

ECCLESIAL IMPASSE: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR LAMENTS?

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Occasioned by current challenges facing the Catholic Church, the article explores the role of lamentations and impasse in the life of the church. By drawing on resources in the Scriptures, Augustine's Expositions on the Psalms, and classic texts in spirituality, the author advances the claim that ways must be developed in ecclesiology and pastoral practice to heed and discern the meaning of ecclesial laments as a necessary complement to a phenomenological and hermeneutical interpretation of the intentions of ecclesial texts and authorities.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE CHURCH begins with lament.”¹ This comment by a local priest in the aftermath of the Rwandan massacre of parishioners by parishioners invites reflection. In every generation there are believers—lay, religious, priests, and bishops—who grieve the current state of affairs in the Catholic Church. Sometimes this is occasioned by traumatic violations, like the clergy sex abuse scandal, and at other times by spiritual and human needs and troubling signs of the times not being acknowledged or addressed by the community or church leaders. In our own day, discussion of grieving in the church has become commonplace.²

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¹ Emmanuel Katongole with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrection Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009) 163.

² Some recent examples of mourning: (1) Peter Steinfels mourning the increasing number of people, especially young people, leaving the church: “Further Adrift: The American Church’s Crisis of Attrition,” *Commonweal* 137.18 (October 22, 2010) 16–20; Marian Ronan mourning the treatment of women and homosexuals: *Tracing the Sign of the Cross: Sexuality, Mourning, and the Future of American*

One might expect that such ecclesial laments would be a perennial topic of concern in ecclesiology and pastoral deliberations. In point of fact, however, many bishops, theologians, and pastoral ministers all too often prefer to accentuate inspiring images and stories of the church, while bemoaning the travail caused by personal sins. We are presented with the mystery and the beauty of the church, but rarely is attention given to the church's failures in living up to its identity and realizing its mission.

There are exceptions. One classic example is Antonio Rosmini's *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* (1846).³ This book challenged readers to reflect on some of the failures in the Italian church of his day by identifying them as the "open, gaping wounds in the mystical Body of Jesus Christ whence its life-blood oozes forth."⁴ Rosmini grieves the loss of the church's vitality caused by internal divisions and weaknesses and by damaging external social and cultural movements and worldviews. This work illustrates how ecclesial laments can serve as a catalyst for a prophetic critique of the church and society, for church reform and renewal, and inspire the formation of new communities, practices, and forms of life.

In the post-Vatican II Church, ecclesial laments have been particularly acute surrounding the implementation of practices of synodality, that is, the dialogical practices of communal discernment and decision-making, especially but not exclusively as exercised in parish and diocesan pastoral councils, presbyteral councils, episcopal conferences, diocesan synods, and synods of bishops.⁵ The stated intentions of these participatory structures of church deliberation, as articulated in official documents and as expressed by testimonies from practitioners, merit close scrutiny. However, it has become increasingly evident over the last 30 years that ascertaining and investigating the frustrations and failures encountered in ecclesial practices of communal discernment and decision-making is at least as important for ecclesiology and pastoral practices as determining the intentions and achievements of these endeavors. In keeping with this growing

Catholicism (New York: Columbia University, 2009); and Bryan N. Massingale mourning the failure to address the problem of racism: *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010).

³ Antonio Rosmini, *Of the Five Wounds of the Church*, trans. H. P. Lidden (1848; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1883).

⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

⁵ On instances of implementing synodal practices in the post-Vatican II Church, see Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006); for an overview, see Hinze, "The Reception of Vatican II in Participatory Structures of the Church: Facts and Friction," *Proceedings of the Canon Law Society of America* 70 (2008) 28–52.

realization, this article advances the claim that lamentations provide a particularly rich theological resource for reflecting on the frustrated intentions and thwarted aspirations of the church and a rationale for incorporating the lessons learned from laments in the study of ecclesiology and in pastoral practices. A phenomenology and hermeneutics of the intentions of the church's dialogical identity and mission finds its necessary counterpart in the study of laments in the church and the world.⁶ I proceed by exploring how biblical, theological, and spiritual approaches to lamentations cumulatively provide a crucial resource for understanding ecclesial experiences of thwarted aspirations and intentions, and showing why we need rules for discerning ecclesial laments.

ECCLESIAL IMPASSE: TWO EXAMPLES

Expressions of lamentation in the church on occasion surface deeper dynamics of ecclesial impasse. Ecclesial impasse comprises situations of antithetical, and seemingly irreconcilable, viewpoints and practices. They frequently disclose contentious dialectical processes of doctrinal conflict associated with expanding social and cultural horizons, difficult conceptual negotiations and developments, collective conversion, and ecclesial reform.⁷ Rather than realities to be ridiculed or repressed, ecclesial laments and impasses are a social fact, realities that merit special attention. Addressing lamentations requires not only fostering a heightened awareness of them but also developing ways to interpret and assess them. This is especially important for ecclesiological method and for the discernment procedures employed in pastoral practices that pertain to the ongoing formation of the church's identity and mission.

Parishioners asked to give examples of collective laments they perceive in the church would undoubtedly include in our time a range of issues surrounding the sexual abuse of children by the clergy; but there would also be concerns raised about church teachings, policies, practices, and pastoral priorities viewed as out of touch with the convictions and aspirations of a majority or significant minorities of church members. These

⁶ Theologians who draw special attention to laments or comparable genres, experiences, or memories invariably employ critical "background theories" (using Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's formulation) and "explanatory methods" (as described by Paul Ricoeur) in their investigations to augment and offset commonplace phenomenological and hermeneutical assumptions. So, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx's "negative contrast experiences" and Johann Baptist Metz's "anamnetic solidarity" and "Leiden an Gott" reflect the influence of the critical theories of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch.

⁷ On dialectic in theology, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 235–66; and Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1989).

laments often point to deeper patterns of ecclesial impasse. Two widely discussed examples of ecclesial impasse in the wake of the Second Vatican Council can help us imagine the kinds of issues and dynamics involved.

The post-Vatican II period, especially since the beginning of the papacy of John Paul II in 1978, has been characterized by struggles between proponents of increased centralization in the exercise of church authority, and those cultivating the authority of the local church, as well as national and regional episcopal conferences. This ecclesial impasse is encapsulated in the debate about the relationship of the universal church and the local church in the exchange that took place from 1999 to 2001 between Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), and Cardinal Walter Kasper, who served as prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from 2001 to 2010.

The formulation in the 1992 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” issued by the CDF, which precipitated Kasper’s intervention, reads: “In its essential mystery, the universal church is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular church.”⁸ This formula, Kasper complained in 1999, “becomes thoroughly problematic if the universal church is being covertly identified with the Church of Rome, and de facto with the pope and the Curia. If that happens, the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot be read as an aid in clarifying communion ecclesiology, but as a dismissal of it, and as an attempt to restore Roman centralism.”⁹ The subsequent exchange between Ratzinger and Kasper indicates the depth of the impasse.¹⁰

The position articulated by Ratzinger reflects a theological paradigm associated with the theology of Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar that has gained ascendance among many curial officials during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.¹¹ Kasper’s position,

⁸ CDF, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” no. 9, *Origins* 22 (1992) 108–12.

