

Life after Brokenness: A Liturgical Portrait of Suffering and Hope

Armand Léon van Ommen

Introduction

Suffering and evil inevitably evoke questions about religion.¹ One way of responding has been to struggle with the problem of theodicy: How can people believe in an all-powerful and all-loving God in the face of suffering? Another answer that the Christian tradition has given is that suffering is somehow redemptive or at some otherwise fundamental level good. This article contributes to the discussion by taking the perspective of liturgy, as the focal point of the worshiping community.² To put the question sharply: How does worship on (typically) Sunday morning make sense of yesterday's tsunami, earthquake, terrorist attack, sickness, death, or other suffering, personal or communal? In the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic and, at the time of writing, the strict lockdown in many countries, how does liturgy address the loss and grief resulting from the pandemic? To focus the discussion and thus be able to go into analytical depth, I will present an analysis of one particular liturgy, in this case the *Scottish Liturgy 1982* of the Scottish Episcopal Church.³ As the article will show, the liturgical analysis of suffering helps to reframe the question of suffering and human flourishing.⁴

Many parts of the *Scottish Liturgy 1982* (hereafter: *SL*) derive from the long-standing Western liturgical tradition, and so we find ourselves with a liturgy that has been celebrated for many centuries in a more or less similar form. The *SL* is a clearly delineated liturgy, celebrated usually in most Scottish Episcopal Churches on Sundays, and most of the liturgy is scripted. Therefore it lends itself more easily to analysis than liturgies of churches whose order varies more from Sunday to Sunday. Also, it is a service of Word and Sacrament, so it includes the Eucharist, which liturgically is at the heart of worship of the Christian community. However, this exercise can be applied to other liturgies as well. Most liturgies follow a similar order, which makes the analysis that follows applicable to other liturgies, at least to some extent.⁵

¹ I am most grateful to Nicholas Taylor and Philip Ziegler for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 2.

³ The Scottish Episcopal Church, *Scottish Liturgy 1982* (Edinburgh: General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, 1982). <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/who-we-are/publications/liturgies/scottish-liturgy-1982-alternative-eucharistic-prayers/>.

⁴ In this article I will necessarily limit the analysis to the text and rubrics of the *Scottish Liturgy 1982*. A fuller analysis should include observation of the liturgical 'performance,' as recent liturgical scholarship has rightly pointed out (see for example Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, and Cas Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies. Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors*, Liturgia Condenda 28 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014)). Elsewhere I have presented such a fuller analysis of worship, see A.L. van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship: Anglican Liturgy in Relation to Stories of Suffering People* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson assert that "if one knows the current Anglican and Lutheran eucharistic liturgies, one has at hand an appropriate model for studying several other Protestant rites as well (e.g., Methodist and Presbyterian)." Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 245, 249, 250.

The outline of the article is as follows. First I will briefly explain my use of the word “suffering” in this paper. Second, I will present a detailed analysis of suffering in *SL*. After that I will interpret these findings, in dialogue with literature on suffering and liturgy.

Suffering

Suffering is all around us and presents itself in many forms. Therefore, it is liable to study from a multitude of perspectives, including theological ones.⁶ A key aspect of suffering, as defined by various authors, is the search for—or interruption or even loss of—meaning in the situation that causes suffering. After having explained the fundamental need of both individuals and communities for a sense of safety and selfhood, Robert Schreiter writes:

Suffering is the human struggle with and against pain. It is the experience of the breakdown of our systems of meaning and our stories about ourselves, and the struggle to restore those senses of safety and selfhood ... It is essentially an erosion of meaning. It is an interruption and destruction of those fundamental senses of safety and selfhood without which we cannot survive as individuals and as societies.⁷

Suffering, according to Schreiter, is a loss of meaning. It leads characteristically to isolation, with the ultimate consequence that life itself is in danger.⁸

Suffering thus defined is what John Swinton calls evil. In his view, however, not all suffering is evil. For Swinton, suffering is evil when it prevents a person from experiencing God’s goodness, from finding hope and meaning.⁹ As such, Swinton relates suffering closely to erosion of the capacity of a person to relate positively to God: suffering occurs when this capacity is taken away from a person. In this view, suffering becomes something which interjects itself between a person and God. That might be defined as sin, as many have done in the classical definition, but sin is not necessarily the root of suffering.¹⁰

