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Global Migration and Liturgical Imagination

Where Doxology Meets Righteous Action

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Abstract

While fences, walls, and ever more dehumanizing restrictions on migrants and asylum seekers go up in various continents, Christians are increasingly realizing that their religious commitments demand an ethical as well as theological recognition of migration tragedies playing out across many regions in the world. Taking the existential actualities of the “age of migration” seriously as a source of theological inquiry also calls for a new mode of constructive liturgical theology. The commitment to such a transformation of theological imagination calls for a shift in how the very notion of “liturgy” is envisioned. In conversation with theologians, liturgical scholars, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Emmanuel Levinas, this article explores how the presence and unjust suffering of migrant neighbors can reshape liturgical imagination to constructively bridge the glaring gap between liturgy and life, worship and ethics, doxology and righteous action.

Keywords: migration, liturgy, justice, discipleship, refugees

Introduction

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes the present state of global affairs succinctly yet with words whose gravitas should not go unheeded amidst the unremitting 24/7 bombardment of infotainment permeating our lives in the global North: “Today the world is experiencing the largest humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II and the Holocaust” (USHMM). At the time of finalizing these reflections, the latest available data from the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) shows that more than 70.8 million persons have been forcibly displaced from their homes all over the world. Almost 26 million persons have the refugee status while 3.5 million people are seeking asylum in various countries. 41.3 million persons are internally displaced (IDPs). Approximately half of all those displaced are children. More often than not displaced children encounter profound difficulties obtaining education in comparison with their peers who are not displaced. At the current rate of displacement, every two to three seconds a person is forced to flee their home somewhere in the world due to conflict or persecution. And only a tiny share of refugees (for example, slightly over 82,000 refugees in 2018) ever end up being resettled in a country where their rights, dignity, and wellbeing are respected.

While fences, walls, and ever more dehumanizing restrictions on migrants and asylum seekers go up in various continents from the United States to Hungary, Denmark, Turkey, Bangladesh, and all the way to Australia, Christian faith leaders, theologians, and grassroots activists are increasingly realizing that their religious commitments demand an ethical as well as theological recognition and reflection of migration tragedies playing out across many regions in the world. Such upheavals challenge theological convictions, moral visions, and liturgical practices for many Christians living in societies that are fortunate enough not to be currently embroiled in violent conflict or war. Christian communities in all their variety of traditions, worship practices, and cultural contexts cannot avoid reflecting and acting on the virtues of charity, justice, and compassion on communal, institutional, and individual levels in light of the displacements facing millions of fellow human beings on the move.

Among such emerging multi-pronged engagements with the realities of migration is also the trajectory of constructive liturgical theology that explores the intersections between the upsurge in global migration as a dominant concern of social justice and religious worship and Christian discipleship. In this sense, Christian liturgical imagination is far from being a narrowly self-referential enterprise as it is sometimes mistakenly assumed. On the contrary, since worship shapes (and sometimes, alas, mis-shapes) both Christian spirituality and its value-committed actions in society, the praxis of liturgical imagination can be seen as a subtype of public or even political theology.

Hence, in the current cultural and historical moment, it is vital for Christian theological inquiry to recognize that global migration demands a re-envisagement of liturgy as a multifaceted, interpersonal, interactive, and comprehensive – that is, personal as well as socio-political – arena of Christian discipleship. Global migration challenges liturgical imagination, I submit, to overcome the dualistic tendencies that juxtapose the ritualized and ceremonial elements of worship vis-à-vis responsible and righteous action for the life of the world. To overcome such deeply entrenched dualisms between the allegedly playful/useless expression of faith and worship of God in ritual and just, prophetic action of “following” Jesus Christ to

restore and uplift the dispossessed, disempowered, and increasingly dehumanized planetary neighbors, I argue that theology today needs a critical and constructive retrieval of the long-forgotten yet more multivalent and integrative notion of liturgy, *leitourgia*.