⁹ Walter Kasper, “Zur Theologie und Praxis des bishöflichen Amtes,” *Auf neue Art Kirche Sein: Wirklichkeiten—Herausforderungen—Wandlungen* (Munich: Bernward bei Don Bosco, 1999) 32–48, at 44 (my translation).

¹⁰ For documentation and analysis, see Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., “The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 227–50; and Medard Kehl, “Der Disput der Kardinäle: Zum Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirchen,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 128 (2003) 219–32.

¹¹ The emergence of this paradigm among curial officials is associated with the central role of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the head of the CDF during the papacy of John Paul II. Ratzinger credits the importance of Henri de Lubac’s work on the body of Christ and its relation to eucharistic ecclesiology, which “thus opened . . . up to the actual questions of the Church’s legal order and the relationship between the

which gives corrective attention to the local churches, represents a contrasting approach associated with the ecclesiologies of Jean-Marie Tillard, Hervé Legrand, and Joseph Komanchak, to name but a few. Impasse is evident in the official limitations placed upon synodal forms of decision-making in synods of bishops and episcopal conferences, which papal and curial documents now restrict to exercises of affective collegiality, but not effective collegiality.¹² This contestation about the relationship of the universal and local churches reverberates in ecumenical dialogues that Catholics engaged in with the Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants.¹³ This problem is also experienced locally. Since the pontificate of John Paul II, candidates for episcopal office have most often been chosen based on their allegiance to the curial position on this disputed issue. Consequently, by design and unwittingly, there is frequently a mimesis of papal and curial leadership styles by local ordinaries.

A second instance of impasse in the postconciliar church is at least as important as the first. The conflict centers on the reception of *Lumen gentium*, chapter 2. This chapter gave prominence to the designation of the church as the people of God and the corresponding conviction that all baptized faithful are full and active participants in the nature and mission of the church.¹⁴ This formulation amounted to an invitation to all the

local and the universal church" (*Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* [New York: Crossroad, 1988] 14). Ratzinger comments on the central contribution of Hans Urs von Balthasar to the work of *Communio* theology in "Communio: A Program," *Communio* 19 (1992) 436–49.

¹² See, e.g., Peter De Mey, "Is 'Affective' Collegiality Sufficient? A Plea for a More 'Effective' Collegiality of Bishops in the Roman Catholic Church and Its Ecumenical Implications," in *Friendship as an Ecumenical Value*, ed. Antoine Arjakovsky and Marie-Audie Tardivo (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University, 2006) 132–53.

¹³ For representative texts, see World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Statement 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005); The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Commission, "Steps Towards a Reunited Church: A Sketch of an Orthodox-Catholic Vision for the Future" (2010), <http://www.scoba.us/articles/towards-a-unified-church.html>; U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, "The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries" (2005), <http://www.usccb.org/seia/koinonia.shtml>; Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), "The Gift of Authority (Authority in the Church III)" (1998), http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcicII_05.html. These URLs and all others herein cited were accessed on April 30, 2011.

¹⁴ For commentaries on chapter 2, see Yves M.-J. Congar, "The Church: The People of God," in *The Church and Mankind: Dogma, Vol. 1, Concilium* 1 (1964) 11–37; Congar, "The People of God," in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller (1966) 197–207.

faithful to reclaim their baptismal inheritance by cultivating their own authority and agency based on their discernment of the faith of the church. Such an orientation expresses the prophetic character of ecclesial faith and offers the necessary counterpart to the sacramental character of ecclesial faith that is emphasized in communion ecclesiology. Its impulse is articulated in the teachings of the council that all the baptized share in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of Christ, and is manifest in the pilgrim people of God actively engaged in “the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time” and attentive and responsive to “the signs of the times.”¹⁵

In the aftermath of the council, this teaching of the people of God inspired individuals and local communities around the world to rethink their call to holiness and missionary engagement. Priests were afforded opportunities to forge new working relationships with their bishops on presbyteral councils, lay people collaborated with priests and religious in the work of diocesan and parish councils, diocesan synods, and countless other efforts at collective discernment and decision-making. But certain cardinals in central Europe raised grave concerns about what had been unleashed by this theology of the people of God. During the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, which was devoted to an assessment of the reception of the council, these influential prelates identified three problems: the people of God theology, it was alleged:

- promotes a democratic ideology in the church, grass-roots movements, a popular church from below, a church of the poor, a sociological, not theological, approach to the church;
- focuses on the human character of the pilgrim church in history without being integrated with the supernatural gift character of the Church identified with the body of Christ;
- threatens the mysterious, divine, sacramental character of the Church that warrants the foundation of the church’s hierarchical and clerical identity in the mediation of salvation.¹⁶

The Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod said virtually nothing about the doctrine of the people of God, the category that had captivated the imaginations of so many people in the aftermath of Vatican II as a central

¹⁵ *Gaudium et spes* nos. 1, 4; translation from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Northport, N.Y., 1996).

¹⁶ Cardinal Godfried Danneels, the general secretary of the Extraordinary Synod, in his initial report based on the written responses of the participating bishops, identified three perceived problems with the reception of the people of God motif. See Joseph Komonchak’s analysis in “The Synod of 1985 and the Notion of the Church,” *Chicago Studies* 26 (1987) 330–45.

framing motif of the achievement of the council.¹⁷ With hardly a word about the people of God, the Extraordinary Synod offered this conclusion: “The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the [Second Vatican] council’s documents. . . [and] is . . . the foundation for order in the church especially for correct relationship between unity and pluriformity in the church.”¹⁸ Instead of trying to address the alleged—and disputed—problems introduced by the people of God motif by fashioning a deeper analysis and formulation, the Final Report simply avoided the topic and established communion as the governing framework for the theology of the church and pastoral practice. By emphasizing the sacramental character of the identity and mission of the church, the 1985 document reasserted the authority of the bishop and the clergy in the local church. Although the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law offered an amalgam of the theologies of people of God and communion in its basic formulas, in its details it provided the legal justifications for the Extraordinary Synod’s reassertion of hierarchical and clerical authority, by establishing that any exercise of synodal or conciliar deliberation was to be “consultative only,”¹⁹ thereby protecting the sovereign exercise of priestly authority at the parish level, episcopal authority at the diocesan level, and papal authority in relation to matters pertaining to the universal, regional, and national levels of the church. In short, an impasse between the people of God theology and communion theology has profoundly shaped the ecclesial policies and practices of the last 30 years.

These cases of impasse and lamentations and others like them are manifest at every level of the church. My aim here is to show how a theology of lamentations and rules for discerning them are needed in order to work our way through these contested matters.