In defining suffering, the above authors agree that suffering is tied to the capacity to make meaning out of the situation of suffering. They also agree on one more issue: suffering demands a practical response. Two examples suffice to make the point. Swinton writes, “To be able to face such experiences [of hopelessness] and retain a sense of meaning, hope, and the possibility of God’s providential presence is to engage in a powerful mode of resistance to evil.”¹¹ On a similar note Schreiter continues his reflections on suffering as a loss of meaning by saying that there is nothing noble or redemptive about

⁶ See for example the collection of essays in Luiz Carlos Susin et al., eds., “Suffering and God,” *Concilium*, no. 3 (2016); and the overview of various perspectives in Kristine M. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Awe(e)Ful Rowing Toward God* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

⁷ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Cambridge, Mass: Orbis Books, 1992), 33.

⁸ See also Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering*, 24.

⁹ John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 58.

¹⁰ David Tracy claims that theologians have seen a necessary connection between original sin and evil for too long. As one of his “five central realities” about suffering he urges: “[I]t is time for Christian theologians to rethink original sin ... [I]t is wrong to state or even imply (as original sin seems to do) that all suffering is somehow caused by human evil.” David Tracy, “On Suffering: The Event of Many Forms,” *Concilium*, no. 3 (2016): 25. Moreover, it should be noted that even when sin is the cause of suffering, the person who suffers is not necessarily the one who sinned (e.g. victims of crime).

¹¹ Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 58.

suffering. “Suffering only becomes redemptive or ennobling when we struggle against these corroding powers and rebuild our selves in spite of the pain we are experiencing.”¹² In different terms that have similar implications in practice, Schreiter and Swinton agree that this rebuilding is most likely to happen, in Schreiter’s words, “when we are able to link our narrative to other, larger narratives.”¹³ Swinton would agree, and say that this larger narrative is the Christian narrative.¹⁴

Liturgy maps well onto these views of suffering, meaning and the connection with a larger narrative. Even if Schreiter applies the word “safety” to a different context than the liturgy, sufferers have identified the structure and familiarity of liturgy as providing safety.¹⁵ Certainly the liturgy addresses the question of selfhood or identity. The many words, gestures and symbols in the liturgy provide an antidote to a key feature of suffering—namely, the lack of or search for meaning. Indeed, the liturgy unfolds the larger narrative of God, to which people can link their own personal narratives. The analysis and interpretation that follow will show how the liturgy names suffering and how the above views on suffering might find a response in the liturgy.

Suffering in Liturgy – An Analysis

Does the liturgy explicitly address suffering at certain moments? Table 1 indicates which liturgical elements of *SL* address suffering.

SL 1982	Suffering of people	Suffering of God
GATHERING (PREPARATION)		
(Entrance)		.
Welcome	(x)	(x)
(Hymn)	(x)	(x)
Collect for Purity		
summary of the Law		
confession and absolution	(X? fear, evil, but emphasis on sin)	X (“who died for us”)
Kyrie	X?	
Gloria	X?	X (Lamb of God)
Collect		
THE LITURGY OF THE WORD		
OT reading	(x)	(x)
Epistle reading	(x)	(x)
(gradual hymn)	(x)	(x)
Gospel reading	(x)	(x)
(Acclamation)		
Sermon	(x)	(x)
Nicene Creed		X
Intercessions	X	
Peace		

¹² Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 33–34.

¹³ Schreiter, 34.

¹⁴ Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 53.

¹⁵ van Ommen, *Suffering in Worship*, 59–60.

THE LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENT		
Offering	X? (offering denotes sacrifice)	
Eucharistic Prayer	X? (offering ourselves with Christ; baptised)	X
Breaking of the Bread		X
Lord's Prayer	X?	
Communion		X
Agnus Dei		X
THANKSGIVING AND SENDING OUT		
Sentence		
Post-Communion prayer		X
Hymn	(X)	(x)
Blessing		
Dismissal		

Table 1 Suffering of People and God in SEC 1982. (x = firm, (x) = possibly, x? = implied, depends on interpretation)