In the New Testament the notion of *leitourgia* is not a primarily or even exclusively ritual or ceremonial term. On some occasions it still clearly carries an earlier, indeed a more political, connotation of vicarious action of service toward common good. It is used, for example, by Paul to describe a ministry of service for the wellbeing of suffering community (2 Corinthians 9:12) or individuals like himself in need of support (Philippians 2:25) alongside the holy actions of carrying out the good news of the Gospel (Romans 15:16). What needs to be boldly reclaimed and repossessed today in a new way to revitalize the dynamic double helix of personal and communal life of Christian discipleship, therefore, is precisely the imaginary of liturgy as an unceasing spiral migration from doxological praise and prayer to righteous action for and with disempowered others. Among them, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants are today's "abject" people, according to Tony Fry, who are not only displaced and "instrumentally dehumanized" but too often also "the world's unseen, unheard, the 'they' who are unfeelingly ignored, [the] neoliberal capital's human waste" (Fry: 18).

In what follows I will present some suggestions toward a constructive imaginary of liturgy itself as migration. That is, liturgy as a hybrid and intertwined terrain of doxological as well as ethical action where the divine and human agencies meet and co-work. My proposals stem from the analysis of the context of global migration in dialogue with contemporary liturgical theologians and some outspoken church leaders from the "East" and "West,"¹ as well as two voices from the past who urge us to challenge ritualistic fixations of liturgical theology – the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Obviously, my proposal can sketch only a few contours of this emerging and much broader interdisciplinary conversation that stretches well beyond the conventions of narrowly defined liturgical theology. The rest is beyond the scope of these brief reflections. With this necessary caveat, I will proceed by exploring the constructive potential of the notion of liturgy through a postcolonial lens. First, however, must come attention to the context itself: namely, the current realities and challenges of migration.

Migration Crisis and Justice: Invasion or Tragedy?

It is sadly ironic that the initial version of this article was presented at the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society 2019 Symposium on Religion and Justice at Creighton University, Omaha, NE, simultaneously as President Donald J. Trump declared a national emergency in the afternoon of February 15, 2019. President Trump described the upsurge of asylum seekers at the southern border as a "national security crisis," "a border security and humanitarian crisis," and an "invasion of drugs and criminals coming into our country" to be

¹ Terms like "West" and "East" are used in quotation marks to signal the geo-cultural construction of these terms as a matter of Christian ecclesiastical traditions that do not always correspond to how geographical landscape of Christian communities is understood today. For example, the "East" in "Eastern Orthodoxy" means Eurasian countries like Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Russia and not China or Japan, while "Western" Roman Catholicism is represented in regions like South Korea, India, and Sri Lanka. Ecclesiastical geography is often a cultural, linguistic, and racial geography.

able to divert over 6 billion dollars toward the construction of the border wall with Mexico (Baker; Trump).

During a time when so many people can agree on so little, there seems to exist at least one agreement regarding migration that is shared among the strangest of bedfellows. It is not only President Trump and certain other political leaders who speak about the migration crisis. It is also Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the leaders representing the largest groups of “Western” and “Eastern” Christians, as well as the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (among other social scientists) who share an uncanny sense that global migration processes today constitute a growing crisis. Of course, when it comes to understanding the causes and implications of migration and looking for solutions to address the roots of migration crisis, perspectives differ quite dramatically. Regardless of where one might stand in relation to how to best conceptualize the unrelenting waves of migrants and asylum seekers even before the brunt of climate degradation is widely felt, in our historical moment, it is impossible to dismiss the recognition that by the end of the second decade of the 21st century we indeed live in an “age of migration” (Castles and Miller), not only due to historically unprecedented forced migration but also accelerating climate change.

The globalization of the modern Western economic model has produced millions of economically “redundant people” (Evans and Bauman) on top of refugees fleeing wars, conflict zones, failed states, and climate change, exacerbating all of these push factors as Bauman unflinchingly observes. The unremitting predicaments of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers signals that “humanity is in crisis” (Evans and Bauman). Alongside wars and conflicts, there is another type of forced migration that is almost universally denied legitimacy and remediation. As the exceedingly inequitable arc of globalized neo-liberal economy still bends onward, multitudes are “condemned to the surplusage of lives full of holes, waiting for a future that may never come, forced into the desperate decision to migrate illegally across whole continents in order to survive” (Young: 27). What many in Western societies ignore or conveniently overlook is the fact that, as Saskia Sassen aptly summarizes, we are already entering that stage in the age of migration when “even more people will be on the move, not because they are in search of a better life but because they are in search of bare life” (Sassen: 11).