A RATIONALE FOR HEEDING LAMENTS

The first step of my argument is to enlist a number of witnesses—scriptural, theological, and spiritual—to justify and advance cumulative

¹⁷ See Giuseppe Alberigo and James Provost, eds., *Synod 1985—An Evaluation, Concilium* 188 (1986); Joseph Komonchak offered the following assessment: “Since . . . the Final Report does not reflect with complete accuracy the variety of viewpoints expressed at the Synod, the question arises as to the source of the reading of the postconciliar developments which it does present. The answer, it appears, must be found in the contributions of the middle-European and especially the German members of the Synod. The Final Report faithfully echoes the views expressed by Cardinals [Joachim] Meisner, [Joseph] Höffner, and [Joseph] Ratzinger” (Komonchak, “The Synod of 1985 and the Notion of the Church” 333).

¹⁸ Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Origins* 15 (1985) 441, 443–53, at 448.

¹⁹ On this clause see Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue* 33–37, 61–63, 173–78, 250.

arguments for why and how paying attention to ecclesial laments is important for ecclesiology and pastoral practice.

Scriptural Witnesses

The testimonies of lamentation in the Scriptures provide the most prevalent biblical idiom refracted in numerous genres and reflective of various kinds of social dynamics and conflicts. The speech act and genre of lamentation in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures offer rich resources for individuals and groups seeking to respond to situations of conflict, frustration, and failure in personal and communal life. The particular literary form of lamentation finds expression in the full range of literary settings in the Hebrew Scriptures: in the complaints of the Hebraic peoples and Israelites embedded in the grand narrative settings in the Torah, the historical books, as well as in prophetic literature. The largest repository of laments is found in the Psalms where laments are combined with prayers of petition, repentance, and rededication, professions of trust, and expressions of gratitude and praise. In the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest and subsequent ascendancy of the Hellenistic empire, laments reconstellated in shriller forms in later wisdom and apocalyptic traditions.

One frequent feature of lament that distinguishes it from the grand narratives, prophecies of consolation, and petitions, professions of trust, or expressions of gratitude with which it is often accompanied is *the cry for God to listen and respond*. Roughly a third of the lament psalms use this formula: “Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my groaning. Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray” (Ps 5:1).

At its most basic level, a lament offers testimony to personal and collective suffering in the form of complaint, grief, frustration, and despair. The motivation of the speech act that gives rise to this genre is not to express gratitude or worshipful awe, nor even in its barest form to plead for help, which is a reflex step that is not always taken. At its core, lament expresses the pain of unfulfilled aspirations or intentions. The reasons for pain may be limitations or failings, personal or collective, singular or compound, episodic or chronic; but whatever the cause (named or nameless, known or hidden to consciousness), the result is an ache, tension, rage, dissipation of energy, a numbness, all of which contribute to the state that Walter Brueggemann has aptly described as disorientation.²⁰

The driving forces behind the literary form of lament are, as Claus Westermann demonstrated over 50 years ago, two basic questions: why

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 51–58, at 54; also see Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 317–406, esp. 373–99.

and how long?²¹ Why is there this experience now of being lost in darkness, the absence of God's presence, seemingly abandoned by God (Ps 44:23), rejected (Ps 74:1), forgotten (Ps 44:24), and frustrated in bringing about God's purposes? As the psalmist writes, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps 10:1). The second question is expressed with an equivalent sense of urgency: How long will this suffering go on? "How long will you be angry?" (Ps 79:5; 80:4; 85:5; 89:46; 89:46). "How long . . . will you hide yourself?" (Ps 89:46). These two questions are more often implied than explicitly raised in the laments. And so too is the petition: "Do not be silent, O God of my praise" (Ps 109:1, see Ps 83:1).

The most important distinguishing structure of the lament is the complaint formula that involves a *triadic relationship*. First, there is the "I" or the "we" who laments; second, there is God as the one addressed; and third, there is the "other" often identified explicitly or by implication as an enemy who is accused of contributing to the reason for the lament.²² The lament provides the occasion to struggle with the harsh reality of these relationships, and with the limited and distorted views of self, community, others, and even God revealed in situations of suffering.

Through the labor of lament, energy is activated in the lamenter in ways that can go undetected or be distorted in consciousness. At one level, the person or community confronts the experience of brokenness in situations of suffering, darkness, and disorientation. At another level there is an attempt to negotiate the power differentials between the lamenter and God, and between the lamenter and the others—often identified as enemies, false witnesses, or accusers. The work of lamentation aims to reconceive and redistribute power between the one who laments and God, and between the one who laments and the others. The lamenter stands up to God not out of hubris, nor to call into question God's transcendence, but to dare to pose liminal questions and to respond to the invitation to become a partner and collaborator with God in the midst of a suffering world. Simultaneously, the lamenter stands up to the others and calls into question destructive power dynamics by offering resistance and working to

²¹ Claus Westermann, "The Structure and History of the Lament in the Old Testament," in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen (1954; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 165–213.

²² Westermann argues that the lament is complete only when it has three dimensions pertaining to God, the one who laments, and the enemy ("Structure and History of the Lament" 169). Westermann speaks of the structure in terms of an address (or introductory petition), lament, turning toward God (or confession of trust), petition, and vow of praise (170). For a similar delineation see John Kselmann and Michael Barré, "Psalms," *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990) 34:9.

renegotiate the relations with authorities and along borders.²³ Ultimately, in all laments a trial is taking place, above or below the surface, in which everyone is called to accountability, and no one escapes interrogation: God, the self, the community, and the others. The scrutiny of the exercise of power and the dissection of pain in the laments of the Hebrew Scriptures can lead to blaming one's self, one's enemies, and even God.

The lament provides a space and time in contemplation, in cult, and in community to be receptive to God's answers to the questions of why and how long in the face of impasse. The limitations and failings of persons and communities are exposed; questions of God's purposes, wrath, and mercy are raised; and deeper fears and projections about the perceived enemy are allowed to surface.²⁴ And it is precisely here that the mystery of God, the hiddenness of God, and the eschatological character of the human person, the church, and the world are confronted. Laments serve as a furnace that releases base ingredients of pity and anger, retribution and remorse. This cauldron need not produce deadly toxins, but can provide a crucible for compassion, where baser forms of pain yield purer forms of love-in-action and a truer, more purified understanding of the identities of self, others, and God.²⁵

²³ For Brueggemann, the ultimate theological significance of the lament is a speech pattern that "shifts the calculus and redresses the redistribution of power between the two parties," the petitioner and God. The petitioner stands up to God and as a result "is taken seriously and legitimately granted power" so that through this discourse of lament "the petitioner is heard, valued, and transmitted as serious speech." In the context of cult (or prayer), one infers that God "hears" and takes the lament seriously. The larger implication is that "such a speech pattern and social usage keep all power relations under review and capable of redefinition." See Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *The Poetical Books: A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 84–97, at 87–88; originally in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (1986) 57–71.

²⁴ One of the interesting features of laments is that they provide a space to accuse the other of being perverse, sacrilegious, and godless, while at the same time recognizing that the enemy acts friendly toward the lamenter (Ps 55:21), greets (Ps 144:8), and spends time with (Ps 41:5–6) the lamenter. See Westermann, "Structure and History of the Lament" 180–81, 188–94.

