

Ecclesial Impasse
What Can We Learn from Our Laments?
Oral Presentation
Bradford Hinze

The Receptive Ecumenism research program invites theologians, church leaders, and ever wider circles of the people of God to consider what gifts ecumenical partners receive from each other and what they can learn from each other. In this paper I wish to pursue this agenda by considering this question: what can we learn from situations of ecclesial lamentations and impasse?

Why has this become an issue for me? In researching the implementation of dialogical practices of discernment and decision making in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, especially in pastoral councils and synods, I became keenly interested in analyzing the frustrations and failures in these endeavors. This led me to ponder the role of lamentations in the church. My argument here today is that the church's identity and mission are recognized and realized through the communication of human aspirations and desires and the intentions of ecclesial collectivities by means of a range of communicative practices, notably conciliar and synodal practices. However, the desires and intentions associated with being church and acting as church, are frequently not met. I wish to use the biblical expression lamentations to designate ecclesial experiences of thwarted desires and intentions and particularly obstinate instances of lament I will identify as ecclesial impasse. These laments and impasses are a social reality, a social fact to use Emile Durkheim's term. They merit special attention and should neither be ignored as insignificant, belittled as irreverent, denied or repressed.

Addressing these requires not only heightened awareness, but eventually developing ways to interpret and discern lamentations both by means of an ecclesiological method and a

pastoral practices essential to the *ongoing formation* of the church's identity and mission.

Two Examples of Ecclesial Impasse

Let me call to mind two examples of ecclesial impasse that may help us imagine the issues invoked. One instance is found in the Roman Catholic Church and reflected in the debate that took place between Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper about the relationship of the universal church and the local church between 1999 and 2001. A second example can be detected in the Anglican Communion in the aftermath of the ordination of women in the 1970s and of gay men in committed relationships, and the blessings of same sex unions in 2003. The lamentations and impasses in these two churches concern the universal and the local character of the church but in an inverse mirror image: the Roman Catholic position reveals an emphasis on the universal church, whereas the Anglican impasse reveals a concern for the local church.

Grow in Awareness of Lamentations

The first step of my argument is to enlist a number of witnesses, biblical, theological, and spiritual in support of my plea for greater attentiveness to ecclesial lamentations.

We begin with a biblical argument. Lamentations provide the most prevalent biblical idiom refracted in numerous genres and reflective of various kinds of social conflicts and dynamics. The speech acts and genre of lamentations in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures offer rich resources for individuals and communities seeking to respond to situations of conflict, frustration, and failure in communal life.

At its most basic level, a lament offers testimony to personal and collective suffering in the form of complaint, grief, frustration, despair. At their core laments express the pain of

unfulfilled aspirations or intentions, which is manifest in the state that Walter Brueggemann has aptly described as disorientation.

The most important distinguishing depth structure of the lament is that 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. The lament provides the occasion to struggle with the *harsh reality of these relationships* and the *limited and distorted views* of the self, the community, God, and others revealed in these situations of suffering.

Through the *labor of lament* energy is released in the lamenter in ways that can go undetected 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 differential between the lamenter and God on the one hand, and between the lamenter and the others—often identified as enemies, false witnesses or accusers—on the other. Lamentations work to reconceive and redistribute power between the one who laments and God, and between the one who laments and the others. Ultimately, in all laments there is taking place, above or below the surface, a trial where one is called to accountability, and no one escapes scrutiny: God, self, or other.

The lament affords a literary space and time in contemplation, in cult, and in community to be receptive to God’s answers to the lamenters’ 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, God’s wrath and mercy *are raised*, and the deeper fears and projections about the perceived enemy *are allowed to surface*. But it is here that the mystery of God, the

hiddenness of God, and the eschatological character of the human person and the community are confronted. Laments are the furnace that can unleash base ingredients of pity and anger, retribution and remorse. However, they 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 God, self, others, and the community.

Do we find instances of ecclesial lamentations in the Christian scriptures, sewn into the narrative fabrics of the stories of Jesus, his disciples, and the nascent church? In my paper I reflect upon four laments among the disciples of Jesus: the controversy surround the request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee; Martha grumbling about Mary; Paul's outrage at Peter's inconsistency in dealing with the Gentiles; and the anxious warning about not extinguishing the Spirit in the community.

These laments are not only about personal conversion and 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 in the community of faith and in the world. Laments, then, provide a learning process and a process of purification on the way to a deeper wisdom about God, self, and others.

Augustine serves as my theological witness. He lends support to the first part of my argument in his exegesis of the Psalms. Psalms of lament or groaning express the voice of the church. He said, "if the psalm prays, you pray; if it groans, you groan. . . , for all [the psalms] written here are a mirror to us." In Augustine's time there were plenty of reasons to lament: the church's difficulties were emotionally charged and intellectually challenging; it was clear that the ecclesial body was not perfect, but a mixture of good and bad. As Michael McCarthy, who has written on these matters, argues, 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.”

Here Augustine confronts the ineffable quality of the reality of the church, and by reflecting on the psalm laments, 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” (27).