However we prefer to call the swelling upsurge of migrants in search of survival and dignity crisscrossing deserts and cities alike – crisis, permanent crisis, the-new-normal, or whatever else – the realities on the ground are by no means theologically neutral. Patriarch Bartholomew puts it very clearly: “We experience this contemporary global social crisis caused by globalization and armed conflicts, as a crisis not only of politics and economy, but of the very essence of our religious faith and our fundamental moral and ethical responsibilities” (Bartholomew). Pope Francis has spoken out even more regularly and consistently about the Christian vocation to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate as those living in and often fleeing in desperation from the “existential peripheries” of the world only to become “emblems of exclusion” (Francis 2019).

Calling attention to the cruel afflictions of migration has been the hallmark of Pope Francis’s pontificate ever since his first official papal trip outside of Rome to visit the small Mediterranean island of Lampedusa and celebrate a mass of repentance there with the purple

Lenten vestments, making a liturgical correlation of the mass to the confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness clear on the global stage. Lampedusa is the hotspot of Mediterranean migration routes and rescue and recovery operations. It is there that on July 8, 2013, Francis lamented the “globalization of indifference” toward migrants and refugees while thanking the local rescuers and praying for forgiveness of all those (many of us) who continue to be “complacent and closed amid comforts which have deadened their hearts” as we “have become used to the suffering of others” and “lost the sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters” enjoying “the culture of comfort which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles” (Francis 2013).

Today, many persons of faith in various religious traditions are perplexed, fearful, exhausted, and resentful in the environment that teems with institutionalized and sensationalized hostility toward those perceived as “others.” Individual Christians as well as whole communities of faith wrestle with the challenges of racism, various forms of nationalism, postmodern neo-tribalism, xenophobia, and hostility toward migrants and refugees – in other words, toward those perceived as “others” and therefore seen as threatening and in need of being “banned.” Under these circumstances, what are the theological and ethical implications of worshipping God in and through Christian liturgies who, in the second person of the Trinity, has migrated to the world to redeem, reconcile, and rejuvenate the whole creation of God?

Taking the existential actualities of the “age of migration” seriously as a source of theological inquiry calls for a new mode of constructive liturgical theology. On the one hand, it would build on – both critically and constructively – some of the most profound insights of the liturgical movement in the 20th century such as, for example, Virgil Michel’s insistence that there must be an integral and transformative relation between liturgy and social justice (Michel; Pecklers). On the other hand, it is perhaps time to consider the need for a liturgical political theology that is deeply committed to postcolonial and decolonial ethics. By postcolonial/decolonial ethics I mean, in brief, an imaginary of power, being, and knowing that attends to the inconvenient truth of the “wretched of the earth” (Fanon) or “the least of these brothers and sisters” of Christ (Matthew 25:40). Such an ethic accords embodied respect to their lived experiences of suffering and injustice. Finally, it is committed to transform the lifeworlds that are currently structured in competitive dominance toward a convivial flourishing of all sentient creation and toward an affirmative empowerment of all the disinherited human persons to realize their capacities and vocations toward living abundant and fulfilling lives.

The commitment to such a transformation of theological imagination necessarily entails not only a robust reexamination of actual worship rites (and a lot could be said about it yet it is beyond the primary focus of my reflections here), but also necessitates a shift in how the very notion of liturgy itself is envisioned. In particular, I wonder, how could the present migration crisis enable Christian theological imagination to bridge the glaring gap between liturgy and life, worship and ethics, doxology and righteous action in a fruitful way? No doubt, the attempts to connect liturgy and the life of discipleship have been manifold – and have remained largely inconclusive if not to say, in many cases, not really efficacious.