²⁵ The solace offered to the lamenter by the larger narrative promise of the covenant, the prophet's consoling hope, the sage's confidence, and the psalmist's prayers of trust and gratitude were occasionally called into question and judged as less than fully credible—for example, during the repression at the hands of the forces of the Hellenistic empire. In this period, complaints became severed from petitions, professions of trust, rededication, and gratitude borne of new orientation. Kathleen O'Connor and Diane Bergant argue that when stripped to its barest literary form, the lament is difficult medicine with no prognosis in sight. See Diane Bergant, *Lamentations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003); Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002); a wider range of issues are explored in Nancy C. Lee and Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Lamentations in Ancient and Contemporary Cultural Contexts* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2008).

Are there instances of lamentations in the Christian Scriptures stitched into the narrative fabrics of the stories of Jesus, his disciples, and the nascent church? One might be inclined to argue that “the New Testament is characterized by the absence of lament.”²⁶ But close examination suggests otherwise. Such an investigation consistently takes its bearings from the focal invocation of the lament psalm voiced by Jesus’ cry on the cross in Mark and Matthew: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (echoing Ps 22:1–2).²⁷ No less pertinent is Paul’s conviction that where there are the groans of human bodies, as of creation itself, with “sighs too deep for words,” we discover the breath and voice of the Spirit at work, “searching everything, even the depths of God,” and attesting to grief in the midst of precarious life alongside pangs of new life emerging.²⁸ The new life that issued forth in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the Pentecostal descent of the Spirit cancels neither the lament of the crucified Jesus nor the future of all lamentations.

In Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels, we also find Jesus expressing laments about people who have lost their way: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not?” (Lk 13:34; Mt 23:37). And in Mark one can detect a lament in Jesus’ reaction to the multitude longing to hear him teach: “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34; see Num 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezek 34:5).

²⁶ Markus Öhler, “To Mourn, Weep, Lament, and Groan: On the Heterogeneity of the New Testament Statements on Lament,” in *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Eva Harasta and Brian Brock (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009) 150–65, at 150.

²⁷ Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark’s Passion* (New York: Cambridge University, 2007).

²⁸ The contention that the expression of human laments and the groaning of creation comes from the Spirit, is based on Paul’s claims in Romans 8:22–26 and 1 Corinthians 2:10. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans, Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 504–21; and Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 504–24. Jewett traces the motif of creation groaning to Job 31:38–40 with allusion to Genesis 3:17–18; and Fitzmyer recognizes not only the threat of divine judgment but also the promise of new life through the travail of creation, a motif found in Hebrew Scriptures and in Greco-Roman literature (Jewett, *Romans* 517; Fitzmyer, *Romans* 509). I would further hypothesize that lament is one form found in speaking in tongues (*Glossolalia*) relevant to Paul’s understanding of the discourse of the Spirit. These scriptural insights invite us to expand our understanding of the Spirit as the mouth of God, as developed by Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, *The Church and the Last Things*, trans. Alexander Golitzen (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Valdimir’s, 1995) 118–22.

These two laments by Jesus insinuate the underlying and often implicit source of his own sense of mission: the laments of the people of God inspired him to teach in order to reveal a new vision of life, to touch so as to heal, to cast out demonic powers in order to free captives, and to share table fellowship with outcasts and sinners and by so doing to reveal God's compassion. Jesus' mission as herald of God's reign was his response to the laments of those overwhelmed by destructive powers. These are often imposed by those who exercise political, religious, economic, or social power on the poor, the marginalized, and the disrespected, but they frequently collaborate with patterns of self-loathing and self-destruction. Jesus establishes his mission to reach out to sufferers. The one who laments on the cross is suffering the consequences of responding to the laments of the people of God. The configuration of Jesus' identity and mission finds in his encounter with those who lament its deepest plot.

This narrative structure in the Gospels establishes a framework for a series of specific laments voiced by the disciples of Jesus both during his lifetime and after his death and resurrection. Consistent with my overarching agenda, I do not attend to all the laments in the world of pain that must be placed at the foot of the cross. Rather I concentrate on a set of laments among the followers of Jesus that bear on the identity and mission of the nascent church. In the New Testament, the formula of the lament in the Hebrew Scriptures—why and how long—is not duplicated. But the struggle with the threefold power relation of lamenter, God, and the others is clearly in evidence. Let me recall several well-known examples.

Two laments came to define nascent Christianity as it emerged in the midst of Jewish and Hellenistic populations and cultures. On the one hand, the resistance by Jews to the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the source of Paul's lament "that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (Rom 9:2), but it was also the occasion for him to learn that "the gifts and the call of God" to the Jews "are irrevocable."²⁹ The frequent and longstanding failure of Christians to learn from Paul has yielded the history of laments of Jews persecuted by Christians. On the other hand, Paul lamented Peter's betrayal of the truth of the gospel by yielding to the pressure of the Judaizers who insisted that Hellenists should follow the eating practices of Jews (Gal 2:13–16; see Acts 10:10–35). These laments disclose how Christians negotiated their own identity as aliens and sojourners amidst members

²⁹ See Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among the Jews and the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1976) 78–96.

of diverse cultures and religious traditions.³⁰ They also witness to the sinfulness of the church.³¹

Other scriptural testimonies suggest laments in the early church concerning who is to exercise authority and how it is to be exercised. One lament concerns privilege and jealousy among leaders in their desire for glory and power, as featured in the request of James and John to share in the heavenly glory of Christ and the reactions among the apostles (Mk 10:35–45). A second set of laments concerns the role of women in the community. The story of Martha grumbling to Jesus about Mary sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him (Lk 10:38–42) has frequently been interpreted as the complaint of the activist against the contemplative, but it likewise implicates complaints about the roles of women as disciples and apostles and not just as hospitable hosts. This latter interpretation coincides with the grumbling about women speaking in church (see 1 Cor 14:34), daring to teach and claim authority among men, rather than remaining silent (1 Tim 2:12–15), and about women uncovering their heads as if they were created in the image and glory of God and not in the image and glory of man, her head (1 Cor 11:17; see Eph 5:22–24).

The lessons learned from these biblical laments often concern the Jewish and Christian dynamics of repentance and renewal. *Why do people lament?* The causes of pain are manifold. Laments frequently are traced back to the vestiges of idolatry and disordered loves. Laments are also often caused by frustration at human limitations, grief at the loss of life, human flourishing, and loving relationships, anger caused by experiences of conflict, or anguish at seemingly insurmountable situations of injustice. The biblical genre of lament often addresses the underlying problems in terms of human limitations and sin. *How long will this season of lament continue?* One view is that it continues until the individual or the group accepts their limitations, as well as repents of sinfulness, and rededicates themselves to God's covenant.³² But laments are not only about personal conversion and

³⁰ See Benjamin H. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009).

³¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetic*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius 1982) 566, discusses how Paul weeps "over the deformations of the Church wrought by sinners" (Phil 2:21; 3:18), "the Gospel's wicked servants," while offering himself as a model of Christ. Peter on the other hand, "weeps for himself." Balthasar draws the conclusion, typologically rich, but logically strained, that "both weep over the same thing, namely, the failure of the institutional Church. They weep over the gap which yawns in the Church between person and office, whereas Christ wanted to impress upon the Church his own identity."

