love, and hope. The article examines the Christological, anthropological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions of martyrdom. It also highlights John Paul II's understanding of "daily martyrdom," through which Christians are called to give themselves faithfully to Christ in ordinary life. In this sense, martyrdom remains a living vocation amid secularization, moral indifference, and contemporary challenges.

Keywords: martyrdom, John Paul II, daily witness, Christian discipleship, Paschal Mystery

Introduction

Martyrdom stands at the heart of the Catholic Church's witness and faith,[2] embodying the ultimate act of fidelity to

1 GenAI Disclosure Statement: This paper used GenAI for grammar check of the introduction and conclusion only. The GenAI technology used was ChatGPT.

2 "Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death." Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), par. 2473. Hereafter CCC followed by paragraph number.

Christ, the "origin of martyrdom,"[3] and participation in His Paschal Mystery.[4] Far from being a relic of the early Church, martyrdom continues to speak powerfully to the present, as seen in the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where many still suffer and die *in odium fidei* (in hatred of the faith).[5] According to *OpenDoors USA,* there are millions of Christians around the world who suffer intense persecution and discrimination for their faith.[6] While *Pew Research Center* reports that Christian persecution happens in more than one hundred forty-three countries around the world.[7] At the same time, in secular and pluralistic societies, martyrdom takes on a new form, such as the struggle to defend human dignity,

3 St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* [As the Third Millenium Draws Near], Apostolic Letter, November 1994, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html, para. 37.

4 Early Christian historical sources show evidence of how the early Church suffered from persecution due to the act of witnessing Christ by expressing the Christian faith and imitating Christ's Paschal Mystery. See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts, and Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.)

5 See stories in Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), https://www.churchinneed.org. This pontifical foundation publishes reports which meticulously document and analyze the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities, calling for religious freedom. The reports detail instances of violence, harassment, and death suffered in odium fidei in those regions. See also Global Christian Relief, "Christian Persecution Stories," https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/.

6 OpenDoors, "The 2025 World Watch List," https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/.

7 Pew Research Center, "Key Findings from the Global Religious Futures Projects," December 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/. Also, "Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down," https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/.

family life, and religious freedom. These people who defend these values, goods, and virtues, according to St. John Paul II, though do not shed their blood for Christ, are "teachers of the faith, missionaries, confessors, bishops, priests, virgins, married couples, widows and children...[and the] nameless '*unknown soldiers*.'"[8] We also include those who fervently fight against moral indifference, systemic injustice, and what the late Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) called the dictatorship of relativism.[9] St. John Paul II, in his insightful and enriching theological reflections, deepened this understanding by presenting martyrdom not only as the shedding of blood but as the highest expression of truth and love that gives life to the Church. In *Veritatis Splendor,* he describes martyrdom as an "exaltation of the inviolable holiness of God," fully manifested in the martyr's joyful embrace of "death to a single mortal sin."[10]

Pope John Paul II presents martyrdom not only as an extraordinary event but also as a fundamental Christian calling that permeates daily life. The magisterial teachings of the Church, particularly in *Veritatis Splendor* and *Vita Consecrata*, describe martyrdom as the highest expression of truth, love, and freedom, rooted in total adherence to Christ. This expanded understanding invites further reflection, viewing martyrdom both as a historical reality and as an ongoing mission for all Christians.

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8 St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente,* para. 37.

9 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, Documents, April 2005, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

10 St. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* [The Splendor of Truth], Encyclicals, August 1993, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html, para. 90.

In the secular context of the modern world marked by moral relativism and, at times, hostility toward religion believers are increasingly called to witness to their faith through daily acts of martyrdom. This "daily martyrdom" does not necessarily involve physical death but rather demands steadfast fidelity to the Gospel through self-denial, moral courage, and active love. Such witness allows believers to participate in Christ's Paschal Mystery, as they continually die to themselves in order to live according to truth and love. In this sense, martyrdom is both an event and a lived experience, shaping a common path of discipleship for all Christians.

This study examines the relationship between martyrdom and the call to daily witness in the teachings of Pope John Paul II. It argues that his vision presents martyrdom as a dynamic and enduring reality that bridges heroic sacrifice and everyday Christian life. Grounded in faith, love, and hope, his theology emphasizes that all believers are called to embody the spirit of martyrdom in their contemporary context. Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate that martyrdom is not a distant ideal but an essential dimension of the Christian vocation. In the thought of Pope John Paul II, the witness of life, lived in truth, sustained by grace, and expressed through love, remains a powerful testimony that continues to shape the mission of the Church in the present age.

Theological Context of Martyrdom

Martyrdom has long been considered one of the most profound forms of witness of the Christian faith, deeply rooted in Scripture, tradition, and the lived experience of the church. The word "martyr" derives from the Greek term *martys*, meaning "witness" or one "who testifies". The verb form *martyreō* means to "bear witness" or "to testify." Before Christianity, the ancient Greek culture used the term in

judicial or legal contexts. Hence, a "*martys*" is someone who was called to give testimony in a court of law. This meaning of "martyr" is also carried over into the New Testament, where witnessing is closely associated with the mission of Christ and his disciples. Jesus Christ is described as "the faithful witness" as mentioned in Rev 1:5 that "From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth, to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" and again as "the faithful and true witness" (Rev 3:14). These passages show that the language of *martyrdom* in the New Testament is rooted first in the idea of faithful witness and testimony.

The same understanding is evident in the mission entrusted to the disciples. After his resurrection, Jesus tells them, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). Likewise, before his ascension, he tells them: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus, in its original New Testament sense, *martys* refers not merely to someone who dies for the faith but, more fundamentally, to one who bears faithful witness to Christ and the Gospel through words, actions, and the whole of one's life.[11] But later on, the word "martyr" meant someone who died due to persecution or by hatred of the Christian faith (*odium fidei*).[12] In this context, a martyr came to be identified with those who bore the ultimate testimony of faith through death, most notably during the persecutions in the first three centuries. In this sense, it was understood as a "proof" sealed

11 Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8 (New Revised Standard Version).

12 Otto Semmelroth, "Martyrdom," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 3, edited by Karl Rahner (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 417.

with blood for the truth of Christian belief.[13] This view is inked in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* which defined martyrdom as "the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity."[14] Gradually, the word "martyr" was understood in a narrower sense, referring specifically to those whose witness was confirmed by the offering of their lives.[15]

On the other hand, the term "martyrdom," first used around the year 160 in a letter of St. Polycarp, usually indicates death for the Christian faith.[16] The 2nd-century Church Father Tertullian said, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."[17] According to him, martyrdom implies a total sacrifice of a Christian's life for the faith. It was a "proof" sealed with blood.[18] While St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, viewed it as an act that consists in the will to do all in sacrifice for Christ, the desire to confess the faith, and to die for Christ.[19] In Polycarp's Martyrology, the martyrs are urged to act prudently and yet bravely.[20] With these ideas, we can say that martyrdom is for those who are deeply faithful to God and Christ who testify and confess their faith until death. The love of one's Christian faith

13 Msgr. Shim Sang-Tai and Others, *The Founding Ancestors of the Catholic Church in Korea*, trans. Prof. Hamm Meeja (Suwon, Republic of Korea: The Committee for the Beatification and Canonization, Diocese of Suwon, Catholic Church in Korea, 2015), 44.

14 CCC 2473.

15 CCC 2473.

16 James Edward Sherman, *The Nature of Martyrdom* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1942), 10.

17 Joyce Ellen Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

18 Sherman, *Nature of Martyrdom*, 3.

19 Sherman, *Nature of Martyrdom*,16.

20 Shim Sang-Tai, *Founding Ancestors*, 48-49.

is considered the best form of active confession or witness of faith and truth.

Along with the confession of faith is the upholding of the truth and other virtues that come with it. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* understands martyrdom in this sense. He understands it as a "manifestation of the truth of Christ. The reason is that all virtues concerning God are a clear profession of faith. Therefore, not only faith but also all virtues can be the basis for martyrdom."[21] For him, the necessary ground for martyrdom is not limited solely to the Christian faith but also encompasses individual virtues and ascetic practices. That is why, for Karl Rahner, an active manner of fighting to defend God's truth, justice, and individual ethical virtues is a form of martyrdom.[22] For instance, Archbishop Oscar A. Romero was killed for his active manner of defending justice for the poor and the oppressed in El Salvador.[23] Affirming the views of Aquinas and Rahner, St. John Paul II also sees martyrdom as the virtue exalting the glory of God's infallible law.[24] He also pointed out that John the Baptist became a martyr as he never hesitated to speak about God's law and protest evil without any excuse: "John the Baptist sacrificed his life for 'truth and justice.' So, he became the one who prepared the way of the Lord."[25]

Martyrdom, therefore, should be understood not only in terms of the moment of death but also in terms of the life of

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21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, pt. 2, sec. 2, q. 124 (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 2.2.124.

22 Karl Rahner, *Dimensionen des Martyriums*, in *Schriften zur Theologie XVI* (Zürich: Benziger, 1984), 295–299.

23 Shim Sang-Tai, *Founding Ancestors*, 44.

24 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 90-94.

25 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, trans. Keong Seung Hyeon (Seoul: Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea, 1994), 90–95.

witness that leads to it. For St. John Paul II, martyrdom is a testimony of fidelity to Christ that involves the whole person and the whole of one's life. It is expressed through faithfulness to the truth, courage in the face of suffering, and the willingness to give oneself for Christ and for others. John the Baptist is a good example of this understanding. St. John Paul II states that John "sacrificed his life for 'truth and justice'" and thus became the one who prepared the way of the Lord. His witness was not limited to his death; it was already evident in the way he proclaimed God's truth and confronted evil. His death finally confirmed the witness he had given throughout his life. In this sense, martyrdom reaches its fullest meaning in a life faithfully given to Christ. The shedding of blood remains the supreme expression of martyrdom, but the martyr's final witness is rooted in a life of faith, truth, courage, and self-giving love. This understanding helps us appreciate St. John Paul II's broader vision of martyrdom as a witness that involves the whole person and the whole of one's life.

The Theological Vision of Martyrdom according to St. John Paul II

1. The Trinitarian Dimension: Christological and Pneumatological

Martyrdom reflects a kind of life that is like Christ. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, martyrdom is an act akin to Christ, who laid down his life for us. With this, "Christians have been called upon – and some will always be called upon – to give the supreme testimony of this love to all men, but especially to persecutors."[26] Therefore, the martyrs are living witnesses of self-giving. By their deeds, they worship God in Spirit and in truth, and just

26 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (hereafter LG), no. 42.

as Christ shed His blood to show God's mercy, so the martyrs, through their bravery and constancy, show that very mercy to the world.[27] That deep-seated faith by which the martyrs are actuated does not come from themselves, but rather from a gift in which God speaks to His Church. They have been chosen for this by the Father to fulfill His holy will as it shapes and governs their whole lives, which include their thoughts, decisions, and concrete actions. Martyrdom is not simply the end of earthly life, but rather a passage into new life, eternal life in communion with God and the Church. The true meaning of martyrdom is found in integrating the divine and human dimensions, as it is both a sanctifying act of theological significance and a living homage to human dignity, fully dedicated to God.

St. John Paul II has considered martyrdom in such a way that the death of the martyrs themselves is actually an image of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. For example, at the Beatification ceremony for the martyrs of the French Revolution, and those who suffered in Spain during the Civil War, on October 1, 1995, in his homily, he said, "In these new blesseds Christ is manifested in a particular way: the riches of his paschal mystery, his Cross and Resurrection."[28] In other words, they are living portraits of Jesus Christ. Their life and death reflect a visible sign, in a powerful way, of the core pattern of Christ's life, that is, suffering leading to glory, and death leading to new life. Further, one can say that their lives are a concrete, historical demonstration of how the power of

27 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of Eight Spanish Martyrs*, Homilies, March 7, 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_07031999.html

28 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of the Martyrs of the French Revolution and the Spanish Civil War*, Homilies, October 1, 1995, https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/martyrdom-a-special-gift-of-the-spirit-beatification-of-martyrs-of-8729?

Christ's death and resurrection is still active and transformative in the lives of ordinary people. In this context, one can say that John Paul II emphasized the Christological orientation of martyrdom, which is obviously highlighted in the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*, which describes martyrdom "as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love."[29]

Interpreting martyrdom in the light of the Paschal Mystery allowed John Paul II to continue the theological orientation of Vatican II and deepen its implications. He emphasized in his interpretation the parallelism between the Christological and ecclesiological dimensions of martyrdom, highlighting that martyrdom is not a defeat but rather a victory, a conformity to Christ, which benefits the life of the Church and serves as a prophetic sign of the eschatological hope of resurrection. It is from the Paschal Mystery that every martyrdom derives its meaning and strength to be fully lived. In his homily at the canonization of St. Maximilian, John Paul II noted that the life exemplified by St. Kolbe was inseparable from the perfect example of Christ. He said, "Maximilian Kolbe did not die, but he gave his life. [...] This offering made possible through the power of Christ."[30] In this respect, the proclamation emphasizes that martyrdom, more than a noble human act, is a grace derived from an intense union with Christ, who died and rose again. Jesus Himself is the absolute model, and in Him, every witness is called to imitate His self-giving and His love unto the end. Hence, St. Maximilian Kolbe becomes a sign of the victory of love over hatred and selfishness, as he conformed to Christ in offering his life for others in the highest expression.

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29 LG 42.

30 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe* (10 October 1982), PiercedHearts.org, https://www.piercedhearts.org/jpii/jpii_homilies/homilies_1982/oct_10_1982_canonization_max_kolbe.htm (accessed Oct. 4, 2025).

In every instance in which the Church confers the laurel of martyrdom, the martyrs become endowed with a likeness to Christ crucified. In the homily for the canonization of Edith Stein, John Paul II invokes this Pauline passage: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."[31] There, the mystery of Christ's own self-offering frames the saint's life in martyrdom, while the saint's sacrifice participates in the Paschal sacrifice of the crucified Messiah. In this way, every martyr is pulled further into the mystery of the Cross, not as an isolated event but as an extension and icon of Christ's redemptive act.

Moreover, John Paul II formulates a eucharistic imagery in which the lives of the martyrs are understood as becoming "broken bread" for others. In his Message for World Mission Sunday (2005), he mentions "bread broken for the life of the world" to underscore how Christ's self-giving serves as the model of mission and sacrifice, which can be easily applied to the subject of martyrdom.[32] Turning toward Christ's sacrifice thus renders a martyr a living sacrament: self-giving in life for the life of others, just as Christ gave Himself. The ground where their blood watered as life is coupled with that sanctifying confession. Their suffering, then, was for the Church.[33] Hence, martyrdom is not an isolated act of dying but shares in

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31 John Paul II, "Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein," Homily, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), 14 October 1998, Weekly Edition in English, 1.

32 John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for World Mission Sunday 2005 - "Mission: Bread Broken for the Life of the World,"* 22 February 2005, Messages, http://vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/missions/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20050222_world-day-for-missions-2005.html.

33 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs*, 5 March 2000, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20041231_te-deum.html

the Paschal Mystery of Christ and serves as an eschatological seed of ecclesial life.

Martyrdom is also understood in the context of how the Holy Spirit works. In the Gospel of John, Jesus affirmed that the Holy Spirit would come to bear witness to him (John 15:26). Any spirit that does not confess Christ is not from God (cf. 1 John 4:2). On the contrary, for the witnesses who confess Christ, it is certainly the Spirit of God who is at work in them. Martyrdom is the most eloquent expression of Jesus' sacrifice. The witnesses themselves cannot do this without being consecrated by the Holy Spirit. John Paul II said: "Where the Spirit of sanctification (cf. Rom 1:4) is poured out, everything contrary to holiness is destroyed." [34] Moreover, the Holy Spirit accomplishes the sanctification and divinization of man. John Paul II emphasized that the Spirit of God not only destroys sin but also sanctifies man.

In addition, witnesses are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Gospel. "Just as he transformed the first disciples into courageous apostles who preached the word of God, the Holy Spirit continues to prepare witnesses to the Gospel in our own time."[35] John Paul II added that the inner strength and supernatural courage for martyrdom are a special gift given by the Holy Spirit to those who follow him. Jesus promised: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

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34 John Paul II, *General Audience*, July 22, 1998, Audiences, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_22071998.html

35 John Paul II, *Message for World Mission Day*, May 28, 1996, Messages, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/missions/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_28051996_world-day-for-missions-1996.html

2. The Anthropological Perspective on Martyrdom

2.1 The Dignity and Value of Human Life

In John Paul II's view, martyrdom cannot be dissociated from the noble dignity of the human person created in the image of God. He often cited *Gaudium et Spes* no. 24 as the anthropological foundation for his theology of martyrdom: "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."[36] In this sense, to John Paul II, martyrdom represents the ultimate expression of self-giving whereby the human person comes to know the deepest truth of his own identity. Through the act of freely giving his life for love of God and for others, the martyr fulfills the human vocation perfectly "to love God and neighbor as oneself" (cf. Rom 13:9–10; 1 Jn 4:20). The unity for which Christ prayed for His disciples becomes a living reality in the martyr who becomes one with God and with humanity through love and truth. Thus construed, martyrdom is not just an act of heroism but a mystery of communion and self-gift that shows the full dignity of the human person in the light of the Holy Trinity. By giving his life, the martyr enters into the deepest communion with Christ, who gave himself in full measure that humanity might be together in love and in truth.

Furthermore, in his homilies for beatifications and canonizations, John Paul II often said that blood speaks loudest for the dignity of man. Speaking about Bernhard Lichtenberg and Karl Leisner, he said that their deaths were "a proclamation of the Gospel of life in the midst of a world of violence and death." Similarly, in the canonization of Edith Stein, he highlighted her self-offering as a profound affirmation that "love

36 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

is stronger than death," emphasizing that only love can fully safeguard the dignity of life in its integrity.[37]

Martyrdom exalts human dignity. The martyrs die not just for the reason of defending the divine truth but also for valuing the worth of the human life that is being given up for God's sake. During the beatification homily for Father Frelichowski, John Paul II described him as a "witness of love for others" and as a sign of humanity willing to live for one another. Therefore, there is never such a thing as senseless martyrdom, but rather, a proclamation of eternal life and of the indefeasible dignity of the human person as seen through Christ, who changes sacrifice into the fullness of life.[38]

2.2 Promoting Human Values in Honoring the Law of God

John Paul II believes that faith and morality are connected profoundly and irrevocably. This conviction has found its most striking expression in the life stories of martyrs who, at the cost of their blood, bore witness to moral truth and defended it even to the point of dying.[39] For them, the ultimate testimony to the Gospel was not doctrine in the abstract, but integrity, a life rooted in faith and ethical fidelity. Their sacrifice reveals that authentic morality cannot be divorced from faith in Christ, and likewise, true faith demands moral coherence.

Further, John Paul II reiterated that martyrs are defenders of both divine truth and the fundamental rights of the human person. Their witness proves that often, the preservation of human dignity and order needs the ultimate sacrifice. By

37 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein*.

38 John Paul II, *Homily in Toruń*, June 7, 1999, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19990607_torun.html

39 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 91.

dying, martyrs give a blood-borne signature for the inviolable worth of the human being, thereby linking Christ's action of redemption with their own testimony to human freedom and justice.

But those martyrs have experienced, in the here and now, what it means to enjoy true freedom, such that they now no longer carry within themselves selfish motives or seek worldly glory. Their self-offering is not a deed of despair, but a manifestation of freedom, a divine gift that transcends all limitations of earthly power. That is how John Paul II made the point that the freedom we enjoy in this world is always fragile and limited, much like a seed, which needs cultivation and nourishment to grow.[40] Thus, martyrs have brought human freedom to its best realization by choosing to give up their lives that they might secure eternal life. For a world today epitomised by violence, injustice, and indifference, their example becomes a prophetic call to a new generation of witnesses, martyrs of love, justice, peace, and forgiveness, who are willing to transcend self-interest for the sake of society, not into an easy life, but toward a more humane and reconciled society.

2.3 Building a Just Society

St. John Paul II believed that martyrdom and the creation of a just society are closely linked because both are based on the same principles of human dignity, truth, and freedom. In his view, martyrdom is the highest proof of the existence of truth and justice. The martyr literally gives up their life as proof that the moral truth cannot be compromised, not even in front of the most tyrannical forces. Thus, martyrdom becomes a prophetic act that reveals the untruth of the power

40 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Maximilian Kolbe* (October 10, 1982).

structures that refuse to recognize both God and the worth of human beings.

John Paul II stated that a just society would have to rely on the supreme human dignity as its foundation and that this person's dignity was none other than the one attributed to God, as he said: "the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate, no individual, group, class, nation or State. Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority, by isolating, oppressing, or exploiting it, or by attempting to annihilate it."[41] This dignity, in turn, requires a society that is based on truth, solidarity, and the common good. The acts of the martyrs convey the message that society must be ethical and just, as these are the only conditions under which society can survive. The martyrs' lives and deaths demonstrate that selflessness is the true meaning of freedom, which is essentially the same principle that sustains social justice.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II points out that the martyr's "no" to evil is also a "yes" to the moral order willed by God. Therefore, martyrdom becomes a basis for the transformation of society, since it demonstrates that true justice must be built on moral truth, respect for conscience, and fidelity to God. A society that values such an example becomes more humane, peaceful, and just because it accepts the idea that the truth is more powerful than human authority and love is more victorious than death. As he said,

41 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, Encyclicals, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (accessed October 13, 2025), par. 44.

> Martyrdom is an *outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church*. Fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem*, so that the splendour of moral truth may be undimmed in the behaviour and thinking of individuals and society. This witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off, in civil society and within the ecclesial communities themselves, a headlong plunge into the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: *the confusion between good and evil*, which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities. By their eloquent and attractive example of a life completely transfigured by the splendour of moral truth, the martyrs and, in general, all the Church's Saints, light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law (cf. Wis 2:12), and they make the words of the Prophet echo ever afresh: 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!' (Is 5:20).[42]

The passage contains insightful statements that help us find the link between martyrdom and its social relevance and value. It speaks of martyrdom as the Church's most potent and luminous act of public witness. It says that by choosing death rather than betraying the moral good like justice, truth, and the welfare of all, the martyrs perform a supreme act of "missionary commitment" that cuts through the fundamental crisis of humanity, i.e., the catastrophic confusion between good and evil. In a world adrift in moral relativism, where the very foundations of a just society are eroded, the martyrs' blood becomes an undeniable testament, a stark light that refuses to let evil be called good or good evil. Their ultimate sacrifice is thus an extraordinary act of public service, a living reproof that reawakens the collective conscience and preserves the

42 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, par. 93.

very possibility of a moral order by demonstrating that truth exists and is worth everything.

John Paul II's theology and anthropology of martyrdom can be summarised as follows. Martyrdom is a form of faith in action. It is the consequence of a life lived completely for Christ. The martyr does not live for himself but for humanity and for the glory of God. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit for man to be able to transcend himself in this way. It is at this point that the martyr demonstrates the noble dignity of man.

3. Ecclesiological and Eschatological Dimensions of Martyrdom

3.1. Ecclesiological Dimension

The New Testament presents Jesus as the central model of Christian martyrdom. His obedience to the Father reached its highest point in his suffering and death on the cross. As Paul states, Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Hebrews similarly presents Jesus as the one who "endured the cross, disregarding its shame," and who remained faithful to his mission, "for the sake of the joy that lay before him" (Heb 12:2). Jesus' death, therefore, was not an isolated event but the culmination of a life completely given to the Father and to others. In this sense, he is the supreme model of Christian martyrdom.

At the same time, John the Baptist should also be considered in the biblical understanding of martyrdom. John remained faithful to his prophetic mission and courageously confronted Herod's wrongdoing, even though he knew that doing so could put his life at risk. Mark recounts that John had told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). Because of his faithful witness to the truth, John was imprisoned and eventually beheaded at the request of Herodias

(Mark 6:17–29). His death, therefore, was not simply the result of political circumstances but the consequence of his fidelity to God's truth and his prophetic mission. John's example shows that martyrdom is closely connected with a life of faithfulness to God and to the truth.

Therefore, Jesus should not be called the "original martyr" in a chronological sense. Rather, he is the supreme model of Christian martyrdom, while John the Baptist provides an important biblical example of a witness whose fidelity was ultimately confirmed by his death. This helps us understand martyrdom as the culmination of a life faithfully given to God.

This ecclesiological dimension is most apparent in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20. Here, Jesus makes it clear that he is not sending his disciples out into a neutral world.[43] Thus, Jesus expects his disciples to acknowledge him openly and to bear public witness to him. There is to be no attempt at concealment, and a general sense of piety does ccnot suffice. It is not possible to be a Christian or to be a church without the communion of suffering and fate with Jesus. The church is also a church of martyrs. A church that does not suffer would not be the church of Jesus Christ. Martyrdom is an essential part of the church.[44]

As Tertullian once said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." In fact, the martyrs have never stopped preaching the Gospel and testifying to what they preached with their blood. According to John Paul II, "The Church throughout history remains deeply rooted in the testimony of

43 Walter Kasper et al., *Theological Studies on Martyrdom, Series of Martyrdom* No.1 (Seoul: Brotherhood Publishing House, 2013), 351.

44 This does not mean that God the Father wills our suffering, but that the suffering is the consequence of witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

the martyrs."[45] Because, as he said, the Church as triumphed in all times, all nations, all languages, the people of God are strengthened in faith. The drops of blood of the martyrs are likened to bricks that build the temple of God. To concretize the aspect of the witness building the Church, we see that martyrdom contributes to the vitality of the Church, and is also the light and sign of the Church.

Through persecution and bloodshed, the Church has not weakened but, instead, has become stronger. At the beatification of 44 martyrs on March 5, 2000, Pope John Paul II pointed out the contribution of martyrs in Brazil. He said, "The martyrs have watered the land of their homeland, making it fertile so that new Christians can be born."[46] Not only have they contributed to the vitality of the Church, but they have also shone before us like lamps for the Church and for humanity, because they received the light of Christ to illuminate the darkness. In *Ecclesia in Europa,* he says:

> I intend, however, to draw particular attention to some of the signs which have emerged in the life of the Church herself. In the first place, together with the Synod Fathers, I want to point out to everyone, so that it will never be forgotten, that great sign of hope represented by the many witnesses to the Christian faith who lived in the last century, in both East and West. They found suitable ways to proclaim the Gospel amid situations of hostility and persecution, often even making the supreme sacrifice by shedding their blood. These witnesses, and particularly those who suffered martyrdom, are an eloquent and magnificent sign which we are called to contemplate and to imitate. They show us the vitality of the Church; they stand before us as a light for the Church and for humanity because they caused the light

45 John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium: Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*, Documents, November 29, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html (accessed October 8, 2025), no. 13.

46 John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs.*

> of Christ to shine in the darkness; to the extent that they came from different religious traditions, they also shine forth as a sign of hope for the journey of ecumenism, in the certainty that their blood 'is also a vital source of unity for the Church.'[47]

For John Paul II, the blood of martyrs unifies the Church. The Second Vatican Council's decree on unity, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, urged Catholics to recognize the richness of the body of Christ and some positive actions of their separated brothers, who also bore the name of witnesses to Christ, sometimes shedding their blood for the faith.[48] In this regard, John Paul II was constantly in dialogue with other Churches in the pursuit of unity. He saw that unity in the Church could be achieved if the "principles of martyrdom," such as selfless love and self-sacrifice, were incorporated into the relationship between the Churches. "The martyrs," he explained, "radiate a sign of hope for the process of unity." Their blood is also "a vital source of unity for the Church."[49] Jesus' cry, "That they may all be one" (John 17:21), echoed in the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, is made alive by the martyrs, who become "superior witnesses of love."[50]

John Paul II further stated that martyrdom is seen as a way of understanding "full communion" in the Church. "Communion," he explained, "is perfected in the way in which we recognize the greatness of a life filled with grace, which

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47 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, June 28, 2003, Apostolic Exhortations, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html (accessed October 8, 2025), par. 13.

48 Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, November 21, 1964, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html (accessed October 8, 2025), par. 4.

49 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, par. 13.

50 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995).

is witness unto death, and self-giving in order to draw back those who are far away (cf. Eph 2:13)."[51] Citing the countless witnesses to the faith in the Churches, the Holy Father asked: "Despite the tragedy that separates us, these brothers and sisters have remained firmly attached to Christ and to the Father even to the shedding of their blood. Is it possible that this attachment is not present among the souls to whom I have invited a 'dialogue of conversion'?"[52] John Paul II's question has become a challenge to those who, while looking to the example of the martyrs, fill their hearts with attitudes of hostility. These people need to be open to the hope of the undivided body of Christ. This will be seen in the eschatological dimension of martyrdom.

3.2 Eschatological Dimension

In the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, Pope John Paul II affirmed the eschatological dimension of the pilgrim Church, and in his work *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, he elaborated on this theme. Pope John Paul II's eschatological vision is deeply rooted in the doctrine of Christian hope. They include both the object toward which hope is directed and the consequences that hope produces. Eschatological hope is the path to the future and the afterlife, overcoming the limitations, darkness, or injustice of the present.[53] For Pope John Paul II, eschatology is not only a part of the Church's doctrine, but moreover, its eschatological dimension must be proclaimed by all Christians, by each person individually and by the Church as a whole. In making this declaration, John Paul II first maintains that only the hope arising from faith in the Resurrection enables

51 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 84.

52 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 83.

53 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 179.

the human person to live a life worthy of God's infinite love. For him, martyrdom is the highest expression of the Gospel of hope. He argues that, in light of the Resurrection, martyrs accept pain and death as a passage to eternal glory. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II indicates that there are three dimensions of the Gospel of hope, reflected in the martyrs' witness: they preach it, celebrate it, and serve it.[54] By their testimony, they restore the faith and hope of those who are trying to overcome despair, thereby giving them back a sense of meaning in life.

From his experience in the twentieth century, John Paul II defines the human condition as caught up in a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death," between the *mysterium pietatis* (mystery of holiness) and the *mysterium iniquitatis* (mystery of evil).[55] This conflict between good and evil was revealed during the collapse of totalitarian regimes, yet it was there that martyrs conquered death through faith in the Risen Christ. John Paul stresses that only a deep faith in Jesus, "who came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10) could give the human being courage over the powers of death. Hence, the blood of martyrs becomes a symbol of hope and restoration of human dignity in Christ.

Following the ancient tradition of the Church, John Paul II recalls that the day of martyrdom is called *dies natalis*, the "birthday into heaven."[56] Their death is not an end. It is the beginning of full life in the risen Christ. By the mystery of the

54 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, par. 13.

55 John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, trans. Wanda T. Starkie (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), 15-16.

56 John Paul II, "Martyr's Death Shows Christ's Love," Angelus, *L'Osservatore Romano* (Rome), December 31, 2003, Weekly Edition in English, 6.

Incarnation and of the Cross, the human body is drawn up into the glory of God and transformed into the likeness of that risen body of Christ. In beatifying the 233 Spanish martyrs on March 14, 2001, it was affirmed that they are "a sign and prophetic announcement of the glorious resurrection." Their death is a testament to the victory of divine love over hatred and violence, and thus martyrdom is the reward for those who remain faithful and holy until the end, triumphing with Christ on Calvary. This shows that the Pope considered martyrdom a reward for those who live a faithful and holy life.