This theological argument about the significance of the church’s laments is the result of Augustine’s conviction 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” (29). This is the case whether it is the voice of Christ speaking Psalm 21, “my God, my God why have you abandoned me” or the voice that speaks to Paul, “Why are you persecuting me,” or in any of the laments.

Augustine’s attentiveness to the laments of the church in conjunction with his exegesis of the psalms supports my appeal to heed the laments of the church. It is noteworthy that his exegetical and homiletic reflections on the psalms (*Enarrationes in psalmos*) cover over thirty years of his life (circa 392-422), and commenced shortly after he became a priest (in 391) and shortly before he became a coadjutor bishop (in 396). His concentration on the performance and practical efficacy of the preacher’s homily and the theologian’s exegesis is important, so much so that McCarthy suggests Augustine appreciated that these performances “make” the church (25). This is probably not just a rhetorical insight, but also a reflection of Augustine’s theology of priesthood and episcopacy, and even of the role of the theologian in the work of biblical exegesis. However, I want to add a caveat: Augustine’s approach may unwittingly restrict and distract individuals and communities from expressing their own laments about the church. For the preacher or exegete to heed the laments of the ecclesial body *is* of utmost importance as it is to explore them in relation to the dynamics of the scriptures. But it is just as important to let the

people of God speak up for themselves and to voice their own lament by offering them an opportunity in councils and synods and forums. This claim is consistent, I would argue, with the deepest convictions reflected in Augustine's ecclesiology of groaning of the total Christ, but it situates the role of the bishop or preacher or theologian within a wider ecclesial ambit for the therapeutic and pedagogical process afforded by lamentations to take place.

The final author I wish to invoke to support my argument is Constance Fitzgerald, a member of a Carmelite monastic congregation in the United States, who has written a seminal essay entitled "Impasse and Dark Night." Her descriptions of experiences of impasse in one's personal life and communal life correspond, I would suggest, with experiences of ecclesial lamentations. She describes impasse as an experience where one perceives that "there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation." Impasse is experienced as "not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted." It is an experience of depletion and limitations. Fitzgerald analyzes the phenomenon of impasse in terms of the interpretive framework provided by John of the Cross' analysis of dark night, who is "intent on showing what kind [of] affective education is carried on by the Holy Spirit over a lifetime." Our desires and loves, our conceptions and images of who God is and how God works can be infected with strains of idolatry based on projections. These can be purified and freed through this experience of negation.

What Place do Lamentations have in Ecclesiology and in Pastoral Practice?

It is not enough to grow in awareness of laments in the church. We need to find ways in to engage them and learn to differentiate them in our ecclesiological methods and in our pastoral practices of councils and synods. I want to offer what I think are some of the most compelling

reasons why.

At the theoretical level in matters of theology and pastoral practice we need to augment an ostensibly phenomenological analysis and hermeneutics of intentionality with a theology and hermeneutics of lamentations in the church. Let me explain. Bishops, church leaders, and theologians and even canon lawyers are trained to determine and adequately interpret biblical, liturgical, conciliar, legal texts in relation to the intentions of the authors and ecclesial bodies that have generated these documents as ingredients of a living tradition of faith. It is by attending to personal and collective intentionality that we have come to recognize the human longing for the true, the good, and the beautiful in our quests for knowledge, freedom, and love, and in theology and in ecclesiology this is how we have come to perceive the glory of God revealed in creation, in Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist, and in the Church. This is what Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of in terms of being transfixed and transformed by the vision of God's glory made manifest by the eyes of faith and what Jean-Luc Marion describes as being bedazzled before a saturated phenomenon.

But we are not just bedazzled by what takes place in the church, we are befuddled and bewildered. As a result it is not enough for theologians and pastoral leaders to focus on a phenomenology and hermeneutics of the aims and intentions of sacred texts, traditions, and church authorities. It is not enough to hold out the belief that we can become transfixed by the idealized and harmonized forms culled from the scriptures, liturgies, conciliar texts that are concretized in regulations and practices. Rather we must discover a way to examine and learn from the frictions, frustrations, and failures present in the church that have thwarted the intentions and aims of the church, or that reveal deeper aspirations and hopes beyond sacred texts and traditions of beliefs and practices. Think about it: laments have always elicited such

responses from saintly women and men, some have become reformers, others founders of religious orders or new ecclesial movements, and others effective pastoral leaders. The problem is that paying attention to the laments that arise from these struggles has not been consciously included in our ecclesiology in terms of method or substance.

A hermeneutics of conscious intentionality is insufficient in theology because there is so much more at work in personal life and collective life. We have come to recognize the role of the unconscious that manifests itself in affectivity, moods, complexes, and prejudices in the psyches of individuals and groups. Lamentations provide ample evidence that conscious intentional subjects are not simply rational and free, but are influenced by deeper desires of which they are not always fully conscious. Laments can express more about oneself than is consciously known. But we need to know how to interpret them and how to respond to them.