³² The logic of lament that leads to conversion and rededication, gratitude, and praise is expressed in the literary structure of individual psalms of lament and in

reform. Lamenters are also challenged to reexamine their most basic convictions about who God is and how God works in the world, and about the need to confront situations of crisis and conflict, frustration and failure. Can we be receptive to new ways of reforming the community of faith and envisioning a more just world? These biblical witnesses attest that lament provides a process of purification on the way to a deeper wisdom about God, self, community, and others.

Augustine of Hippo

Recent findings occasioned by the retrieval of Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* confirm my main contention that we need to heed and discern the laments of the church.³³ In his meditation on Psalm 34 (35) Augustine offers this comment: "What is mourning for? [One] longs for what [one] does not possess."

If you want to be close to God, be like him. If you do not want to be like him, you will withdraw into the distance. If you are like him, be glad of it; if you are unlike him, groan over it, so that your groaning may arouse your desire, and your desire move you to groan the more. Then you will begin to draw near to him by your groaning, even though you have been heading in the opposite direction.³⁴

For Augustine, the apostle Peter offers the most vivid illustration of lament and mirrors the experience of all Christians. In the words of Brian Brock, for Augustine, "lament is the expression of the pains of awaiting the eschaton."³⁵ Grief over the loss of earthly goods and the frustration of carnal desires must be weighed against the loss of heavenly goods. "Plenty

the dynamic of the entire psalter, characterized by Brueggemann in terms of psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation, and in the larger canonical polyphony where laments are embedded in redemptive and consoling narratives and prophecies, wisdom sayings or apocalyptic visions.

³³ See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vols. 38–40; *Expositions of the Psalms 1–32*, Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century III/15, intro. Michael Fiedrowicz, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2000). In his "General Introduction" to vol. 1 of Boulding's translation, III/15, 13–66, Fiedrowicz summarizes his landmark study, *Psalmus Vox Totius Christi: Studien zu Augustins "Enarrationes in Psalmos"* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997). Michael C. McCarthy explores the psalms of lament and ecclesiology in *The Revelatory Psalm: A Fundamental Theology of Augustine's "Enarrationes in Psalmos"* (Dissertation: University of Notre Dame, 2003) 243–39; see also Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).

³⁴ Augustine, "Exposition 2 of Psalm 34," *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/16, pp. 64–65.

³⁵ Brian Brock, "Augustine's Incitement to Lament, from the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," in *Evoking Lament* 182–203, at 186.

of people . . . do grieve” writes Augustine, “and I grieve too, but I lament because they lament for the wrong reasons. [For instance,] someone who has lost a coin laments, but he or she raises no lament over the loss of faith. I weigh the coin against the faith, and my grief is keener over a person who grieves for the wrong reasons or does not grieve at all.”³⁶

Most importantly for my inquiry, Augustine is not simply concerned about personal laments. As Michael McCarthy has demonstrated, psalms of lament—or, in a common translation, psalms of groaning—express for Augustine the voice of the church.³⁷ To quote Augustine, “if the psalm prays, you pray; if it groans, you groan. . . , for all [the psalms] written here are a mirror to us.”³⁸ Groaning, more than praising or rejoicing, is the most frequent mood revealed in the psalms, which Augustine identifies with the church in the present.³⁹ In Augustine’s time there were plenty of reasons to lament. The church’s challenges were emotionally charged and intellectually challenging. It was clear that the ecclesial body was not perfect, but a mixture of good and bad. As McCarthy explains, Augustine recognized that “to be a member of such a mixed body is to groan mightily at the obvious iniquities and imperfections that incorporation entails. To find oneself in such a body is to share in the laments so powerfully voiced by the Psalmist: “My heart bellows its groans. All my desire is before you, Lord, and my groaning is not hidden from you” (Ps 37:9–10).⁴⁰ Here Augustine confronts the mysterious and perplexing reality of the church, and by reflecting on the psalms of lament, he “actively appropriates for the church the groans which resound throughout the Psalter and indicates that, by lamenting with the Psalmist and reflecting deeply and continually on that affect, the church comes to learn what it is, comes to be what it is.”⁴¹

This argument about the ecclesiological significance and corporate labor of the church’s lamenting is rooted for Augustine in the belief that psalms are “the voice of the whole Christ, head and body, the one voice of the Incarnate Word speaking to, with, and within the Church.”⁴² In the words of McCarthy, “In order to understand the psalms, the hearer must already be situated in the ecclesial body. To see oneself in the psalm and be healed

³⁶ Augustine, “Exposition 1 of Psalm 101,” *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/19, p. 51.

³⁷ See McCarthy, *Revelatory Psalm 243–339*, esp. 284–301; and “An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, The Psalms, and the Making of the Church,” *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 23–48.

³⁸ See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 30 (2) s. 3.1, vol. 38, p. 213, trans. McCarthy in “An Ecclesiology of Groaning” 26; see also *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/15, p. 347.

³⁹ See McCarthy, “An Ecclesiology of Groaning” 45.

⁴⁰ See Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 37,” *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/16, pp. 156–157; and McCarthy, “An Ecclesiology of Groaning” 26.

⁴¹ McCarthy, “An Ecclesiology of Groaning” 27.

⁴² *Ibid.* 29; see also Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction” 50–57.

by it, one must see his/her own passion in the groans and lamentations voiced by the head on the cross."⁴³ Augustine's comments on the psalms of lament clearly have a christological focus, but he does not overlook the Spirit of God at work in this genre. In his commentary on Psalm 26 (27), Augustine affirms that these laments are ours, yet not ours, but the

voice of the Spirit of God, because we would not be speaking these words if he did not inspire us; but it is not his, because he is not wretched, nor is he toiling. Yet these are the groans of people who are wretched and toil. On the other hand, they are ours, because these words give expression to our misery; yet not ours, because our entitlement even to groan is the gift of God.⁴⁴

It is particularly noteworthy that Augustine's *Enarrationes in psalmos* span more than 30 years of his life (ca. 392–422), commencing shortly after he became a priest (in 391) and continuing well after he became a bishop (in 396). His concentration on the performance and practical efficacy of the preacher's homily and the bishop/theologian's spiritual exegesis is important, so much so that McCarthy suggests Augustine thought these performances "make" the church.⁴⁵ This is not just a rhetorical insight, although it is certainly that; but it also reflects Augustine's theology of revelation, priesthood, and episcopacy. The theologian's ecclesial task in biblical exegesis and preaching is here subsumed into the role of bishop. Priests and bishops join the great cloud of witnesses that includes apostles, martyrs, and ascetics, who testify to this revelatory psalm in their own suffering.⁴⁶ The voice of the whole body of Christ suffering, head and body, is heard in the psalms of lament and provides an interpretative framework for understanding the groaning of the church on its pilgrim journey. Augustine thus paves an important path for theological exegesis, priestly preaching, and episcopal teaching.