The Spiritual Meaning of Martyrdom in the Thought of John Paul II

1. Martyrdom as Interior Transformation

For John Paul II, martyrdom is not a moment of destruction but a transfiguration instead. In the martyr's heart, suffering is transformed into a praise act, pain into a love language, and death into a divine life passage. The Pope declared that martyrdom manifests the human person's deepest freedom, i.e., the capacity to affirm truth and goodness even when everything external is taken away.[57] Thanks to the Holy Spirit's grace, the martyr undergoes what the Pope has labelled an "inner victory of the spirit,"[58] a victory not over enemies but over fear, sin, and despair. The transformation is linked directly to the Paschal Mystery. The martyr's gift of life, given freely, is a reflection of Christ's total surrender, the one who "loved to the end" (Jn 13:1). In this alignment with the Crucified One, the martyr comes to realize that life is all about self-giving which John Paul II often referred to as "the law of the gift."[59]

57 John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, par. 91.

58 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 203.

59 John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), par. 10.

The martyr thus becomes a living representation of Christ's redemptive love, a visible proof that holiness lies in surrendering oneself totally to God and to others.

2. The Mystical Communion of Suffering and Love

For John Paul II, martyrdom is more than just a single act of heroism; it is a mystical event, a divine blessing that allows the person to experience the suffering of Christ more deeply. He asserts in *Salvifici Doloris* that when a person suffers with Christ, "it becomes a participation in the redemptive work of the Savior."[60] It follows that the martyr is not only the one who suffers violently but also the one who takes part in God's plan of redemption through Christ. By giving up their life, the human being engages in a mysterious love dialogue with the Divine, where suffering is transformed into prayer and the very one witnessing through death. In this connection, the Holy Spirit is the key player. It is the Spirit who empowers the martyr to love unconditionally, to pardon, and to be unyielding to hate. The martyr's support reveals the Spirit's power to sanctify, the assurance that divine grace can transform human frailty into holiness.[61] From this mystical viewpoint, martyrdom occurs at the intersection of heaven and earth where the faithful believer's "yes" to God resounds with Christ's obedience in Gethsemane.

3. Forgiveness as the Soul of Martyrdom

One of the most remarkable spiritual features in the teachings of John Paul II is his emphasis on forgiveness as the core of true martyrdom. The martyr's real victory, he states, lies

60 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), par. 19.

61 Ibid.

not in defiance of the persecutor but in loving them.[62] This love is not a mere feeling, but a participation in redemption; it reflects the mercy of Christ, who prayed for His executioners. Forgiveness transforms the act of dying into a declaration of the Gospel of peace. The martyr's last words and demeanor are a revelation of Christ's mercy, demonstrating that love can conquer even death and that evil can be subjected only through goodness.[63] Martyrdom, thus, is not an act of despair, but of hope. The martyr transcends the suffering of the moment and looks forward to the everlasting promise of God's communion. In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II stated that the martyrs are "the most eloquent sign of the truth of the Gospel, for they proclaim with their lives that the hope of glory is greater than the fear of death."[64] The martyr's peace in suffering becomes the foreteller of the resurrection and the proclamation that every cross hides within it the power of eternal life.

4. Martyrdom as the Victory of Hope and Communion

Ultimately, martyrdom for John Paul II serves as a beacon of Christian hope. Martyrs' blood is not a sign of tragedy, but a sign of birth, the seed of a renewed humanity reconciled through love.[65] Their martyrdom has the certainty that divine mercy is stronger than evil and that suffering borne in faith

62 John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of the Vietnamese Martyrs*, Homilies, June 19, 1988, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19880619_martiri.html.

63 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), par. 25.

64 John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), par. 37.

65 John Paul II, *Homily at the Beatification of the Spanish Martyrs*, Homilies, March 11, 2001, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_07031999.html.

is mysteriously connected with the redemptive act of God over the world. Besides, martyrdom is a factor that unifies the Church more. The Pope teaches that the testimonies of all martyrs belong to the whole Church, which transcends the boundaries of countries and even those of religions.[66] Their loyalty connects all the Christians of the different denominations, and as he put it in *Ut Unum Sint*, "a vital source of unity for the Church."[67] The saints, through their suffering, encourage the Church that holiness is not a gift for the few, but a universal vocation —a road of constant conversion from self-love to the love of God. In the end, John Paul II saw martyrdom as the revelation of God's own heart, a love that totally gives itself without regard for the cost. The martyr's demise is not the silence of the defeated; it is the song of the conqueror, victory announcing the truth that love and life in Christ are indestructible. Moreover, he expressed this point during the Jubilee of the Martyrs, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of new Christians and the sign that love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death."[68]

To sum up, for Saint John Paul II, martyrdom represents the pinnacle of Christian discipleship, characterized by a profound union with Christ in love, suffering, and hope. It is not just dying as an external act but an inward change where the believer's freedom and God's grace come together in complete self-giving. The martyr, through forgiveness, communion, and hope, becomes an image of God's love that wins over hatred and death. Thus, martyrdom shows the person's highest dignity

66 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), §13.

67 John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, par. 84.

68 John Paul II, *Homily for the Jubilee of the Martyrs*, May 7, 2000, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20000507_test-fede.html.

and the Church's ultimate mission: to live and die in the truth of love. After examining the spiritual meaning of martyrdom in John Paul II's theology, we now explore its contemporary relevance. We will explore how this enduring witness continues to inspire evangelization, support faith during modern persecutions, and shape the understanding of "daily martyrdom" in the lives of today's Christians.

The Contemporary Relevance of Martyrdom

1. Martyrdom and Evangelization

At the heart of St. John Paul II's concept of martyrdom is not just the ultimate personal, martyr-like confession of faith, but also a crucial factor in the Church's worldwide mission. He points to the missionaries of old who were killed in the mission lands and said that the martyrs "crowned their testimony ... with the sacrifice of their lives."[69] This indicates that the mission must be undertaken with the same spirit of self-giving: to evangelize is to be ready to die. During the canonization ceremony on March 6, 2000, he said:

> These martyrs made their lives a generous response to God's gift and are eloquent models of Christian witness for us all. ... Let us pray to God that the example of fidelity of these first Christians, especially of those families of martyrs - many of whom had tender-age children - and of the numerous unknown people, will spur us to renew our commitment to a courageous and fruitful evangelization at all levels of society.[70]

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69 ZENIT Staff, "John Paul II Remembers Murdered Missionaries," *ZENIT*, October 24, 2004, https://zenit.org/2004/10/24/john-paul-ii-remembers-murdered-missionaries/?

70 Pope John Paul II, *To the Faithful Gathered for the Beatification of 44 Martyrs*, March 6, 2000, Speeches, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2000/jan-mar/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000306_beatifications.html.

Hence, martyrdom and evangelization are closely linked: the preaching of the Gospel demands bravery and the willingness to be a witness even unto death.

In the *Angelus* on August 29, 2004, Pope John Paul II quotes St. John the Baptist, pointing out that "martyrdom ... is the highest point of witness to moral truth ... Although relatively few are called to make this supreme sacrifice, it is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice"[71]. At times, a truly heroic effort is also needed in daily life, in order not to give in to the difficulties that are an incentive to compromise and to live the Gospel "*sine glossa*."[72] This means that while not all Christians are called to die for their faith, they are all invited to participate in evangelization, being ready for anything that would require full witness to Christ.

Missionary activities face numerous challenges, including cultural opposition, persecution, and poverty, and martyrdom can then become the greatest act of evangelization. The congregants are called to live like martyrs, to proclaim the Gospel with generosity, even if it means losing their lives. To sum up, the relationship between martyrdom and evangelization is so close that the two cannot be separated: the real preaching of the Gospel requires nothing less than total surrender. Martyrs are the perfect example of "silent evangelization," proving that the life of a martyr in witness can be fruitful for the Church, and John Paul II invites all Christians to join this mission with boldness and liberality.

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71 John Paul II, *Angelus, 29 August 2004, Castel Gandolfo*, Angelus, August 29, 2004, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20040829.html

72 Ibid.

2. Martyrdom Amid Modern Persecution

In the present-day world, John Paul II notes that martyrdom is not an event of the past Church alone, but remains very much alive. "Martyrdom is not a reality that belongs to the past, but also a reality of the present time. ... every day the possibility arises of continuing to endure sufferings for the love of Christ."[73] This knowledge enables the faithful to see that persecution still takes place, be it through marginalization, coercion, or social exclusion, not only by direct violence.

In the *Angelus* on December 26, 2003, the Pope announced: "Today I would especially like to remember the Christian communities that are suffering persecution and all the faithful who suffer for the faith. May the Lord give them the strength to persevere and the ability to love even those who cause their suffering."[74] In this sense, "persecution" refers not only to the outright religious suppression but also to the societal and cultural hostilities. He further pointed out that the martyr not only gives the faithful strong evidence of their belief but also acts as "a seed of life" for the oppressed. So, modern persecution does not hinder the Church's mission. It might even facilitate its growth, for. as he asserts: "in them, as in all martyrs, the Church has always found a seed of life."[75]

Today's believers are invited to recognize that faith might demand suffering, to respond with bravery and wisdom, and, when the option comes up between disowning faith or

73 ZENIT Staff, "Martyrdom Is Reality of Our Times, Pope Says," *ZENIT*, March 12, 2001, https://zenit.org/2001/03/12/martyrdom-is-reality-of-our-times-pope-says/

74 Pope John Paul II, *Angelus: Feast of St. Stephen*, December 26, 2003, Angelus, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/angelus/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_20031226.html

75 Pope John Paul II, "We Must Follow in the Martyrs' Footsteps," *CatholicCulture.org*, March 12, 2001, https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3521.

testifying, to opt for loyalty. As Jesus tells us: "Do not fear those who kill the body..." (Mt 10:28), a passage which he said,

> wherever there is no need for the witness of blood, the witness of daily life should be even more evident. We need to bear witness to God in word and deed everywhere, in every place: in the family, in the workplace, in offices and schools. In places where people work and where they rest. We need to profess our faith in God by taking an active part in the life of the Church; by concern for the weak and suffering, and also by taking responsibility for public issues, in a spirit of concern for the future of the nation, built on the truth of the Gospel.[76]

To sum up, martyrdom as a living witness still holds its ground through modern persecution. It inspires courage, fortifies communities in times of trial, and prepares every believer for ultimate faithfulness if the time comes.

3. Daily Martyrdom

John Paul II presents daily martyrdom not as a mere image, but as a real challenge to live one's faith in the same way as it is lived out in everyday situations. He points out that although only a few die for the faith, all Christians, through small but constant acts of fidelity, are part of the living and essential family, as evidenced in their work, study, and neighbour relationships, which give testimony to their faith. Daily martyrdom is seen in perseverance in prayer, moral uprightness, love for the poor, and advocacy of justice and truth, even in the places where Christian values are either totally rejected or at least not welcomed.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, martyrdom is described not only as a sacrifice for those who give their

76 Pope John Paul II, *Homily of John Paul II at the Celebration of the Word in Gorzów*, June 2, 1997, Homilies, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19970602_gorzow.html

lives for Jesus but also as a deeper and wider concept known as "daily martyrdom," which involves constant self-surrender and faithfulness in a typical Christian life.[77]

Daily martyrdom signifies that all Christians are invited to die to themselves so that Christ may live in them. It is an internal struggle of constant conversion, where one gives up their own desires, aspirations, and sins so that divine grace can live and work totally in one's life. Saint Paul said it in this way: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal 2:20). Thus, martyrdom is not limited to a single heroic death scene but is experienced daily, through minor but loving choices, whenever believers carry their cross and follow Jesus (cf. Lk 9:23).

This is what John Paul II describes as "bloodless martyrdom," a mighty yet silent way of giving one's life by daily fidelity to the Gospel amidst the ups and downs of modern life.[78] He mentions in *Vita Consecrata*: "The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God."[79] But the reality also applies to laypersons; indeed, every baptized Christian is encouraged to practice daily martyrdom, giving oneself in love to God and serving others.

Innumerable, everyday situations are the arena for daily martyrdom: the father, the family hero; the mother, the faithful nurturer of the children; the young person, the Gospel reader and heir of heaven, etc.; the sick person, the God-truster; or those who, like the poor, serve, despised and misunderstood, yet always lonely, holding on to their faith. These are all hidden

77 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, par. 25.

78 Ibid., par. 104.

79 Ibid., par. 105.

acts of love, the little martyrdoms buried in the world's heart like seeds.

Daily martyrdom is a constant struggle and requires dedication. Martyrdom without loyalty cannot exist. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux is a remarkable example of such a silent witness. Although she did not lose her blood, she dedicated every minute of her life to God through love and called it a "martyrdom of love." She was dying every day in little acts of sacrifice, which were all for the glory of God.[80] This again is the path that is open to every believer, to live normally with extraordinary love.

Today, daily martyrdom is a great deal in the secularized world. When people are carried away by comfort, ambition, and egoism, being faithful to the Gospel, really in honesty, humility, or purity, requires the same amount of strength as dying. It is indeed the true form of martyrdom. Many christians may not be killed for their fait, but they can still "die" for choosing the truth in the midst of lies, "die" for being chaste in a permissive culture or "die" for the right to life and human dignity in the midst of a death culture. The crosses of modern times are these, and every believer is invited to bear them with joy and hope.

The term "daily martyrdom" refers to the specific decisions made by Christians on a daily basis, such as truth-telling, living according to the Gospel, and tolerating minor inconveniences. It encompasses the sacrifices of parents for their children, the relinquishment of youthful pleasures for the sake of others, and the dedication of clergy to pastoral care. Moreover, it is claimed that even the most common believers are allowed to participate in this silent witness: "This martyrdom in ordinary

80 Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *Story of a Soul*, ch. XI.

life constitutes a testimony more important now than ever in the secularized societies of our time."[81]

The Pope, besides, adds that the daily life suffering, no matter whether it is through sickness, personal sacrifices, or moral struggles, can be a part of Christ's redemptive suffering. In his words, "suffering accepted in union with Christ becomes a participation in His saving work, transforming ordinary daily challenges into a form of witness."[82] Thus, every Christian's life becomes a living testimony, a silent yet powerful Gospel proclamation that may touch even family, friends, and society who are not so receptive.

The concept of daily martyrdom encourages Christians to be morally courageous even when confronting the modern world's social pressures. For instance, being honest in one's job or among friends, refusing to be part of corrupt practices, and being a voice for life and human rights are the witnesses of today. Additionally, John Paul II indicates that the daily martyrdom has communal repercussions. These acts, though mostly private and unnoticed, enhance the moral and spiritual values of the Christian community. The believers, by being true in their daily lives, not only encourage others to do so but also create a chain reaction of the Church's empowerment.

Daily martyrdom instils in Christians the virtues of perseverance, patience, and hope. The choice to constantly bear witness to Christ, by the means of honesty, love, and service, turns out to be a heroic act of faith in a world full of distractions, materialism, and moral compromises. The Pope instead calls the believers to see the extraordinary worth of

81 Pope Benedict XVI, "Holy Father's Angelus on Martyrdom in Everyday Life," *Catholic News Agency*, October 28, 2007, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/10810/holy-fathers-angelus-on-martyrdom-in-everyday-life.

82 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, §19.

common fidelity: "Even the smallest acts, united with Christ's sacrifice, have eternal significance."[83] Thus, the daily martyrdom prepares Christians with the necessary qualities to face hardships with boldness, maintain their faith in unwelcoming places, and, through small but regular, faithful deeds, sanctify the world.

Conclusion

The theological reflections and teachings of Saint Pope John Paul II lead to the conclusion that martyrdom is not merely an ancient Christian tradition but signifies a new era of martyrs whose understanding would thoroughly encompass all aspects of theology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. He considered martyrdom as the highest proof of the faith, a full meeting of God and mankind, of grace and freedom, of love and truth. In the context of the Paschal Mystery, the blood of martyrs is turned into seeds that bear Church, revive faith, and proclaim with a loud voice that love is victorious over death.

John Paul II's insight reveals that martyrdom is not so much a death penalty for being a Christian, but even more an ultimate expression of love, in which one offers oneself freely to God and others. In this, human dignity is elevated through the Savior's fellowship, in which the man learns the most profound significance of his being: "Man can not completely find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." Accordingly, martyrdom is not just a past historical event, but a living message for the present world, which still endures persecutions of different kinds, violence, and indifference.

The teaching of Saint John Paul II serves as a reminder to the faithful that every Christian is called to be a witness - even without bloodshed - through the Gospel's faithfulness in daily

83 John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §10.

life. "Daily martyrdom" refers to the perseverance in the face of difficulties, the courage to live by the Gospel in a secularised world, and the steadfastness in pursuing justice, peace, and love. It is the quiet yet strong witness of faith that turns suffering into communion and loyalty into mission.

Martyrdom as perceived by Saint John Paul II is a puzzle that can only be solved through faith and love, the highest point of human freedom and dignity, and at the same time, a spring of renewal for the spiritual life and missionary zeal of the Church today. By martyr's blood, the Church is cleansed and born again in the hope and glory of the Resurrection. Their martyrdoms are viewed as a purification of the Church; thus, Christians are encouraged to keep on living, to speak of Christ through their actions and words, and to testify that real life is only found in love that is entirely given.

HOPE AMIDST DESOLATION: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON MYANMAR CATHOLICISM[1]

Set Paing Tun, SJ

Abstract. This research paper examines the profound spiritual resilience of Catholics in Myanmar amid ongoing socio-political turmoil, including the *coup d'état*, civil war, and rising inflation. Utilizing socio-historical and literary analyses, this paper investigates how Psalm 23 functions as a vital source of hope and consolation, fostering resilience among Myanmar Catholics experiencing uncertainty and desolation. The analysis highlights Psalm 23:4, which states, "even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me," and explores the metaphor of God as a shepherd who provides and protects, resonating with the lived experiences of believers facing suffering and instability. This paper further reflects on the enduring resilience and daily protection attributed to God, despite challenges faced by Church leaders. Finally, the paper demonstrates how biblical texts offer a framework for understanding and nurturing hope, faith, and perseverance during turbulent times, and advocates for enhanced pastoral leadership rooted in scriptural wisdom.

Keywords: resilience, coup, Myanmar, desolation, hope

Introduction

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian country, has a rich culture and traditions that are based on the majority Buddhist religion,

1 GenAI Declaration: This paper used Grammarly Application for the following components: sentence check, grammar check, and vocabulary check.

with other minor religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam coexisting peacefully. There was a democratic transition led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a leader who spent decades advocating for democracy. With this effort, a political and economic transition process began under the power of the military government in 2011. Furthermore, the people in Myanmar experienced the real and first democratic elections that were held in 2015. From that election, the National League of Democracy party (NLD), a party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the election, and the country became a democratic nation. From 2011 until 2020, Myanmar experienced a free and safe nation with high economic growth. This became a great economic reform and optimism for greater economic stability in the nation. However, on 1st February 2021, a military coup set back the democratic nation and development, as well as the seizure of Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces), made the fragile progress towards civilian rule, spread the violence, political instability, and the devastation for economic development. As a result, the country has increased the number of poor and hungry, internal conflict, and displacement from civil war. According to the UN, 18.6 million or approximately one-third of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, including six million children.[2] The recent crises have eroded many of the development and achievements made over the past decades.

The impact of civil war is awful because millions of people have been forced to flee and displaced from their native places and moved to neighboring countries such as Thailand and India as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in many refugee camps. The tactics of the military applied the use of airstrikes attacks on their own Myanmar civilians, and many civilians

2 "The World Bank in Myanmar," *World Bank Group*, October 8, 2024, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/overview (accessed May 3, 2026).

experienced the loss of life and suffered from the escalation of violence. The military regime cracked down on freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, then arrested the journalists and activists, and anyone who joined in these movements. These actions created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, and difficult for civilians to live and rebuild their communities. The coup also disrupted the investment, trade, and services. The value of currency has declined, and there was inflation has eroded for buying power of ordinary citizens. The rising cost of food, medicines, and other basic necessities has pushed millions into poverty, and it is difficult for civilians to meet their basic needs. The effect of *coup d'état*, ongoing civil war, and economic crisis has led to deep despair and hopelessness for many civilians in Myanmar.

The Catholic Church in Myanmar is a minority religion within a majority Buddhist nation. The Church plays a role in social services and volunteer acts to foster a strong sense of community for its members in Church. Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar Catholics have experienced an ongoing crisis of violence, displacement, and destruction of their homes and livelihoods, and the loss of loved ones from the bombing attack of airstrikes. The people experienced emotional and psychological traumas from their experiences of suffering. The Church leaders find it difficult to solve these issues to stop the violence with the military government. However, the ability of Church is to provide pastoral care, administer sacraments, and help civilians remain resilient and hope amidst this chaos and suffering.

In the midst of profound desolation and ongoing crisis in Myanmar, Psalm 23, as "The Lord is my shepherd," offers the message of hope and resilience. The importance of Psalm 23 resonates with the experience of humans in times of crisis.

It shows the central metaphor for God as a shepherd of care, guidance, and protection for God's flock to provide their needs and save them from danger. While Myanmar civilians are facing the challenges from the coup, civil war, and economic crisis, the message of Psalm 23 provides a source of hope and strength for those experiencing violence, displacement, and loss of loved ones to find hope and sustain faith amidst the sufferings. Therefore, this research paper argues that Psalm 23 serves as an important source of hope and resilience for Myanmar civilians, offering a framework for understanding their sufferings, fostering their faith, and inspiring perseverance in times of socio-political turmoil.

Methodological Approach

The research paper draws on two complementary methods of interpretation: socio-historical analysis and literary-theological analysis. These are read together through the lens of contextual theology. Stephen B. Bevans argues in the book of *Models of Contextual Theology* that all genuine theological reflection must begin from within a specific human situation, because the context of a community shapes not only what questions are asked but how Scripture itself is heard and what it is heard to say.[3] This means that Myanmar context in this paper does not merely serve as background scenery for a Psalm 23 interpretation but it is a genuine source for the theological interpretation. The socio-historical method applied here grounds that context in specific institutional and scholarly documentation, rather than leaving it as a fuzzy general view.

The contemporary humanitarian situation is the focus of this paper, which draws on the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The annual

3 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans, compiled by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), included verified field data on displacement figures, civilian casualties and humanitarian access from UN agencies and local bodies operating across all areas of military control.[4] This institutional documentation is compiled from primary field reports across the country and differs substantially in character from journalistic sources. For the broader perspective of political and religious history of Myanmar since independence, the present paper draws on David I. Steinberg's *Burma/ Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, being a widely cited scholarly introductions to the modern political history of country. Steinberg looks at how the military has always been hostile towards ethnic and religious minorities. This goes from the colonial period through Ne Win's socialist government, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and into the present coup, providing the historical framework within which this paper situates the Catholic Church's long experience of survival under pressure.[5]

For the specifically ecclesial dimension, this paper uses the official statements from the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Myanmar (CBCM). These documents are the Catholic Church's own account of what is happening to it and how it is responding. In their June 2021 plenary statement, the thirteen bishops of the CBCM described thousands of Catholics "starving in the jungles" and pleaded for humanitarian corridors- speaking not as outside observers of a crisis but as pastors already

4 Marcoluigi Corsi, "Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (December 2023)," https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-december-2023-enmy (Accessed August 13, 2026).

5 David I. Steinberg, *Burma/ Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 67-70.

inside it.[6] Together, these sources allow this paper to show how the socio-historical method actually works in practice: the Myanmar context from which Psalm 23 is read is a documented, historically specific situation, not an unclear general setting.

This paper is also characterized by an honest acknowledgement of the limits of its socio-historical grounding. The Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) has maintained a missionary presence in Burma since 1868, and the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP) arrived even earlier. Both institutions possess archival records, including mission diaries, correspondence between missionaries and Rome, and reports on local Catholic communities under colonial and post-independence governments. These records offer the potential to provide a more comprehensive primary documentation of the Catholic Church's history in Myanmar prior to independence. It should be noted that the archives in question were not directly accessible during the preparation of this research. Where such depth is unavailable, this paper uses a strategy of triangulation. This involves the integration of institutional reports named above, in addition to scholarly secondary sources cited throughout the text, and the firsthand testimonies from individuals in Myanmar who have direct experience of the present crisis. This approach aligns with the "praxis model" of contextual theology as proposed by Bevans that the lived testimony of a community under pressure is itself treated as a legitimate theological source, not a lesser substitute for archival documentation.[7] The testimonies of Cardinal Charles

6 Catholic Bishop's Conference of Myanmar, "Myanmar Church urges 'Humanitarian Corridor' to conflict zone," *Vatican News*, June 11, 2021. https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-06/myanmar-catholics-bishops-appeal-humanitarian-corridor.html

7 Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 70-73.

Bo, Archbishop Marco Tin Win, Father Donald Martin, and the displaced Catholics of Kayah State are examined throughout this paper with this spirit that they are not merely used as illustrations of a point made elsewhere, but as primary evidence of what hope, faith, and resilience look like when Psalm 23 is prayed not in a room but in the midst of a civil war.

In contrast, the literary-theological method involves attending closely to the language, imagery, structure, and rhetorical movement of Psalm 23 itself. This involves examining key Hebrew terms, the progression of metaphors of shepherd and sheep, and the way how the psalm invites the reader into an act of trust rather than mere observation. This paper read the psalm as a "psalm of trust," with the perspectives of Brueggemann, Wenham and other scholars. This approach allows the paper to identify the theological claims the text makes about divine presence, provision and protection in the lives of people.

Bringing these two methods together is the fundamental objective of contextual theology which asserts that the biblical interpretation should never be considered a one-way movement from the text to the reader. Instead, the lived experience of a community becomes a genuine partner, raising new questions of the text and being addressed in turn by it. For Myanmar Catholics, the experience of military coup, displacement and martyrdom is not merely incidental background information; rather, it is the very horizon from which the words of Psalm 23 is interpreted and heard with urgency issue as a word of hope amid desolation. Therefore, this combined methodology does not merely illustrate the psalm with contemporary examples, but it allows the socio-historical reality of Myanmar and the literary-theological content of Psalm 23 to interpret one another.

Socio-Historical Context

The socio-historical approach helps this paper to explore the context of Myanmar Catholics, how the current situations and experiences are rooted in Myanmar's history, cultural background, and society. Myanmar is a diverse country with 135 ethnic groups, and there are eight major ethnic such as Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Burma, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. The Burmese ethnic is the largest ethnic, and the government made the Burmese language as a national language. For religion, Buddhism is the major religion in Myanmar, while Catholicism is a minority group within the nation. Myanmar was colonized by the British, with a complex history, and many missionaries came to Myanmar to do evangelization during the colonial period. Catholicism has been present in Myanmar for over 500 years. However, the Catholics in Myanmar faced many problems from the military after gaining independence in Myanmar. Graceffo mentioned in the article on the *Catholic in Myanmar's Civil War*, "Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, successive military regimes have portrayed Catholics as traitors, subjecting them to repression."[8] The missionaries in Myanmar made many efforts by doing the evangelizations for the benefit of Catholics. However, the military junta, under General Ne Win, position as a dictator, forced the missionaries to leave the country in 1965. Therefore, the Catholicism in Myanmar faced many struggles related to self-determination and human rights in the past.

To go deeper into the history of Catholicism, the minority of Catholicism arrived in Myanmar in the 18th and 19th centuries with the effort of missionaries from European countries. Most of the priests were Italians, and they could speak and teach the

8 Antonio Graceffo, "Catholics in Myanmar's Civil War," *Providence*, January 17, 2024, https://providencemag.com/2024/01/catholics-in-myanmars-civil-war/ (accessed May 5, 2026).

Myanmar people in English. The missionaries and the Catholic community engaged in education, social services, and healthcare, which help and foster not only Catholics but also for the other non-Catholics in Myanmar. Sai Leng, a Buddhist student from a Catholic school, expressed that "Although students at the Catholic school had to attend chapel and religious instruction, there was no requirement to convert to Catholicism."[9] The missionaries did not persuade the Buddhist students and other ethnic students to convert to Catholicism, but they gave the service of education for the well-being of the nation. Although the missionaries did excellent work in Myanmar, the military junta, General Ne Win, forced the missionaries to go back to their own countries in 1965. Then, all the systems of education and healthcare in Myanmar became poor and collapsed.

Nowadays, the Catholics from different minor ethnic groups are facing different kinds of oppressions in Myanmar because of the ongoing war. After the coup, the Burmese army (Tatmadaw) increased the brutality for the innocent ethnic groups in different areas. Khu Ko Reh, a director of the minor ethnic group of Karenni Civil Society, mentioned, "In the past, they mostly dropped bombs where fighting was taking place. It used to be that when the bombs were falling, civilians could seek refuge in buildings. But now, they also drop bombs on IDP camps, clinics, hospitals, schools, churches, and temples."[10] They intentionally target the public areas like churches and attack the places of refuge. This creates excessive turmoil and suffering for the civilians, especially for refugees. Therefore, this paper shows that from the past until the present moment how the military junta oppressed the missionaries as well as innocent Catholic civilians in times of suffering.

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9 Graceffo, "Catholics in Myanmar's Civil War."

10 Graceffo, "Catholics in Myanmar's Civil War."

Challenges Faced by Myanmar Citizens

The military coup in Myanmar since 1st February 2021 has created many crises with economic inflation and instability for Myanmar citizens. The impact of the coup led to complex inflation, increased poverty, and a decline in the standard of living for the people of Myanmar. First, the primary cause of inflation disrupted trade and investment. Because of political instability and widespread conflict from the coup, the economy in Myanmar became uncertain and discouraged from continuing the foreign investment. Foreign businesses have left the country due to deteriorating business performance, while others have left due to sanctions-related issues. A few companies remain simply because they are unable to fully withdraw.[11] The new foreign investments have plummeted in Myanmar, and they have decided to cancel their businesses in Myanmar. This decline in investment has led to an economic deficit in trade. In addition, there was increasing poverty, which was driven by inflation. In June 2024 the regime had printed 30 trillion kyat since the coup.[12] This shows that inflation has peaked at 35% in 2022, especially for food items and transport. The government increased the essential goods, so people in Myanmar find it difficult to handle the need for the goods with their own incomes. Moreover, many young people are fleeing to other countries, especially Thailand and India, to work and survive their lives. Nearly one-fifth of Myanmar's population has left their home communities due to economic hardship or conflict, reducing the working-age population

11 Jared Bissinger, "Challenges and Priorities for Myanmar's Conflicted Economy," *Yusof Ishak Institute*, 13 February 2025, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ISEAS_Perspective_2025_11.pdf, 6.

12 Bissinger, "Challenges and Priorities for Myanmar's Conflicted Economy," 3.

and lowering productivity.[13] The Myanmar military regime made the economy worse, so many young people migrated to other countries, which led the country to increase poverty and economic hardship. The disruption to trade and investment and the ongoing conflict have led to a complex economic crisis. The result of slow growth, high inflation, and widespread poverty has shown a challenging and uncertain future for the people of Myanmar.