One of the chief, yet often hidden, stumbling blocks is the deeply ingrained Western presupposition that worship is really only about an absolutely non-utilitarian and playful realm of ritual and hence it can be no otherwise than radically different and separate from everyday life of purpose and utility. If the dividing line is drawn so sharply then, of course, it is very difficult to see how these seemingly separate arenas of faith could ever be connected. Such an approach has been the default methodological position – with all its worn-out pitfalls – in the last century of liturgical theology despite sincere attempts to tease out connections. With that goal in mind, liturgical theologians have tried to construe external and therefore rather artificial and unconvincing ways to bridge the self-inflicted overarching cleft between the sacred realm of ritual and the mundane world of everyday struggles and joys. But in the unrelenting moral urgencies that migration now presents for many global societies on individual and socio-political levels across multiple continents where Christians live and worship, it is time to look at this liturgical conundrum through the lens of migration precisely as an ethical exigency that challenges nothing less than, as Patriarch Bartholomew puts it, “the very essence of our religious faith” – and therefore also the very essence of our worship. Before I address the most important question of how can considering the imaginary of liturgy as migration facilitate a shift in how we understand the very nature of liturgy, a short excursus on the conventional interpretation of what liturgy is will be helpful to better appreciate the impact of the shift I am proposing.

For the Life of the Real World: Worship and Discipleship

The conventional way of understanding liturgy today, despite a variety of confessional nuances, is to equate it with structured – and usually more or less tightly scripted – corporate, and public Christian rituals. In a nutshell, liturgy is a sort of umbrella term for the sacramental rites and rituals of public worship of the Christian churches. In the so-called nonsacramental traditions, at least according to the conventional Western taxonomy, liturgy can merely describe the order and pattern of corporate worship within a community of faith. Liturgy is, depending on where one stands in the theological and ecclesiastical spectrum, primarily what the assemblies of Christians *do* when they praise, give thanks, adore, lament, and pray to God. The attention to the action of the worshipping assembly in liturgy derives from the admittedly polyvalent origins of the term “liturgy” itself in the Christian context: *leitourgia* is often interpreted as the most important “work of the people” – the worship of God. Furthermore, Protestant traditions usually underscore that all our praising and praying is really focused on what God *a priori* and absolutely gratuitously *does* for us and for our salvation (i.e., God’s service for us) before we can even begin responding through any type of our “work” or “service” of praise, confession, prayer, lament, supplication, intercession, and thanksgiving.

Today, Lutherans and Roman Catholics alike increasingly feel the need to underscore the theo-ontological primacy of divine agency in liturgy. Thus the Lutheran Frank Senn deploys the Eastern Orthodox term of choice for sacramental worship – “divine liturgy” – to remind that liturgy is “also the work of God (*opus Dei*), that in fact it is the work of God’s people only because it is the work of God” (Senn 6). From the Roman Catholic perspective, Nathan Mitchell echoes a similar sentiment while also highlighting the entanglement between the service of worship and the ministries of justice. “For one thing,” Mitchell argues, “liturgy (*opus*

Dei) is less ‘our work for God’ than God’s work for us” (Mitchell 2006: 41). This *opus Dei* is not

something beautiful *we* do for God, but something beautiful that *God* does for us and among us. Public worship is neither our work nor our possession . . . *our* work is to feed the hungry, to refresh the thirsty, to clothe the naked, . . . to visit the imprisoned; to welcome the stranger; to open our hands and hearts to the vulnerable and the needy (Mitchell 2000: 557-58).

Above all, doxology – our praise and thanksgiving to God, and our whole worship of God through liturgical rites – does not exist *sui generis*, in splendid isolation from the rest of life. This insight is, arguably, among the most visionary and most consequential – yet not universally shared or denominationally endorsed – realizations of the modern Western liturgical movement. As Nathan Mitchell has summarized it, “Christian liturgy has to be verified outside itself, exteriorly, in what Emmanuel Levinas called ‘the liturgy of the neighbor’” (Mitchell 2006: 36). Even though the language of external verification might not be entirely optimal due to the implicit emphasis on the binary between rituals of worship and ethical action on behalf of the neighbor in need, Mitchell captures a passionate current within the late modern Western liturgical movement by insisting that underneath the ambiguous language of exteriority, liturgy is a notion that is much more spacious and multiply vectored than just self-referential ritual doxology: “Christian ritual is . . . capable of verification only through the *exteriority* of ethical action. Christian liturgy begins as ritual practice but ends as ethical performance” (Mitchell 2006: 38).