Here, however, I risk posing a question to the theology of Augustine. Does Augustine unwittingly fail to make room in his vision of the church for individuals and communities to express their own laments about everyday ecclesial and social life? Certainly for this great theological exegete, preacher, and bishop, heeding the laments of the ecclesial body *is* of utmost importance, as important as it is to explore present grief in relation to the dynamics of the Scriptures. Yet, does his theology create a public space for the people of God—not just the descendants of the apostles, martyrs, and

⁴³ McCarthy, "An Ecclesiology of Groaning" 34.

⁴⁴ Augustine, "Exposition 2 of Psalm 26," *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/15, 26, p. 274

⁴⁵ McCarthy (*Revelatory Psalm* 194–214, 252–300) elucidates how Augustine finds reading the psalms a therapy of the affections and catalyst for social dynamics, especially in performance.

⁴⁶ On the testimony of apostles, martyrs, and ascetics, see *ibid.* 301–35.

ascetics, but all the faithful—to speak up for themselves and voice their own laments? Are theologians, preachers, and bishops trained to attend in their pastoral practices to the living voice of the laments of the people of God? To put the matter in terms of Catholic Church practices, is there a pastoral communal process for personal and communal laments to be articulated and heard in synods, dioceses, and parishes? This suggestion is consistent, I would argue, with the deepest convictions reflected in Augustine’s ecclesiology of the groaning of the total Christ, but I wish to situate the role of the bishop or preacher or theologian within a wider ecclesial ambit in order to enable more effectively the performative, therapeutic, and pedagogical processes afforded by lamentations to take place.

Augustine’s chief contribution is unassailable: a hermeneutics of ecclesial laments must be pursued in the context of a hermeneutics of the Scriptures. Only in this way will we discern our way as church, creature of the Word, and as a living tradition of the pilgrim people, with the animating and transforming power of the Spirit, moving the church into the future. Augustine’s way of interpreting laments cannot be repudiated; the central role of the bishop remains. But just as one might ask if it is even possible to imagine the synodal order fulfilling its mission, in response to laments, unless it is accompanied and led by the episcopal order, can the episcopal order fully interpret laments or the Scriptures without the synodal order, where bishops, priests, religious, and lay people can voice their laments?

Constance Fitzgerald on John of the Cross

Constance Fitzgerald is widely recognized for her interpretation of the phenomenon of the dark night of the soul developed by John of the Cross in terms of the category of impasse.⁴⁷ In the process she explores ways to negotiate the destructive, purifying, and regenerating patterns involved in these struggles. What she articulates bears a striking resemblance to the dynamics we have discovered in the biblical testimonies of lamentations. Among her most important achievements, Fitzgerald has demonstrated how impasses are not restricted to the personal province of one’s individual spiritual life but extend and intersect with experiences of social impasse, such as situations of oppression, prejudice, and ecclesial struggles for reform: “many of our societal experiences open into profound impasse, for which we are not educated.”⁴⁸ In taking

⁴⁷ See Constance Fitzgerald, O.C.D., “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1986, 1996²) 287–311 (references will be to the 1st ed.); Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 64 (2009) 21–42.

⁴⁸ Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night” 287–88.

these steps, Fitzgerald's investigation of the field of impasse is coextensive with the field of ecclesial laments and thus directly relevant to ecclesiology.

Fitzgerald initiates her investigation by educing from the testimonies of individuals situated in diverse contexts a complex scene where individuals are forced to confront situations of impasse—personal, social, and ecclesial. In these circumstances one perceives that “there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation.”⁴⁹ Her exploration begins by attending to the affections when facing impasse: an individual feels alone, rejected, powerless, misunderstood, and trapped. One faces the prospect of psychological disintegration, breakdown, and self-deception. There is often a depleted sense of worth and a diminished ability to recognize one's own achievements and contributions. We can draw the implications for communities and collective awareness: facing situations of ecclesial impasse, communities can question their own identity, direction, effectiveness, and value.

Next, following the lead of John of the Cross, Fitzgerald explores how impasse is a crucible for desire, reason, memory, and imagination. Like Augustine's treatment of psalms of lament, John of the Cross's consideration of dark night begins and ends with desire. Fitzgerald discovers in John of the Cross an interpretive framework for understanding the phenomenon of impasse in terms of “what kind [of] affective education is carried on by the Holy Spirit over a lifetime.”⁵⁰ This pedagogy of the Spirit takes place for individuals and communities in circumstances where desire and the affections confront a dead end.

Situations of impasse force one to confront the limits of the powers of reason. Logic, analysis, and planning do not seem to help. The more one tries to find a rational escape, the more trapped one becomes. In this complex, one is pushed to the very limits of consciousness, where reason and desire are tested. Whether one holds firm to the results of reason with no clear breakthrough in sight or awaits something new and unexpected to take place, situations of impasse bring one to the threshold of consciousness, where one is left to search for a deeper order through the unconscious and the recesses of the affections.

During personal or communal periods of impasse, personal and institutional patterns predominate—Bernard Lonergan characterizes such periods as cycles of decline—and the memories that have long been the source of solace and orientation of self and community can betray and

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 288.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 291.

bedevil. Here John of the Cross teaches “the limiting and destructive power that memories [can] hold.”⁵¹ In Fitzgerald’s words:

What one remembers, how one remembers, how long one remembers is called into question. The past can seem a mockery or an illusion; the psychological and intellectual structures that have supported or held us together over a lifetime, “the beacons by which we have set our course,” the certainties on which we have built our lives are seriously undermined or taken away.⁵²

In the experience of dark night, now recognized as impasse, the sense of self and the perception of communal identity are called into question and can seem utterly annihilated. But this darkness and death can be the seedbed for hope. “For John of the Cross this experience signals that the memory is being deconstructed or dispossessed in a redemptive movement whereby the incredibly slow appropriation of theological hope gradually displaces all that impedes new vision, new possibility, the evolution of a transformed self that is freed from bondage to its confining or destructive past.”⁵³ As Fitzgerald stresses, “the selfhood that is lost will never be regained and therein lies its hope. In this purification, the annulling of the memories, we are being dispossessed of the autonomous self, our achieved selfhood put together over a lifetime.” Here she finds the basis of genuine theological hope for John of the Cross, as he writes: “Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for what is not possessed. It withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with [God].”⁵⁴ What Fitzgerald speaks of in terms of personal memory bears upon the role of collective memory in communal life. If memories can be a source of genuine hope in the midst of darkness, nostalgia can hinder communities and guardians of memory from pursuing the hard labor involved in the purification of memories.

Impasse is also a crucible for the imagination. The social imaginary provided by ecclesial memory can be insufficient to address impasse and the signs of the times. Fitzgerald develops a diagnosis of the failure of imagination and its revitalization in John of the Cross. So we read:

⁵¹ Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope” 22. Here Fitzgerald’s approach is informed by John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 3, chaps. 1–15; and *Dark Night of the Soul*, book 2; in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

⁵² Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope” 23; the internal quotation is from Hein Blommestijn, Jos Huls, and Kees Waaijman, *Footprints of Love: John of the Cross as a Guide in the Wilderness* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 74.

⁵³ Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope” 24.

⁵⁴ John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* 2.21.11 (*Collected Works* 448–49).