Moreover, the Church leaders, like priests and religious, face many challenges since the 2021 coup till the ongoing war in the present time. They found it difficult to provide pastoral care for the people in the conflict zone and maintain the mission of the Church within the mix of feelings of fear and oppression. Cardinal Charles Bo expressed in the article of *Catholic World Report*, "The conflict has already left more than 100 places of worship bombed or damaged, and the violence has spread in many areas of the territory. In addition, almost 3 million people have been displaced and are in urgent need of assistance."[14] The Church is the place for gathering of a Catholic community – the place where the sacrament are celebrated, where the children are baptized, and where the dead are mourned. When more than hundred worship spaces are bombed and burned, the military is not only attacking the buildings but attacking the spiritual space that holds the Catholic life together. Cardinal Charles Bo points at the center of this crisis is an attempt to unmake the Church not only physically but spiritually,

13 Bissinger, "Challenges and Priorities for Myanmar's Conflicted Economy," 3.

14 Ana Paula Morales and Andrés Henriquez, "Myanmar conflict: a state of unprecedented turmoil and suffering, Cardinal says," *Catholic News Agency*, May 24, 2024, https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2024/05/24/myanmar-conflict-a-state-of-unprecedented-turmoil-and-suffering-cardinal-bo-says/ (accessed May 8, 2026).

destroying the spaces where Catholics gather, worship, and recognize themselves as a community.

However, Cardinal Charles Bo made a universal call for peace and said, "We call on all parties to seek a path of peace. At the beginning of the war, the Church tried to bring together all parties to work for consensus. Recently, the avenues for peace seem to be limited, but the Church continues to reach out to all stakeholders in the hope of bringing peace."[15] What makes this especially difficult is that negotiations with the military regime have produced little result. This shows how the Church leaders faced the challenges of freedom to save their sheep in a conflict war zone. The Church leaders are trying to negotiate with the military not to harm the Catholics and the Church in the war zone, as well as to support the people who have psychological trauma from these sufferings. The people in a war zone experience mental disorders, depression, and anxiety. They feel the powerlessness and hopelessness because of the fear of persecution and suppression of human rights. The Church tries to offer spiritual care, like prayer and sacrament, as well as mental health services like counselling for those who are affected by mental disorders in war zones. The Church plays an important role in providing the basic needs of its own members in conflict areas and offers spiritual and psychological guidance to overcome these traumas and find hope amid despair.

Historical and Literary Analysis on Psalm 23

The passage of Psalm 23 explains God as a shepherd who is depicted as a caring and loving guide for God's people. This psalm focuses on imagery, metaphors, and poetic structures to enhance its message of protection and guidance, which offer the strength for those facing adversity, particularly the Myanmar

15 Morales and Henriquez, "Myanmar Conflict."

citizens enduring the ongoing crisis. Psalm 23 explains three main points: God's provision, protection, and peace on earth. God's provision can be seen in verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This sentence gives the message that God is not withholding anything. God provides us abundantly that we are not lacking but overflowing with a true blessing. God's provision is stable and still given even in the face of adversity in our lives.

The central metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep in Psalm verse 1 is a powerful example of how the shepherd embodies God's care, guidance, and protection while the sheep represent the vulnerable being. This helps the sheep avoid pain, injury, and even death. God's protection over our lives is often unseen, but the faithful can feel the benefits of God's constant love and care. In addition, the author can see the meaning of "shepherd" in the book *Exploring the Old Testament*; the author mentioned that:

> The metaphor of the shepherd was a rich one in ancient Israel. In a largely agricultural society, everyone knew about the ways of sheep and the responsibilities of shepherds. Because of the very seasonal nature of the rains, there were times of year when good pasture was hard to find, and it was the shepherd's duty to find it for the sheep. Since the pasture was out in the open country, the shepherd had to protect the sheep from predators. So, shepherding was about provision and protection for the flock. In the ancient Near East, 'shepherd' was a title applied to leaders. Both gods and kings were spoken of as shepherds of their people. The shepherd mace שֵׁבעט (rod) as a stick and מִשְׁעֶנֶת (staff) were often used as symbols of office. Through the metaphor of 'shepherd,' the psalmist speaks of Yahweh as the one who can be relied on to provide for and protect, the one who trusts in him.[16]

The shepherd mace (rod) as a stick and (staff) as a support of walking stick which shows the symbol of shepherd. The rod and the staff are the shepherd's weapon and implement. These instruments of guidance help David even in the valley

16 Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature*, vol. 3, Exploring the Bible: Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 39.

of the shadow of death, and God guides David even through correction. It is a great comfort to know that God will correct us when we need it. Moreover, this beautiful prayer with "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" evokes the nomadic environment of sheep farming and the experience of familiarity between the shepherd and the sheep. This image calls us to see the atmosphere of trust, intimacy, and tenderness, how the shepherd knows each one of the sheep and calls them by name, and they follow the shepherd because they recognize and trust in the shepherd. God looks after God's sheep and is ready to defend them and to guarantee their well-being and enable them to live a peaceful life. The sheep can lack nothing as long as the shepherd is with them. The psalmist refers to this experience by calling God a shepherd and letting God lead the sheep to a safe place.

The other scholars of the Psalm have brought out dimensions of the shepherd image that speak directly to the situation of Myanmar Catholics. The scholar Artur Weiser in his commentary on the Psalms argues that the message of Psalm 23 is not simply a personal feeling of comfort. It is rooted in Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh, the same covenant established in the Exodus, when God fed, led and protected a people who had nothing of their own to rely on.[17] This covenantal relationship shows that the sheep does not trust the shepherd because the shepherd has proven pleasant; but the sheep trusts because the shepherd has made a promise and kept it through generations. For the Catholics of Myanmar- a community with no political power and no guarantee that tomorrow will be safer than today- the confidence of "I shall not want" is not wishful thinking but is grounded in God's historical faithfulness.

17 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 228.

Another scholar, James L. Mays, points to the political and social dimensions of the shepherd-king image in the ancient Near East. The Kings were called shepherds of their people, and the specific duty of a shepherd was to protect the vulnerable. In the ancient Near East, the duty of a shepherd-king extended specifically to protecting the vulnerable - the landless, the widow, the person without a defender and the that protective accountability was built into the very image itself.[18] The psalmist addresses God as "shepherd" and has positioned God's self as the one responsible for those who have no other protector. This speaks directly to Myanmar Catholics who have been abandoned by their own state and targeted by military junta that was supposed to defend them with God's protection and care. God as a shepherd takes on this role and takes on the accountability to protect for the people of Myanmar.

If the Lord is the Shepherd, even in the desert and desolate place of death, the author can say "I shall not want" because our life will not be ruined and destroyed, and God will be with us. Indeed, the shepherd has a good heart for the flock, and the shepherd knows what the needs of the sheep are. The shepherd walks and lives with them and leads them on the path of righteousness. The safety of the sheep is a priority for the shepherd, and the shepherd complies with this in leading the flock. If we follow the Good Shepherd, no matter how difficult, torturous, and deserts without water, one may walk on the paths of righteousness with the guidance of the Good Shepherd.

The patristic tradition finds deeper meaning here as well. Augustine of Hippo reflects on Psalm 23 in his *Exposition of the Psalms*, that the one who has God as shepherd is not in want, for He is his all. For Augustine, the shepherd restored and renews

18 James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 117.

those who have lost their strength through suffering.[19] For Augustine, "I shall not want" shows not to material needs but the deepest hungers of human person for life meaning, security and future that cannot be taken away. These are the hungers that military coups and economic collapse cannot satisfy and cannot destroy because they are hungers that only God can meet. The person who lives in this relationship with God, lacks nothing even when they lack everything in the ordinary sense.

Augustine goes further in his commentary on verse 3 that "he restores my soul as God drawing back to God's self the soul that has wandered. He guided me along the narrow paths of his righteousness for the sake of his own name."[20] Augustine clearly understood that human person who is always in danger of losing the way not only through sin, but through fear, grief and suffering. The shepherd's task is continual work of restoration, bringing back the soul that has lost not once, but as many times as it is needed. The reading of Augustine shows the experience of Myanmar Catholics who have been displaced, physically and psychologically wounded by years of civil war. However, Psalm 23 assures that God is not simply a God who was present in the beginning but God who keeps restoring for the wandering soul.

Moreover, the author can see how the Psalmist declares calm and assurance without doubt or fear in verse 4: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." When one observes the literary explanation of this verse in the book of *Exploring the Old Testament*, the Hebrew adjective that is used to describe the "valley" can be

19 Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000), 244.

20 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*, 246.

interpreted as a word meaning "darkness," or as a compound word meaning "shadow of death." The sense may be metaphorical, "deepest darkness," but the mention of death gives the added element of a sense of fear.[21] Walking through the valley of the shadow of death on our own does not produce a sense of peace. However, the psalmist encourages those who walk with the Lord, even in the dark valleys of suffering, doubt, and all the human problems, to feel safe. The phrase "I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" means that the shepherd can correct the right way for the sheep, so that the sheep are on the right track. Similarly, God's peace comes because God is with us and one can trust in God. God's peace restores the broken and hurting parts of our souls. Therefore, the author can see how God loves us and cares for the sheep because God is our shepherd and the faithful will never lack and always have God's protection and peace. In the book of *Message of Psalms*, Brueggemann mentioned that "Evil is present in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the source of new orientation."[22] This symbolizes the divine provision and protection that reinforce the message of God's constant care and presence to give us peace. This literary analysis of the psalm enhances the message of God's protection and guidance, which serves as a source of hope and comfort for the people of Myanmar to find strength in their faith and to persevere through their suffering.

Restoration, Protection, and the Promise of God's House Psalm 23:2–3 and 5–6

While verses 1 and 4 in Psalm 23 have previously been analyzed as the foundation of God's provision and protection,

21 Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 40.

22 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 156.

the surrounding verses deepen this message and speak as directly to the situation of Myanmar Catholics. Verse 2 states that "He makes me lie down in green pasture; he leads me beside still waters," and verse 3 continues by stating that "He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." For sheep, lying down in the green pastures beside still waters is not a luxury but a necessity; the sheep that are anxious, thirsty or fatigued will not rest or nourish themselves no matter how abundant the pasture is. Therefore, the shepherd's role is first to create the conditions that enable rest to occur. For millions of Myanmar civilians who have been displaced on multiple occasions, who live under the constant threat of military airstrikes and who carry the cumulative exhaustion of years of conflict, this image of being made to lie down speaks to a need that is at once physical, emotional and spiritual. The ministry of Catholic Church to Internally Displaced Person (IDPs), through the provision of shelter, food assistance and a simple encouragement in IDP camps, can be understood as a concrete extension of act of shepherding that create the small spaces of green pasture and still water for the needs of sheep within a landscape.

The phrase "he restores my soul" is of particular significance for the population experiencing widespread trauma in Myanmar. The term can also be translated as "restoration," suggesting a soul that has wandered, weakened or lost its way being brought back to wholeness.[23] This is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing action of the shepherd, repeated as often as the sheep strays or grows weary. When read alongside the experiences of Myanmar Catholics, many of whom carry profound grief over the loss of family members, homes, and the land. This verse offers a vision of God who does not abandon

23 Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 154.

the wounded soul to its wounds but continually works to restore it. The subsequent phrase, "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake," further grounds this restoration in God's own protection and faithfulness rather than in the merit of sheep. For a community that may feel powerless to change its political circumstances, this is a significant theological claim: the path forward is guaranteed not by human strength but by the trustworthiness of God's own name.

Verse 5 marks a transition in imagery, with a shift from shepherd and sheep to host and guest that "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." The act of setting a table is an act of hospitality and abundance and the fact that this table is prepared in the presence of my enemies. The psalmist does not claim that the enemies have been removed or the danger has passed; rather, God's goodness becomes visible precisely within the unresolved tension of a hostile situation.[24] For Myanmar Catholics who continue to assemble for celebrating Mass and devotions even in the midst of ongoing danger and violence, this verse offers the act of divine abundance and presence where the surrounding conflict and war cannot fully extinguish. With the image of overflowing cup in Eucharist, the Church in Myanmar is itself a sign of hope that exceeds the limits imposed by the crisis.

Finally, the psalm concludes with verse 6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." This final verse of psalm serves to broaden the psalm's perspective, transitioning from the present journey to a permanent dwelling in God. For Myanmar Catholics, whose days are seen by uncertainty about tomorrow, this final verse provides an

24 Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 155.

eschatological dimension: the hope expressed in Psalm 23 is not contingent on the resolution of present crisis, whether through a ceasefire, an election or an improved economy. However, the promise of dwelling in the house of the Lord help the Myanmar Catholics to firmly believe even the most severe present sufferings without denying their reality. In this way, the psalm as a whole from the immediate need of the sheep for pasture and water, through the assurance of presence in the valley of deep darkness, to the hospitality of the table and finally to the permanence of God's house, offers a complete hope that begins in the concrete struggles of daily survival and ends in the assurance of God's unending faithfulness.

The Experience of Myanmar Catholics

The main aim of Psalm 23 is to confess trust in the midst of the daily lives of believers, especially when we are in crisis. In the article on Working Preacher, the psalm is described as a psalm of trust. It speaks powerfully to and for God's people in troubled times.[25] The message from the psalm that "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" gives the message of hope, comfort, and assurance for the people of Myanmar. It invites Myanmar Catholics to recognize God's loving care and trust in God's provision and protection, that God is always present even in the most challenging circumstances. The message of trust and dependence on God is relevant to the context of Myanmar, where Catholics face immense suffering and uncertainty. It is to remind that even amidst desolate times, there is a source of hope and security from the divine shepherd.

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25 Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Psalm 23," *Working Preacher–Luther Seminary Saint Paul*, March 30, 2014, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-psalm-23-11 (Accessed May 10, 2026).

The imagery of the shepherd who guides and protects the flock directly relates to the experiences of Myanmar Catholics. Psalm 23:4 says that "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." God is like a shepherd even in the darkest valley, providing a sense of security and reassurance for God's people. Therefore, David sang this phrase that David was under the care of the Lord, the shepherd. Even in a fearful place, the presence of the shepherd banished the fear of evil.[26] This shows the reality of suffering while asserting God's presence as a source of strength and courage. This is an invitation for Myanmar Catholics to have resilience and hope in the face of fear and violence.

Role of Faith in Sustaining Hope

Moreover, faith plays a crucial role in sustaining hope for Myanmar Catholics amidst the ongoing suffering and turmoil. In November 2017, Pope Francis visited the country of Myanmar. According to the archbishop of Yangon, during his visit, the pope gave "several messages of love and peace, but unfortunately, they didn't register." Despite everything, the cardinal added, it brought a message of peace between religions and their leaders.[27] It shows that the unwavering belief of Myanmar Catholics in God's presence and care, as mentioned in Psalm 23, provides a source of resilience and strength. The faith is not merely a passive acceptance but an active and lived experience that informs the daily lives of believers and offers a pathway to cope with the immense challenges faced in Myanmar.

The author believes that God is the shepherd, guiding and protecting through the darkest valley, which provides a deep

26 David Guzik, "Psalm 23 – The Lord is My Shepherd and My Host," *The Enduring Word Bible Commentary*, https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-23/ (Accessed May 10, 2026).

27 Morales and Henriquez, "Myanmar conflict."

sense of security. However, this contrasts with the experience of Myanmar Catholics. There was a Catholic priest who was brutally murdered on 14th February 2025 in his parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in the Archdiocese of Mandalay, which is situated in the middle part of Myanmar. The name of the priest is Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win, who was the parish priest of that Church. He was an active and pious priest who organized educational initiatives for the children and young people who could not attend school during the coup. Due to the ongoing war, many schools in that region remain closed. Thus, the parents sent their children to religious leaders and catechists who could provide education in the parish. The area where Father Donald served is controlled by the People's Defense Force (PDF), an armed group opposing Myanmar's military junta. On 14 February, a group of ten men came to Father Donald and asked him to stop helping the children by giving them an education. Furthermore, they asked Father Donald to kneel down in front of them. Father Donald did not kneel down and said, "I will only kneel down in front of God, not you." Then, they shot Father Donald, who died on the spot. Since that area is outside the control of the military junta, it is difficult to identify which group killed Father Donald, either the PDF or the military junta. It is sad that the military junta did not take responsibility for the murder of Father Donald. The Archbishop Marco Tin Win condemned the cycle of violence gripping the nation, saying, "Violence only brings death and destruction; it is always a defeat. He called upon all armed groups involved in the conflict to lay down their weapons and take a path of peace and reconciliation."[28] Father Donald's death is the worst

28 LiCAS News, "Massive turnout for funeral of slain Catholic priest in Myanmar," *Vatican News*, 18 February 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-02/myanmar-funeral-slain-catholic-priest-aggressors-arrested.html (Accessed May 12, 2026).

tragic event in Myanmar. The Catholic Church in Myanmar calls for peace and reconciliation amid the persistent violence. Although the archbishop requested peace, there is no response to the peace, and the military junta continues to persecute the Church and religious priests, which shows crimes against humanity in Myanmar.

The faith of Father Donald motivates this author to see how he served his parish and helped the children who needed him the most. This was inspired by the example of Christ, who came to serve rather than to be served. Myanmar Catholics are called to do the acts of compassion and solidarity in times of suffering. Psalm 23 also inspires the people in Myanmar to persevere in their faith even when facing persecution and oppression. They can feel that the assurance of God is with them, even in the darkest valley, which provides a sense of courage and resilience in times of suffering and hopelessness in Myanmar.

Message on Resilience and Hope

From the theological perspective, resilience and hope are gifts from God that empower the person to endure suffering and persevere in faith. The ability to endure suffering and maintain faith with trust is a testament to God's grace and a reflection of divine presence in our lives. In the article *Working Preacher*, Jacobson mentioned, "In prayers for help, the emphasis is usually on crying out in complaint and requesting help. In the psalm of trust, the emphasis is on trust."[29] The Myanmar Catholics' suffering is a result of the ongoing crisis, which can be seen as Christ's own suffering that offers a path toward new life and liberation. Myanmar Catholics are participating in the

29 Jacobson, "Commentary on Psalm 23."

suffering of Christ, which led to a more profound connection with the divine.

The Catholic tradition has long held that solidarity in suffering is not incidental for Church's mission but belong to its very identity. The Second Vatican Council declared in *Gaudium et Spes* that "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."[30] This affirmation was something concrete for the Catholics of Myanmar. Their suffering is not a peripheral matter that the rest of universal Church looks at from a distance. However, it belongs to the whole body. The grief of a vulnerable people in Kayah State who has lost their home from airstrike is, according to pastoral constitution, the grief of the Church everywhere. This is not a rhetorical solidarity but it is an ecclesiological claim what the universal Church actually is.

Gaudium et Spes 22 further affirms that through the incarnation, the Son of God united himself in some fashion with every human being, so that those who endure suffering are never enduring it in a space that God has abandoned.[31] The document does not explain why God permits innocent people to suffer but it offers about God's accompaniment that God entered human history in Christ who continued to be present for the suffering people made in God's image. Myanmar Catholics who find themselves unable to pray, unable to feel God's nearness and protection amid their loss, this teaching gives the theological

30 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, in *Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. James H. Kroeger (Pasay: Paulines Publishing House, 2011), no.1.

31 *Gaudium et Spes*, no.22.

assurance to what Psalm 23 expresses that the image of shepherd walking through the valley alongside the sheep.

Moreover, Pope Francis expressed the direct response to 2021 coup in Myanmar. In his Angelus prayer in Saint Peter's Square on 7 February 2021 that "In this most delicate moment I wish to again assure to the people of Myanmar my spiritual closeness, my prayer and my solidarity. And I pray that those who have positions of responsibility in the country will place themselves with sincere willingness at the service of the common good, promoting social justice and national stability, for a harmonious, democratic coexistence."[32] His declaration of closeness shows the grief of Myanmar's people was offered in the prayer of the universal Church. It is also consistent with Psalm 23 that the shepherd does not call out instructions from outside the valley but the shepherd goes in and be with his sheep.

The role of the shepherd in guiding, protecting, and providing for the flock shows how God's relationship with God's people and God's constant love offer comfort and strength in times of suffering in Myanmar. Guzik mentioned in his commentary, "The goodness and care suggested by the prepared table is set right in the midst of the presence of my enemies. The host's care and concern does not eliminate the presence of my enemies but enables the experience of God's goodness and bounty even in their midst."[33] God always prepares a table before God's people, even in the presence of enemies, showing divine protection and provision even in the midst of the suffering of Myanmar citizens.

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32 Pope Francis, *Angelus*, February 7, 2021, Angelus, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210207.html (Accessed August 12, 2026).

33 Guzik, "Psalm 23 – The Lord is My Shepherd and My Host."

Moreover, the hope proclaimed in Psalm 23 does not resolve the theological problem of evil. It does not explain why God permits the airstrikes and bombing of Churches in Kayah State, why thousands of children in Myanmar are hungry and flee every day, or why Father Donald Martin was shot in his own parish for helping the children while the military attacks and kills his own people. These are the real questions that the people of Myanmar living through this crisis and theological reflection does not serve them well too quickly.

Johann Baptist Metz, one of the political theologians of the twentieth century, argued that "the continuity of time is not the empty continuum of evolution, but rather the trail of suffering."[34] The suffering that must not be buried under easy hope. For Metz, hope arrives too cheaply is not genuinely Christian hope but it is a way of managing grief rather than facing it. The death experience of Father Donald, the hundreds of bombed churches and millions of displaced people must be kept alive and it is not smoothed over by the reading of Psalm 23 that God's presence feels like a comfortable guarantee against loss ones.

However, Metz did not abandon hope and expressed it more honestly. He argued that "respect for the dignity of suffering that has accumulated through time impels the apocalypse to understand nature's time from the perspective of the time of suffering. This certainly does not mean ignoring the billions of years of nature's time, but rather judging it to be sort of timeless time.[35] Hope survives not by denying suffering but insisting the last word has not yet been spoken. This is precisely what Psalm 23 does. The psalm does not promise that the valley will

34 Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 52.

35 Metz, *A Passion for God*, 53.

disappear or the enemy will leave the table, but it promises in verse 6 that the journey through the valley ends not in the valley but in the house of the Lord. This is the assurance for Myanmar Catholics that the eschatological dimension is not escapism but the present suffering of Myanmar Catholics as real and as terrible is not the final word.

Furthermore, the role of Church leaders is an important one to provide hope and guidance for Myanmar Catholics in times of ongoing crisis. Cardinal Charles Bo, the archdiocese of Yangon, mentioned, "The wrongdoing committed against Father Donald Martin is not something that can be easily forgotten. We urge those responsible to take appropriate action and ensure justice is served, so that such incidents do not occur again in the future."[36] It is sad that the military junta never responds to the voice of Church leaders and continues to attack Catholic churches and religious priests brutally. However, their leadership helps sustain hope and perseverance for Myanmar Catholics in times of darkness. Moreover, hope is not about denying the reality of suffering but believing in the possibility of a better future, about peace and justice. In the context of Myanmar, this hope is focused on the promise of eternal life and the belief in God's victory over evil. Graceffo mentioned, "They are very brave. The civilians and leaders who persevere in their fight and faith serve as an example for Catholics everywhere."[37] The unwavering faith of Myanmar Church leaders and Catholics, with their resilience and service, is an expression of hope and resilience even in the midst of suffering.

36 Deborah Castellano Lubov, "Cardinal Bo prays for priest brutally killed in Myanmar, appeals for end to violence," *Vatican News*, 17 February 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-02/cardinal-bo-prays-for-priests-brutally-killed-in-myanmar.html (Accessed May 14, 2026).

37 Graceffo, "Catholics in Myanmar's Civil War."

Interreligious Dimensions: Catholic Resilience within a Buddhist-Majority Context

Although the primary focus of this paper is on Psalm 23 as a resource for the Catholic minority in Myanmar, it is important to contextualize this reflection within the broader religious landscape of the country, in which 85 percent of population follow Theravada Buddhism which is the majority religion in Myanmar.[38] The suffering caused by military coup, the civil war, and the economic collapse has not just confined to Catholic communities; but Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people have also been displaced. The monasteries have been damaged in the conflict areas and the members of the Sangha have been targeted and arrested for participating in pro-democracy demonstrations. The shared experience of suffering under military violence creates a common ground for the collaboration of Catholic and Buddhist communities in Myanmar often stand together in various forms including joint humanitarian relief efforts, shared use of monastery and church compounds as places for Internally Displaced People (IDP) and solidarity with people who are facing the challenges and uncertainties in this time of crisis.

Theologically, the message of Psalm 23 does not need to be presented as a claim that compare with Buddhist understanding of suffering; rather, it can be offered as the Catholic community's particular articulation of a hope that the other religious communities in Myanmar are also seeking the way, according to its own tradition. Buddhist teaching emphasizes impermanence and compassion (*metta* and *karuna*) as a proper response to the suffering of all sentient beings.[39] The Buddhist

38 Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st* Century (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 11.

39 Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 66.

practice of cultivating a compassionate and detached mind amid the impermanence of all things shares a commonality with Psalm 23 which grounds hope in the personal and covenantal presence of shepherding God who walks with the sufferer through the valley. The Myanmar citizens who are experiencing the suffering such as military coup, airstrikes and economic hardship, the psalm's portrayal of a divine presence "in the presence of enemies" can serve as a foundational framework for respectful conversation about how different religions sustain hope in such circumstances of desolation in Myanmar.

The Asian contextual theologians have long argued that this kind of interreligious solidarity is not just something that the Church in Asia should focus on, but something that is important part of what the Church is in this part of the world. Aloysius Pieris, SJ who work on Asian theology argued that "The mission crisis is solved only when the church is baptized in the twofold liberative tradition of monks and peasants of Asia. The Asian church not as an teaching church but as a learning church, lost among the 'religious poor' of Asia in search of kingdom of holiness, justice and peace."[40] He points out that the real immersion is in the religious traditions and the poverty of the Asian peoples rather than a separation from them. For Myanmar Catholics, this is not a theological program to be implemented; but it is simply the reality of their daily lives. They have always lived with Buddhist neighbors, studied in the same schools, shared the same refugee camps and experienced the same sufferings since 2021. Pieris's argument is that this shared suffering is not an obstacle for the Church to overcome on its way to authentic Christian identity but it is the environment in which real Christian beliefs in Asia are formed.

40 Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 47.

Moreover, Peter C. Phan draws from the perspective of interfaith dialogue and argues that Asian Christians naturally inhabit multiple religious worlds and that genuine interreligious encounter is made possible not despite suffering but through it.[41] According to Phan, shared desolation creates a common ground that can't be created by just talking about religion. The two communities that have prayed in different beliefs for generations can find themselves standing on genuinely common ground when they are standing in the rubble of same airstrike. This insight reframes the interreligious dimension of Myanmar's crisis: the cooperation between Catholic and Buddhist communities under military violence is not just a way of agreement born of necessity but Phan would call it a genuine interreligious encounter – both communities' understanding of what hope looks like in face of suffering time. The hope of Psalm 23 does not erase the religious differences but because the reality it describes a community walking through a dark valley, sustained by trust in a presence that accompanies which resonates with something that the communities of Myanmar are experiencing the same suffering and also seeking for hope and peace in Myanmar.

This interreligious dimension also has the practical application for the Catholic Church's witness in Myanmar. Cardinal Charles Bo's repeated calls for peace and reconciliation in Myanmar which are addressed not only to Catholics but also to all parties and nations situate the Church's message of hope within a broader aspect to the whole Myanmar society, including its Buddhist majority. In this sense, the hope articulated through Psalm 23 is not a private consolation only reserved for Catholics but is offered, through the Church's public invitation

41 Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 61.

to entire nation as it seeks an end to the cycle of violence and injustice in Myanmar.

Pastoral Recommendations: Toward a Shepherding Leadership Rooted in Psalm 23

If Psalm 23 can be regarded as providing a theological framework for hope amid desolation, it can also be regarded as implicitly offering a model for pastoral leadership. In this model, Church leaders are called to embody the shepherd's provision, protection and accompaniment within the limits imposed by the current crisis in Myanmar. It is evident that this framework gives rise to a number of concrete pastoral applications. Firstly, the use of Psalm 23 in catechesis and liturgy could be intentionally expanded. Short reflections, prayer services, and small-group sharing sessions could be built around each verse of the psalm in IDP camps and displaced communities. These sessions would invite participants to name where they have experienced the "green pastures," "still waters," or a "table prepared" even amid hardship and desolation. This would help people process trauma and recognize God's grace even in the midst of hardship.

Second, because clergy face severe movement restrictions in conflict zones, many communities find themselves without regular pastoral presence that becomes pastoral urgent in Myanmar. However, the image of the shepherd in Psalm 23 is not limited to a single figure standing at a distance from the flock; rather, it suggests an ongoing, daily presence among the sheep. Where the priests and religious cannot reach regularly in conflict zones, the catechists can serve day-to-day pastoral accompaniment, including basic spiritual care, psychosocial support and humanitarian aid, while remaining in communion with and supported by the Church in Myanmar.

Third, the Church's pastoral leadership has a role in providing psychological and spiritual accompaniments. The people who got the psychological problems including grief, anxiety, and trauma of witnessing violence such as the killing of Fr. Donald Martin Ye Naing Win, it is important to integrate the fundamental training in psychological and counseling programs alongside with spiritual and catechetical formation. This would enable the religious leaders and catechists to recognize the signs of severe distress and respond with appropriate psychological accompaniment while continuing to support the spiritual accompaniments such as Eucharist, prayers and devotions for the people in conflict zones.

The Church's leadership, particularly bishops, priests, and religious figures with greater visibility and access to international networks, has a continuing responsibility to speak out for the protection of civilians. Cardinal Charles Bo and the Archbishop of Mandalay have already done this, calling for urgent humanitarian aid in response to attack on churches, monasteries and civilian communities where pastoral act consistent with the shepherd's role of protecting the flock, even when that protection cannot prevent every harm. Taken together, these pastoral application imply that the hope offered by Psalm 23 is meant through the structures of care and leadership, rather than merely being proclaimed in preaching. Therefore, the experience of being accompanied by a shepherd who provides, protects and remains present manifest in the daily life of Myanmar Catholics.

The pastoral approach in this paper has been met with criticism and a responsible discussion of the subject must acknowledge this directly. Jon Sobrino, SJ, a liberation theologian says that crucified people who suffer unjust, structural death not through accident but through the organized violence

of political systems must be taken down from the cross through concrete acts of justice, not simply accompanied in their suffering.[42] From this view, a pastoral response centered on Psalm 23 might raise the following question: is the Church by offering prayer and spiritual accompaniment to displaced Myanmar Catholics and providing the genuine pastoral care or is it offering the spiritual consolation without dealing with political and structural dimensions of the crisis? A Church that engages in prayer with displaced without first addressing the causes of their displacement may, as Sobrino warns, offer a false sense of comfort. This type of comfort, which makes the church feel calm without looking at the reasons why the flock left, is not helpful.

This paper does not ignore that criticism. The recommendations above: teaching catechism in IDP camps, accompanying lay people in their daily lives, helping people deal with trauma, and asking religious leaders to speak up are not offered as a complete response to the crisis in Myanmar, and they should not be understood that way. They are what the Church can do now, using its own resources and purpose, for people who need accompaniment today. However, Sobrino's challenge shows us something the Psalm itself insists on that the God of Psalm 23 is not a God who will just make us feel comfortable. The shepherd leads the flock through the valley and out the other side, toward the table set in the presence of enemies, towards a situation where abundance is possible even though the enemies have not disappeared. Psalm 23 verse 6 ends with a dwelling, not an escape. The psalm offer hope, not for an easy life, but for a better future – a future of justice and peace. The Church is called to work this future happen, while also helping those who are suffering now. Accompaniment and

42 Jon Sobrino, SJ, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 50.

advocacy are not competing priorities in Myanmar's situation. They belong together, and Sobrino's challenge shows that the pastoral Church must never mistake the first for a substitute for the second.

Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper, the author shows how the profound resilience of Myanmar Catholics in times of ongoing political turmoil, such as *coup d'état*, civil war, and economic hardship, as well as how Psalm 23 serves an important role of hope and resilience for the people of Myanmar. The passage "even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me" resonates with the daily lives and struggles of Myanmar Catholics, providing comfort and perseverance. In times of desolation and ongoing crisis in Myanmar, the message of Psalm 23 assures that God is always with us, even in the darkest valley. Although the Myanmar people are facing the challenges of violence, displacement, and economic hardship, they still have faith and resilience that gives inspiration to all believers.

Moreover, "The Lord is my shepherd" in Psalm 23 offers God's protection and provision for God's believers even in times of suffering, which offers a beacon of hope for the people of Myanmar. By sustaining faith, solidarity with displaced people from conflict areas, and supporting them with community effort, one can build hope for a future of peace and justice in Myanmar. The challenges are immense, but the spirit of hope nurtured by faith remains a powerful tool for positive changes. Indeed, the Lord is our shepherd, and God's presence may offer the promise of peace and justice in Myanmar.

GRIEF, MEMORY, AND HOPE: SIGNIFICANCE OF ANCESTRAL LAND IN PSALM 137 "BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON" IN HEALING INTERGENERATIONAL MIGRATION TRAUMA[1]

Shimbo Pastory William, CSSp

Abstract. Psalm 137 presents a paradigmatic expression of exile and lament, and the power of shared hope to return to the ancestral land. Memories trigger strong feelings and a firm resolve not to "forget" the ancestral home. This paper argues from a constructive perspective that in Psalm 137, the memory of ancestral land is not merely nostalgic or a source of grief, but it functions as a theological act that preserves communal identity and sustains hope for restoration and healing. Even today, we feel strongly about land, especially ancestral lands, because they are closely connected to our identity, cherished memories, grief, and hopes. Methodologically, we will employ historical-critical exegesis and theological reflection enriched by cultural memory theory. In treating Psalm 137, which David Stowe calls the "Memory-Project,"[2] most scholars have emphasized the side of trauma and vengeance; this study highlights a merger of positive theological and psychological approaches to trauma, grief, memory, and ancestral land as resources of hope and healing, especially for migrants who are mostly

1 GenAI Disclosure Statement: GenAI was not used in any way in the paper.

2 David Stowe, *Song of Exile: The Enduring Mystery of Psalm 137* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 114.

affected by intergenerational trauma arising from migration circumstances.

Keywords: ancestral land, grief, memory, historical migration trauma, healing migrants

Socio-Historical Background of Psalm 137

Psalms are among the oldest extant poems in the world, ranking with any poetry in any culture, ancient or modern, from anywhere in the world.[3] Psalm 137 is said to have been written during the exile, by one of the exiles,[4] between the years 597 BCE and 538 BCE. Historically, it follows the 586 BCE defeat of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II.[5] The aftermath was the capture and siege of Jerusalem, which was the capital of Judah, and many Judeans (Jews), especially the elite, craftsmen, soldiers, priests, and others who were talented, were captured and deported to captivity in different Babylonian cities.[6]

Scholars suggest that this psalm was authored in exile because of the vivid expression of the experience, even though verses 1-3 use the past tense. In verse 8, the author depicts Babylon as yet untouched by the Persians, making the Psalm appropriately belong to the exilic period whose *terminus ad quem* is 538 BCE.[7] The exile is said to have lasted 7 decades, in

3 N. T. Wright, The Case of the Psalms: Why They are Essential (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 1.

4 William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 57.

5 Gosta Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 781.

6 Elias Bickermann, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 133.

7 William R. Taylor, *The Song of an Exile* (137: 1-9), vol. 4, *The Interpreter's Bible: Psalms and Proverbs*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1955), 704.

connection with the land-related prophecy of Jeremiah 29:10, but there is no historical consensus.

The popular prophetic message of the time endured despite the silencing of prophets and the exiling of some as undesired inhabitants. Their message sank into the Jewish consciousness, and in their "racial memory," as Dimont calls it, a reason why their faith flourished even in the foreign land where they were an oppressed minority.[8] Though the continued existence of the holy city, according to Renckens, "kept the national feelings and national hopes alive,"[9] the exiles needed a place to belong, a land to call their own, beyond being united by their oral tradition of God's great act of deliverance.[10]

Scholars consider the Babylonian exile and the latter dispersions as progressive social and religious crises,[11] which completely affected the people's "mazeway," as Anthony Wallace calls it; their sense of meaning and order, and their mental representation of their world, themselves, their culture, and their society.[12]

As a minority community, the exiles became more unified because of the common situation and mechanisms of survival and resistance. The need to adapt to this new situation made the community acquire a completely new social structure

8 Max Dimont, *Jews, God and History* (New York: Signet Books, 1962), 64.

9 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. N.B. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 280.

10 William L. Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 127.

11 Tero Alstola, "Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE" (PhD diss., Leiden University: 2017), 222, 224, 226-227.

12 Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Houston: Meyer Stone Books, 1989), 49, 50.

there in exile.[13] This solidarity created a separation from other Jews who did not endure the exile, hence forming a "community of crisis." The peak of this conflict is between the two groups.[14] Hans Kippenberg notes evidence of the development of 'classes' in the post-exilic period.[15] Those who returned, as Daniel Caroll elaborates, were not the same people, as they had seen the larger world and the great cities of its most powerful empire at the time and had lived among other cultures. Meanwhile, those who remained developed resentment and an opposition towards the returnees, as they did not want them to change the status quo of their lives. As such, their return did not automatically mean they were free people.[16]

Yet, amid survival, some Judean exiles intermarried with the conquerors, and some assimilated. In a way, they followed the advice of Jeremiah, who advised the exiles not to resist their new situation, but to settle productively and peacefully in Babylon (cf. Jer. 29:4-7). But this was controversial in many ways, as marriage also involved faith; hence, the concerns were religious, not political or cultural. Intermarrying compromised the demands of their Jewish faith.[17] There is also evidence of bilingualism among the exiles, especially in Aramaic, which was widely used alongside Hebrew among the subject peoples across the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.[18]

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13 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 276.

14 Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 63, 64, 65.

15 John W. Rogerson, "Old Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

16 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2020), 40-41.

17 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 41.

18 Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 56.

In an attempt to look at history from a positive lens as well, historians consider the defeat of Judah in 586 BCE as an event that made it possible for Judah to germinate "a new phase" of Jewish life.[19] Renckens supports that the exile made a new pattern of life both necessary and permanent. He says, "Only a radical break with the old order could make the rise of the new Jewish world possible."[20]

Historical-Critical Exegesis of Psalm 137

Poetry is a human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language. It enriches the understanding of human experience.[21] As psalms are important ancient Israelite poems, it is important that every psalm is read with its context in mind in order to grasp the historical, social, and political situations hidden between the terse lines of the Psalms, and to harmonize the richness in the contexts of words, commitments, moods, feelings, aspirations, actions, and messages being communicated.

Regarding authorship, Psalm 137 is said to have been written by someone who sat by the rivers, wept, hung up his harp, and later recorded the memory.[22] Scholars attribute it to the prophet Jeremiah. The Septuagint adds, in some manuscripts, a superscription "Of David (by/for) Jeremiah." The link to Jeremiah is because he is traditionally considered the author of the Book of Lamentations. Several verses of Psalm 137 also share wording with Jeremiah 51, which foretells the destruction of the Edomites, "repaying" Babylon for her

19 Dimont, *Jews, God and History*, 60.

20 Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 280.

21 Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 11th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2004), 7 – 8.

22 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 13.

crimes, and "dashing" evildoers.[23] David is most likely not the author because he lived about four centuries before the exile.

While the genre of lament in Psalms is by far the most attested form of psalm in the Book of Psalms,[24] Psalm 137 is classified as an "individual communal lament"[25] as it is a prayer that stems from their collective suffering in exile, expressing the grief, humiliation, and longing shared by the whole community. The tone is personal, but the language is symbolically representative, suggesting it was intended for public recitation, likely in post-exilic worship.[26] As a poem, the phrase "Rivers of Babylon" emphasizes their displacement, while Zion or Jerusalem serves as a metonymy for their identity, homeland, covenant with God, and God's presence.

The first part, verses 1-4, is a sorrowful dirge or elegy, evoking a mood similar to mourning the dead, as it conveys the sorrowful memory of exile. Here, the poet "presents a retrospective look at the situation of Judean exiles during their sojourn in Babylon."[27] In the second part, verses 5-6, the oath of loyalty to Jerusalem expresses the poet's bitterness and self-imprecation. The third part, verses 7-9, contains an imprecatory *lex talionis* prayer for God to avenge the exiles' enemies.

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23 Adele Berlin, *Psalms 120-150*, vol. 5, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, ed. Benjamin Sommer (Melrose Park, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2023), 94.

24 Linda S. Schearing, "Psycho-theological Functions of Lament: Giving Voice to Anger and Grief," in *Theology in a Post-Traumatic Church*, Ed. John N. Sheveland, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2023), 138, 139.

25 "Individual" because an individual voice speaks on behalf of the community and thus embodying collective grief in personal form. So "*individual communal*" is a hybrid form.

26 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd Edition, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 1984), 21.

27 Willem S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 137," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2003), 430.

These 3 parts also form a three-movement structure that shifts sharply in tone, emotion, and focus, creating dramatic contrast. According to Brueggemann, the psalm moves from Grief >>> Resolve >>> Protest.[28] These dramatic contrasts, according to Meir Stenberg, help to sustain the theological tension.[29]

In the Psalms' prayer tradition, both lament and imprecation are crucial and valid theological speech forms;[30] hence their protest, which Sr. Marion Moeser calls: "The loud, religious 'Ouch!' 'Why?' 'Please!'"[31] - is a prayer. Lament psalms are important for life and faith and do not have to be lost, as Westermann says, because they end up in praise, which is full and unfettered.[32]

Ancestral Land in Israel's History and Theology

In different societies, ancestral land extends beyond physical territory, representing a deep and multifaceted connection to a people's identity, culture, and spiritual worldview. It is a shared inheritance across generations and plays a significant role in cultural survival. The capture of ancestral land, however small, has historically caused tragedies because of sentimental attachment rooted in the significance of such land to the people's existence, being, "past-present-future" history, and identity.

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28 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 25, 42-43, 46.

29 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 20.

30 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 9.

31 Schearing, "Psycho-theological Functions of Lament," 139.

32 Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36: (1986): 57-58.

A territory is important for the purpose of legitimizing a societal unit, which in this case is a nation.[33] William Holladay asks, "*Did the Israelites Need Land*?" as he considers it an assumption that the Israelites needed land. He observes that the promise of land to Israel is ancient and is embedded in the ancient narrative of the patriarchs, and their memory is that their ancestors were nomads, aliens moving from one pasture to another, depending on the tolerance of the local population.[34]

William Holladay traces these historical events of the Israelites and the land in Scripture. He begins with the promise of land to Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelites (Gen 12), the covenant binding on both the offspring and the land (Gen 17:5-7), the purchase of land (cave) to bury his wife Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), and the repetition of the similar promises later to Jacob (Gen 28:13-14).[35] Abraham and his descendants lived a nomadic life, even in the Promised Land; this is why they are often referred to as sojourners, especially in the book of Genesis. The only land Abraham is said to have owned is the Machpelah cave, which he bought for his wife's interment.[36]

For the Israelites, therefore, land is understood both theologically and morally,[37] and was not merely a property, but a sacramental reality and a tangible sign of their covenantal relationship with God. It was meant to be held in love, trust, and fidelity to the covenant. In the Old Testament, humans' love for God cannot be interpreted except in the context of fidelity to

33 Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 57.

34 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 126.

35 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 127.

36 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 19.

37 Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52-53.

the covenant relationship and a commitment to the social and private dimensions of loyalty to the covenant.[38] Their identity as the chosen people was deeply rooted in the fulfilled promise of land given to Abraham in Gen. 12 and 15. As such, when they lost the land, numerous theological questions arose regarding their covenant with God. For example, "Has God revoked his covenant?" Though William Holladay says, "the dream of land is the dream of the underclass,"[39] it is different in this case, as land is more than the physicality of a place; it is a sign and bond of a relationship never meant to end.

The Rivers of Babylon

The land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris was called Mesopotamia by the Greeks; *Mesos* is a Greek word for middle, and *Potamos* for river. Politically and culturally, the borders of this land have varied in history.[40] Attempts at expansion were made, and Romans and Parthians, Byzantines and Sassanians, Muslims and Magians, and later, in the 13th century, Mongols and Turks fought over it.[41] Mesopotamia is one of the most influential common sources of both Hebrew and Greek civilization, and it is an important historical land for the Hebrews, as important patriarchs, judges, and kings lived there.

Historically, it was traditional to worship near water sources,[42] (see also: Ezek. 3:15, Acts 16:13), as divine attributes were given to water, which was also considered infinitely

38 G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology*, 115.

39 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 127.

40 Cyrus H. Gordon, "Mesopotamia," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: K-Q*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press Nashville, 1962), 359.

41 Paul Kriwaczek, *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2005), 19.

42 Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Tr. John McHugh, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), 277-278.

mutable and a medium of supernatural agency.[43] Thus, for the Israelites, sitting "by the rivers" of Babylon meant gathering to pray, mourn, and reminisce about the homeland, and it reminded them of the practice of worshipping near water sources. With the pain and distress of exile, the rivers became sites of lamentation and memory.

The Exile's Social, Political, and Religious Experiences

Socially, the exile significantly and irreparably fractured a well-bonded society; families and hierarchies were torn down.[44] The exiles were deported over 500 miles away to Babylon, with the trauma of leaving their beloved city destroyed, its people scattered, the kingship in the line of David ended, and, above all, the temple, which is Yahweh's throne, destroyed.[45] They were also traumatized by the memory of the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ez. 10:1-22, 11:22-25).

Prior to the exile, Hebrew flourished as a literary and spoken language.[46] But after the exile, the script was changed from the alphabetic script that the Israelites shared with the Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites to the square script still used for Modern Hebrew.[47] The exile made

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43 Marti, Nissinen, "Sacred Springs and Liminal Rivers: Water and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean," in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Period*, vol. 461, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 29.

44 Barry J. Beitzel, *Biblica: The Bible Atlas* (Sydney: Global Book Publishing, 2007), 216.

45 Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 54.

46 John Elwolde, *Language and Translation of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 136.

47 Wilfred G. Lambert, "Ancient Near Eastern Studies: Mesopotamia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76, 136.

Judah economically non-viable.[48] Those who were skilled and made Jerusalem productive and flourishing were taken away. (2 Kings 24:14).

Religiously, the exile strengthened a monotheistic faith, and it was an important *prefiguration* of the Church.[49] This new challenge compelled them to reinterpret their faith in the pagan Babylonian Empire, without their Land and Temple.

Music, Liturgy, Memory in Exile Communities

In history, the Kingdom of Judah was known for its music. Music was important for liturgical, royal, and prophetic activities. From David's time, musicians participated in the liturgy and festivals. They sang psalms and accompanied the rituals with harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets (cf. 1 Chr. 15:16-24, 25:1-7). As the psalms testify to a long, rich, and ancient tradition of sung prayers, N. T. Wright calls the Psalms "the Church's original hymnbook."[50] They form the musical corpus of the Israelites, which retells their history as God's people.

Music was considered an instrument of covenantal memory, a sacred vocation, and a vehicle for the presence of the Divine; when the priests and musicians sang in unison, the glory of the Lord filled the temple (cf. 1 Chr. 25:7, 2 Chr. 5:12-14). The Levites were trained as temple musicians, as the temple was an important center for the manifestation of these resounding rhythms of faith. Music was closely connected with God's revelation through the prophets, as when "the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha, while the musicians played" (2 Kings 3:15).

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48 John Rogerson, "Israel to the end of the Persian Period: History, Social, Political, and Economic Background," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 281.

49 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 710.

50 Wright, *The Case of the Psalms*, 3.

It is important to note that music was already being used for therapeutic purposes to bring spiritual relief, such as when David played the lyre to calm King Saul's tormented spirit (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14-23). Musical instruments were also used by the prophetic circles for ecstatic prophecy, which often involves trance-like ecstasy and emotional excitement (cf. 1 Sam. 10:2, 2 Kgs. 3:15, Is. 5:1). The timeline here is from the 11th to 10th century BCE, and music had already assumed liturgical, royal, and prophetic functions.

In exile, 6th Century BCE, music was not mere entertainment, but an instrument for preserving the faith. Songs carried theological truths and the faith of the Jews, like portable sanctuaries helping them to reinterpret their faith and worship without the temple, altar, or choir.

In theorizing about "memory," Paul Ricoeur explains that the Greek philosophers made a distinction between "*mneme*," "an unexpected unbidden popping into minds of a concrete memory," and "*anamnesis,*" the intentional recall by which the mind carries out an active search for something in the past. *Mneme* was understood as an affection, a *pathos*; while *anamnesis* was a disciplined activity of the mind.[51]

A later French philosopher, Henri Bergson, conceptualized two kinds of memory in his book *Matter and Memory*: pointed recollection (*souvenir*) and habit (*habitude*). Both forms are operating in Psalm 137. The opening verses, with the mourning scene by the river, present memory as souvenir, or *mneme*, with its pathos of longing and loss. The second section presents an inward turn and suggests an *anamnesis*, an act of intentional recall and of disciplined effort.[52] Thus, this re-living and

51 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 14-30.

52 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110.

remembering resonates with the Church's understanding of *anamnesis*[53] in the liturgy, where we remember the salvific events and make them present.

Verse 2 of Psalm 137 describes harps hung upon the poplars, signifying silenced liturgy. Refusal to sing for their captors in verses 3-4 can also be interpreted as an act of covenant fidelity with God, as well as a resistance, non-violent resistance. It was a means of cultural survival, an act of worship, and a refusal of profanation. The insistence "How could we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?" (Verse 4) becomes a theological question about authentic worship in displacement and amidst oppression, as music carried memories of lost worship. The destruction of the temple ceased the continuous song of the Lord accompanied by harps, lyres, and cymbals. In the context of Verse 5, the hand that once plucked the harp now pledges loyalty to memory itself.[54] It was a grave mockery asking them to sing sacred songs to amuse pagan oppressors. Thus, the

53 This Greek word, as explained in The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, "is practically untranslatable in English," while "'memorial,' 'commemoration,' 'remembrance,' all suggest a recollection of the past, anamnesis means making present an object or person from the past." Some theologians have used the word "reactualization" to express what anamnesis entails. Cf. Frank C. Senn, "*Anamnesis*," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink, SJ (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 45.

54 Cf. Konrad Schaefer, OSB, "Psalms," in The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century, 3rd edition, eds. John J. Collins, Gina Hens-Piazza, Barbara Reid, OP and Donald Senior, CP (New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 707; Furthermore, "the hand would no longer be able to play the harp and the tongue no longer be able to sing the Songs of Zion. The memory is more precious than body or life. The psalm's stunning intention is that, in spite of the fact that the temple has been left in ruins and Jerusalem destroyed, the victorious captors will not control the memory and imagination of this community of exiles. Memory is a powerful weapon and can be sustained over the long haul and fuel resilience." – Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, *Psalms: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 574.

silence of Psalm 137 is not the absence of faith, but the protest of faith.

Hope and the Persistence of Identity

In Psalm 137, hope and identity are strongly rooted in collective memory.[55] For exiles, remembering Zion keeps alive the belief that God's presence and promises will endure, and therefore that they must endure.[56] Their deep longing is not mere nostalgia, but confidence that they are God's people (*identity*) and that God will restore them and all they have lost (*hope*).[57] According to John Locke, memory constitutes our "sense of self;" that is, the self is "essentially coterminous" with its memories.[58]

God reaffirmed His covenant promise to Israel through Moses before the Exodus was complete, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7), "...how I bore you on eagle's wings" (Ex. 19:4-6), "I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12), "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God" (Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 26:18-19). "It has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself" (1 Sam. 12:22, see also 2 Sam 7:23-24).

Through the prophets, the tone of these loving assurances is even more intimate: "... O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is. 43:1), I chose you and did not cast you off" (Is. 41:8-9). This covenantal assurance informed their hope as they held Jerusalem in memory

55 David Stowe clarifies that people can share memories, but they share them as individuals whose memory-lives are irreducibly private. Cf. Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110.

56 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 39.

57 Prinsloo, "Psalm 137," 430.

58 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110. Cf. John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk. 2, Chp. 27, no. 9.

also helped to preserve them from disintegrating and slowly assimilating into Babylonian culture. Their cry to God for justice manifests their faith even more strongly. However, for them, "justice should be done in the visible and the historical world of here and now."[59]

For the exiles, "remembering Jerusalem" is crucial in preserving their deep, historical relationship with God. Because their remembering is collective, and in light of Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, we see that this ongoing act of remembering shapes their past into a shared narrative that supports identity, continuity, and meaning. In this process, all the trauma, loss, and rupture can be reinterpreted into a story that explains their "who we are" as well as their "why we endured."[60]

Grief and Longing

In Psalm 137, grief is not self-indulgent despair, but it shapes their disposition of worship, even amid pain and lamentation. Lament is a valid and acceptable form of prayer; just as Jesus lamented to the Father, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk. 15:34). God always shows solidarity in human pain.

Writing about the expression of feelings in Psalms, including grief, Wahl elaborated that: "Psalms have a compelling grip on us. We find expressed in them feelings of joy and grief, of fear and anger, with which we seem to identify; we seem to find in them a reflection of our own aspirations and complaints, our own gratitude and shame."[61] They make the believing commu-

59 Thomas Peter Wahl, *The Lord's Son in a Foreign Land: The Psalms as Prayer* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 187.

60 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 37-39.

61 Wahl, *The Lord's Son in a Foreign Land*, 1.

nity aware of the full range of human experience and dispose them to prayer by reflecting actual contexts.[62] The Church teaches that: "The Psalms bring to the fore the grandeur of God's actions in creation and history, as well as the depth of human feelings in the face of these actions. They celebrate the Lord who created the universe and governs history, and they express human joy and sorrow, hope and anguish, gratitude and supplication."[63]

Caroll describes Psalm 137 as: "A veritable roller-coaster of emotions about their being so far from everything that had given meaning and order to their lives."[64]The exiles suffered grief and deep pain for different reasons related to their exile experience. They lost their homeland and the place of their king, which was an important sign of the Davidic dynasty and hope for glory,[65] and they were hurt by the destruction of their Temple. There were deaths along the way, and thousands lost their loved ones, as scholars say between forty and fifty thousand Judaeans went into exile.[66] Important relationships were permanently halted; they lost freedom and autonomy, and their community and its structures perished. Many suffered traumas from alienation, violence, and destruction as well. The loss or alienation from Divine Presence caused them *theological grief* as well, as they experienced spiritual emptiness and interpreted their suffering as abandonment by God.

Living a life of uncertainty and in-betweenness, as they were neither at home nor fully integrated in Babylon, was also

62 Dragoslava Santrac, "Praying the Psalms: How Biblical Prayers can Enrich our Personal and Liturgical Prayer Lives," *Theologica* 33/2 (2018): 262.

63 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2588.

64 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 34.

65 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 34.

66 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 278.

a cause and context of grieving. In its entirety, the exiles' grief was rooted in their loss of the indispensably fond social and religious collective memory, which also constitutes their identity as God's chosen people.

Grief over Ancestral Land

For ancient Israelites, ancestral land embodied both the theological promises and their cultural belonging. It was the material and spatial expression of their divine election as chosen people as well as their response in obedience. Their dwelling in the land and the fulfillment of their hopes, as Wittenberg elaborates, were contingent on their relations to both the land and God.[67]

The loss created a crisis of theological identity among the exiles. Losing their land was like losing the visible sign of divine promise. Yet that memory became the seed of hope. Their experience is deeper than mere homesickness; it is grief.

Land is sacred, and its holiness has been communicated throughout history. Land was never distanced from the human person. Prophet Ezekiel said "*eretz*" meaning: land, country, earth can sin by being unfaithful (c.f. Ez. 14:13), can as well be made desolate and waste (c.f. Ez. 6:14, 12:19-20), can be taken away (Ez. 7:21-22, 33:24-26), but can also be restored to bear fruits (c.f. Ez. 11:17, 28:25-26, 36:8-10, 24-28, 33-35).

So, why would they grieve over land? The exile experience was a death, a death of an important embodiment of the people's history and identity. Being removed from their land separated families and disrupted cherished social ties. The

67 Gunther Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah, in The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 129-130.

posture of sitting on the ground in Psalm 137:1 is culturally understood as that of mourners in the ancient East.[68]

We can also think of the graves of their ancestors, who, like seeds, are planted in their ancestral land. Francesca Stavrakopoulou expounds the functions of the dead in biblical times' contexts. She says a grave is a medium of social, cultural, and ideological meaning communicated both among the living and between the living and the dead. The burial place not only expresses, but also represents, or materializes, ideology; it is ideology.[69] She says: "For the living, a grave serves not merely to hold the remains of the deceased, and not only to memorialize the existence of an individual; ... a grave is also a socially structured space."[70]

Ultimately, the most tangible sign of the close bond between the nachalah (i.e., inheritance) and the family was the family tomb, which linked the present generation with the ancestors.[71] The grief of the loss of loved ones becomes the binding force for the family.

Ancestors are materially present in the ancestral land.[72] Being forced out of this important land, however small it is, becomes a source of unimaginable pain and grief as if for a new bereavement; the memories cause weeping: "... we sat and wept, remembering Zion..." (Psalm 137:1).

In his treatise, *A Grief Observed*, which is based on his personal experience of bereavement, C. S. Lewis sees grief as "a

68 Taylor, *The Song of an Exile* (137: 1-9), 705.

69 Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers: The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 1, 3.

70 Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers*, 1.

71 Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah*, 133.

72 Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers*, 4.

sudden jab of red-hot memory" which makes the whole act of living different. It is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. In his view, grief is personal, non-transferable, and comes with an unavoidable bodily experience, as the body feels like "an empty house." It feels like fear, restlessness, loneliness, laziness, fluttering in the stomach; like darkness, especially "young grief," suspense, and waiting, which give life a permanently provisional feeling. Grief covers the griever's eyes with tears, making it difficult to see anything properly. The memories turn the griever into a whimpering child, unable to settle down and feeling it is not worth starting anything, what he calls "empty successiveness."

We can relate to this feeling in Psalm 137:4: "How can we sing ..." Looking back at the memories is appalling, and a steady look at them is unbearable, even though they are real, genuine, and wholly involuntary. The griever thinks more about the deceased than oneself. These memories, as C.S. Lewis expounds, can choke prayer and hope.[73]

The grief of the exiles is not separable from their ancestral land because the land (earth) was related to them as kin, and as a partner and co-creator rather than as property, commodity, or possession.[74] They considered themselves "planted" in the land and deeply felt they belonged to and with it.[75] Today, the traditional understanding of the land as "given," and as "kin," is being re-incorporated in the six core ecojustice principles,

73 Clive Staples Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Harper Collins: 1996), 3-4, 11-12, 16-18, 22, 28, 30, 33, 45, 60.

74 The Earth Bible Team, "The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 28.

75 Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah*, 130.

which re-establish the dignified place of Mother Earth in relation to the human person.[76]

Hope and Land

Among the exiles, hope is deeply connected to their experience and memory of ancestral land, as differentiated from "foreign land." We see this in v. 4. Their land matters because it contains a historical continuity of their life, faith, God's promises, culture, and history. This is why they can find neither joy nor excitement in singing in a land with no deep roots in their faith history.

Hope is manifested as loyalty, faithful waiting, and testimony of resilience. The exiles resist the temptation to fall away to foreign cults or assimilate because those are not built on the promise and faith given to their fathers, and they have seen and testified to God's work in their history and collective memory. Refusal to conform is a loud proclamation of hope.

Theologically, the memory of Zion, the covenant, the Temple, the liturgy, and songs become anchors of identity and hope when visible signs are lost. Memory is a crucial vehicle of restoration. Believing that "a testimony can freeze a moment in time," Stowe says, the opening lines of Psalm 137 are a testimony, and they have frozen this scene now for some two-and-a-half millennia. Recording a memory through testimony, he opines, transforms it into a rough material of history.[77]

Exiles Today: Grief, Memory and Hope among Migrants

Migration sits at the centre of human life. We consider migration not as an event, but as a spectrum of migratory

76 Norman C. Habel, "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," *Spiritan Horizons*, Vol. 11, Issue 11 (Fall 2016): 92-109.

77 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 4.

experiences.[78] Phenomena associated with trauma are consistent across cultures. But lived experiences of traumatic events are personal and are influenced by personal perspectives.[79] Among migrants and forcibly displaced persons traumatic grief coexists with anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), conditions which impede normal functioning.[80]

Intergenerational vs. Historical Trauma

Inter-generational traumas are multiplex traumas rooted in historical traumatic events, which encompass all areas of human life, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual. They can trace back to original traumatic events as far back as centuries.[81] The patterns of historical trauma behind the intergenerational traumas can stretch as far back as 10 generations and are linked with large-scale social injustices such as slavery, colonialism, forced displacement, genocide, and loss of land and language.[82]

A historical trauma is always linked to specific historical injustices that affect the cultural memory and identity of the

78 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 1-2, 45.

79 Renee Bradford Garcia and Elizabeth Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention, Building on Strength* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 29.

80 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 119.

81 Luis Urrieta, "Indigenous Reflections on Identity, Trauma, and Healing: Navigating Belonging and Power," *Genealogy* 3(2) (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020026.

82 Laurence J. Kirmayer, Joseph P. Gone, and Joshua Moses "Rethinking Historical Trauma," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51(3) (2014): 299-319.

group.[83] It is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that occurs to a group of people and is passed down across generations. Persons and communities are often affected even if they did not experience the actual traumatic event directly. Trauma is passed down together with the different coping mechanisms developed to survive the traumatic events.[84] When this trauma is passed down across generations, in families and cultural groups of those affected, it continues to influence their behaviours, emotional patterns, beliefs, parenting styles, and coping mechanisms. In this continuum it is considered inherited and intergenerational trauma.[85]

Migration Trauma *Vis-à-vis* Ancestral Land

While migrants[86] and destinations change, the reasons for migration and its reality has not completely evolved as migrants face situations similar to those faced by migrants centuries ago. In most cases, migration is a survival response to intergenerational traumas, which oftentimes are linked to land. Alongside migration, these traumas have become what

83 Sandy Woo-Cater, "Unearthing Historical Trauma to Advance Health Equity for Survivors of Human Trafficking," *HCA Healthcare Journal of Medicine* 3, no. 3 (June 28, 2022): 197–202, https://doi.org/10.36518/2689-0216.1432

84 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 30.