An analysis of the liturgical text reveals several points.¹⁶ First, when it comes to human suffering, in the sense of a major negative life event, only in the intercessions will suffering *certainly* be addressed. Second, other places where this *possibly* happens are words of welcome, hymns, readings and sermon. Remarkably, only the rubrics point to all these instances; the order of service in the liturgical book does not script the content of these moments.¹⁷ These moments in the liturgy depend on how the liturgical minister(s) use them. In other words, if a minister wants to address specific events explicitly in the liturgy, it is likely to happen at moments like these. Hence, these are potentially moments of great liturgical and pastoral creativity for which liturgical minister(s) must shoulder an important responsibility. Third, the liturgy contains a number of points, such as “Lord, have mercy,” where the language used relates to the semantic field of suffering, although in this liturgy the Kyrie Eleison occurs in the context of asking forgiveness for sin.¹⁸ Other examples are the language of offering and sacrifice, and the petition “deliver us from evil” in the Lord’s Prayer. In such instances the reality of suffering may be *implied*. Here we should also mention that the confession of sin is directed toward God and “to our fellow members in the Body of Christ,” possibly implying that our sins may also affect these “fellow members.” A final observation, one that does not appear in the table above, is of yet another layer of language relevant to our discussion. This is the language of “new birth,” “children of your [= God’s] redeeming purpose,” “bringing to wholeness all that is made,” “set your people free.” This language does not explicitly name suffering, but it does assume a reality that is to be redeemed and made whole, including a people who need to be set free from brokenness, captivity, or the burden of suffering.

The table shows a contrast between the instances where the texts address human suffering and where they address God’s suffering in Christ. First, the liturgy addresses Christ’s suffering explicitly throughout, most clearly in reference to his sacrificial death. The particular instances are:

¹⁶ *SL* has five Eucharistic Prayers. Here Prayer I is analysed.

¹⁷ Liturgical books may provide samples of some of these instances elsewhere; *SL* provides three ‘forms of intercession’ in an appendix.

¹⁸ See for a critical discussion of the place of the Kyrie John Baldovin, ‘Kyrie Eleison and the Entrance Rite of the Roman Eucharist’, *Worship* 60, no. 4 (1986): 334–47.

- the rite of confession;
- the Gloria;
- the Nicene Creed;
- the Eucharistic Prayer including the post-communion prayer.

Apart from that, God's suffering may be referred to in:

- the words of welcome;
- hymns;
- readings and the sermon.

The suffering of people is more often implicit. In the column "suffering of people" I have marked several elements with a question mark. These points in the liturgy might imply the suffering of people, depending on the interpretation of the text. The column "suffering of God" lacks such question marks. Sometimes the suffering of human beings might be implied, but when it comes to God's suffering, the liturgy is always explicit. Or so it seems. Worthwhile as this observation may be, the analysis does not take into account the world of biblical stories and theology that lurks throughout between the lines.¹⁹ For example, the explicit instances of the God's suffering all relate to the sacrificial life and death of Christ. However, some scholars have also made a compelling case for God's suffering which may be present in the liturgy in other ways, more implicitly.²⁰ For example, the confession of sins implies God's suffering because of the people's waywardness. Therefore, as with human suffering, God's suffering is implied through intertextual references.

Let us now turn to a closer analysis of the instances where Christ's suffering is mentioned.

- Confession and absolution
 - o "...deliver us from the power of evil, for the sake of *your Son who died for us* . . .
- Gloria
 - o "*Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us*"
- Nicene Creed
 - o "For us and for our salvation *he came down* from heaven . . . *became incarnate . . . and was made man. For our sake he was crucified* under Pontius Pilate; *he suffered death and was buried*"
- Eucharistic Prayer
 - o (The gift of your Son *born in human flesh*)
 - o "Obedient to your will *he died upon the Cross* . . . he broke the bonds of evil and set your people free to be his Body in the world"
 - o "On the night when *he was given up to death* . . . he loved them to the end."
 - o "This is *my Body: it is broken* for you . . . This is *my Blood* of the new covenant; it is poured out for you, and for all, that sins may be forgiven."

¹⁹ On intertextuality in the liturgy, see Juliette J. Day, *Reading the Liturgy: An Exploration of Texts in Christian Worship* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²⁰ For example, the Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim distinguishes between God's suffering *because, with, and for* his people. John Swinton speaks about God's suffering love—love is always vulnerable. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 66.

- “We recall his *blessed passion and death*, his glorious resurrection and ascension; and we look for the coming of his Kingdom. Made one with him, we *offer* you these gifts and with them ourselves, a single, holy, living *sacrifice*.”
- Breaking of The Bread
 - “*The living bread is broken* for the life of the world. Lord, unite us in this sign.”
- Communion
 - “The Body of Christ given for you.”
 - “The Blood of Christ shed for you.”
- Agnus Dei
 - “*Lamb of God*, you take away the sins of the world” (3x)
- Post-Communion Prayer (one of three options)
 - “we have broken the bread which is Christ’s body, we have tasted *the wine of his new life*. We thank you for *these gifts* by which we are made one in him and drawn into that new creation . . . through *him who died for us* and rose again.”