The negative situation constitutes a reverse pressure on imagination so that imagination is the only way to move more deeply into the experience. It is this “imaginative shock,” or striking awareness that our categories do not fit our experience, that throws the intuitive, unconscious self into gear in quest of what the possibilities really are.⁵⁵

When reason fails and imagination is in shock, God can work at the threshold of the unconscious

to reveal new possibilities, beyond immediate vision. . . . It implies that the unexpected, the alternative, the new vision, is not given on demand but is beyond conscious, rational control. It is the fruit of unconscious processes in which the situation of impasse itself becomes the focus of contemplative reflection. . . . Impasse can be the condition for creative growth and transformation *if* the experience of impasse is fully appropriated within one’s heart and flesh with consciousness and consent.⁵⁶

There are important personal and communal ramifications: facing situations of lamentation as experiences of impasse provide the fertile soil for the power of God to work in the imagination, if individuals or communities can let go of an imaginary they cannot sustain and can be receptive to new social imaginaries that can unleash fresh energies of life and action in apostolic mission.

In the dark night one confronts the breakdown and failure of reason, memory, and imagination. Building on important insights developed by Michael Buckley, Fitzgerald concludes that over time one comes to realize that the desires and loves that inform one’s cherished images and conceptions of God, and of how God operates with us, in the church, and in the world, are infected with strains of idolatry based on projections. These distortions can never satisfy, can never withstand the test of reality, and therefore need to be purified and freed through such experiences of negation.⁵⁷ In this way, through experiences of impasse, we can find passage through the intense furnace of laments that will destroy idols and distorted views of the self and community as it transforms our memories and imagination in the work of God.

DISCERNING LAMENTS IN ECCLESIOLOGY AND PASTORAL PRACTICE

As I indicated in my introduction, the customary way Catholic and other Christian theologians have reflected on the church’s nature and mission is

⁵⁵ Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night” 289.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 290, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Michael J. Buckley, S.J., “Atheism and Contemplation,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 680–99, at 696; see also Buckley’s treatment of ideology and purity of heart in *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate: Towards a Relational Understanding* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 22–31.

to consider certain motifs, whether biblical metaphors (body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit, people of God) or theological concepts (sacramental, communion, structured hierarchy, perfect society). Thus theologians delineate and illuminate the reality of the church as set forth in authoritative texts established by the intentions of ecclesial bodies.

In their quest for deeper understanding of the church's identity and mission, theologians have often turned to a phenomenological description of the church, broadly construed, guided by a hermeneutics of traditional texts and practices. In our own day in the Catholic tradition, these kinds of approaches have been reinforced, but also enriched and expanded by the contributions of 20th-century proponents of transcendental Thomism (e.g., Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Edward Schillebeeckx) and of *ressourcement* theology (e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar and more recently Jean-Luc Marion's philosophy), in combination with historical and textual methods learned from biblical scholars and historical theologians. One could easily identify analogous illustrations of such efforts among Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant theologians.

All this widely respected work has left its mark on the church's identity and practice. Christians have come to perceive in fresh ways the glory of God revealed in creation, in Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist, and in the church. This is what Balthasar speaks of in terms of being transfixed and transformed by the perception of God's glory made manifest by means of the eyes of faith, and what Marion would call instances of being bedazzled before a saturated phenomenon.

But for members of the church, being bedazzled does not simply entail being awestruck and entranced. They are just as often befuddled and bewildered. This means it is not enough for theologians and pastoral leaders to focus on a phenomenology and hermeneutics of the intentions of sacred texts and ecclesial authorities. It is not enough to ponder the rich recognition and reception of these texts by communities of faith. It is certainly not enough to assume that believers are to be transfixed by the idealized and harmonized forms culled from the Scriptures, liturgies, and conciliar texts, which are then concretized in regulations and practices. It is equally important and necessary to discover ways to learn from the frictions, frustrations, and failures present in the church, and how these have thwarted the intentions and aims of the church, or how these difficulties may reveal deeper aspirations and hopes behind, within, and in front of our sacred texts and traditions. To heed and to respond to laments is the common and indispensable inspiration of prophetic critique, doctrinal development, and ecclesial reform in the church.

It is also not enough for individuals and groups merely to grow in awareness of laments in the church. In fact, to simply heighten the community's

awareness of their laments can easily contribute to escalating frustration, anger, and cynicism. Unleashing laments could conceivably feed a mob mentality or breed venomous factions bent on destruction and denunciation with no clear vision of a future worth inhabiting. We only have to look to the contemporary political arena for evidence of this phenomenon. The last thing we need is to cultivate an ecclesial community of complainers who impugn the good will and character of others and foster hostility or pessimistic withdrawal. Instead, we need to develop a theology and hermeneutics of lamentation as an indispensable facet in ecclesiological method and in our pastoral practices by means of synodal processes of discernment. This means changing how we do ecclesiology and pastoral practice, but how?

What sense are we to make of our ecclesial laments? This challenge is reminiscent of Ignatius of Loyola's attention to experiences of desolation in the spiritual life and his efforts to advise strategic responses to them. Of first importance, he counseled people to develop the daily practice of heeding their consolations and desolations. The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises* provide an aid for growing in awareness and understanding of the various movements in the self in order to respond in a beneficial way. Ignatius identifies spiritual consolations as those times when our desires and passions are animated with and oriented by faith, hope, and love of God and everything in relation to God. He describes desolations in terms of "darkness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving one toward lack of confidence, without hope, without love; finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad, and feeling separated from our Creator"⁵⁸—characteristics similar to those of lamentations. When Ignatius ponders the possible reasons or motives for desolation, he identifies three: laxity in performing one's spiritual practices; a test of one's spiritual commitment; and an experience of one's poverty before God and one's radical dependency on God.⁵⁹

Most intriguing for my inquiry is that while Ignatius originally identifies consolation with the efficacy and guidance of God and the good spirit, he subsequently qualifies this in the second set of rules, stating that "both the good angel and the bad can console the soul, for contrary ends: the good angel for the profit of the soul, that it may grow and rise from good to

⁵⁸ *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganns (New York: Paulist, 1991) no. 317, p. 202; translations occasionally revised in light of Timothy M. Gallagher's translation and observations in his *Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 2005) 62–66. Belgian Jesuit Bert Daelemans, by private communication, offered helpful insight into Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*.

⁵⁹ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 322, p. 203.

better; and the bad angel for the contrary, and later on to draw it to his damnable intention and malice.”⁶⁰ Through his experiences at Manresa, Ignatius came to realize that one could have a deceptive sense of consolation, and this possibility led him to develop a second set of rules for “greater discernment.”⁶¹

Interestingly, however, Ignatius fails to make the logically offsetting observation and qualification pertaining to desolations. Could it be possible that desolations have at times their impetus and motivation in good and holy desires and affections? Might they sometimes have their ultimate source in the Spirit of God groaning in the self, in the community, and in the world, accessing deeper unfulfilled desires and fostering greater imagination and generosity in response? Could it be that occasionally, not always, a believer and, by extension, a community might be in desolation, consonant with what I have identified as lamentation, not only because of sin and temptation, nor solely because of one’s radical poverty and dependency, but because of God’s agency in advancing an unfinished work and new stage of development? If this is so, then one would need to follow through with a wider set of criteria for assessing desolations, for tracing them back to their sources and for following them to where they might lead as suggested in the second set of rules.⁶² As much as Ignatius’s astute treatment of desolations overlaps with the analysis of lamentations as I have explored them, my consideration of the labor of God’s Spirit in laments, the inverse inference not drawn by Ignatius, distinguishes the argument advanced here.