On the Eastern Orthodox side, since the 1970s some Eastern Orthodox theologians have been drawing on the ecumenical conversations at the World Council of Churches (WCC) to propose the notion of “liturgy after the liturgy” to highlight the salvific entanglement between praise and just action in the world. Ion Bria lifts up the awareness in the Eastern Orthodox milieu that:

The dynamics of the liturgy go beyond the boundaries of the Eucharistic assembly to serve the community at large. The eucharistic liturgy is not an escape into an inner realm of prayer, a pious turning away from social realities; rather, it calls and sends the faithful to celebrate “the sacrament of the brother” outside the temple in the public marketplace, where the cries of the poor and marginalized are heard (Bria: 20).

Although it is not a critique that one hears often in the Orthodox context even in the 21st century, I find Bria’s assessment of the liturgy vs. life conundrum to be spot-on with few exceptions such as Patriarch Bartholomew. Orthodox theologians, Bria poignantly argues, “have ignored the social and political consequences of *theosis* (deification) and disregarded the historical concretization of Eucharistic spirituality. In so doing they interrupt the flow of the liturgical act, breaking off diakonia at the end of worship, at the door of the church” (Bria: 23). But not to boast: Western assemblies of worship will not have difficulty recognizing some of their own unhelpful clichés here.

What underlies such seemingly intractable “interruptions of the flow of the liturgical act” across so many Christian communities in past and in the present might be a confusion about

what Christianity is all about. Namely, Christianity, as Miroslav Volf puts it, “is not a ‘culture’ or a ‘civilization’; it is a way of living centered on Christ *in* many diverse cultures and civilizations” (Volf: 144). And that amounts to what Rowan Williams describes as discipleship: “Discipleship is . . . a state of being. Discipleship is about how we live” (Williams). Modeled upon the Trinitarian relations, discipleship is rooted in the Trinitarian mystery of relationality and has its contemplative mode – we might call it also a doxological and devotional mode – alongside “the transformative mode of living in which the act of God can come through so as to change ourselves, our immediate environment, our world” (Williams). There is no need for a rift between these modes of discipleship, Williams passionately insists. And rightly so, since these modes of discipleship must be held together – “contemplation as your openness to the real roots of transforming action” (Williams).

Christian faith is a discipleship of being and doing: contemplation and praise as well as living and acting in the world and for the life of the world. Ultimately, liturgy is about actions – both divine and human. It encompasses the worship of God in more than one form of expression and in more than one possible location or time slot. All of these actions intermingle within the original orbit of ambiguity – and fecundity – of the notion of *leitourgia*. The contextual crucible of present reality where this transformative ambiguity and fecundity of *leitourgia* comes to bear on and potentially effectively reshape the whole liturgical imagination and praxis of Christian discipleship is the predicament of migration and displacement as these realities directly foreground the entanglement of doxological actions to ethics. In dialogue with Bonhoeffer and Levinas, I will next re-read *leitourgia* as an intertwinement of prayer and righteous action.

***Leitourgia*: Liturgy, Work, Action**

The Greek etymology of liturgy (*leitourgia*) is work (*ergon*) and public (*leitos*). It originates from the everyday Greek usage designating as *leitourgia* any public work or ministering that is done vicariously *on behalf* of some people by others who are appointed and equipped to do so (Marshall). Recently, Giorgio Agamben has renewed attention to the vicarious aspects of *leitourgia* – the obligations that can reach the degree of being onerous to those who are called to perform it in various political settings as a service for the community (Agamben: 653-55, 661). Liturgy, in this sense, is indeed akin to a costly discipleship, to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s language. In the New Testament, the term *leitourgia* is used sparingly, yet in contexts that go well beyond the conventional settings of worship rites, rituals, and purely cultic acts (Agamben: 653-67).