85 Psychotraumatology, "Intergenerational (Transgenerational) Trauma," *IP Trauma*, last updated July 3, 2025, https://iptrauma.org/docs/trauma/intergenerational-transgenerational-trauma/

86 "Migrants" in this paper is a term inclusive of all forms thereof: Immigrants, asylum seekers, exiles, deportees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees.

Vivien Elton refers to as "Signatures of our time"[87] and have massively written their affliction in human history.

Land is formative of the identity, personal recognition, which is at the heart of our human condition, memory, ancestry, continuity, as well as spiritual belonging. It is the most fought for reality, because its dispossession is a threat, which in the process triggers emotional wounds, then violence, helplessness, grief and ultimately migration.

Thus, migration is primarily a traumatic event because of the loss of one's motherland.[88] It gives a new definition to life and to the traditional sense of physically belonging to a place and a community, as one hardly denounces the ancestral land, however long the alienation lasts, and however bitter the separation experience was. There is always a continuing feeling of connectedness to ancestral land.

For migrants, there is always a land-related trauma that memory and narrative will still own and carry forward as is. Until the hoped-for restoration or return is attained, the narrative and the trauma it carries remain, and even when the trauma heals, the history remains. When such trauma remains untreated, those experiences can lead to chronic psychological illnesses such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD.[89] The *strange* land that receives migrants also has a healing effect on them,

87 Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp and Vivien B. Pender, "Editorial Introduction – Trauma, Flight, and Migration: A Signature of Our Time," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 1.

88 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration: A Signature of Our Time," 2.

89 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration," 2.

as it provides an opportunity to revise their personal history and to repair damage.[90]

Scriptural Contexts of Migration: Holy Family and Apostles

Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus experienced a stressful migration journey as well, fleeing a gruesome ruler, Herod (Matt. 2:13-15). What was the threat? The threat was that Jesus was the newborn King. It is about Land again, as kingship is rooted in and is expressed jurisdictionally in terms of Land. Herod is ready to commit any form of injustice, even to kill innocent children, just to remain a ruler of the Land and protect his illegitimate kingship, as he was not of the Davidic line, but was imposed by the foreign Roman government. We can imagine how much fear and sadness the family of Jesus felt while fleeing their ancestral land, and how much discomfort they suffered as they were not rich enough to travel on foot with a donkey for some days. At that time, there was a problem of robbers on the ways, and it was also a challenge to get food, water, and a safe place to rest at night along the way.

The same was with the different journeys of St Paul and other apostles in the early church who faced the difficulties of migration as well. St Paul walked long journeys on foot, hungry in harsh weather, and sometimes lacked shelter (2 Cor. 11:26). He experienced rejection, suspicion, and persecution, and was arrested and tortured (Acts 14:19, 16:23-24, 2 Cor. 11:24-25). He was also shipwrecked on his way to Rome (Acts 27:41-44). But also, he experienced hospitality from strangers and local believers (Acts 16:14-15). Daniel Caroll proposes a sense of

90 Elizabeth Haworth, "Forced to Flee: The Experience of Peruvian Women in Times of Political Violence," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, Eds. Vivien Elton, et al. (London: Routledge, 2023), 63.

realism in which suspicion and rejection towards immigrants does not come as a surprise, as in host cultures, there will always be those who are compassionate and also those who are cruel.[91]

While Apostles generally depended on the generosity of good people (Lk. 8:1-3), we see in their resoluteness that they were deeply convinced by their experience, memory and purpose. Their faith and memory of Jesus motivated them to remain determined, just as the Judeans in the Psalm 137, not to forget their *Yerushalayim* – Jerusalem – "Foundation of Peace"[92] - the Lord Jesus, the source of their joy.

Hospitality Crises

The migration crises of our time manifest the failure of hospitality. Harsh and traumatizing realities of migration today include indefinite and unexpected separation from family and homeland, insecurity along the journeys, home-sickness, inclement weather, injustices, language barrier, public distrust in receiving countries, and restrictive and hostile deterrent policies.

Migrants also suffer disappointments, grief over their dead, empathy for the most helpless among them, and pain over unquantifiable losses. They encounter unsympathetic people and even officers, similar to the ruthless captors and tormentors in Psalm 137:3, merciless robbers "who strip strangers naked, beat them leaving them half dead" (c.f. Lk. 10:30). Migrants are hurt by rejection and being despised, public humiliation and being considered as without dignity, being called names. Cases of migrants who have been abused,

91 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 45.

92 George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962–1965), s.v. "Jerusalem.", 843-844.

tortured, deceived, and exploited for profit, and even denied their right to life, are on the rise. These migrants are traumatized and are in need of healing.

Journeys of many migrants, of all races and histories, hang by a thin thread between life and death. But migration is a reality that involves our lives and our practices. Elizabeth Haworth sees migration as a metaphor for something much more general: the unsettledness, otherness, and precarity that are part of the human experience.[93] Migrants are tormented by memories of their love for home and kin, and their rootedness in culture, religion, and ancestral land. No one loves to be away from home for no reason. Migrants and displaced persons long to return home if the conditions that made them leave are remedied. They wish their lands are healed from wars, disasters, persecutions, etc. No one loves to sit by the river in foreign lands and weep, remembering home while enduring oppression, as in Psalm 137. Sparse across the globe, migrants are today's grieving Judeans, as their experience is similar.

Working on Healing

1. Healing Memories of Ancestral Land

Psalm 137 is helpful in processing migration trauma and healing the deep wounds of migrants primarily because it can vocalize their pain. Linda Schearing highlights that vocalizing the pain allows one to process the trauma and start healing.[94]

Theologian Dorothee Solle and Psychiatrist Judith Hermann laid out three stages of moving from suffering to healing. The first is characterized by "the experiences of muteness and isolation." One feels the need to establish safety. In the second stage one "becomes capable of speaking of the pain with a

93 Haworth, "Forced to Flee," 63.

94 Schearing, *Psycho-theological Functions of Lament*, 140.

mix of emotion and rationality," and capable of lament, with change becoming possible through reconstruction of a trauma story. In this stage one is able to speak of the previously unspeakable agony. In the third stage, "the person attains the rational language and solidarity with others," resulting from being heard and reconnects with life going forward.[95]

In Psalm 137 we can situate the writer in the second stage with nuances of progressing to the third stage, especially by the inclusion of the communal plural forms. To heal memories of ancestral land, guided by Psalm 137, it is crucial to begin with an honest acknowledgement of pain; a lament/mourning that is inclusive of memories of actual experiences and feelings. Mourning "is a sign of a psychic maturation and a process which accompanies the healing of trauma."[96]

Among other things, migrants need to process the grief of loss of home, culturally meaningful systems, and the loss of the feeling of life and safety within one's home setting/culture.[97] This should be allowed to organically happen at both individual and group levels, because without help, mourning migrants can end up mourning forever.[98] Shared mourning also helps to strengthen the cohesiveness and reflective capacities of the healing group.[99]

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95 Schearing, *Psycho-theological Functions of Lament*, 141.

96 Mariia Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams in Zabuzhko's "'The Museum of Abandoned Secrets,'" *Genealogy* 3 (1) (2019): 8.

97 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration," 5.

98 Vamik D. Volkan, "Mourning, Large-Group Identity, and the Refugee Experience," in *An Uncertain Safety: Integrative Health Care for the 21st Century Refugees*, eds. Thomas Wenzel and Boris Drozdek (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 23-35.

99 Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 22.

The pain of losing ancestral land (and home), which feels similar to losing identity, should be named in detail without minimizing it. To enable the "naming" of the pain, safe spaces for storytelling and history narration are important; spaces similar to the rivers of Babylon where one can sit and weep, and open up expressing their loss, anger, longing and grief (c.f. Ps. 137:1); A space where one can "remember" their ancestral land and whatever it is that one left behind, be it religious or political persecution, poverty, etc., as this is important knowledge in processing the trauma. This naming has to be mention specific names of the land, explore events of dispossession and displacement, and vent out the emotional impact both on persons and the group. Narrating grief breaks the cycle of silence which often deepens the reach of intergenerational trauma/wounds caused by unspoken land loss.

Than a mere property, ancestral land has to be appreciated as an important unsubstitutable reality which gives meaning and dignity to people's history, spirituality, ancestry and ancestors, and identity and a sense of belonging. Experts establish that a sense of stable belonging and of historical continuity is a basic psychological need.[100] Ecopsychologists emphasize that place attachment (association with land) is a crucial aspect of self-identity,[101] and of our "peoplehood."[102] Thus, healing requires restoring the bond between people and their ancestral land, until the land (even in the perceived sense) becomes

100 Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano and Nydia Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 3rd Edition, eds. Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano and Nydia Garcia-Preto (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 1.

101 Gilberto Marzano, "Place Attachment and Place Identity: Their Contribution to Place Branding," *Culture and Creativity in Urban Development*, *Scholarly Papers* (2015): 42-47.

102 McGoldrick, Giordano, Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," 1.

a therapeutic and life-giving space. The theological meaning of land is also important, especially considering the ancestral land as God given (Gen. 12:7), as a covenant (Gen. 17:8), a blessing (Deut. 8:7-10), and home of the ancestors (Gen. 28:13).

Ecopsychologists stress also on the need to reconnect to the collective identity by engaging those cultural symbols linked to the lost, captured, or abused ancestral land even amidst displacement. Songs, rituals, languages, oral history and other cultural symbols are important for stabilizing in people the wavering sense of identity amidst pains of estrangement. As Psalm 137 is a collective lament, these rituals, gatherings, festivals, and intergenerational dialogue slowly reify a positive gaze towards belonging and reduce the pain and trauma of history. Saying with a firm conviction like the Psalmist "If I forget you ..." (cf. Ps. 137:5-6) needs a lot of affirmation hinged on the rediscovered and re-imagined collective identity.

Lawrence Kirmayer highlights that in healing intergenerational remembrances of indigenous identity and trauma, it is important to dive deeper into the personal, family, and community memory.[103] However, he cautions that to bring the historical and intergenerational land trauma to the surface is a delicate double-edged sword because often the violence experienced can hardly be made sense of in simplistic ways, and when simplified, can be used to invoke "homogenizing tropes of a collectivized indigenous victimization and powerlessness."[104]

2. Healing the Migrant

When a home is lost, all the organizing and containing functions break wide open, and there is a disintegration that,

103 In some contexts in decolonizing memory he explains it as "ethnic" memory.

104 Kirmayer, Gone and Moses, "Rethinking Historical Trauma, Adversity and Resilience in Indigenous Communities," 305.

according to Papadopoulos, occurs at three levels: individual–personal, familiar–marital, and socio-economic/cultural-political.[105] For families, especially those raising children, migration is disruptive and it introduces an entirely new reality; an extra integration stage in their cycle. In effect, traumatic family experiences/memories of migration, alongside their trail of emotions which are not just resolved immediately,[106] become an irremovable part of their heritage.[107]

These dynamics in the process of migration make migrants vulnerable due to the resulting feeling of powerlessness and the inability to control or manage their situation. In those circumstances their natural protection against overwhelming stimulus is destroyed by the sudden, unforeseeable and extreme experiences which, aside from trauma and grief, cause mortal danger and fear of death.[108]

Grief, loss, and powerlessness are for most migrants the major experience of their lives. Grief is an expected reaction to any significant loss.[109] As observed by Hannah Arendt, migrants suffer a double loss: first, the loss of self and secondly, of

105 Renos Papadopoulos, "Refugees, Home and Trauma," in *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place like Home*, ed. Renos Papadopoulos (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.

106 Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 16.

107 McGoldrick, Giordano, Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," 13.

108 Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp and Nora Hettich, "What has clinical psychoanalysis to offer to traumatised refugees? Some Experiences during the so-called "Refugee Crisis" in Hesse (Germany)," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 33.

109 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 25, 36.

belonging in the common world.[110] Therefore to work towards their healing, it is important to explore deeply the reality of their grief and loss in two dynamics: first, the "foreignness" which we can look at as "loss of self," and secondly, the internalized and culturally protected sense of borders, which we can look at as "loss of sense of belonging to the common world."

The reality of rational "borders" (internalized ideological borders) is not an isolated or modern phenomenon. It has been there, and it is being passed down to generations. Fabio Castriota emphasizes particularly understanding "borders" as psychic, relational and cultural.[111] Hamilton highlights that borders, as ideological constructs, are sensitive as they are capable of triggering political movements or the migrant populations to decide to isolate themselves, even contrary to their own rationally considered self-interest."[112] This is because they feel out of their "familiar protective bubble," using words of Raphael-Leff.

As such, most migrants, according to Raphael-Leff experience a triple trauma: First, *displacement* and loss of forbearers (traditions, material possessions, ancestral graves, primal voices). Secondly, *transition*, suffering a disequilibrium of impermanence risks, and possible loss of family members in the crossing; and thirdly, *arrival*, with new demands of

110 Joan Raphael-Leff, "Perinatal Migration: Lived Experience and Integration Transmission," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 74.

111 Fabio Castriota, "Psychoanalysis and the Drama of Refugees in Italy," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 113.

112 Mark Hamilton, *Jesus King of Strangers: What the Bible Really Says about Immigration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 8.

acclimatisation and acculturation.[113] In one word, for each trauma dynamic we can relate the undefined displacement with "grief," transition with "memory," and arrival with "hope," the core themes of this paper.

A foreigner, a sojourner, has been referred to in different ways, even as far back as the biblical times. In the Old Testament, terms like *Nokri/ben-nekar* and *zar* are used to refer to someone who is not an Israelite. There are times when "foreignness" is presented in positive or neutral manner (Ex. 22:21, Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 10:18-19, Is. 56:6-7, Zech. 8:22-23), but also times when it is presented negatively, as bad and threatening (Deut. 7:1-4, 1 Kgs 11:1-8, Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13).

In relation to loss and mourning, Haworth sees the migratory process as going through several phases. First is intense sorrow for what is lost, fear of the unknown, and deep experience of loneliness and helplessness. Second is the manic stage, where the migrant minimizes the significance of the change in his/her life and overvalues everything new, disdaining the past and the lost. Third is the experience of nostalgia and the sorrow for the resurfacing lost world. Finally is the recovery of the pleasure of thinking and desiring to make plans for the future in which the past is regarded as such, and not as a "lost paradise" where one constantly longs to return.[114]

For Ilany Kogan, the conversation and process of healing has to permeate these five traumatizing realities that migrants experience. First, the separation and loss and the disruption that occurs with it. Second, the experience of loneliness and the feeling of not belonging to anyone. Third, the threat of identity. Fourth, the regression or infantilization which occurs as a consequence of migration. Fifth, the deferred

113 Raphael-Leff, "Perinatal Migration," 73, 77.

114 Haworth, "Forced to Flee," 62.

mourning because of migration.[115] Healing these will help prevent "re-traumatization" which is more complex. We can notice these experiences in Psalm 137.

Mourning, which Mariia Lenherr sees as a sign of psychic maturation and an important process in trauma integration,[116] is considered "simple mourning" when it occurs under favourable conditions, "complicated mourning" when there are serious difficulties in working through the migratory grief and "extreme mourning" when the grief cannot be resolved. This is adapted from the Freudian theory of loss.[117] But trauma healing can always be pursued, however slow the process.

One of those ways is the use of symbolic actions to process the trauma, even when complex and multi-layered. In Psalm 137, the "hanging up" of the harps on the poplars in verse 2 can be understood as a symbolic action, a sign of giving up and leaving to God their grief, as it comes after they had "sat" and "wept." Symbolic actions enable the mind/psyche to externalize the grief and remake the lost meaning.

Aside from externalizing the grief, experts also recommend practices like "externalizing of conversations,"[118] an approach developed in the 1980s by Michael White, which employs practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectifying people. Stories of loss are

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115 Vivien Elton, et al., eds. *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 6.

116 Mariia Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 22.

117 Anna L. Christopoulos, Chrysi Giannoulaki and Nicholas Tzavaras, Mourning and Issues of Identity in the Treatment of Refugees in Lesvos," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 121.

118 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2007) 9, 26.

reconstructed in empowering ways, and somatic experiencing helps release stored bodily tensions from displacement trauma. Externalization is important because it separates the problem from the person and, therefore, enables more space for genuine engagement with the problem.

White points out that, when people are not tied to restricting "truths" about their identity and negative "certainties" about their lives, new options for taking action to address the predicaments of their lives become available, and they are able to assume responsibility.[119] This affects the story that is told, as future generations inherit falsehood and have no way of fact-checking due to the corruption of history. This creates false history, and therefore false memory. However, it is crucial to humbly cherish the truth value of the historical narratives. Being victims, many people bend the truth to fit their desired narrative, especially to waive guilt and to appeal to elevated public sympathy.

Exploring healing of intergenerational trauma in indigenous contexts, Urrieta recommends healing by decolonizing identity and trauma with a method he calls: "I/We belonging and healing." He recommends reconstructing a relationality that decentralizes the self, especially as the western worldview puts the "self" at the centre and the "other" as marginal.[120] Psalm 137 has this, by the remembering through a plural form: *We* sat and wept, *We* remembered, and *We* hung up our harps.

It is crucial to highlight that trauma continues to be transmitted if it is not faced. Next-generation survivors are left to psychically metabolize inherited trauma, and since human violation is perpetuated, many from this new generation will

119 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 26.

120 Luis Urrieta, "Indigenous Reflections on Identity, Trauma, and Healing," 11.

face their own repression and suffering. This pattern has been observed from migrant generations closest to genocide, war, exile and racialized violence globally.[121]

Equally, migration trauma is also emotional, behavioural, and a physical/bodily experience. Those who have survived traumatic events often experience profound and lasting changes in their physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory.[122] Sverne Varvin elaborates that generally traumatized persons struggle with mental and bodily pains, which are difficult to understand and difficult to put into words. The pains may be expressed as dissociated states of mind, bodily pains and other somatic experiences and dysfunctions, overwhelming thoughts and feelings, behavioral tendencies and relational styles, ways of living, etc.[123]

As such, healing from migration trauma is a progressive process that only yields results in the context of safe and reliable relationships based on compassion, respect, holistic care, and non-judgmental acceptance, without stigma. While the process of healing from trauma provides fertile ground for personal growth, development, and enhancement of individual strengths, and fosters a profound appreciation for life, [124] it

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121 Debra Gill, "Suffering from elsewhere: Trauma and its Transmission," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 101.

122 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 30.

123 Sverre Varvin, "Long-Term Psychoanalytic Treatments with Traumatised Refugees," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023),152.

124 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 35.

is important to heal the environment because the sense of loss is often socially constructed.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the importance of ancestral land as portrayed in both the historical circumstances behind Psalm 137 and the contextual scriptural message towards healing intergenerational trauma alongside grief, loss, and alienation suffered by migrants. The exegesis and interdisciplinary exploration have helped build a strong foundation for a deeper appreciation of ancestral land in people's lives, especially by giving meaning to people's identity, spirituality, and sense of belonging. Psalm 137 is therefore an important and functional resource of hope, especially among migrants, as it gives a historical but practical context for theologizing and ultimately healing.

MEDIEVAL CANON LAW ON CATECHESIS AND CHRISTIAN FORMATION[1]

Enrico C. Eusebio Jr., SJ

Abstract. By reconstructing medieval catechetical legislation, this paper presents a distinct field of research within the Church's canonical system, one that has been overlooked for a long time in canonical historical study, which has always interested itself in matrimonial, liturgical, or disciplinary norms. Drawing primarily from conciliar and synodal canons and episcopal directives, this study demonstrates that long before the Council of Trent, the Church was already systematically legislating on the teaching of Christian doctrine and Christian formation. As Church practice shifted from adult to infant baptism, catechetical formation moved from the holistic pre-baptismal catechumenate to doctrinal and moral instruction through the catechetical sermons of bishops, parish priests, and monks; confessional handbooks; and vernacular catechisms for children. Informally, however, Christians were able to learn the faith through the Christian culture in which they lived, which served a catechetical and formative purpose – the great feasts attended by masses of people, works of art, paintings, music, processions, etc.

1 This article is adapted from the author's work published in *Loyola Monographs* no. 7, *The Evolution of Church Legislation on the Object and Means of Catechesis: A Historico-Juridical Study of Cann. 773 and 779 with Special Reference to Philippine Catechesis* (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 2024). The author's earlier study, "The First Four Hundred Years of Catechesis," *Landas* 34, no. 2 (2020): 1–22, provides a historical foundation for the present discussion. GenAI Disclosure Statement: No GenAI tools were used in the research, writing, or preparation of this article.

However, local church legislation aimed at educating people in the faith proved insufficient to arrest the tide of religious decay and ignorance, especially on the eve of the Reformation. The overwhelmingly Christian setting itself became a breeding ground for a religious culture of maintenance and preservation that, unwittingly, tended to overlook the importance of intensive, missionary-style Christian initiation and formation in the spirit of the early Church.

Keywords: catechesis, medieval church, catechetical legislation, doctrine and morals, vernacular, Christian environment

Sources of Catechetical Legislation

Medieval catechesis can be described as a process whereby Christian teaching, moral precepts, prayers, and devotions were taught to believers during the medieval period. Quite distinct from contemporary catechesis, medieval catechesis was not a separate system of religious education, but part of the church's pastoral, liturgical, sacramental, homiletic, and cultural context. It shaped Christians in faith and practice through preaching, pastoral care, participation in liturgy, memorization, devotions, and visual and material culture.

Beyond catechesis, the Church, from its very beginnings, has developed institutions and laws – especially with regard to organization, liturgy, and moral life – that regulated the life of the community. In the first centuries, these norms were found in sources such as the Apostolic Tradition, the *Didaché*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the Apostolic Constitutions. However, one cannot obviously claim the existence of a precise

juridical science at this early point in time.[2] That development culminated only later, around the mid-twelfth century, with the *Concordia discordantium canonum*,[3] in which Gratian organized existing norms of the early Church down to his day.

With the peace of Constantine and the granting of religious freedom to Christians beginning in the fourth century, legislation by councils and popes became sources of law in response to new situations and problems concerning doctrine, discipline, and organization, including catechesis. Bishops of the empire convened synods and councils and issued norms for their local churches. Popes wrote decretals in response to concrete questions regarding matters of discipline and law.[4] In the fifth century, the popes no longer limited themselves to resolving concrete difficulties but, on their own initiative, issued general norms for entire regions. This trend continued during the Middle Ages and to the present day.[5]

After the conciliar canons and the papal decretals, the texts of the Fathers and other Church writers occupy a third important place. Not only were they considered the most complete and reliable transmitters and interpreters of apostolic teaching, but they also established liturgical and moral

2 Brian E. Ferme, *Introduzione alla storia del diritto canonico. Il diritto antico fino al Decretum di Graziano* (Roma: Pontificia Università Lateranense – Mursia, 1998), 41-42. See also Peter J. Huizing and Ladislas M. Orsy, "Canon Law - History," *Britannica*, updated May 16, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/canon-law/History (accessed September 22, 2025).

3 *Corpus Iuris Canonici, Editio Lipsiensis secunda post Aemilli Ludovici Richteri curas ad librorum manu scriptorum et editionis Romanae fidem recognovit et adnotatione critica instruxit Aemilius Friedberg, Pars prior, Decretum Magistri Gratiani, (Lipsiae 1879; Ristampa, Graz* 1959).

4 Ferme, *Introduzione alla storia del diritto canonico*, 43.

5 Constant van de Wiel, *History of Canon Law* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992), 16.

rules on the basis of apostolic teaching.[6] In this sense, their writings formed an authoritative source of canon law, but not as constitutive or legislative sources. This means that, though the Western Church has never granted the force of law even to positions unanimously held by the Fathers, they were nonetheless a source of inspiration for the legislators of the time, i.e., the bishops and the pope. They were important witnesses of the discipline and of the law in force, both universal and particular. Nevertheless, in the East, the writings of the Fathers had been recognized as having the force of law from the sixth century onwards.[7] The fact that Gratian incorporated the writings of the Fathers into his *Decretum* attests to their unique value.[8]

Many medieval local councils and synods developed a body of legislation on the teaching of Christian doctrine.[9] Ecumenical

6 Giuseppe Groppo, "*Catecumenato antico*," in *Dizionario di Catechetica*, ed. Jean Gevaert (Leumann: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1986), 133–36. For the West, the four great Church fathers and doctors are Ambrose (+ 397), Jerome (+ 420), Augustine (+ 430) and Gregory the Great (+ 604). For the East, they are Athanasius (+ 373), Basil (+ 379), Gregory Nazianzen (+ 390) and John Chrysostom (+ 407).

7 van de Wiel, *History of Canon Law*, 21.

8 The *Decretum Gratiani*, collection of nearly 3,800 texts touching on all areas of church discipline and regulation compiled by the Benedictine monk Gratian about 1140. For centuries, the *Decretum* was the text on which the teaching of canon law in the schools was based. It was glossed and commented on by canonists. It became the first part of the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, the great body of canon law, and it served as an important source for the official codification of canon law in 1917 and its revision in 1983. "Gratian's *Decretum*," Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gratians-Decretum (accessed September 25, 2025).

9 Many of these medieval conciliar legislations are discussed in the following sources: Manuel Fernández Magaz, "Historia de la catequesis medieval a través de los concilios," *Sinite* 5 (1964): 25–52; Angel Matesanz Rodrigo, "Historia general de la catequesis," in *Nuevo Diccionario de Catequética*, vol. 1, ed. Vicente Pedrosa Arés, Maria Navarro Gonzales, Ricardo Lázaro Recalde, and Jesus Sastre García (Madrid: Editorial San Pablo, 1999), 1132–48.

councils, in exercising legislative power for the entire Church, also sought to provide a united and coordinated direction to the legislation of the local churches. Through these councils, bishops, archbishops, primates, and patriarchs exercised their pastoral care over their regional communities. Often, these councils were called to address problems of doctrine and discipline and became opportunities for the constant renewal of the local churches.[10]

Pastoral Challenges of the Period

As early as the fourth century, various Germanic tribes from northern Europe began migrating into and invading the crumbling Roman Empire. Alaric, the Goth, eventually captured and sacked Rome in 410. Soon, Slavic peoples began moving into the Empire. Although Roman influence continued in the cities until the sixth century, the Western Roman Empire was already collapsing. During this period of upheaval, the outcome of wars among the Germanic tribes determined future developments. The Frankish people eventually prevailed.[11]

10 Gabriel Le Bras, "*La Iglesia medieval*," in *Historia de la Iglesia: De los orígenes a nuestros días*, ed. Augustin Fliche and Victor Martin, vol. 12 (Valencia: Editorial Católica, 1976), 628–629. One can notice from the beginnings of the Church the interesting phenomenon wherein particular norms of various regions would acquire a general and universal value through their reception and acceptance by other local churches.

11 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 115–116.

With the baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, as a Catholic, i.e., non-Arian,[12] Christianity found itself identified with, and supported by, the new Frankish state after some years of separation from political associations with the Roman Empire. The Church was greatly assisted in its missionary preaching to the various tribes as they came into contact with a largely Christian civilization. With the crowning of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III in 800 as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the Church developed a movement called the Carolingian Reform, in which the Emperor embarked on massive efforts to renew society by establishing "a European theocratic Christendom."[13]

From the end of the fifth century, with the baptism of Clovis, until the time of Charlemagne, the conversion of princes followed the conversion of whole tribes. Mass baptisms were held without due preparation and catechesis. As in the earlier period of religious freedom under Constantine, the Church grew in numbers, but its members lacked the personal Christian formation previously provided in the catechumenate.[14] In this regard, the Church had to consider not only the situation of new converts, but also the many baptized Christians who came from families with a long-standing Christian tradition. With the migration of the northern tribes, the Church found

12 Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 421. Bevans and Schroeder highlight the term "Catholic" to distinguish him from the Arians. Catholics held the Trinitarian declaration of the Council of Nicaea (325), especially with regard to the doctrine that Jesus, the Son, was of the same substance as, and co-eternal with, the Father. Majority of the Germanic tribes followed the Arian teaching that denied the teaching of Nicaea, relegating Jesus Christ to one of the Father's creatures, even if he was the most perfect of them. The monks of the Greek East had initially introduced the Christian faith to them, but with this Arian perspective. There arose a movement to form an alliance of Arian Christian Germanic tribes against non-Arian Catholic Christians, and King Clovis supported the latter.

13 Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 116.

14 Matesanz Rodrigo, "*Historia general*," 1135.

itself in a happy situation of a great influx of new Christians reminiscent of the fourth century, but also faced the most challenging task of catechizing them. At the same time, the Church had to attend to the ordinary pastoral care of Christian communities already spread throughout the Empire.

Given this general background of the early Middle Ages from the fifth to the ninth centuries, the next section explores how the Church carried out the religious formation of her old and new members through catechesis in a milieu that later became increasingly Christian, at least on the surface.

From Adult to Infant Baptisms

The Augustinian doctrine of original sin led to the widespread belief that infants should be baptized *quamprimum*, i.e., at least within a week of birth. Baptizing newborn children withdrew them from that state of original sin, which could not fail to affect them by reason of their coming into the world. With this teaching in mind, parents were required to have a speedy baptism for their infants, especially on account of the high mortality rate at that time.[15] Thus, from the fifth century on, the baptism of adults became the exception rather than the rule.[16] Consequently, adult pre-baptismal instruction also declined. With the disappearance of adult catechesis in the setting of the catechumenate, a primordial form of Christian

15 Henri Bourgeois, *L'initiation chrétienne et ses sacrements* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1982), 75.

16 Le Bras, "*La Iglesia medieval*," 129. For a study on the historical evolution of the practice of infant baptism, see Paul Camelot, "Le baptême des petits enfants dans l'Église des premiers siècles," Maison-Dieu 88 (1966): 23-42.

formation almost became extinct.[17] A renewed form of adult catechesis later succeeded it, with a new terminology and a different approach.

Soon, new liturgico-pastoral developments arose out of the shift from adult to infant baptisms. It happened that the various formative stages of the original catechumenate were reduced to a single rite of baptism.[18] The Rite of Baptism in the early eleventh-century rubric, the Sarum Manual,[19] attests to this transformation. The preparatory rite commenced at the door of the church with the ceremony of making the child a catechumen. The child is breathed upon and signed on the forehead and breast. Then followed the prayers, giving of salt and the series of exorcisms. The child is then brought into the church, the Our Father and Apostles' Creed are recited, after which the child is brought to the font for the *effeta* or the touching of the mouth and ears, the threefold renunciation of Satan, and the anointing of the candidate's breast and back. The rite of baptism then followed.[20]

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17 Maxwell Johnson writes that *quamprimum* baptism "sounds the death knell for the catechumenal process in relationship to baptism as a whole." Maxwell E. Johnson, The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation, rev. and expanded ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 215. See also Milton McC. Gatch, "Basic Education from the Decline of Catechesis to the Rise of the Catechisms," in *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis*, ed. John Westerhoff and O. C. Edwards (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1981), 79–108.

18 Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 216.

19 A. Jefferies Collins, ed., *Manuale ad usum Percelebris Ecclesie Sarisburiensis*, from the edition printed at Rouen in 1543 compared with those of 1506 (London), 1516 (Rouen), 1523 (Antwerp), and 1526 (Paris) (Chichester: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1960).

20 John Douglas Close Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West. A Study in the Disintegration of the Primitive Rite of Initiation* (London: SPCK, 1965), 126–27.