This catalogue shows that the liturgical text associates Christ’s suffering with human sinfulness and is intended to issue in forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, in virtually all instances where Christ’s suffering is mentioned, his glory and the purpose of his suffering, which is to enable worship and new life, are present as well. Consequently, the liturgy does not necessarily focus on Christ’s death, but rather portrays it as an episode in a larger story. Christ’s suffering and death are the low point before the glorious climax of the story, where worship, glory, and new life are the terms that define it. The next section further interprets these observations.

In sum, from this analysis of the liturgical text, we can make the following observations. The text hardly addresses human suffering explicitly. In contrast, the text refers at several points to God’s suffering in Christ. Below their surface, however, words like “freedom” and “new birth” imply human suffering or at least a diminished state of being as a negative correlate. The liturgy’s mention of Christ’s suffering might point to God’s suffering in a broader sense. It is noteworthy that Christ’s suffering is related to human sinfulness, which in turn is an expression of the diminished state of human being. Sin and diminishment are portrayed in terms of the relationship between people and God.

Interpretation of Suffering in Liturgy

How can we interpret the observations so far? How do they answer the question of how liturgy makes sense (meaning) of the suffering that is all around us? First, we will discuss the suffering of God in Christ. This is a logical starting point, because the analysis showed that Christ’s suffering was clearly present in the liturgy. As we will see, Christ’s suffering sets the framework for interpreting the liturgy’s take on human suffering, which we will discuss next.

The Suffering of Christ

There can be no doubt that Christ’s suffering is bound up with the forgiveness of sins. This is clear from both the structure and the content of the liturgy. God’s suffering in Christ is first mentioned in the confession, which takes place right after the opening words of the liturgy. The structure of the liturgy makes clear that sin is the problem standing in the way of the intended relationship between God and

people.²¹ While the burden of guilt lies with human beings, it took God’s only Son to overcome the breach in the relationship. Thus the liturgy describes a God who suffers *because of* the sins of his people, but also who suffers *for* his people to heal the broken relationship.²² The content of the liturgy also connects sin and the suffering of Christ. The petition for forgiveness includes the death of Christ as the ground for forgiveness: “Forgive us our sins, and deliver us from the power of evil, for the sake of your Son who died for us . . .” Again in the Gloria: “Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world.” The title “Lamb of God” refers to the sacrifice that is Jesus. The Eucharistic Prayer describes the blood of Christ as being poured out “that sins may be forgiven.” Three times the Agnus Dei repeats that line we quoted from the Gloria. All of this demonstrates that Christ’s suffering is connected with human sinfulness.

In relation to Christ’s suffering, the liturgy also uses language that does not necessarily refer to human sinfulness but that might have to do with human suffering (and perhaps of all of creation). The confession asks for both forgiveness for sin and deliverance from evil. The absolution speaks forgiveness, but also words of healing, strengthening and new life. The Nicene Creed uses the broader term “for us and for our salvation” (it does mention forgiveness of sins near the end, but without directly relating it to Christ’s suffering). The Eucharistic Prayer says Christ “broke the bonds of evil.” Again the Lord’s Prayer includes the petition “deliver us from evil,” although here Christ’s suffering is not mentioned explicitly. When the bread and wine are distributed, sin is not mentioned but the Body and Blood are simply “given for you” and “shed for you.” Thus Christ’s suffering is for deliverance from evil, for healing, strengthening and new life—and for salvation. The active sinfulness of humankind is a major element in the liturgical theology of Christ’s suffering, but this suffering has a wider scope, including evil that is not necessarily related to active human sinfulness.²³

Every time Christ’s suffering is mentioned in the liturgy, the purpose or outcome is mentioned as well, as the following list demonstrates. That purpose provides the meaning-making framework—that central concept in suffering—within which we can interpret Christ’s suffering and ours, as we will see shortly.