The most important repercussion of this insight into lamentations, following Ignatius’s approach to desolations, is that there is a need for discernment of spirits in everyday life and especially when considering one’s life choices. Ignatian discernment is not simply about personal asceticism, but has crucial ramifications for discerning the apostolic mission of the church both in ecclesiology and in pastoral practice. Peter Schineller has convincingly demonstrated that Ignatius, during the period of his life when he wrote the *Exercises*, was oriented by the image of soldier as illustrated by his meditation on the two standards where one must choose between following the standard of Jesus Christ or that of Lucifer. Subsequently, during the time when Ignatius formed a community and prepared the *Constitutions* with the help of his companions, the orienting metaphors in his writings shift to “pilgrim” and

⁶⁰ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 331, p. 206.

⁶¹ On the rules of discernment for the second week of the exercises, see Timothy M. Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide to the Greater Discernment of Spirits* (New York: Crossroad, 2007) 11–14, 59–60.

⁶² *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 333, p. 206.

then to “workers in the vineyard.”⁶³ This represents a transition from a resolutely ascetic spirituality to a broader apostolic spirituality, which requires in turn a more expanded criteriology for discernment.⁶⁴ In Schineller’s words:

In the process of discernment, when we are making choices regarding missions, there is an increased emphasis upon external factors, examination of the needs as uncovered in the historical situation. While prayerful listening to the interior movement of the Spirit (signs from heaven) remains constant, Ignatius puts more emphasis in the *Constitutions* on the circumstances, the objective conditions in the Lord’s vineyard (signs of the times) and has us make decisions in light of that input.⁶⁵

This larger framework is directly relevant to the discernment of desolations and lamentations, which can have everything to do with an apostolic, mission-oriented spirituality. And as Jesuits have realized with ever greater clarity since Vatican II, apostolic discernment must take place in common, in all kinds of communities, including with lay collaborators.⁶⁶

At one of his lowest points in Manresa, Ignatius’s desolation almost led him to take his own life. This is an important reminder that the dark undercurrents unleashed in laments, like those encountered in spiritual desolation, can be destructive for individuals, just as they can be for groups, if they are not expressed, addressed, and dealt with wisely. Just as spiritual desolation can unleash destructive dynamics in the self, where freedom is hindered and harm can be done, so too ecclesial lamentations can lead to the release of poison into the body politic, and vicious patterns of relationships can take hold.

As a result I am proposing that the search for relevant theological methods and spiritual and pastoral processes be complemented by a quest

⁶³ J. Peter Schineller, S.J., “The Pilgrim Journey of Ignatius: From Soldier to Laborer in the Lord’s Vineyard and Its Implications for Apostolic Lay Spirituality,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 31.4 (September 1999).

⁶⁴ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), Part VII, nos. 622–26, pp. 284–91.

⁶⁵ Schineller, “Pilgrim Journey of Ignatius” 23.

⁶⁶ Three superior generals have promoted practices of common apostolic discernment. Pedro Arrupe in his letter of December 25, 1971, *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, vol. 15 (Rome, 1972) 767–73; Peter Hans Kolvenbach, in his annual letter of 1986, *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, vol. 19 (Rome: Vatican 1987) 720–40; Adolfo Nicolás, “Common Apostolic Discernment,” *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* 40.122 (2009) 9–20. To what extent practices of communal discernment have been developed by Jesuit or Ignatian-based communities like Christian Life Communities merits further investigation. It is clear, however, that Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría was keenly aware of the work of communal discernment, as is evident in his emphasis on the “historicization” of the *Spiritual Exercises* (inspired by the philosophy of Xavier Zubiri), and on the collective use of the creative imagination in the discernment of a *proyecto social* (social project) in communities and universities dedicated to apostolic mission.

for criteria of discernment that will enable us to heed, differentiate, and learn from laments that arise in the church, thus determining their significance and drawing their energies positively into theology and into the pastoral life of the church. Communal laments, like personal desolation, can serve a diagnostic purpose in surfacing and analyzing potentially with great precision what problems need to be addressed, what desires and intentions need to be purified, and what new habits of mind and heart need to be learned.

To develop an ecclesiological method and pastoral process for discerning lamentations in the church would require determining the possible sources of these laments, the criteria for evaluating them, and delineating a range of responses to them. Here is not the place to pursue that agenda in any detail, but this much can be said. During this postconciliar period in the Catholic Church, there have been times when frustrations and failures have arisen from conciliar texts not being implemented or synodal processes being restricted and not fully employed. Lamentations might reveal a deep longing to receive dimensions of a council or a synod that have been thwarted or undermined by policies and practices, by disciplinary codes introduced and implemented, that may not reflect the deepest aspirations of the council. There may also be instances when testimonies of lament are disclosing new aspirations of the *sensus fidelium* of the church that build on what has previously been taught and practiced and bring into view a challenging new perception of the truth of the gospel. And of course, as the Scriptures, Augustine, John of the Cross, and Ignatius would all agree, laments can signal disorder and destructive dynamics at work in the church. Only by developing a heightened awareness of such lamentations and formulating rules for discernment can we hope to engage them authentically and wholesomely in the church.

Finally, one crucial conviction animates my proposal and offers a key to the orientation I am advocating. In advancing a contemporary theology of ecclesial lament, Augustine's christological concentration on the groaning of the body, head and members, must be augmented with a complementary recognition that in laments we might hear the voice of the Spirit of God. For Christians, the laments of the Christian community and the countless forms of lament in a suffering world must be understood not only in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ and the crucified peoples, but also in terms of the Spirit of God who searches the heart and "intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:22–23, 26). The groaning of laments can be an expression of the indwelling agency of the Spirit in a suffering church and world. People may not grasp the meaning of this groaning and may be clueless about how to offer a grace-filled response. But provided this groaning is not a "grieving of the Holy Spirit of God" that generates "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together

with all malice” (Eph 4:30–32), it can be the clarion call of God’s Spirit. Lamenting that is a work of the Spirit fosters compassion, whereby lamenters become “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph 4:32).

In the various schools of spiritual wisdom about the discernment of spirits, peace and joy and compassion are regarded as central signs of the Spirit’s work. But we need to be mindful that when cries are too deep for words, there the agitating agency of the Spirit can also be at work. The lodestars in the process of discernment may be peace, joy, and compassion, but the energy fields that give birth to new galaxies and supernovas, new constellations in the church and in the world are laments. Cultivating a receptivity and attunement to laments is a work of prophetic obedience to the voice of the Spirit in the church and the world. A church that is prophetic is one that has learned how to be obedient to the voice of the Spirit in laments. This spiritual wisdom stands at the heart, the sacred heart, of Jesus’ identity and mission.