Notably, even for babies, the seven scrutinies on certain weekdays of Lent were also practiced, as in the old catechumenate. These were also opportunities for adults to receive catechetical instruction. St. Caesarius,[21] the Archbishop of Arles, urged the mothers who brought their babies to the scrutinies not to miss these celebrations. In this way, the parents were also prepared for their babies' reception of baptism by making the same catechetical and liturgical journey together with their children.[22] In the case of adult candidates, St. Martin, Archbishop of Braga, Portugal, succeeded in having the Council of Braga (572) adopt a law requiring three weeks of preparation to give adult catechumens the time to be instructed in the Creed.[23] St. Boniface, who propagated Christianity in the Frankish Empire at the beginning of the eighth century, instructed his catechumens in Germany for at least two months, and even longer.[24] For Johnson, these efforts were attempts by Church leaders to restore some kind of minimal adult catechumenate for those asking for baptism.[25]

Elements of Post-Baptismal Catechesis

Medieval post-baptismal catechesis saw the more common use of preaching in the context of the liturgy as a form of

21 St. Caesarius of Arles was born at Châlons-sur-Saône in Burgundy around 470. Known to be a great and popular preacher, St. Caesarius died at Arles probably in 542. Herbert Beck and William E. Klingshirn, "Caesarius of Arles, St.," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard L. Marthaler, 2nd ed., vol. 2, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 848–49.

22 Michel Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, trans. Edward J. Haasl (New York: Sadlier, 1979), 133.

23 *Concilium Bracarense* III (Braga), *Regnante Domino*, can. 1 *ut episcopus ambulet per dioecesim suam, et ante triginta dies paschae catechumeni doceantur Symbolum*, in *Mansi* IX, 838-839.

24 Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate*, 134.

25 Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 215.

catechesis. Outside the setting of liturgical or catechetical preaching, however, the Christian environment of the period also served as a form of catechesis or a means of Christian socialization. Later in the period, the beginnings of formal children's catechesis outside the home emerged in the Church.

Liturgical Preaching

With the widespread practice of infant baptism and the disappearance of a form of formation that prepared catechumens for baptism, the catechesis that had not been provided to Christians prior to their baptism, when they were infants, was eventually imparted to them as adults through post-baptismal liturgical or catechetical preaching. These sermons were catechetical in that they expounded on the basic baptismal texts of the Symbol of the Faith and the Our Father, as well as common moral precepts. The content of this sort of teaching was closely parallel to the catechetical instructions given by bishops in the context of baptism. In fact, these catechetical sermons became the most recorded and documented means of teaching Christian doctrine during this period.[26]

St. Caesarius of Arles wrote in sixth-century Gaul about his high regard for this form of catechesis, declaring that the Word of God and its interpretation in the sermon were no less than the body of Christ in the Eucharist. He personally thwarted those who wanted to leave Mass early by keeping the church doors closed and not reopening them until after the blessing.[27] The *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua*, a collection of 105 canons compiled by Gennadius in France, threatened those

26 Fernández Magaz, "Historia de la catequesis medieval," 27. See also Robert N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, c. 1215-c. 1515 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 66-67.

27 *Caesarius Arelatensis*, *Sermo* 78, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, Tomus* CIII, 323-324.

who went out during the bishop's sermon with excommunication: "If a priest is delivering the word in the church, let anyone who leaves the assembly be excommunicated."[28] In most cases, however, the sermons must have been very simple, either because the preachers had little education or because they intended to make themselves understood by all hearers.

The rise of the mendicant orders had a profound influence on medieval first proclamation of the gospel and catechetical preaching. The Dominicans and Franciscans embarked on remarkable efforts to adapt catechetical approaches to the needs of urban society.[29] Councils directed bishops to enlist their cooperation in ministering to the people, especially through preaching and instruction. For example, the Council of Rouen (1223) legislated that worthy candidates should also be ordained among the religious orders:

> In cathedrals as well as in convents, suitable men are to be ordained whom the bishops could have as helpers and collaborators in preaching, in hearing confessions, and in other things which pertain to the salvation of souls.[30]

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28 "*Sacerdote verbum in ecclesia faciente, qui egressus de auditorio fuerit, excommunicetur." Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua, anno Domini* 475, can. 31, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, Concilia Galliae* A. 314 – A. 506, *cura et studio* C. Munier, *Tomus* CXLVIII (Turnholti Typographi Brepols Editores Pontifici MCMLXIII), 172.

29 Luciano Meddi, *Catechesi: Proposta e formazione della vita cristiana* (Padova: Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 2004), 28. See also Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 70.

30 "*Tam in cathedralibus, quam in conventualibus ecclesiis viri idonei ordinentur, quos episcopi possint habere coadiutores et cooperatores in praedicationibus, et audiendis confessionibus, et in ceteris quae ad salutem pertinent animarum.*" The English translation is ours. *Concilium Rotomagense* (Rouen), Anno MCCXXIII, cap. 10, *Viri idonei ordinentur quos episcopi possint habere coadjutores, in Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio, Tomus vigesimus secundus* (Venetiis MDCCLXXVIII), 1199.

In fact, Bosch writes that monasticism was one of the main instruments in reforming European society during the Middle Ages.[31] Much of its influence on medieval society came from the high esteem the general populace had for monks and nuns, who, in their eyes, took the place once occupied by martyrs, now that the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom was no longer frequent. They provided, so to speak, a living catechesis to the people. In any case, one can surely claim that monasticism helped bring the Church a little closer to her ideals during the Middle Ages. From the fifth to the twelfth century, the monastery became not only a center of culture and civilization, but also of devotion, evangelization, and preaching.

Monastic preaching, and medieval preaching in general, consisted of doctrinal instruction and the teaching of the Church's moral precepts. These two components are explained below.

Doctrinal Instruction

The content of medieval liturgical preaching can be clearly seen through the local legislations and statutes of bishops and councils. Although the early and medieval church's approach to Christian initiation and education changed radically, one still notices a consistent continuity between the doctrinal content of catechesis in the catechumenate and that of the Middle Ages.

The medieval councils consistently stressed the learning of the formula prayers, which contained, in summary form, the basic truths of the faith. Ecclesiastical legislation made it clear that the minimum aimed for – though still achieved with much difficulty due to the little, if any, education of the people – was

31 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 231–32.

the universal memorization of the Creed and the Our Father, together with a basic understanding of Christian morality. In so learning these prayers, the mystery of the Holy Trinity should occupy a central place in instruction.[32]

Since the Creed and the Our Father were the essentials of Christian doctrine, they also constituted the fundamental content of catechesis within the family. The adults passed on these truths and prayers to their children[33] and explained them in a way that was adapted to their capacities. In a real sense, therefore, catechesis during the Middle Ages was derived from the ancient praxis of the *traditio* and the *redditio Symboli,* and from the liturgy of Christian initiation.

Moral Instruction

Aside from preaching on the content of formulaic prayers, preachers in the early Middle Ages also preached on moral issues and the Ten Commandments. Both Caesarius of Arles and Martin of Braga tried to root out superstition and magic, which were practiced for the sake of cures and were vestiges of pagan practices. Caesarius of Arles taught that in order to be saved, it was not sufficient to pray the sign of the cross or all the other articles of the Symbol of faith. Good works, almsgiving, love, justice, and chastity were necessary because faith without

32 *Concilium Cloveshoviae* (Clovesho), Scriptum enim, can. 11 *ut omnes presbyteri uno modo sua ministeria peragant*, in *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio, Tomus duodecimus* (*Florentiae* MDCCLXVI), 399.

33 Matesanz Rodrigo, "*Historia general*," 1138.

works was a dead faith.[34] The Councils of Orleans[35] (538), Braga[36] (573), Tours[37] (813), Paris[38] (829) and Aix-la-Chapelle[39] (836) warned the people against the errors of idols and sin (murder, adultery, perjury, false witnesses and mortal sins) and sought to instruct the people in living a true Christian life, i.e., fulfilling their Christian duties, living in virtue and avoiding vices and returning to the fold if they had fallen into sin.

Later in the twelfth century and the succeeding years, a new element in the content of catechesis emerged: the insertion of catechetical instruction within the medieval religious framework of the *via salutis* or the way of salvation. The knowledge of the Christian faith and morals became increasingly necessary to all Christians for their salvation[40]. The Council of Toledo (1473) utilized militaristic language in expressing the salvific importance of instruction in the faith:

> The arms of our militia against the workings of the evil spirit consist especially in the faith. This is the cornerstone and the foundation of our whole work. Thus, one who

34 *Caesarius Arelatensis, Sermo* 71, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 64-68.

35 *Concilium Aurelianense* III (Orleans), can. 31, *de haereticis, et Bonofiacis Sacerdotibus, qui rebaptizant*, in *Mansi* IX, 19.

36 *Concilium Bracarense* III, *Regnante Domino*, can. 1, *ut episcopus ambulet per dioecesim suam, et ante triginta dies paschae catechumeni doceantur Symbolum*, in *Mansi* IX, 838-839.

37 *Concilium Turonense* III (Tours), *Quantum piissimi*, can. 4, *ut episcopi gregem sibi commissum sacra praedicatione, vitaeque suae exemplo doceant*, in *Mansi* XIV, 84.

38 *Concilium Parisiense* VI (Paris), *Recordari* vos, liber 1, cap. 1, *Quid proprie ad religionem Christianam pertineat*, in *Mansi* XIV, 536-537.

39 *Concilium Aquisgranense* II (Aix-la-Chapelle), *In nomine*, cap. 2, can. 5 *de officio presbyterorum erga eos qui ad ipsorum ecclesias pertinent*, in *Mansi* XIV, 680-681.

40 Hubert Jedin and John P. Dolan, eds., *History of the Church*, Vol. IV (London: Burns & Oates, 1980–1981), originally *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. IV (Freiburg: Herder, 1965–1979), 87.

> wishes to attain eternal salvation must be instructed in the faith and morals.[41]

The preaching of monks, canons, diocesan clerics, and bishops had aroused in the hearts of the laity the desire for the so-called *vita apostolica* or the apostolic life, a life of personal closeness to Jesus of Nazareth, "wandering, suffering, humanly close, redeeming, and not holding sway."[42] The knowledge of the person of Christ was precisely the path that led to one's salvation. It was not surprising, therefore, that the twofold theme of the acquisition of virtues and the avoidance of vices had become the basic framework for teaching Christian morality.[43] Many preachers lashed out against the vices and immorality of people as a direct contradiction to the Christian's closer imitation of Christ. Thus, it can be affirmed that late medieval Christianity, especially in the fifteenth century, was characterized also by its emphasis on action, as Swanson writes:

> The religion of the great majority was not one of consideration and comprehension of deep theological matters, but action and reaction to secure salvation. Agreed, there was intense devotion and a strong streak of contemplative religion, which could become mysticism, but the emphasis is on action, on living the Christian life.[44]

Jedin and Dolan assert that, in fact, the proclamation of the doctrines of the faith even took second place to moral teaching, a pattern generally characteristic of late medieval religious

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41 "*Arma militiae nostrae adversus spirituales nequitias maxime consistunt in fide. Haec enim lapis angularis est, et fundamentum totius nostri operis. Ideoque volentes aeternam salutem adipisci, oportet de fide et moribus esse eruditum.*" *Concilium Toletanum, Quoniam a nascentis*, cap. 2 *Quod rectores ecclesiarum habeant in scriptis articulos fidei et publicent populo*, in *Mansi* XXII, 385.

42 Jedin and Dolan, *History of the Church*, IV, 87.

43 Gatch, "From the Decline of Catechesis," 102.

44 Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 26.

instruction.[45] Thus, apart from the prayers, they strongly emphasized penance, the Ten Commandments, the seven capital sins, and all the virtues and vices. Together, however, with the widespread teaching of moral precepts, the councils also never failed to stress going back to the basics of doctrine, as evidenced in const. 1 of the Council of Sevilla (1512):

> Since we have been informed that many of our subjects, having reached the age of discretion, are ignorant of the prayers required by the Church [...], we therefore command that the above-mentioned parish priests and confessors are to admonish them that they may learn the general confession, the Sunday Prayer, *Ave Maria*, the Creed, and the *Salve Regina*.[46]

Nevertheless, they recognized the need to teach both morals and doctrine, since they complemented each other. The Council of Avignon (1209) admitted that where the preaching of evangelical morals and discipline was lacking due to the negligence of the priests, one frequently also encountered numerous and dangerous heresies.[47]

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45 Jedin and Dolan, *History of the Church*, IV, 577.

46 "*Et quia sumus informati, quod plures ex nostris subditis, habentes aetatem discretionis nesciunt Orationes ab Ecclesia institutas [...] ideo mandamus, ut praefati parochi, et confessores, illos moneant pariter, ut procurent scire confessionem generalem, et Orationem Dominicam, Ave Maria, et Credo, ac Salve Regina.*" The English translation is ours. *Concilio Provincial de Sevilla, In nomine, año* 1512, const. 1, *Quod parochi doceant suos parochianos Mysteria nostrae Sanctae Fidei Catholicae, et quod in qualibet Ecclesia adsit tabula, in qua contineantur omnia, quae illos docere debent,* in *Colección de cánones y de todos los concilios de la Iglesia de España y de America*. Por D. Juan Tejada y Ramiro, *Tomo* V (Madrid: Imprenta de D. Pedro Montero, 1861), 69-70.

47 *Concilium Avenionense* (Avignon), *In nomine*, cap. 1, can. 1 *Ut episcopi frequentius vel praedicent, vel faciant praedicari, in Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio, Tomus vigesimus secundus* (Venetiis MDCCLXXVIII), 783.

The Christian Environment

The bulk of formal doctrinal and moral instruction was given to Christians in the Middle Ages through catechetical sermons of bishops, parish priests and monks. But informally, Christians were able to learn the Christian faith through their lives and experiences in a Christian environment. The Christian culture in which they lived served a catechetical purpose – the great feasts attended by masses of people, works of art, paintings, music, processions, etc. The very explicitness of all that was Christian both in the family and society served, in the words of Gianetto, "as a new form of a catechumenate, not anymore of the personal kind, but one that was more social. The educator now was the Christian environment, with a minimum of formality."[48] For Meddi, one cannot speak of the absence of catechesis in the Middle Ages but rather of "a transformation of catechesis itself and its functioning educative structure. The environment took the place of the catechumenate: the new educative structure had now become 'the Christian society.'"[49]

One interesting and artistic means employed in catechesis during this period of the Middle Ages was the *bibbia pauperorum* or Bible of the Poor. It consisted of various forms of art that adorned churches and public places – paintings, murals, frescoes, stained-glass windows, statues, sculptures, wood

48 "[...] *un 'catecumenato' di nuovo tipo, non più personale ma sociale. L'educatore è ora l'ambiente cristiano, con un minimo di formalità.*" Ubaldo Gianetto, "*La catechesi nella storia: Dagli inizi fino al rinnovamento conciliare*," in *Andate e insegnate: Manuale di catechetica*, ed. Emilio Alberich and Ubaldo Gianetto (Leumann: Elledici, 2002), 63.

49 "[...] *una trasformazione della stessa e della struttura educativa ad essa funzionale. Al catecumenato si sostituì l'ambiente: la nuova struttura educativa fu la 'società cristiana*.'" Meddi, Catechesi, 30. Cf. Emilio Alberich, "*La catequesis en el contexto del Concilio Vaticano II y el posconcilio*," *Teología y Catequesis* 45–48 (1993): 289.

carvings, etc. - depicting religious themes, biblical scenes, and personalities, all serving a catechetical purpose.[50] Preachers used these artistic expressions to educate, especially the poor and the illiterate, in the tenets of the Christian religion. Through these forms of art, used as powerful means of catechesis, parents were also able to communicate the faith to their children in a way that enabled them to easily remember the content of the history of salvation and the elements of Christian doctrine.

Children's Catechesis

This paper has discussed post-baptismal catechesis in the form of liturgical preaching addressed primarily to adult Christians. With regard to the catechesis of children during the early Middle Ages, it must be noted that no official post-baptismal instruction was provided to children baptized as infants. Instead, the task was entrusted to parents and godparents, "[...] the former, because they have begotten their children, given to them by the Lord; the latter, because they are their guarantors in the faith."[51] The religious initiation of the young took place substantially in the setting of the family and likewise, by custom.

50 Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 86-87. See also Dante Balboni, "*Arte cristiana*," in *Dizionario di catechetica*, ed. Joseph Gevaert (Leumann: Elledici, 1986), 50.

51 "[...] *illi, quia eos genuerunt, et eis a domino dati sunt: isti, quia pro eis fidejussores existunt.*" *Concilium Arelatense* VI (Arles), *Dum anno* XLV, can. 19 *ut parentes filios, et patrini filiolos erudire studeant*, in Mansi XIV, 62.

The Councils of Clovesho[52] (747), Arles[53] (813), Mayence[54] (813) and Paris[55] (829) legislated that parents themselves should be instructed in Christian doctrine and morals in order for them to fulfill their duty to instruct their own children in the first place. There were also references in the eleventh and twelfth centuries concerning the duty of parents and sponsors to have a deeper understanding of the faith in order to equip themselves to teach their children. On this account, pastors of souls were enjoined to instruct their parishioners every Sunday so that, in turn, parents among them should be able to instruct their children. Such a reference can be found in the Sarum Rite, an important early eleventh century rubric:

> The godmothers should be enjoined to teach the infant Our Father, and Hail Mary, and I believe in God [...]. Wherefore, persons are not to be received nor admitted as godparents except those who know the aforesaid things, because godparents must instruct their spiritual children in the faith, which they cannot do unless they themselves have first been instructed in the faith.[56]

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52 *Concilium Cloveshoviae* (Clovesho), *Regnante Domino*, can. 11, *ut omnes presbyteri uno modo sua ministeria peragant*, in *Mansi* XII, 398-399.

53 *Concilium Arelatense* VI, *Dum anno* XLV, can. 19, *ut parentes filios, et patrini filiolos erudire studeant*, in Mansi XIV, 62.

54 *Concilium Moguntiacum* (Mayence), *Glorisissimo et Christianissimo*, can. 45, ut *Symbolum et orationem dominicam omnes discant*, in *Mansi* XIV, 74.

55 *Concilium Parisiense* VI (Paris), *Recordari vos, liber* 1, cap. 7, *Quod tempus baptismatis a nonnullis non ita ut canonicus ordo edocet observetur*, in *Mansi* XIV, 541-542.

56 "*Item et commatribus iniungatur ut doceant infantem Pater noster et Ave Maria et credo in Deum* [...]. *Unde non debent recipi in patrinos nec admittantur nisi qui sciunt predicta: quia patrini debent instruere filios suos spirituales in fide quod facere non possunt nisi ipsimet in fide prius instruerentur.*" A. Jefferies Collins, ed., *Manuale ad usum Percelebris Ecclesie Sarisburiensis* (Chichester: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1960), 37, 42; English translation in John Douglas Close Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, 195–198.

It appears to be the case that children's catechesis had become limited to the mere memorization of three key texts: the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Creed.[57] Parents and sponsors initially took up this instruction of children concerning these prayers. However, some councils began to exhort parents and godparents to bring their children to church as well, where they might be able to learn their prayers and some simple points of doctrine. The Councils of Bezier[58] (1246) and Albi[59] (1254) specified that children be given religious instruction in the church on Sundays and feast days, beginning at age 7. The Council of Leon[60] also encouraged employers to send their household helpers or *criados*, especially the young, to church on Sundays and feasts of precept in order that they might learn Christian doctrine.

In his study of the catechetical efforts of the Spanish church, Sanchez Herrero found that several local councils began issuing decrees in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries concerning catechesis, in the sense of gathering children specifically to teach Christian doctrine. The Council of Toledo (1497) decreed that every Sunday, before nightfall and after the singing of the *Salve Regina*, the catechist should gather the children and teach them Christian doctrine publicly. He should engage them in dialogue, speaking and asking questions while

57 Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, 232-233.

58 Concilium Biterrense Provinciale (Beziers), *Rectitudo conditionis*, cap. 7, *Ut parochiales sacerdotes articulos fidei simpliciter doceant diebus Dominicis*, in Mansi XXIII, 693.

59 *Concilium Albiense* (Albi), *Multis episcopis*, cap. 18, *Ut pueri instruantur in fide*, in *Mansi* XXIII, 836-837.

60 *Concilio de Leon, Anno Domini* MCCLXVII, in *Colección de cánones y de todos los concilios de la Iglesia de España y de America, Por D. Juan Tejada y Ramiro, Tomo* III (Madrid 1861), 393.

the children respond.[61] It was not until the Council of Trent that the universal Church officially legislated catechesis for children.

Specific Tools and Methods for Catechesis

The medieval church used three important tools to catechize the Christian faithful. First, clerics and preachers used confessional handbooks and homiletical collections as aids in their work. The confessional handbooks eventually also reached the laity. Second, these clerics and preachers preached and taught the faith in the vernacular. Third, the faithful were made to memorize catechetical texts.

Confessional Handbooks and Homiletical Collections

Aside from preaching during the liturgy, the Sacrament of Penance was another important means by which the clergy instructed the people in medieval times. As the practice of individual or private confession spread in the West between the sixth and tenth centuries, it took on some of the formative functions once provided by the ancient catechumenate. The Sacrament of Penance provided penitents with some approximation of the catechumenal experience of conversion, receiving God's forgiveness, catechesis, and moral instruction. They were able to learn a minimum of religious knowledge also, since the priest had to test and augment the penitent's religious knowledge through the recitation of the Creed, the Our Father, and other prayers.[62] For Bourgeois, "sacramental penance,

61 Jose Sanchez Herrero, "*La legislación conciliar y sinodal hispana de los siglos XIII a mediados del XVI y su influencia en la enseñanza de la doctrina cristiana. Los tratados de doctrina cristiana*," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Medieval Canon Law*, Cambridge, England, 23-27 July 1984, edited by Peter Linehan (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1988), 369.

62 Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 26.

once considered to be a kind of 'second baptism,' became one of the major practical forms of baptismal remembrance."[63] An important legislation in this regard was the decree *Omnis utriusque sexus* of the Lateran Council IV[64] (1215), which required annual confession and communion, thereby intensifying also the priest's contact with the laity through the confessional.

To assist priests in confessions, the more widespread use of confessional booklets, or penitentials, arose, already in use even before Lateran IV. Some examples of these penitentials are Alan of Lille's *Liber Poenitentialis sive methodus digne administrandi et suscipiendi sacramentum poenitentiae* (ca.1200)[65] and Robert of Flamborough's *Liber Poenitentialis* (1208).[66] Eventually, the laity, for their private devotion, began to use similar penitentials of the confessors written in the vernacular. For example, a French manual was prepared by Lorens d'Orleans entitled *Somme le Roi*, also known as *Le Somme des Vices et des Virtues, Li Libres Roiaux de Vices et de Vertues, Le Livre des Commandmens, Le Miroir du Monde* (1279), which eventually found itself translated into English entitled *The Book of Vices and Virtues.*[67] Another handbook in

63 "[...] *la pénitence sacramentelle, appelée autrefois une sorte de 'second baptême' devint l'une des grandes formes pratiques de la mémoire baptismale*." Bourgeois, *L'initiation chrétiénne*, 74.

64 *Concilium Lateranense* IV (Lateran), *Firmiter credimus*, can. 21 *De confessione facienda et non revelanda a sacerdote et saltem in pascha communicando*, in G. Alberigo, ed., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Bologna, 1991, 245.

65 *Magistri Alani ab Insulis, Liber Poenitentialis sive methodus digne administrandi et suscipiendi sacramentum poenitentiae*, in *Patrologia Latina* CCX, 279-505.

66 Robert of Flamborough, *Liber Poenitentialis (1208): A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1971).

67 Lorens d'Orléans, *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth-Century English Translation of the Somme le Roi of Lorens d'Orléans. From the Three Extant Manuscripts*, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London: Early English Text Society, 1942).

English was Robert Manning of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne* (1303), which was based on William of Waddington's *Manuel des Pechiez* (1250).[68] With the great facility for reproducing reading materials after the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg in 1447, these manuals became even more widely available to the laity. Jungmann writes that these confessional booklets served as "the forerunners of the catechism, except that the section devoted to the commandments dominated all others."[69]

Medieval homiletical collections also served as forerunners of the catechism. In the light of the low level of education of the clergy and their relative incapacity to preach and instruct the people on their own,[70] the early seventh century saw a gradual diffusion of these homiletical collections that became a practical necessity for the use of priests. These were series of oral instructions, usually in some form of sermon, given at set times during the liturgical year. One example is the work of St. Ildefonsus of Toledo, *Admonitiones de cognitione Baptismi,* in which he explains the Creed, the Our Father and the sacraments of initiation to those recently baptized.[71] In the eighth century, the most prominent homiletical collections were

68 Manning, Robert. *Handlyng Synne, A.D. 1303: With Those Parts of the Anglo-French Treatise on Which It Was Founded, William of Waddington's Manuel des Pechiez (1250). From Manuscripts in the British Museum and Bodleian Library*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: Early English Text Society, vols. 119 and 123, 1901–1903).

69 Josef Andreas Jungmann. *Handing on the Faith: A Manual of Catechetics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959), 17.

70 Jedin and Dolan, *History of the Church*, IV, 575. See also Le Bras, "*La Iglesia medieval*," 166-167.

71 *Hildefonsus Toletani, Admonitiones De cognitione Baptismi, in Patrologia Latina* XCVI, 111-172. St. Ildefonsus was archbishop of Toledo, Spain. He was born probably in 610, and died in 667. Cf. S. J. McKenna, "Ildefonsus of Toledo, St.," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard Marthaler, vol. 7 (Washington, DC, 2003), 316.

Rabanus Maurus' *Homiliae de festis praecipuis item de virtutibus*[72] and his *Homiliae in evangelia et epistolas.*[73] In the late tenth and early eleventh century, Anglo-Saxon England, there emerged a large body of sermons and other materials in Old English for the use of preachers. They were probably written in the vernacular for use in the Latin Mass just after the reading of the gospel. Called the "Prone" in later times, they included a translation or paraphrase of the gospel, and occasionally with some explanation, moral instruction, and prayer.[74] AElfric was the greatest of the Anglo-Saxon sermon writers and worked chiefly in the last decade of the tenth and first decade of the eleventh century. His works included the *Catholicae Homiliae Serie Prima*[75], *Catholicae Homiliae Serie Altera,*[76] *Homiliae Supplementariae*[77] and *De temporibus anni.*[78]

By the end of the thirteenth century, there was a felt need for some kind of a compendium or handbook of Christian

72 Rabanus Magnentius Maurus, *Homiliae de festis praecipuis item de virtutibus*, in *Patrologia Latina* CX, 10-134. Rabanus Maurus was a Benedictine theologian, Abbot of Fulda and Archbishop of Mainz. He was born probably in 776 in Mainz and died in 856. His writings contributed to the Carolingian renaissance and the growth of learning in Germany. Cf. M. F. McCarthy, "Rabanus Maurus, Bl.," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, ed. Berard Marthaler (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 881-882.

73 Rabanus Magnentius Maurus, *Homiliae in evangelia et epistolas*, in *Patrologia Latina* CX, 135-466.

74 Gatch, "From the Decline of Catechesis", 92-93.

75 *Catholicae Homiliae: Serie Prima*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London: 1844).

76 *Catholicae Homiliae: Serie Altera*, ed. Malcolm Godden (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).

77 *Homiliae Supplementariae*, vols. 1–2, ed. John C. Pope (London: Oxford University Press, 1967–68).

78 *De temporibus anni*, ed. Heinrich Henel (London: Oxford University Press, 1942).

doctrine. The Councils of Albi[79] (1255) and Lavaur[80] (1368) required parish priests to use this for the instruction of unlearned people. These handbooks presented in a clear and simple way the articles of the faith, the prayers, their Christian obligations and the Sacred Scriptures. The Council of Scotland (1225) specifically imposed on archdeacons the task of preparing this compendium.[81] At the Council of Lambeth (1281), Archbishop John Pecham of Canterbury promulgated can. 10 entitled *Ignorantia sacerdotum,*[82] a foundational document for all later medieval legislation in England on the subject of catechetical instruction. It contained a summary exposition of those things that every minister of the Church should know concerning doctrine and morals, including the impediments to marriage and the offenses that entailed excommunication.[83]

The first time, however, that the term "catechism" was used to describe a book of instruction on Christian doctrine was in 1357. The Convocation of York approved a text containing the basic contents of catechetical instruction for the faithful, mostly based on the contents of *Ignorantia sacerdotum* prepared at the Council of Lambeth in 1281. Archbishop Thoresby of

79 *Concilium Albiense* (Albi), *Multis episcopis*, cap. 17, *Ut parochi et episcopi articulos fidei populo explicent*, in *Mansi* XXIII, 836-837.

80 *Concilium Vaurense* (Lavaur), *Sacrorum canonum*, cap. 1, *de fide catolica, et ut laici de articulis fidei, et aliis ad capessendam aeternam salutem necessariis, cum diligentia informentur*, in *Mansi* XXVI, 485.

81 *Concilium Provinciale Scoticum* (Scotland), *Concilium Provinciale Scoticum, Honorius episcopus*, can. 3, *de fide catholica*, in *Mansi* XXII, 1223.

82 *Concilium Lambethense* (Lambeth), *Ab exordio*, cap. 10, *Ignorantia sacerdotum*, in Mansi XXIV, 410-413.

83 Gatch, "From the Decline of Catechesis," 99.

York had the Latin text translated into English for the use of the clergy and called it the *Lay Folks' Catechism.*[84]

Another example of this compendium in the context of France was Jean Gerson's *Opus tripartitum de praeceptis decalogi, de confessione et de arte moriendi.*[85] Born in 1363 in Champagne and died in 1429, Gerson was appointed Chancellor of the University of Paris in 1395. He was among those who had the most lasting influence in the history of catechesis. Priests used to read his *Opus tripartitum* on Sundays in church until the Roman Catechism superseded it.[86] The work of Gerson reflected a fresh concern and solicitude for the education of children that began to appear in the fifteenth century. Even during his term as university chancellor, he took time out to catechize children. In a small treatise, *De parvulis ad Christum trahendis,*[87] he emphasized the need to teach children in terms they understood. For the mass diffusion of catechesis, he proposed that simple summaries of doctrine be made in the form of posters or wall charts to be displayed in public places where people could read them.[88]

As early as 1322, the Spanish Church had been using these posters on Christian doctrine to instruct the people. The

84 The original Latin version of the Lay Folks' Catechism and its English translation are found in T. F. Simmons and H. E. Nolloth, eds., *The Lay Folks' Catechism, or the English and Latin Versions of Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction for the People* (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, vol. 118, 1901); cf. Berard Marthaler, The Catechism Yesterday and Today: The Evolution of a Genre (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 12–13.

85 The original Latin texts of this work are found in *Joannis Gersonii, Opera Omnia, tomus* 1, ed. Louis Ellies Du Pin (Antwerp, 1706), 426–50.