- The “purpose” of the *petition for forgiveness* and the subsequent *absolution* is that God can “forgive us and free us from our sins, heal and strengthen us by the Holy Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord.”
- The confession is introduced by the *Collect for Purity*, in which God is asked to “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts . . . that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name.”
- The *Collect* gives an additional “purpose” to the confessional rite, i.e. the worship of God.
- The *Gloria* states that the “Lamb of God . . . take[s] away the sin of the world,” but also petitions to “have mercy on us” and to “receive our prayer.”
- The *Nicene Creed* does not make explicit the purpose of Christ’s suffering other than to say it was “for us and for our salvation” and again “for our sake.” The creed ends with worship and the eschatological hope of the “resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

²¹ Even if one emphasizes the fact that the confession of sin is set in the context of God’s love, the suggestion of the liturgy remains that sins need to be confessed before moving on. Note that *SL* has the option of placing the confession and absolution at the end of the Gathering, after the intercessions and before the peace, in which case the peace moves to straight after the welcome.

²² Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, chaps 7, 9.

²³ Cf. n.10.

- The *Eucharistic Prayer* notes that Christ “made his home among us that we might for ever dwell in you.” Furthermore, the Father “call[s] us to new birth in a creation restored by love.” The people are designated as “children of your redeeming purpose,” and as such they burst out in praise with the Sanctus and Benedictus, joining “angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven.” Christ brings “to wholeness all that is made.” By his death “he broke the bonds of evil and set your people free to be his Body in the world.” The epiclesis includes the petition that “we may be kindled with the fire of your love and renewed for the service of your Kingdom.” The prayer continues: “Help us, who are baptised into the fellowship of Christ’s Body to live and work to your praise and glory; may we grow together in unity and love until at last, in your new creation, we enter into our heritage in the company of the Virgin Mary, the apostles and prophets, and of all our brothers and sisters living and departed.” At the breaking of the bread the priest and congregation declare and pray that “The living bread is broken for the life of the world. Lord, unite us in this sign.”
- One of the *post-communion prayers* makes clear that by “these gifts [of bread and wine] we are made one in him and drawn into that new creation which is your will for all mankind.” An alternative post-communion prayer praises the Father for bringing us home through his Son. The Son “gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.” It continues to pray: “May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.” It further asks for freedom, so that “the whole earth live and praise your name.”

The purpose of Christ’s suffering, as this long list makes clear, is the reconciliation between God and people in order for the people to worship God, and to be set free to live a new life. This new life is sometimes pictured in eschatological terms, but more often in terms of serving the kingdom of God as Christ’s Body on earth here and now. In other words, the liturgy draws participants into a movement away from all that stands in the way of living life to the full, i.e. from evil and sin, and toward reconciliation with God (through the rite of confession and absolution, and enacted in the eucharistic rite), which results in the risen life with Christ, and which has a missional outlook.

Human suffering

What about *human* suffering? We observed that human suffering can be addressed in the liturgy but only in the intercessions is this necessarily the case. Other moments may refer to suffering, such as the petition in the confession and the Lord’s Prayer to “deliver us from evil.” So we seem to learn little about human suffering through a liturgical analysis other than that it has its proper place in prayer before God. However, valid as this conclusion may seem, there is more to say. That Christ’s suffering figures prominently in the liturgy should make us think twice about the nature of suffering. Moreover, at two points in the liturgy—in the Creed and in the Eucharistic Prayer—the suffering of Christ through death is preceded by the notion of incarnation: Christ becoming human. Because of the incarnation we should not distinguish too sharply between human suffering and Christ’s suffering, since Christ suffered in his humanness. Through the incarnation God identifies with human suffering.²⁴ Indeed, in the gospels we find Jesus weeping in grief for his friend Lazarus, for the city he loves, and because of the fear he felt in Gethsemane. Pope Francis could say with confidence in his sermon on the Fifth Sunday of Lent at the

²⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), 66–67.

Casa Santa Marta that Jesus was weeping with all those affected by COVID-19, and called believers to follow Christ in weeping for the world.²⁵ Furthermore, some forms of human suffering, especially martyrdom, are Christ-like.²⁶ Christ's suffering, therefore, provides the interpretative and meaning-making framework for human suffering. At the same time, however, exactly because of the incarnation we should distinguish between Christ's suffering and human suffering. Christ suffered in his humanness, but at the same time kept his divine nature. While Christ's suffering functions as an interpretive framework for human suffering, Christ's suffering includes a uniqueness, a "once-for-allness," that make his suffering different. Christ's suffering is central to the Gospel and the liturgy in ways that human suffering is not. The incarnation should make us careful to not only not identify Christ's suffering entirely with human suffering but also to not disconnect the two. Either extreme should be avoided.