This challenge—what are we to do with our laments—is reminiscent of Ignatius of Loyola’s struggle with the spiral of desolation he experienced while at Manresa. His 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 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 relationship can be established. Now I am not suggesting that Ignatius’s sense of spiritual desolation is the same as ecclesial lamentation, but I do believe that they share certain characteristic traits. As a result I am proposing that we need to discover a theological method and pastoral process with so-called “rules of discernment” that will enable us to heed,

differentiate, and learn from these laments that arise in the church, to determine their significance as an impetus in theology and in the pastoral life of the church.

Ecclesial laments, like desolation, can serve a diagnostic purpose in analyzing 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. Ecclesial laments, like spiritual desolation, can also serve as a caldron, a red-hot energy field that can contribute to the transformation of the self and community, a catalyst for something better and more.

In order to develop an ecclesiological method and pastoral process for discerning lamentations in the church, we would need to determine the possible sources of these laments, the criteria for evaluating them, and delineate a range of responses to them. This is not the place to pursue that agenda in any detail, but this much I can say. There are times when laments can signal destructive dynamics at work in the church. There are also times when such frustrations and failures arise from authoritative texts not being received or implemented or synodal processes not being fully employed. Lamentations might also reveal a deep longing to receive dimensions of a council or a synod that have been thwarted or undermined by policies and practices. However, there may also be instances when testimonies of lament are disclosing new insights and aspirations from the *sensus fidelium* of the church that builds on what has previously been taught and practiced, but also enables the church to learn new things. Only by developing a heightened awareness of such lamentations and formulate rules for discernment can we hope to wisely engage them in the church.

There is one further theological point that I believe is important. Augustine's christological argument about the groaning of the body, head and members, should be augmented with a complementary pneumatological claim. For Christians, the laments of the

Christian community and the countless forms of laments in a suffering world must ultimately be understood in terms of the Spirit of God who searches the heart and “intercedes with sighs too deep for words” as St. Paul tells us (Romans 8:22-23, 26). The groaning of lamentations is an expression of the indwelling and the agency of the Spirit. In the various schools of spiritual wisdom about the discernment of spirits, the importance of peace and joy and compassion are central signs of the work of the Spirit. These insights are also based on Pauline insights. But we need to be mindful that when there are cries, sometimes too deep for words, there the agitating agency of the Spirit is at work too. The lodestars in the process of discernment may be peace and joy and compassion, but the energy fields of new galaxies and supernovas in the church and in the world are laments. Cultivating a receptivity and attunement to laments is a sign of prophetic obedience to the voice of the Spirit in the church and the world. Stated differently, 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 of Jesus’ identity and ministry.

Receptive Ecumenism

The third and final step of my argument is to ponder what all of this might mean for receptive ecumenism. What do we learn from our laments and impasses? I believe we need to learn from each other how we make space and time for ecclesial laments in our churches and learn how to wisely discern and respond to these laments. This is not simply a task for bishops, [or their rough equivalent in other traditions], or theologians, but also for the lay faithful. We need to cultivate synodal practices where these three groups can learn how to discern our laments together.

What do we learn from the Roman Catholics? As I indicated at the beginning of my

paper, after Vatican II synodal and conciliar structures were canonically established where free and open discussion was allowed to take place and initially encouraged. The voices of the lamenting church in conciliar and synodal settings were decreasingly welcomed and nurtured, and more often squelched and discredited. And yet there are those who continue to call for a fuller reception of Vatican II by continuing to speak out their laments at synods, pastoral councils, and in episcopal conferences. In particular I want to mention a small group of Catholics, a group that has grown from 72 to 240 participants, many of them women religious who have held elected leadership roles in their communities or have been active in various kinds of service work and justice advocacy in institutions and programs. They have been involved in a project entitled “Engaging Impasse: Circles of Compassion and Dialogue.” Their task in this group project was not to solve the problems of impasse, but to “engage and embrace” them through dialogue and contemplation. Through their efforts they came to recognize that “*frustrated desire and intentionality are at the heart of impasse.*” They pondered how they themselves contributed to these situations of impasse, but also how renewed dedication can emerge even in the midst of struggle and conflict, and that new horizons, new constellations, can materialize unexpectedly.

What can we learn from the Anglicans? I wish I had more time to discuss the attention given to engaging laments and conflict in the recent statement of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, *The Kuala Lumpur Report, Communion, Conflict and Hope*, and the pastoral process called the Indaba method of discussion on matters of importance employed during the Lambeth Conference this last summer. But I want to close by mentioning that the organizers of the Lambeth Conference and the bishops that participated in it had a clear recognition that ultimately the hermeneutics of lamentations must be pursued in the context of a

hermeneutics of the scriptures. This brings us back to Augustine. Ultimately, we must learn to explore and shed light on the relationship of a hermeneutics of the scriptures and a hermeneutics of laments. Only in this way will we find 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. Augustine's way of interpreting laments cannot be repudiated, the central role of the bishop [or analogous forms of leadership] remains. But the episcopal order cannot fully interpret laments or the scriptures without the synodal order (that makes room for theologians and the lay faithful to fully participate); and the synodal order cannot fulfill its mission unless it is with the episcopal order. Only in this way will the church move beyond the impasse of the universal and the local church. Without learning from our laments, there is no hope for the ongoing vitality of the church's identity and mission. I think here there are mutual gifts to be exchanged.