86 Marthaler, *The Catechism*, 14.

87 Giovanni Gersone, *Del dovere di attrarre i fanciulli a Gesù*, trans. L. Locatelli and G. Allegranza (Milano, 1946).

88 Marthaler, *The Catechism*, 15-16.

Councils of Valladolid[89] (1322), Toledo[90] (1473) and Sevilla[91] (1512) obliged parishes to set up in Latin and the vernacular posters containing the articles of the faith, prayers, precepts of the Decalogue, sacraments of the Church, and the kinds of vices and virtues. But aside from these posters, some councils, like the Council of Tortosa (1429), decreed that parish priests themselves be given a compendium of Christian doctrine for their use in catechizing the people. The decree reads: "We order that a brief compendium be composed and written by some educated and approved men, in which is to be contained in a clear and succinct manner all those necessary things which the people should know."[92]

Preaching and Catechesis in the Vernacular

The Church had always insisted, in her catechumenal formation during the early church and in liturgical preaching during the Middle Ages, that Christian formation aimed at a continuing conversion of one's life to Jesus Christ, manifested in assent of faith and in good works. However, in order to have

89 *Concilium apud Vallemoleti a Valladolid, Iniunctum nobis, cap. 2, De officio ordinarii*, in *Mansi* XXV, 698.

90 *Concilium Toletanum* (Toledo), *Quoniam a nascentis*, cap. 2, *Quod rectores ecclesiarum habeant in scriptis articulos fidei et publicent populo*, in *Mansi* XXXII, 385.

91 *Concilio Provincial de Sevilla, In nomine*, const. 1, *Quod parochi doceant suos parochianos Mysteria nostrae Sanctae Fidei Catholicae, et quod in qualibet Ecclesia adsit tabula, in qua contineantur omnia, quae illos docere debent*, Tejada, *Colección de cánones*, V, 69-70.

92 "*Mandamus, et per viros literatos, et probos dictari, et scribi faciant aliquod breve compendium, in quo praedicta omnia, quantum populares est scire necesse, districate comprehendantur, et clare*." *Concilium Dertusae* (Tortosa), *Faustissimus omnium, const.* 6, *de modo instruendi populum circa fidem necessaria*, in *Mansi* 28, 1147-1148. Nevertheless, Etchegaray Cruz takes note of the opinion of Llorente that this compendium or catechism might not have been written at all. Cf. Adolfo Etchegaray Cruz, *Storia della catechesi*, trans. L. M. Rolfo (Rome, 1983), originally published as *Historia de la catequesis* (Santiago de Chile, 1962), 215–16.

an intellectual grasp both of doctrine and moral demands that would guide one to action, the message had to be understood by presenting it in a language intelligible to the hearers. Only thus would the message sustain one's initial conversion and truly impact one's life.

There was a serious language problem during the Middle Ages. Communal worship, including preaching, was held in Latin. Because of the unintelligibility of Latin to the majority of the Christian population, people's participation in public worship – both in terms of numbers and the quality of involvement – diminished considerably from what it had been in the days of primitive Christianity. This situation was detrimental to catechesis.[93] Nevertheless, some councils like the Councils of Clovesho[94] (747) and Arles[95] (813), and clerics worked out ways to provide religious instruction in the vernacular. St. Bede or Venerable Bede, a Benedictine monk who lived around 672-735 in Durham, England, wrote that Christians who understood only their native tongue should be taught the Creed and the Our Father in that language. At the same time, he insisted on Latin for those who understood it.[96] But the singular instance during this period of a policy of complete adaptation to the

93 Mary Jegen, "Catechesis II (Medieval and Modern)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. William J. McDonald, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 210. See also Gianetto, "*La catechesi nella storia*," 63.

94 *Concilium Cloveshoviae, Regnante Domino*, can. 10, *ut presbyteri baptizent, et in suos Evangelii officium diligenter exerceant*, in *Mansi* XII, 398-399.

95 *Concilium Arelatense* VI, *Dum anno* XLV, can. 3, *ut episcopi presbyteros de baptismo doceant, sanctaeque Scripturae, et canonum lectioni insistant*, in *Mansi* XIV, 59.

96 *Beda Venerabilis, Epistola II ad Ecgberctum antistitem, Paraeneticorum Venerabilis Bedae operum. Sectio Quarta in qua continentur ejus epistolae*, in PL XCIV, 659.

vernacular was the efforts of Saints Cyril (+ 869) and Methodius (+ 885) among the Slavs.[97]

The mandate of some councils to translate homilies from Latin into the vernacular was a special help to priests in preaching in the vernacular. The homilies of the early Fathers were translated into the tudesque language, i.e., Frankish language understood by the common folk, or to the rural Roman language, which was a corrupted version of Latin from which the current French was formed. The homilies were then made available to priests, who simply read them to the people. Canon 17 of the Council of Tours (813) was most representative of this concern:

> It is our unanimous opinion that each bishop should have homilies containing needful admonitions by which his subjects may be taught [...]. In addition, each should be diligent to translate clearly the same homilies into the rustic roman language or tudesque, so that all may more easily understand the things that are being said.[98]

The Lateran Council (1215) left its mark on the Church's pastoral adaptation efforts, as it did on other concerns. In considering the pastoral care of Christians from different language groups living in the same locality, the council also promoted religious instruction in the vernacular. The Council's constitution 9 stated:

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97 Jegen, "Catechesis II," 210. For a historical survey concerning efforts at liturgical adaptation through translations of liturgical texts, see A. G. Martimort, "*Essai historique sur les traductions liturgiques*," *Maison-Dieu* 85 (1966): 75–105.

98 "*Visum est unanimitati nostrae, ut quilibet episcopus habeat homilias continentes necessarias admonitiones, quibus subjecti erudiantur* [...]. *Et ut easdem homilias quisque aperte transferre studeat in rusticam Romanam linguam, aut Theotiscam, quo facilius cuncti possint intelligere quae dicuntur.*" *Concilium Turonense* III, *Quantum piissimi*, can. 17, in *Mansi* XIV, 85. The English translation is mine.

> Since in many places people of different languages live within the same city or diocese, having one faith but different rites and customs, we therefore strictly order bishops of such cities and dioceses to provide suitable men who will [...] instruct them by word and example.[99]

One must observe that adaptation in preaching did not only entail an adjustment to language needs. Pastoral concern also necessitated different catechetical approaches for those living in the cities and those in the countryside. The Synod of Gran[100] (1114) and the Council of Albi[101] (1255) provided for the Sunday explanation of the gospels and letters of St. Paul in big churches usually situated in the urban areas. In more remote rural communities, the articles of the faith and prayers should instead be taught clearly and simply, at least for the time being, until the people are ready for other points of the faith.

Memorization of Doctrines and Prayers

Memorization of doctrine had always been a constant feature of catechesis. Since the study of the two formulas of the Creed and the Our Father developed a fuller understanding of Christian life, children and adults were invited to memorize these prayers and were later instructed by their pastors in

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99 "*Quoniam in plerisque patribus intra eandem civitatem atque dioecesim permixti sunt populi diversarum linguarum, habentes sub una fide varios ritus et mores, districte praecipimus ut pontifices huiusmodi civitatum sive dioecesum, provideant viros idoneos*, [...] *instruendo eos verbo pariter et exemplo.*" *Concilium Lateranense* IV, *Firmiter credimus*, const. 9, *De diversis ritibus in eadem fide*, in COD, 239. The English version is found in: Fourth Lateran Council, const. 9, On different rites within the same faith, in Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (London and Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward / Georgetown University Press, 1990), 239.

100 *Synodus Strigoniensis Nationalis* (Gran), *Saeviente in fratrem*, cap. 2, *de Sermone ad populum*, in *Mansi* XXI, 100.

101 *Concilium Albiense, Multis episcopis*, cap. 17, *Ut parochi et episcopi articulos fidei populo explicent*, in *Mansi* XXIII, 836-837.

them. Confessors also required their penitents to recite their prayers from memory.

Certain help was utilized for memorization. The Council of Sevilla (1512) allowed priests during Sunday Mass to ask the people to recite – instead of the penitential prayer – the Our Father, Hail Mary, *Salve Regina,* and/or the *Credo* in order to facilitate the continuous learning of these prayers, including their correct pronunciation.[102] Moreover, the Middle Ages saw the use of lists, word associations, and other aids to memorization.[103] The *septenarium*, for example, organized doctrines and other elements of Christian life in groups of seven. In his *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide et spe et caritate*[104], Augustine identified seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer. Hugh of St.Victor, an Augustinian canon regular who lived around 1096-1141, wrote his *De quinque septenis seu septenariis*[105] or "the five groups of seven": the seven deadly sins, seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven virtues and the seven Beatitudes.

In line with the genre of the *septenarium*, the Council of Toledo (1323) outlined the articles of the faith into fourteen, the first seven corresponded to the divinity, and the other seven to

102 *Concilio Provincial de Sevilla*, *in nomine*, const. 1, *Quod parochi doceant suos parochianos Mysteria nostrae Sanctae Fidei Catholicae, et quod in qualibet Ecclesia adsit tabula, in qua contineantur omnia, quae illos docere debent*, Tejada, *Colección de cánones*, V, 69.

103 Marthaler, *The Catechism*, 10-11.

104 *Augustinus Aurelius, Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide et spe et caritate, Sermo de Simbolo, in Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, CCL XLVI, 23-114.

105 *Hugo de S. Victore, De quinque septenis seu septenariis, in Patrologia Latina* CLXXV, 406-414.

the humanity of Christ.[106] Other councils like Beziers[107] (1246), London[108] (1237), Lambeth[109] (1281), Lavaur[110] (1368), Tortosa[111] (1429) and York[112] (1466) listed the seven sacraments, seven principal virtues, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven petitions of the Our Father, seven beatitudes, seven fruits of the Holy Spirit, seven corporal works of mercy, seven spiritual works of mercy and seven capital sins.

Conclusion

This reconstruction of medieval legislation on catechesis presents a distinct field of research within the Church's canonical system, one that has long been overlooked in canonical historical studies, which have always focused on sacramental (especially matrimonial), liturgical, or disciplinary norms. This research has revealed how catechesis, as a primordial institution in the Church, gradually acquired a distinct juridical form and canonical status from moral exhortation in the early councils to explicit legal prescriptions in later medieval legislation. The collection of decrees from local synods,

106 *Concilio de Toledo, Joannes miseratione*, const. 1 *Instructio articulorum fidei, sacramentorum Ecclesiae praeceptorum Decalogi, virtutum, et vitiorum*, Tejada, *Colección de cánones*, III, 506.

107 *Concilium Biterrense Provinciale* (Beziers), *Rectitudo conditionis*, cap. 7, *Ut parochiales sacerdotes articulos fidei simpliciter doceant diebus Dominicis*, in *Mansi* XXIII, 693.

108 *Concilium Londoniense* (London), *Eodem iniquit*, cap. 2, *de sacramentis ecclesiasticis*, in *Mansi* XXIII, 448.

109 *Concilium Lambethense* (Lambeth), *Ab exordio*, cap. 10 *Ignorantia sacerdotum*, in Mansi XXIV, 410.

110 *Concilium Vaurense, Sacrorum canonum*, cap. 1, *de fide catolica, et ut laici de articulis fidei, et aliis ad capessendam aeternam salutem necessariis, cum diligentia informentur*, in *Mansi* XXVI, 485.

111 *Concilium Dertusae* (Tortosa), *Faustissimus omnium*, const. 6, *de modo instruendi populum circa fidem necessaria*, in Mansi 28, 1147-1148.

112 *Synodus Provincialis Eborum* (York), *Georgius permissione,* can. 1, in *Mansi* XXXII, 275.

individual bishops, and ecumenical councils, along with their interpretations, has demonstrated that the medieval Church was already systematically legislating on catechesis well before the Council of Trent, in response to various pastoral and liturgical contexts.

In the wake of the mass conversions after the peace of Constantine in the fourth century and despite all its problems, the Church still sought to achieve its *objective* of continual personal conversion to Christ. However, the *means* used was no longer the catechumenate, but rather an abbreviated form of baptismal preparation and intensified catechetical preaching. This new approach still followed the lines of doctrinal and moral instruction, but now in the context of the Sunday liturgy. Thus, during the Middle Ages, from the fifth to the late fifteenth centuries, in response to the needs of the times, catechetical preaching flourished as the new way to educate Christians in the faith. Meanwhile, children's catechesis took place in the family setting, under the guidance of their parents. By the thirteenth century, a new form of catechesis arose as some local councils began requiring that children be brought to the church for catechesis, which consisted primarily of memorizing prayers, the Ten Commandments, and the most basic truths of Christianity.

Through the legislation of medieval councils and synods, local churches provided useful *tools* and required specific methods for equipping pastors to teach and preach to the people. This legislation included handbooks on doctrine for educating pastors and laity, vernacular translations of homilies that priests read to the people, and a general push toward memorizing catechetical texts. But one aspect of medieval Christianity could perhaps be considered as another "tool" for catechesis: the Christian environment. People simply lived in

an environment that, to a certain extent, provided a kind of catechesis.

However, the legislation of local churches aimed at educating the people was insufficient to arrest the tide of religious decay and ignorance. The overwhelmingly Christian setting itself became a breeding ground for a certain kind of religious culture of maintenance and preservation that, unwittingly, tended to overlook the importance of intensive, missionary-style Christian initiation and formation in the spirit of the early Church. If such a Christian environment could be loosely considered a "tool" or a "means" of Christian formation, then it was clearly insufficient to form Christians in a mature faith, precisely because it lacked the in-depth religious formation provided by the ancient catechumenate.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

SOLA SCRIPTURA AS *PRIMA SCRIPTURA*: A MODERN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT REFLECTION ON THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE:

A RESPONSE TO "A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA* IN LIGHT OF ROMAN CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS ON THE TEMPORAL PRECEDENCE OF TRADITION AND THE FORMAL INSUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE"

Jason Valeriano Hallig

Abstract. This paper offers a critical evangelical response to Salvador G. Agualada Jr.'s analysis of the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, particularly his engagement with Roman Catholic critiques grounded in Yves Congar's arguments concerning the temporal precedence of tradition and the alleged formal insufficiency of Scripture. While acknowledging the historical development of Protestant reflection on Scripture and tradition, this study argues that *sola Scriptura* is best understood not as the exclusion of tradition but as the affirmation of Scripture's normative and final authority within the life of the church. Drawing on contemporary evangelical theology, the paper proposes that this principle may be more precisely articulated as *prima Scriptura*, wherein Scripture functions as the supreme and governing authority, while tradition, reason,

and experience such as ecclesial practices serve secondary and ministerial roles. By reframing the Protestant position in this way, the study seeks to clarify persistent misunderstandings surrounding *sola Scriptura* and to demonstrate how the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture may be upheld without dismissing the historical and theological significance of the church's interpretive tradition.

Introduction

A central conviction shared across the Christian tradition is that Scripture bears authoritative witness to God's self-revelation and to his redemptive purposes in history.[1] Through the canonical Scriptures, the church encounters the divine testimony to God's work in creation, the redemption of humanity from sin, and the ultimate restoration of all things under the reign of God. Accordingly, Scripture has functioned as the foundational source for Christian faith, theology, and practice from the apostolic era to the present. This includes the idea in Roman Catholic theology that nothing contrary to God's word in Scripture could have any claim to be authentic in tradition.[2]

Despite this shared affirmation, significant theological differences persist regarding the nature and function of Scripture's authority within the church. In particular, the relationship between Scripture and ecclesial tradition remains

1 For the Roman Catholic view on the Sacred Scripture, see Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum,* Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

2 While the Roman Catholic does not hold the concept that describes Scripture as a norm for validating tradition, but on its teaching on the authority of the Scripture, the Scripture somehow holds that canonical authority vis-a-vis church tradition. As such, no tradition contra Scripture must be authenticated as tradition. See Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 96.

a central point of divergence between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. While both affirm Scripture as divinely inspired, they differ on whether Scripture alone constitutes the final normative authority for the church or whether it must be interpreted within an authoritative and co-constitutive tradition.

Roman Catholic theology, as presented by Salvador G. Agualada Jr. in engagement primarily with Yves Congar, advances two principal critiques of *sola Scriptura*.[3] First, it asserts the temporal precedence of tradition, arguing that apostolic tradition predates the New Testament canon and thus constitutes the original matrix within which Scripture emerged.[4] Second, it contends for the formal insufficiency of Scripture, maintaining that Scripture does not contain within itself all that is necessary for the full articulation of Christian doctrine apart from the interpretive authority of the church.[5]

In response, this paper argues that a properly articulated evangelical understanding of *sola Scriptura* neither rejects tradition nor denies the church's historical role in the transmission and interpretation of Scripture.[6] Rather, it affirms Scripture as the *norma normans non normata*—the normative

3 Salvador G. Agualada Jr., "A Critical Analysis of the Protestant Principle of *Sola Scriptura* in Light of the Catholic Arguments on the Temporal Precedence of Tradition and the Formal Insufficiency of Scripture," *Loyola Papers: Student and Alumni Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 7:1 (2026): 31-50.

4 Ibid., 33-36.

5 Ibid., 36-40.

6 For a discussion on Sola Scriptura and Biblical Interpretation in the Protestant tradition, see my article written on the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, entitled: Jason Valeriano Hallig, "*Sola Scriptura*–Reformation's Ecclesial Legacy: Hermeneutical Freedom and Interpretive Diversity toward a Reformed Catholicity of the Church," *Mediator* 13, no. 2 (2018): 1-14, https://www.apnts.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/documents/mediator_documents/volume13/volume13-2/Mediator_13.2.1_Halig.pdf

norm that is not normed—while recognizing tradition as a real but subordinate or secondary authority. Reframed as *prima Scriptura*, this principle preserves Scripture's supremacy while situating it within the life of the church.

Scripture and Tradition: Revelation as God's Acts

God's revelation is given first and foremost through a series of divine acts and accompanying words in history. These saving acts—accompanied by God's own interpretive speech—constitute the primary mode by which God makes himself and his will known to his people. From the outset, such acts and words were received as authoritative by those to whom God revealed himself, forming the basis of the community's faith and obedience.

This divine self-disclosure, as it is received and remembered within the community of faith, gives rise to tradition—specifically, the apostolic tradition. This tradition is not a static deposit but the living transmission of God's revelatory acts and words, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. In this sense, tradition denotes the ongoing reception, preservation, and proclamation of revelation within the life of the Jesus-believing community. It is therefore dynamic yet derivative, grounded in the prior reality of God's self-revelation in history generally and in Christ particularly. As such, apostolic tradition bears faithful and authoritative witness to God's definitive revelation in Jesus Christ.

In this respect, Yves Congar's emphasis on the temporal precedence of tradition rightly underscores the historical priority of the church's reception of revelation prior to its inscripturation. As Agualada observes, "for Congar, 'the apostles themselves at first built up the Church by the completest possible communication of the Gospel, by words and actions, preaching and example, by the exercise of authority and

organization; not by writing.'"[7] The apostolic proclamation or tradition thus existed as a lived and transmitted reality before it assumed written form, highlighting the community as the initial locus of reception and transmission of God's culminated revelation in Christ.[8]

Yet this temporal priority does not entail normative superiority or coequal authority across subsequent generations. The tradition that precedes Scripture is not an independent source of revelation but the very means by which the once-for-all revelation is received and transmitted via movement from oral tradition to interpreted text. Dunning writes, "Instead of being the transmission of the event/interpretation complex, it becomes an interpretive tradition in relation to the transcribed text."[9] From a Protestant perspective, this transmitted witness finds its definitive and normative form in the canonical Scriptures, wherein the apostolic testimony to the person and work of Jesus Christ is inscripturated and fixed as the enduring rule of faith.

Accordingly, *sola Scriptura* does not arise in opposition to tradition but from within it. Indeed, it is the apostolic tradition

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7 Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 33-34.

8 Dunning offers at least four forms of apostolic tradition that can be identified with reasonable certainty: (1) **catechetical instruction**, reflected in the early Church's *kerygma* and embodied in the simple sermons recorded in Acts. Paul explicitly refers to this tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:1–3: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if you hold fast to what I preached unto you—unless you have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (KJV); (2) **hymnic material**, such as Philippians 2:6–11 and 1 Timothy 3:16; (3) **liturgy**; and (4) **sacrament**. H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 79.

9 Ibid., 79.

itself that served to discern and exclude oral traditions that deviated from the gospel already received and proclaimed. For instance, in Paul, "tradition" can carry negative connotations when it is merely human in origin or divorced from the gospel.[10] Scripture, therefore, stands as the canonical culmination and normative embodiment of both the Old Testament tradition and the apostolic witness. While tradition provides the historical matrix in which Scripture emerges, Scripture functions as the *norma normans non normata*—the norming norm that governs and judges all subsequent traditions.

The relationship between Scripture and tradition, therefore, is not one of competing authorities but of ordered relation. Tradition is indispensable as the means of reception and transmission, yet it remains ministerial and derivative, normed by the canonical witness. In this way, the movement from revelation to reception to canon establishes Scripture as the definitive and sufficient witness to God's redemptive acts in history, culminating in Jesus Christ.

Scripture and the Canon: The Inscripturation of God's Revelation

The formation of the canon reflects the recognition that God's revelation in history must be inscripturated for its faithful preservation and authoritative transmission. LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush write,

> The Bible nowhere suggests that all of God's revelations were committed to writing. On the contrary, the Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus Christ did and said many things which are not recorded–and these were part of God's revelation to

10 See D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris' "New Testament Canon," in *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 487-499. The already established Gospel Tradition was the unwritten "Scripture canon" of the oral and interpreted traditions of the Early Church.

> that generation (cf. John 20:30). But for the sake of future generations and in the light of his ongoing redemptive purpose, God did will that some of his revelation be written down so that his redemptive acts in former generations might serve as examples to those who came later. The result of this inscripturation is the Bible.[11]

As the covenant community entrusted with God's self-disclosure, the church receives, preserves, and transmits this revelation in written form under the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "All Scripture is inspired by God[12] and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man *or woman* of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16-17) This means that "God used his revelatory and saving acts for his people, and his personal dealings with individuals, to lead them to write and collect together the books of the Bible; and since God himself is omniscient and infallible and consciously initiated this process, it follows that the resulting product will be true and reliable, although not necessarily infallible in every particular."[13] The inscripturation of revelation ensures that the apostolic witness is not lost to history but remains accessible and normative for succeeding generations.

In the process of canonization, the church does not confer authority upon Scripture but recognizes and receives those writings that are inherently authoritative as witnesses to God's revelatory acts and words. The canon is thus not the product of ecclesial determination but of ecclesial recognition. The

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11 William Sanford LaSon, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992 reprint), 12.

12 Literally "God-breathed."

13 I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1982), 39.

authority of Scripture resides in its character as the inspired and faithful testimony to God's revelation, rather than in the church's act of reception.

This distinction is crucial for a proper understanding of *sola Scriptura*. While the church plays an indispensable role in discerning and preserving the canon, it does so as a servant of the Word rather than its source. The church stands under Scripture even as it bears witness to it. In this sense, the canon functions as the normative boundary of divine revelation, delimiting the content of the gospel and safeguarding it from distortion.

The inscripturated Word, therefore, provides the stable and enduring form of the apostolic *kerygma*.[14] What was once proclaimed in the living voice of the apostles is now preserved in the canonical texts as the definitive witness to God's saving revelation. This written form does not diminish the vitality of the gospel but secures its integrity across time and context.

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14 For a thorough investigation of the apostolic preaching, or the primitive gospel, see Charles Harold Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 38-45, where he offers a summary of the primitive preaching under the following topics:

First, the age of fulfillment has dawned.

Second, this has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Third, by virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as messianic head of the new Israel.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.

Fifth, the messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ.

Finally, the *kerygma* always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and promise of salvation.

While Dodd employs the term *kerygma* to describe the apostolic message, he acknowledges its near equivalence to *euangelion*: *kerygma* emphasizes the act or mode of proclamation, whereas *euangelion* denotes the essential content of the message. See also George Eldon Ladd, *A New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994 reprint), 364-378.

Accordingly, the canon undergirds the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, properly understood as the primacy of Scripture. Scripture alone stands as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, not in isolation from the church, but as the norm that governs the church's life, doctrine, and proclamation. No ecclesial authority may stand above Scripture; rather, all such authority is accountable to it. As Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles rightly reminds the Catholic church on its perceived authority, "The Catholic understanding of the Church as a stable community in history, in which Christ continues to make himself present and available, leads to a different view of authority in the Church."[15] He adds, "The magisterium of the Church is, to be sure, not over the word of God but under it."[16]

Thus, the inscripturation of God's revelation in the canon establishes Scripture as both the foundation and the boundary of the church's faith. It is within this canonical framework that the gospel is preserved, interpreted, and proclaimed, ensuring that the church remains faithful to the once-delivered revelation entrusted to it.

Scripture and the Gospel: The Proclamation of God's Revelation

Revelation is God's self-communication—his gracious disclosure of his will and saving purpose to humanity—and, as such, constitutes the good news for all generations, grounded in divine love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) This revelation was first proclaimed in history through God's saving acts and the

15 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987, expanded edition), 87.

16 Ibid.

apostolic witness prior to its inscripturation, thus reflecting the historical priority of the church's living tradition in the transmission of the gospel.

Scripture bears the normative and authoritative witness to this once-delivered revelation, extending its scope to all nations. The gospel it contains is universal in intent and has been entrusted to the church as its steward or rather herald.[17] Through the process of canonization, the church received and preserved this apostolic witness, recognizing in it the definitive and normative form of the gospel. Thus, while Tradition temporally precedes Scripture, Scripture functions as the canonical norm that governs and judges the church's proclamation.

The proclamation of the gospel is therefore inherently ecclesial. It is through the church—under the agency of the Holy Spirit—that the once-given revelation is faithfully proclaimed and rendered effective. Proclamation participates in the economy of revelation not by supplementing it or adding to it, but by transmitting and actualizing the apostolic gospel within ever-new contexts.

The apostolic *kerygma*, first delivered orally and later inscripturated, constitutes the material content of the gospel. These writings, entrusted to the church, serve as the full and sufficient witness to God's saving revelation. Accordingly,

17 Dulles argues that one of the models of the church is that of a herald. He writes, "Characteristics of this model, as contrasted with the three previously considered, is a sharp distinction it makes between the Church in its terrestrial form and the kingdom of God, considered as an eschatological reality. Kung stresses that the Church neither is the kingdom of God, nor does it build the kingdom, or extend it on earth, or work for its realization. 'It is the reign of God which the Church hopes for, bears witness to, proclaims. It is not the bringer or the bearer of the reign of God which is to come and is at the same time already present, but its voice, its announcer, its herald. God alone can bring his reign, the Church is devoted entirely to its service.'" *Models of the Church*, 79.

the canonical gospel is materially sufficient. Yet, as Catholic critiques have argued, Scripture is not formally self-sufficient in abstraction from the interpretive community; its proper understanding presupposes the living tradition of the church.

Nevertheless, this does not necessitate the formal insufficiency of Scripture in an absolute sense. Rather, Scripture is formally sufficient insofar as it normatively governs the church's interpretive activity. The church, as the recipient and steward of divine revelation, does not stand above Scripture but under it, even as it serves as its faithful interpreter. In this way, material and formal sufficiency are held together within a dynamic relation between Scripture, Tradition, and the church.

The gospel thus remains the hermeneutical center of Scripture and the decisive norm of its proclamation. Consequently, the church is bound to the apostolic gospel and cannot proclaim another: "If anyone preaches to you another gospel, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

Scripture and Theology: Revelation and the Need for Discipleship

The living tradition of the church is actualized in its theological task, understood as the disciplined and ecclesial reflection upon God's revelation for the purpose of faithful articulation. This task is grounded primarily in Holy Scripture and secondarily informed by the church's historical and theological reflections or tradition, reason, and experience. Theology thus arises not as an optional or speculative endeavor but as a necessary function of the church's vocation, particularly in light of its mandate *to disciple* all the nations (Matt 28:18–20). The work of discipleship entails not only the transmission of the gospel but also its ongoing interpretation, doctrinal formulation, and contextual application.

As Agualada observes, "determining Christian doctrine and practice demands consulting other theological *loci* within the Church's Tradition, as 'an appeal to the Bible does not suffice by itself,' since the meaning of Sacred Scripture is interpreted, understood, and expressed through the church's life and worship."[18] Properly construed, this claim does not undermine the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* but clarifies the conditions of its operation. Scripture is not appropriated apart from the interpretive activity of the church; rather, it is received, read, and expounded within the community of faith, employing the requisite hermeneutical and theological judgments necessary for faithful understanding.

Yves Congar's formulation is instructive at this point:

> Scripture does not surrender its meaning by the bare text; it yields it to a living mind, a subject living within the conditions of the Covenant. This living subject...is the Church, God's people, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit... it is there, in this setting and in these conditions, that the Holy Scriptures reveal their meaning.[19]

This insight rightly underscores the ecclesial location of interpretation. Yet, from a Protestant standpoint, this must be qualified: the church is not the constitutive source of Scripture's meaning but its ministerial interpreter, bound to the text as the normative witness to divine revelation.

The nature of Scripture itself necessitates this theological labor. Scripture is theological without being a fixed system, historical without being reducible to historiography, and literary without collapsing into literalism.[20] Wright and Bird warn,

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18 Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 38-39.

19 Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004), 91, as cited by Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 39.

20 See N. T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament and Its World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 51-58.

> These three elements comprising history ('the past'), literature ('the text'), and theology ('understanding God and the world') are all sewn together into the fabric of the New Testament. And yet, what we find as whole cloth in the text—a historically situated discourse about God and the world, in various literary forms— can be violently torn asunder by readers who are afraid that too much history, or too much literature, or too much theology might prove that their mighty edifices of scholarship and piety have been built on a foundation of sand. It has been all too easy for some interpreters to highlight one of the trio: history or literature or theology—and to discard the rest.[21]

Consequently, its faithful appropriation requires disciplined hermeneutics and responsible theological construction. The church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, undertakes this task as the means by which the once-for-all revelation of God is continually proclaimed and applied across diverse contexts and generations.

Accordingly, *sola Scriptura* is not a principle of mere repetition but of ordered theological authority. It designates Scripture as indeed the *norma normans non normata*, the primary and definitive source of all theological judgment, while recognizing the subordinate and ministerial role of tradition, reason, and experience. These secondary *loci* do not constitute independent sources of revelation but function as necessary instruments in the church's interpretive and doctrinal work. In this way, the theological task remains ordered to the church's mission of discipleship, ensuring that the apostolic witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ is rightly understood, faithfully articulated, and normatively governed in every age.

Conclusion

Agualada, Jr. is to be commended for concluding, in line with Yves Congar, that the same value cannot be attributed

21 Ibid., 55-56.

to tradition and Holy Scripture, notwithstanding *Vatican II's* affirmation of their conjoint reverence.[22] His recognition that Scripture possesses an absolute value as the supreme guide to which all other authorities are subject marks a significant point of convergence with the Protestant claim regarding Scripture's unique normativity.[23]

Building on this insight, this study has argued for a reframing of *sola Scriptura* as *prima Scriptura*. Properly understood, the Protestant principle does not negate tradition or the church but orders them. Scripture, tradition, and the church exist in a relation of theological coherence, structured by the movement from revelation to reception to inscripturation. Within this order, Scripture alone functions as the *norma normans non normata*, while tradition remains ministerial and derivative, serving as the means of reception and transmission rather than an independent source of revelation.