It is predominantly against the backdrop of human sin (and evil more generally) that the liturgy displays Christ's suffering. If the purpose of Christ's suffering is liberation, healing, and new life, then the liturgy says something about the human condition. The liturgy states, even if quite implicitly and more as an assumption than a proposition, that the human condition is diminished, less than human beings were created to be, a diminishment from which they should be liberated and healed. Thus the liturgy puts forward a new theological interpretation of suffering. While not denying forms of human suffering as major negative life events or meaninglessness, it emphasizes suffering as alienation from the image of God in which humankind was created, and alienation from the purpose to worship and glorify God, and to live anew in service of the kingdom of God.²⁷ One could say that this alienation is the liturgical interpretation of sin. The liturgy leaves room to address the worshiper's own "small stories"²⁸ of suffering, but it reframes these stories by the overarching narrative of God's story with creation. To both the happy and the sad the liturgy says, This is not all there is: a more glorious life lies ahead of you. The liturgy that finds meaning in the life of worshiping God and serving God's kingdom counters the erosion of meaning that characterizes suffering in the definition of Schreier and others. By drawing worshipers into this different story of God with humankind, the story of the liturgy offers a different perspective on the human condition.

Sacrifice

The last semantic field in relation to suffering concerns the language of offering and sacrifice. This language is used primarily of Christ, but at two points near the end of the liturgy, it is also used of the people. Christ's sacrifice is clear: he is called the Lamb of God, *Agnus Dei*, who takes away the sin of the

²⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope-francis/mass-casa-santa-marta/2020-03/pope-raising-lazarus-homily-sunday-tears-jesus-weep-compassion.html>; cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCFCIOEjMK0>, last accessed May 28th 2020. For an in-depth treatment of Jesus' weeping and lament, see Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

²⁶ See also Cooper-White, who connects the work of "witnessing" another's pain, which is the work of pastoral care, to the idea of martyrdom (*martys* being Greek for "witness"). Cooper-White, Pamela, "Suffering," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 1st ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 29–30.

²⁷ This aligns with Swinton's take on suffering as evil (as distinguished from suffering that is not evil). He argues that suffering is evil when it prevents a person from experiencing God's goodness and from hoping and finding meaning. Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 57–60.

²⁸ Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Leuven and Dudley: Peeters, 2005), 333–58.

world by sacrificing his own life. As we have seen, the liturgy is a tapestry of references to Christ's suffering and his sacrificial death for the life of the world.²⁹ The liturgy uses sacrificial language of human beings as well. After the institution narrative the Eucharistic Prayer continues:

We now obey your Son's command.
We recall his blessed passion and death,
his glorious resurrection and ascension;
and we look for the coming of his Kingdom.
Made one with him, we offer you these gifts
and with them ourselves,
a single, holy, living sacrifice.

In this part of the Eucharistic Prayer sacrifice is connected to human beings in two ways. First, if we are "made one with him," this means that somehow we partake in the "blessed passion and death" and "his glorious resurrection and ascension." Suffering—but also flourishing—is therefore an expected consequence of following Christ, and inherent in believers' unity with him.³⁰

Secondly, this prayer connects sacrificial language to people through the giving of ourselves, "a single, holy, living sacrifice." What does this sacrifice mean? Like virtually all liturgical texts, this one is based on words from Scripture. In Romans 12: 1-2 the apostle Paul writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Much can and needs to be said about this text, but I will restrict myself to a couple of observations that pertain most clearly to our topic. First of all, through the liturgy's portrayal of Christ's suffering, we see that God is fully committed to the relationship between Godself and human beings—even to the point of giving his Son. Now in their turn the people give themselves in this relationship to God and respond, obeying the Son's command and recalling the story of his suffering and glorious new life. "Made one

²⁹ The relation of sacrificial language to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross has been vigorously debated throughout history, in particular since the Reformations. The ecumenical consensus of the 20th century is that somehow the language of the liturgy cannot be seen entirely apart from the idea of sacrifice (World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), sec. II,5.) Nevertheless, some prayer books remain hesitant to use the language of sacrifice, see Stuart G. Leyden, "Communion as Sacrifice," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2012); Brian Douglas and Terence Lovat, "Dialogue Amidst Multifority: A Habermasian Breakthrough in the Development of Anglican Eucharistic Liturgies," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 35–57. For a historical overview of the development of sacrifice in the Eucharist, see Bradshaw and Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies*.

³⁰ Various texts in the bible point to suffering as a consequence of following Christ, which is even presented as a joy (e.g. 1 Pet 4:12-13). Katherine Hockey's explanation of this text aligns well with our observation that in the liturgy suffering is always set in the context of new life. She writes: "[The believers] can appreciate, as they align themselves with the narrative of Christ and choose fidelity to God, that they are setting themselves on the path to flourishing. As a result, the author's call to rejoice in suffering not only impacts identity and behaviour but, at the deepest level, challenges what it means to flourish as a human." Katherine M Hockey, *The Role of Emotion in 1 Peter*, Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series 173 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 176.

with him,” they are drawn into and partake in this similar movement. The Pauline language makes clear that this is a sacrifice, giving up the pattern of this world, being transformed by the renewal of their minds instead.³¹ Interestingly Paul immediately makes this very practical by turning this renewal of the mind into a life lived in community. His many examples of this renewed life all illustrate or demonstrate the pattern of Christ, one of giving up pride, forsaking vengeance, cursing our persecutors, and having the good of others in view (Rom. 12:3-21). The new life, which comes from sacrificing ourselves, follows that strange pattern of Christ, in which enemies are loved, Christ and his followers sit at the table of sinners, and death leads to life.³²

In the second post-communion prayer *SL* uses language that might also be interpreted as sacrificial: “May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.” These words fit very well what we have just described. It is about living the pattern of Christ by being made one with him, or in the words of this prayer, by sharing Christ’s body and drinking his cup. We should, however, point to one more element. In addition to the reference in Romans 12 to the sacrificial language of suffering, the post-communion prayer refers to drinking the cup of Christ. Jesus asks the disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee, whether they can drink his cup. They say they will (Mt. 20:22-23). This is the cup of suffering that Jesus begs his Father to take it from him.³³ In the institution narrative this cup has become “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). These passages point to the same themes as Romans 12: following Christ means following a different pattern than the world. Power, status and greatness are redefined; suffering and self-sacrifice are pathways to life. Drinking the cup of Christ ties those who drink it to Christ’s way of suffering, but also to new life, bringing life to others.³⁴

One final comment is in place here, related to the language of sacrifice and giving life to others, and to the Eucharist more broadly. While the intercessions most explicitly address human suffering, participating in the life of Christ through the Eucharist means that the believers also participate in bringing the good news of new life to others, in particular to places and situations where life is diminished. Writing particularly about the Eucharist in relation to hunger, Matthew Whelan states: “[W]hen he [Jesus] takes the bread, breaks it, shares it, tells his disciples that the bread is his body and they should ‘do this in remembrance’ of him, he speaks of a way of living in which his followers’ bodies, like his, are to be gifts for the nourishment of others.”³⁵ Even though Christ’s suffering is more central in the liturgy than human suffering, Christ suffers precisely to overcome the suffering and diminishment of creation. This encompasses more than earthquakes, hunger and other life events that upend our lives, but certainly includes these. Therefore, the whole of the Eucharist, and at some level the whole of the liturgy, connects Christ’s suffering with human suffering. When the people offer themselves in this

³¹ On Paul’s terminology of sacrifice in relation to the Roman believers’ social and ritual context, see James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, vol. 38b, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1988). The close connection with Christ’s sacrifice, in particular his crucifixion, is made in passages like Gal. 2:20, 6:14 and Rom. 6:6.

³² Cf. N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 706–7.

³³ Commentators interpret the ‘cup’ as suffering, death, and possible martyrdom. The metaphor in the bible often refers to God’s judgment, but “it can also refer to a person’s ‘fate’ or in a more narrow sense to death.” Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 543; cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33b, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1995).

³⁴ For a profound reflection on the ethical implications of the Eucharist, see Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York and Paramus: Paulist Press, 1976).

³⁵ Matthew Whelan, ‘The Responsible Body: A Eucharistic Community’, *Cross Currents* 51, no. 3 (2001): 360.

grander narrative of God's purposes for the world, they participate in this movement of giving themselves for the life of the world. In Monika Hellwig's words, "The eucharistic gathering is of all places the most suitable place for the cry of the oppressed to be uttered and considered." Moreover, "to accept the bread of the Eucharist is to accept to be bread and sustenance for the poor of the world."³⁶ Thus celebrating the Eucharist becomes an act of interceding for the world, which continues daily in lives that give life to others.