Accordingly, the sufficiency of Scripture—both material and formal—is affirmed in relation to the gospel and its proclamation. At the same time, the necessity of the church's living tradition is upheld in its theological task of interpretation, articulation, and application. *Sola Scriptura*, therefore, is not a principle of isolation but of regulation, grounding the church's ongoing work of discipleship in the normative authority of the canonical witness.

> In this way, the Protestant principle is best understood not as a rejection of tradition, but as its proper theological ordering under the final authority of Scripture.

22 Ibid., 49.

23 Ibid.

PHILOSOPHY SYNTHESIS PAPER

DESIRE FOR THE GOOD: A PHILOSOPHICAL ROADMAP THROUGH SPACETIME

Bertrand Leong, SJ

Humankind's participation in eternity involves a desire for the good. I arrived at this conclusion after a film that I had watched piqued my interest in the rules of the universe and had challenged my understanding and experience of the metaphysical categories of spacetime and eternity.

There is original, rigorous philosophical work done in the medium of cinema, according to philosopher Stephen Mulhall. Cinema does not reduce human existence to film; it takes massive, abstract philosophical categories (of what is reality, truth, skepticism, and more) and projects them visually, temporally, and emotionally outward onto the big screen. The result is an immersive, larger-than-life experience that forges new imaginative pathways for human thought and reorients the way we think about our world.[1,2] To illustrate this, let us first examine the plot of the movie *Interstellar* (2014).[3]

Interstellar Film Plot

Humanity was facing extinction due to violent dust storms. Joseph Cooper, a former NASA test pilot, lives with his two

1 Nathan Andersen, "Is Film the Alien Other to Philosophy? On Stephen Mulhall On Film," *Film Philosophy* 7/3 (2003), https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2003.0023.

2 Stephen Mulhall, "XI—Film as Philosophy: The Very Idea," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 107, New Series (2007): 279-294, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20619359?seq=1 (accessed May 7, 2026).

3 "Interstellar (film)," Wikipedia, March 19, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Interstellar_(film)&oldid=1344261480.

children (Murph and Tom) and their grandfather on a farm. When his 10-year-old daughter, Murph, notices falling books and dust patterns in her room, she attributes them to a ghost.

Promising his children that he would return, Cooper and a team of experts leave for space with 5,000 frozen embryos in search of a new home for humankind. They travel through a wormhole (named Gargantua) near Saturn, only for Cooper to discover mid-journey that he was not coming back.

Gargantua opens up to another galaxy with potentially 12 other habitable planets. Cooper falls into Gargantua's event horizon and into a tesseract (a 4-cube or four-dimensional hypercube) made up of infinite copies of his daughter's Murph's bedroom across moments in time. Deducing that the tesseract was constructed by advanced humans in the far future, Cooper tries to communicate with Murph through Morse code by manipulating the hands on a wrist watch he gave her to send the completed data of the gravitational singularity within the black hole to solve a gravity equation. Cooper had become his daughter's "ghost." Through their communication, Murph was finally able to complete the gravitational equation and colonize a habitable planet.

Apart from the references to relativistic mechanics, this was also a story about a deep connection across spacetime between a child and her father. Although this made for an entertaining sci-fi movie, it got me thinking about our common assumptions about spacetime and eternity, and if humankind has access to eternity despite being subjected to a three-dimensional space in chronological time. If so, what does connecting with eternity look like? How can humankind connect with an eternal being in eternity? And why does this endeavor potentially involve a desire for the good? This paper seeks to serve as a sort of philosophical roadmap to help unpack and understand this

spatiotemporal phenomenon and elucidate what it takes for humankind to participate in eternity and reconnect with it.

A 3D Existence

Let us begin by clarifying the spatial dimensions. Imagine that you need to get somewhere quickly and that the fastest way to get from point A to point B is a straight line (with two vertices). So you decide to take an expressway to avoid a major traffic jam. A wormhole, therefore, can also be seen as a shortcut through space.

Now, let us duplicate the straight line. This gives us four vertices. If we draw lines connecting the four vertices, we have a two-dimensional (2D) square. Duplicate the square and connect the vertices on both squares with lines, and we have a three-dimensional (3D) cube. If we then replace each face of the 3D cube with a cube, we have a tesseract—a geometrical shape in four dimensions (4D) that unfolds to eight cubes in 3D space. A five-dimensional hypercube (known as a penteract) is formed by connecting two parallel tesseracts at their corresponding vertices.

If the 4th and 5th dimensions sound mind-boggling, that is because it is hard to visualize anything with more than three dimensions. However, just because we cannot visualize it, it does not mean it does not exist. If human existence is understood in terms of three spatial dimensions of length (x-axis), width (y-axis), and height (z-axis), and a 4D universe includes the temporal dimension of time, is there a world that exists outside of our three-dimensional existence that we have not yet grasped? If so, are there ways for us to understand and interact with a multidimensional world like Murph did? Or are we, as Augustine purported in *De vera religione*, according to

Roland Teske,[4] so enraptured by temporal things that we have blinkered ourselves to eternal things?

Reimagining Spacetime

In his paper on *Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession: Perspectives from Theology and the Philosophy of Time*,[5] Mikel Burley makes a compelling case for how eternal life is not so much an unending continuation of life after death but is fully actualized in one's present mortal and finite life.[6] In addition to drawing on some of Burley's sources to explain spacetime concepts and reframe our understanding of time and eternity, I would like to explore how humankind's desire for the good translates into a desire for God, who is eternity itself.

Some commentators believe that the modern debates of the metaphysics of time in eternalism, presentism, and possibilism were prefigured by the Presocratics. Heraclitus' "you can never step in the same river twice" showed the impermanence of reality and how things were always in flux, while Parmenides believed that "everything constitutes an immutable unity and nothing really comes into or goes out of existence."[7] Eternalism is the view that all times are "equally real."[8] This

4 Roland J. Teske, *The Aquinas Lecture 1996: Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998), 31.

5 Mikel Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession: Perspectives from Theology and the Philosophy of Time," *Sophia* 55, no. 2 (2016): 145–61.

6 Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession," 145-159.

7 Ronald C. Hoy, "Heraclitus and Parmenides," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Time*, 1st ed., ed. Heather Dyke and Adrian Bardon (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 13-21. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118522097.ch1.

8 Harold W. Noonan, "Presentism and Eternalism," Erkenntnis 78, no. 1 (2013): 219–27, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-011-9303-1.

includes times that are normally designated as past, present, and future. Presentism is the view that "only present things exist"[9] or "only the present is real."[10] It ontologically denies existence to past events (like the dinosaurs) and to future events. "Possibilism (the growing block theory) maintains that the past and present are real, but the future comprises bare possibilities that are yet to be realized."[11] Of the three, I have opted to use eternalism as the basis for my discussion.

There are two ways, according to McTaggart[12,13] of conceptualizing positions in time: the "A-series" and "B-series." The A-series identifies positions in time as forming a series running from past to present to future. This sequential view of linear time is known as *Chronos*. It is a chronological, changing, temporal duration geometrically represented by a line.

Paraphrasing Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius writes that what has faded into the past is history, the future is mystery, and the present is a mobile, transitory moment.[14] He adds that temporal creatures (like human beings) in time do not embrace the whole extent of life simultaneously but live in the present that proceeds from the past to the future.[15] The idea of the present as a transitory moment is

9 Thomas M. Crisp, *"Presentism and The Grounding Objection,"* Noûs 41, no. 1 (2007): 90–109, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00639.x.

10 Noonan, "Presentism and Eternalism," 219.

11 Craig Callender, "Time's Ontic Voltage," in *The Future of the Philosophy of Time*, ed. Adrian Bardon (London: Routledge, 2013), 73. In Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession," 152.

12 John Ellis McTaggart, "I.—The Unreality of Time," *Mind* XVII, no. 4 (1908): 457–74, https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/XVII.4.457.

13 John Ellis McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence (Vol. 2)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 10-11.

14 Brian Leftow, "Boethius on Eternity," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1990): 123–42.

15 Leftow, "Boethius on Eternity," 125-128.

similar to Augustine's, who believed that the physical present is durationless.[16] The present quickly recedes into the past as soon as it moves into the future. Thus, to have any meaningful measure of time, Augustine turns to the mind in terms of memories (the past), perceiving (the present), and expectations (the future), which we will discuss later.

The B-series, on the other hand, regards the positions as standing in relations of "earlier than," "simultaneous with," and "later than."[17] Moreover,

> Minkowski's model of the universe as a four-dimensional manifold of spacetime coordinates, has much in common with McTaggart's B-series, for it also represents 'all events in the history of the universe' within a single picture while privileging none of them as 'present.'[18]

The A-series is deemed internally inconsistent by several philosophers and theologians (known as B-theorists). This is because it is not an objective feature of reality, but merely appears to be so from our perspective. The B-theorists and McTaggart believe that the B-series alone is sufficient for the reality of time.[19]

Now, if eternalism in a 4D block universe is like a B-series, where everything within the temporal sequence is an equally

16 Henry Chadwick, ed., *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 235.

17 Robin Le Poidevin, *Change, Cause and Contradiction: A Defence of the Tenseless Theory of Time*, 1st ed. 1991 (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1991), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21146-3.

18 Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession," 153 citing Dennis Dieks, "Time in Special Relativity," in *Springer Handbook of Spacetime*, ed. Abhay Ashtekar and Vesselin Petkov (New York: Springer, 2014), 93, 103. For a detailed explanation of Minkowksi's universe model, cf. Hermann Minkowski, "Criticisms and Discussions, Time and Space," *Monist* 28/2 (1918): 288-302, https://doi.org/10.5840/monist19182826.

19 Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession, 153.

real totality of things and events spread out in an "ordered extension,"[20] that would make the quality of our existence today our eternal life.[21] Just imagine yourself holding a photo album with pictures of yourself as a child, an adult as you are right now, and a senior citizen. You would be holding all of that and seeing your life as a permanent fixture in reality. As Burley[22] suggests, this would mean that our current lives are not dress rehearsals for an afterlife, but our words and actions are being etched in the "4D architecture of the universe." Whatever you do today is permanently carved in eternity. Let us now turn our attention to eternity and an eternal being in eternity.

Eternity and the Eternal Being

Plotinus describes the nature of the eternal in the *Enneads* as:

> a partless completion, as if they were all together in a point, and had not yet begun to go out and flow into lines; it is something which abides in the same in itself and does not change at all but is always in the present, because nothing of it has passed away, nor again will anything of it come into being, but that which it is, it is... [23]

Augustine would articulate this philosophical concept of eternity as an eternal being, "a life that is complete all at once

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20 Donald C. Williams, "The Myth of Passage," *Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 15 (1951): 463, https://doi.org/10.2307/2021694; Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession, 153.

21 Burley, "Eternal Life as an Exclusively Present Possession," 153-159.

22 Ibid.

23 Plotinus, *Ennead* III, 7, 3, lines 13-23, in *Plotinus in Seven Volumes* III, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 302-05. In Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 22.

in the present without any past or future."[24] In the *Consolation of Philosophy*,[25] Boethius contrasts the way things in time live with how an eternal being lives its whole life at once. An eternal being not located in time can

> embrace its whole extent simultaneously...possesses the whole fullness of illimitable life at once and is such that nothing future is absent from it and nothing past has flowed away...it is necessary both that...it be always present to itself and that it have the infinity of mobile time present to it.[26]

Augustine's and Boethius' view of the eternal being (God) is one of omnipresence, whose experience of time is best represented geometrically by a point or dot (instead of a line), which can be infinitesimally small and infinitely large at the same time, with a consistent radius in all directions.[27] The reason for the consistent radius is so that the dot is equally present to all points on its circumference, the way an eternal being is present to all events—past, present, and future.[28]

Furthermore, since duration through time is the mode proper to things in change, Boethius thinks that eternity is the mode of duration proper to a simple point—an unchanging God. He illustrates this with a set of revolving concentric circles, which is akin to concentric spheres (i.e., revolving concentric circles in three dimensions):

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24 Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 22.

25 Leftow, "Boethius on Eternity," 123-124.

26 Ibid.

27 Bertrand Leong, "Philo 212A: Personal Takeaway from Lesson on Tuesday, February 25, 2025" (Personal Takeaway, Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, 2025).

28 James J. O'Donnell, review of *Review of The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius*, by Boethius et al., *The American Journal of Philology* 98, no. 1 (1977): 77–79, https://doi.org/10.2307/294005.

> The inmost one comes closest to the simplicity of the center.. .God.. .the relationship between the ever-changing course of fate and the stable simplicity of providence is like that between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle.[29]

Since the point or dot can be expanded infinitely to subsume the mode of duration, the eternal being and eternity are one and the same (divine simplicity). In terms of coherent (compatible) divine properties, this simplicity flows from incorporeality because God has no parts or divisions. Hence, in terms of unity, God is one. God is incorporeal and has no body (except in the case of Jesus Christ). Therefore, God can be omnipresent, where even the soul is immaterial. This incorporeality and divine simplicity of God point to His immutability (not changing with time). He does not age as humans do in temporal, linear time since he is also incorporeal and is not affected by anything outside of Him. He is impassible (without pain, suffering, or emotion). But in the weak sense of his immutability and impassibility, God can allow Himself to be affected, but only in the way and to the extent that He allows.[30] Since I am considering God purely from a philosophical lens here, I refer to God as understood by philosophers without the theological underpinnings of the God of Christians, who, in Jesus Christ, suffered and died for our sins.

Since God is an eternal being capable of full illimitable life where neither past has flowed away, nor future is absent from, events for God do not unfold chronologically the way they do for human beings. God can interact simultaneously with past

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29 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Ernest Watts (London: Penguin Books, 2003), book IV, prose VI, p. 105. In Leftow, "Boethius on Eternity," 132.

30 Louis Catalan, "Omnipotence: Divine Properties" (lecture, Loyola School of Theology, March 10, 2026).

and future events in the eternal, all-encompassing present. This, in contrast to linear time or *Chronos* (symbolized by the line) is *Kairos* or opportune/appointed timing (symbolized by the dot).

This provides a key understanding of God's divine nature and interaction with the world. If God (like Cooper, whom I analogize to share God's perspective on time in the tesseract) can access multiple streams of time simultaneously and concurrently as part of His divine existence, and if God could communicate to humans in a way we can understand in the context of our three-dimensional world, how would this communication look like? How will we recognize these communications in *Kairos*?

When Cooper fell into the tesseract, he was able to view infinite copies of his daughter's Murph's bedroom across moments in time (past, present, and future). Returning to Mulhall's film theory,[31] a Mulhallian understanding of this scene would explain how film spatializes time by turning temporal succession into a sequence of frames. Human beings are temporal creatures inside time, yet capable of reconfiguring and reimagining our relation to it. Cinema's power to reorganize experience and reflect on its own ontology allows us to fathom a glimpse (though poorly) of how an eternal being like God could view reality. To emphasize human temporality, time here was turned into a navigable sequence when it was represented as a physical three-dimensional space inside a five-dimensional reality. Cooper could see and influence his daughter, select and revisit scenes (like a spectator to a film), but not be present to her in a shared moment. He eventually figured out that a force (such as gravity) could be exerted across spacetime. Using gravity and Morse code to transmit

31 Mulhall, "XI – Film as Philosophy: The Very Idea," 283-294.

quantum data in binary to his daughter through a wristwatch, Cooper realized that his role was to communicate with a three-dimensional world (Earth) to save it from its impending destruction. Now, if gravity were the force that transcended spacetime, could an eternal being like God communicate with us via exerted forces in our three-dimensional existence in a way that we can understand? How would these forces play out in our reality?

Falling into Time—a Distension of the Mind

As temporal beings "thrown" in time, human beings, according to Augustine, experience time as a distension of the mind.[32] The Latin verb form of *distendó*[33] means to stretch out, lengthen, extend, or swell. It also means to "hold apart."[34] Hence, time is described as a stretching out, extension, or swelling of the mind (*distentio animi*), which I explained earlier to consider our past (memories), present (perceiving or immediate awareness), and future (expectations). Time is the mind's ability to perceive order. Augustine draws

> a parallel between the distension of time and the extension of bodies – as a body swells in three dimensions, time swells out in a fourth dimension. Augustine refers to the

32 Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 29.

33 Oxford University Press, "Oxford Latin Dictionary," 1968, http://archive.org/details/oxford-latin-dictionary.

34 James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 29, 35.

> three-dimensional swelling of a body by the Latin term *tumor*, which has the same negative connotation in English.[35]

If Augustine sees time as a swelling of the mind, Immanuel Kant saw space and time as structures in the mind that are necessary to organize sensory experience.[36] He proposed that space and time are not independent realities, but rather *a priori* forms of human intuition.

Augustine clarifies that time is not co-eternal with God, as it is a creature, but that all temporal processes find their origin in the creator who made time.[37] Although Augustine considers time as part of eternity, by describing time as a distension of the mind,[38] he seems to allude to the descent into time as a sort of folly: "The distendedness that is our temporal condition is not merely the being of creatures; it is also our condition of being separated or having fallen away from the One."[39] Our

35 Teske, Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine, 29. Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* 30, 56: *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (CCL) 32, 223, where Augustine contrasts things which are beautiful in places and times with the equality and unity known only to the mind which "*nec loco tumida est nec instabilis tempore*." Also, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* II, 5, 6: *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 34, 199, where Augustine describes the soul's fall through pride in terms of a swelling into external things: "in exteriora per superbiam tumescens...." He also describes this so-called swelling in the following: *De quantitate animae* 14, 24: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL) 89, 160: "*Tumor enim non absurde appellatur corporis magnitudo*." Also in *De quantitate animae* 19, 33: CSEL 89, 172: "*Namut in corpore tria sunt genera incrementorum, unum necessarium,... alterum superfluum,...tertium noxium, quod cum accidit, tumor vocatur....*"

36 Andrew Janiak, "Kant's Views on Space and Time," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/kant-spacetime/.

37 Chadwick, *Confessions*, 229.

38 Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 29.

39 Henri-Irenee Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez saint Augustin* (Montreal-Paris: Institut d'etudes medievales, 1950). In Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 31.

being in time then, it seems, is a penalty for sin like Adam and Eve's fall from grace in Genesis.[40]

In *De vera religione*,[41] Augustine says, "We have come down into temporal things, and by love of them we are kept from eternal things...And so, though places offer us things to love, times steal from us what we love." Following Augustine's train of thought, our condition as temporal beings not only makes us prone to simply viewing time in a chronological, linear fashion, but when we love the temporal life and pursue it as an end in itself, we inevitably miss out on perceiving eternal things.

Following from Kant and Augustine, if time is intuited in our minds as a commodity (for example) and is distended to organize sensory experience, then to quote Henri Bergson in his essay *Time and Free Will*,[42] "We live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we are acted rather than act ourselves." Patrick Nogoy adds that,

> Accelerating lived experiences muddles the existing and existence of things. It has been the greatest theft of wisdom in these times, in favoring productivity and efficiency. We live instead for time, not realizing that time is the twin of our being. It is we who pass away when we say time passes away.[43]

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40 Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 31.

41 *De vera religione* 24, 45: CCL 32, 215: "*In temporalia devenimus et eorum amore ab aeternis impedimur.*"; 35, 65: CCL 32, 230: "*Loca offerunt quod amemus, tempora surripiunt quod amamus.*" In Teske, *Paradoxes of Time in Saint Augustine*, 31.

42 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. Frank Lubecki Pogson (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960), 231.

43 Patrick Nogoy, *Touching Love: Thoughts and Stories* (Pasay City: Paulines Philippines, 2016), 113-114.

What does this look like in our reality? We desire maximum results within the least amount of time, sacrificing health, cutting back on sleep, or drinking more coffee to stay awake to complete our work, chores, and assignments. We advocate for larger and faster crop yields, experience more traffic jams as we rush from place to place, and produce more carbon emissions—all due to the perceived lack of time. With the introduction of smartphones and AI, increasing expectations and accelerated lived experience, we experience physiological changes as a result of environmental degradation and lifestyle stressors that cause tumors and cancer. It is no wonder that we feel so burnt out and scattered. The more we try to hold things together, the more we find that our identity is fracturing. Modern anxiety caused by a cognitive overload forces us to multitask while maintaining a cohesive sense of self, leading to an inevitable entropy of personal identity.[44] If *distentio animi* refers to the mind stretching out over time, the *distentio* here is morphed "to sunder" (to pull to pieces). One literally cannot hold everything together. Left to its own devices, the human mind stretches out, but the person is sundered. Things start dropping and falling apart. The mental stretch pulls a person's soul to pieces in a mental entropy.[45] For Paul Ricoeur, the secret passage of time colludes with our decaying memories.[46] Just think of forgetfulness, ageing, death, and the fleeting passage of time: the more we master, the more we lack. We cannot bring ourselves to completion.

But what time lacks is temporary. In an eternal state, one needs to let go and surrender. To move away from *distentio* to

44 Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 35-37.

45 Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 37.

46 Paul Ricœur, "Memory — Forgetting — History," in *Meaning & Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen (Brooklyn, NY: Berghahn Books, Inc., 2008), 16.

extensio (ordering oneself inside and outside of time) and *intentio* (an intense concentration on intention) toward reconnecting with an eternal being not bound by earth's decay.[47] Such an opportunity is made possible only if we are free and desirous to pay attention to and recognize the myriad ways in which we are participating in the eternal being who is one with eternity, even though ours is a limiting essence in the participation of God's divine existence. Contrary to Augustine's view of the fall, which brings disharmony to nature, I am inclined to Irenaeus' theodicy, which emphasizes living in a challenging existence as an essential part of our evolutionary growth and maturation as creatures. So it is with one's desire, striving, and actualizing that one grows from encountering eternity, which I will explain more later. That said, both Augustine's and Irenaeus' approaches are key to understanding our place as temporal creatures participating in a growing but limited way in the eternity of an eternal being.

God as Efficient Cause for our Being

Human beings' descent into time (according to Augustine) may be compared to the Platonic world of senses, and eternity to Plato's world of forms. Human beings have some idea about immutable forms, as we were once part of the world of forms. We participate and reflect these forms in particular ways. For Aristotle, the forms are here in particular beings, and the manifestation of human form is the intellect and will. But our material embodiment in the world of senses made us forget our knowledge of the forms. Aquinas (who followed Aristotle and Augustine) would educate us in recovering this forgotten knowledge of "superlatives" (what is most beautiful, most noble, the Highest Good, and more) that is used to make comparisons. Though Augustine would proceed to discard Plato's world of

47 Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 35-36.

forms, he would now see these as residing in the mind of God. Hence, any human desire to reconnect with the Highest Good is a desire to connect with the mind of God.

Using Aquinas' Theory of Participation, we may shed light on humankind's participation in the perfect form of an eternal being (God) as well as the ontological structure of shared beings to ground both the similarities and distinctions or multiplicity of each being's limiting mode in sharing this eternal being's perfection and goodness. According to Aquinas, God's existence is his essence, and one of God's actual perfections is to exist. Therefore, human beings' existence is good because, based on Aquinas' argument on the Gradation of Qualities, God is the efficient cause of all beings' existence. We each have "a limited share in the unrestricted existence of God who is Pure Being, the Highest Good, and also the Final Cause (end) of beings.

But why can we not access eternal things in their entirety from the beginning? And why can we only gain access to eternity sometimes and not all the time? Irenaeus' approach (mentioned earlier) clues us in on this. He says that the creature is brought into existence at an epistemic distance in the cognitive dimension from God (the creator).[48] For if human beings were to be immediately conscious of the full scope of eternity and eternal things, not only would this result in a disproportion between creator and creature, but the creature would have no freedom in relation to God, and not be able to exist as an independent, autonomous person.[49] Think of a fire and a wooden beam. The wooden beam becomes hot due to its proximity to the fire. But place the wooden beam in the fire, and it risks being consumed by the latter. So it is with God

48 Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (London: Palgrave MacMillan UK, 1992), 54-55.

49 Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 54-55.

(Creator) and human beings (creatures). If we were to come too close in our bodily 3D reality to God, our bodies (and minds) may not be ready to handle the multidimensional complexity that God is. This cognitive dimension may also be understood in the sense that human beings are free to exist within a three-dimensional space where God, as a multidimensional being, is not overwhelmingly evident. This is similar to how Cooper found himself in a familiar and navigable three-dimensional space within a five-dimensional reality as a physical dimension crafted by advanced humans (Cooper's astronaut predecessors) who were his pathfinders.

Desiring and Connecting with the Highest Good

Desire is a movement of attraction. Aristotle and Aquinas believe that all things desire the good. Beings are good not only because they exist, but also because they possess a potential perfection based on the nature of what they are. It is a dynamic existence that Aquinas talks about that desires the good. Just as a plant bends toward the sun (phototropism), human beings are inclined to strive for what is good and for self-actualization after their basic needs have been met (Maslow's hierarchy of needs). Aquinas says that "All things desire (or are attracted to) God himself by desiring their perfection (actualization)." We are all looking for God, ultimately by trying to fully actualize ourselves and fulfill our potential.[50]

The goodness of God here does not refer to a moral goodness, but the desirability of beings for God, as God exceeds the most profound grasp of human comprehension. He is beyond the criteria of human morality. He has no obligations (since there is no being superior to Him) and no virtues or

50 Louis Catalan, "Divine Omnibenevolence" (lecture, Loyola School of Theology, March 17, 2026).

vices (since there are no dispositions that can be acquired or lost). Hence, God is immutable.[51]

Only God is the Highest Good because He has no risk of failing to exist due to His unrestricted existence as pure being. God has no potential perfections, since all His perfections are actual. He is Pure Act (actus purus), This also explains why he is immutable and therefore in a state of full actualization: All his perfections are actual. There is nothing potential in God. The desire to realize one's potential perfection is fulfilled when one is in a similar state of full actualization based on the kind of being that one is. The immediate desire to actualize one's potential perfections expresses one's ultimate desire for God. As a final cause, God attracts all beings towards Him as their ultimate end (telos). God, then, is good because He is desirable. He is the Highest Good (summum bonum). What living beings desire about Him is to be in a similar state of full actualization that only God is in.[52] Therefore, humankind's participation in eternity essentially involves a desire for the good.

"A case in point (which also addresses the question of 'when do we access eternity?') is this true story[53] related to me by a friend who met a Christian missionary while on a flight. He was a Cambodian child prisoner-of-war (POW) in the late 1970s. Caught by Pol Pot to instill fear and obedience in his parents, he was one of 40 children made to suffer (at night) so that their parents could hear their cries. Their fingernails were plucked from their fingers, and cigarette butts were stubbed out on their bodies. The now Christian missionary had a recurring dream where the events of his past would replay themselves,

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Bertrand Leong, "Philo 212A: Eternity, Providence, and Good According to Boethius Applied to Intergenerational Healing" (Unpublished Paper, Loyola School of Theology, May 6, 2025).

and he would experience the pain and suffering of the torture every night. However, desiring the freedom of the children (the highest good in that particular situation), he managed to transcend his own pain and suffering to comfort the souls who were still there—returning each night in his dream to rescue one child for 40 nights until all the children were freed, and his dreams of the ordeal ended."[54]

Although it stands to be argued from a psychological standpoint that rescuing the children could also be considered a traumatic response to recover a sense of agency from a terrible ordeal, we can see how the missionary's desire for the good of saving souls was a transcendent and transformational encounter beyond the usual confines of 3D spacetime, which also gave him a sense of closure and peace. But what was remarkable about his experience was (i) the repeatability of his dreams (given the fact that he cannot consciously construct his own dreams) and (ii) that there was a co-immediacy between him and his dream, the knower and the known. To take a leaf from German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's relational model of knowing, knowing is seen as a mode of existence and not an activity that can be turned on or off at will. In paying attention to what his recurring dreams were telling him, desiring the Highest Good, and responding accordingly, the Christian missionary (the dreamer) was forever changed by them (his dreams).

Mediums Across Spacetime

Recall that at the start, Cooper realized that he could exert a force (like gravity) to communicate with Murph across spacetime. Gravity in this case, was the medium for their communication. In the case of the Cambodian missionary stuck in a

54 Ibid.

oneiric time loop of his ordeal as a POW, the medium was his dreams. Other mediums could be things like *déjà vu* and prayer.

Déjà vu refers to a feeling of already having experienced a present situation. It can be understood in a variety of ways. It can be seen as a form of *anamnesis*, a recalling from a prior life (using Plato's theory of forms),[55] a fragmentation of memories or a participation in a multiverse of worlds due to quantum physics,[56] or from Henri Bergson's idea that the coexistence of the past with the present behaves like a shadow to the body,[57] among other explanations.

For prayer, it is in prayer that theists or believers seek to communicate with God (the eternal being). And at Mass, Catholics participate in the Eucharist where the eternal sacrifice of Christ is made present. All these examples would all make for intriguing topics for future philosophical and theological discourse. But whether it is prayer, prophecy, a deep desire, an unfulfilled promise, or love that enables us to reach above and beyond into eternity, the striving of human beings for self-actualization and the Highest Good entails a journey that takes us across and beyond the immediate confines of our three-dimensional existence.

Summary and Conclusion

As a philosophical exercise inspired by the movie *Interstellar* (2014), I asked if it is possible for humankind to have access to

55 Olugbenga Ebenezer Oloidi and Paul Olorunsola Folorunso, "Is Plato's Recollection Thesis a Déjà Vu?" *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management IJHSSM* (Ado-Ekiti) 4, no. 6 (2024): 1118–25.

56 Big Think, "Michio Kaku: What Is Déjà Vu?" *Big Think* (YouTube), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks_UHmaZcSg.

57 Sam Woolfe, "Bergson's Theory of *Déjà Vu*," *Sam Woolfe*, October 27, 2025, https://www.samwoolfe.com/2025/10/bergsons-theory-of-deja-vu.html.

eternity despite being subjected to a three-dimensional space in chronological time. And if so, what does this look like, and how can we connect with an eternal being in eternity? Then, plotting a philosophical roadmap, we explained the spatial dimensions and made a case for eternalism in the B-series where past, present, and future are seen in totality. Then, from the perspectives of Boethius and Augustine, we made a geometrical representation of God as a point or dot where neither past nor future has escaped from the eternal present. God may also be represented as a sphere when one considers how the eternal being can be infinitely expanded to take in all of eternity. These contrast with the chronological image of time as a line, which human beings are subjected to according to Augustine, who sees time as a distension of the mind and the falling into time (which is part of God's creation) as a penalty for sin. However, this view is challenged by Irenaeus'theodicy. While Plato's world of forms and Aquinas' Theory of Participation shed light on humankind's participation in the perfect form of an eternal being (God), the Irenaean approach helps us see why the creature, though participating in the eternal being, is free to exist at an epistemic distance in the cognitive, three-dimensional space where God is not overwhelmingly evident. I touched upon human beings' deep desire for actualization of the highest good, which is God, and qualified that the 'good' here refers not to a moral good but the desirability of God whose nature and essence is inherently good in itself. Thus, humankind's participation in eternity requires a desire for the good, like in the account of the Cambodian missionary, to realize one's actualization and uncover new, unexplored ways of reconnecting with eternity.

Although there are many examples (*déjà vu*, prayer, prophecy, and more) that challenge the conventional idea of time as a chronological A-series, one thing is clear: that the striving

of human beings for self-actualization and the Highest Good entails a journey that can take humankind beyond the immediate confines of its three-dimensional existence into eternity.

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