Conclusion

How does liturgy portray suffering? What meaning-making is going on in the liturgy? Four points have emerged through our analysis. First, human suffering, in the colloquial sense of major negative life events, can figure in the liturgy, but does not have to, except for the prayers of intercession. The liturgy is aware of this kind of suffering, but human suffering is not its main focus. Second, God's suffering in Christ is much more prominent in the liturgy. When we look at the liturgical portrait of suffering, we see the suffering of Christ, especially his death on the cross. Third, the backdrop for Christ's suffering is an evil and sinful, and therefore diminished, world. Part of this backdrop is the human suffering we just mentioned. Christ's suffering is meant to overcome this diminishment, turning us instead toward a new life characterised by glorifying God and serving in the kingdom of God. Finally, our careful examination of the liturgical text reveals that human suffering also refers to sacrificing our lives to God. The liturgy portrays a unity between God and God's people, in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. This unity means that the believers are caught up in the heavenly kingdom where life is turned upside down. That pattern includes suffering—with a view to transformed life. In the sense that the gathered community is united in Christ through the Eucharist, participates in his suffering and is called to be a community that gives life to the world, the celebration of the Eucharist connects believers to the world's suffering. That way, the whole of the Eucharist and indeed the liturgy is intercessory.

In the literature suffering is often understood as a loss or breakdown of meaning. At the same time, people experience certain situations as suffering because meaning is absent and so they are seeking meaning.³⁷ What meaning does liturgy make of suffering? According to Gordon Lathrop, meaning is found in juxtaposition, of interpreting one liturgical element in light of the other.³⁸ Our analysis has shown that Christ's suffering, the suffering that the liturgy presents most clearly, is juxtaposed with human sin and new life. Christ overcomes the dark colours of sin and paints a picture of bright, new life of union with God. Suffering derives its meaning from the glorious vision of worship and a transformed life, in the sense that Christ's suffering counters the breakdown of that vision that results from sin and evil. And, against the background of sin and evil the vision of new life becomes meaningful in the sense that it says: "the broken life of this world is not all there is, God's vision for creation is much more glorious." This gives hope amidst the world's brokenness, whether that brokenness is due to COVID-19, earthquakes, broken relationships, or anything else that diminishes God's vision for creation of living life to the full.

One with God in Christ, believers follow Christ's pattern, and "offer themselves" as "a single, holy, living sacrifice." The language of sacrifice might denote suffering, but it is questionable how many worshipers would understand this act of dedication in those terms. Nevertheless, this sacrifice does mean that

³⁶ Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, 78.

³⁷ Cooper-White, Pamela, "Suffering," 25.

³⁸ Lathrop, *Holy Things*.

believers are not to “conform this world, but be transformed” into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 12:2). Suffering can result from this act of dedication. Jesus, Peter, Paul, and James all warn that suffering is to be expected as a consequence of following Jesus. Only then can suffering be considered something in which believers can rejoice, for it is an identity marker of belonging to Christ.³⁹ In the way that Christ’s sacrificial suffering might be said to be meaningful in countering and overcoming sin and evil, suffering as a consequence of following Jesus gains meaning in giving up the patterns of this world and living the new life of the kingdom of God. If suffering cannot be connected to this greater narrative (Schreiter), it indeed remains meaningless as it contributes to the diminishment of life that Christ’s suffering overcomes.

The liturgy does not seem to engage with the classic why-question of theodicy. Just as Job does not receive an answer but a vision of God, so the liturgy does not give an answer to the why of suffering, but paints a vision of new life. It is a picture that does not leave sufferers where they are, but comforts with its different perspective on life, and calls for transformation. Schreiter warns that there is nothing noble or redeeming in suffering itself. Suffering can be redemptive only “when we struggle against these corroding powers and rebuild our selves in spite of the pain we are experiencing.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Swinton speaks about retaining a sense of “meaning, hope and the possibility of God’s providential presence” as a way of resisting evil.⁴¹ It is exactly this sense of meaning and hope that liturgy fosters. Bread and wine point to God’s providential presence in Christ. Liturgy engages in the struggle against the “corroding powers” of sin and evil, and invites believers to “rebuild our selves” in light of the transforming vision of worship and new life. As such, liturgy is an act of resistance against sin and evil that draws the participants into a different story which starts with grace and peace from God, and ends with the blessing of that same God.

³⁹ Hockey, *The Role of Emotion in 1 Peter*, 176.

⁴⁰ Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 33–34.

⁴¹ Swinton, *Raging With Compassion*, 58.