At this point, it should be clear that liturgy is much more than one thing only. However it may manifest, liturgy can be envisioned as a vicarious action of God for the whole creation and simultaneously, through participation in *opus Dei*, also as an action for and with others by those who claim to be the followers and friends of Christ (John 15:14-15). Hence, as Edward Foley argues the “continuity between living and worship is reflected in the language of the New Testament which avoids cultic terminology for Christian worship” so that it “can refer to evangelizing, taking up a collection, and even to the duties of state officials” (Foley: 29-30). Ferdinand Hahn argues that in the early Christian understanding of liturgy “there is no longer any distinction in principle between assembly for worship and the service of Christians in the world” (Foley: 30 n.67).

Before presenting my final constructive reflections on how liturgical political theology can respond from the midst of the migration crisis, I would like to invoke two perspectives from the shadows of the World War II on how we might finally journey beyond the unproductive dualisms of allegedly useless ritual and instrumentalized socio-ethical actions. Instead of such juxtapositions, another imaginary of liturgy is possible and, I submit, useful. Liturgy can be conceived more like a multifaceted and synergistic interface of divine and human work for the life of the world – by divine initiative of grace as well as through human responses in the power of the Spirit of Life. I would like to acknowledge Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Emmanuel Levinas as two thinkers who were not liturgical theologians but whose visionary critiques of conventional worship practices serve as inspiration for my constructive trajectory.

Writing from the totalitarian and imperial ruins of Western Christendom, it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who turned his sober gaze toward the modern Christianity and found it preoccupied with its own institutional self-preservation while millions of people were dying during World War II (Bonhoeffer 2010: 389, 500).² Under those trying circumstances Bonhoeffer's insight was that “we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action” (Bonhoeffer 2010: 389).

Bonhoeffer certainly cannot be accused of having a bad liturgical taste, ignorance of liturgical intricacies, or entertaining anti-aesthetic sentiments. Far from it. And yet, he insisted that only those Christians who dared to speak up for the vulnerable Jews under persecution can legitimately allow themselves to be soothed and carried away in Gregorian chant. In times of crisis, the ultimate challenge for Christian life and theology is to discern the will of God (and not just about how the rites of worship are to be correctly performed) and then to attend to the “making real” (*Wirklichwerdung*) of God's reality as revealed in Christ among God's creatures (Bonhoeffer 2005: 47, 49). Elsewhere Bonhoeffer is concerned about discipleship that entails “responsible action” – in “response to God's question and call” (Bonhoeffer 2010: 40, 49).

For Bonhoeffer, writing from within a most violent decade of the 20th century, the emphasis falls on participatory (in Christ) “responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freedom and redeeming love for all who suffer” (Bonhoeffer 2010: 49). Prayer and righteous action both encapsulate the path of discipleship that Bonhoeffer, at the end of his life, envisioned as contemplative and active at the same time: as enacting transcendence through “being-for-others” according to the form of Jesus since the “church is church only when it is there for others” (Bonhoeffer 2010: 501-3). This sort of discipleship – or this sort of liturgy is “worldly” which for Bonhoeffer meant that “one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities” (Bonhoeffer 2010: 486).

² See, for example, Bonhoeffer's “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of D.W.R.” and “Outline for a Book,” in Bonhoeffer 2010.

The other voice I would like to briefly invoke as conversation partner is Jewish – that of the Lithuanian-French philosopher of religion Emmanuel Levinas. Writing in the long shadow of World War II and the Holocaust, Levinas also re-envisioned religion through the optic of ethics. He is among the most vociferous critic of all those who get not only lost but indeed stuck, as it were, “in wonder, love, and praise” while remaining oblivious toward the suffering fellow creatures of God. For Levinas, “theology begins in the face of the neighbor. The divinity of God is played out in the human. God descends in ‘face’ of the other” (Levinas 2001: 236). In the long run, for Levinas, “the ethical order does not prepare us for Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is a dream” (Levinas 1990: 102).

But liturgy is not a tranquil subject in Levinas’s thought. Quite on the contrary, in some cases like in his early reflections in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas has nothing good to say about liturgy. Liturgy for him functions as a trope for a rogue relation with God. It denotes enthusiastic and self-indulgent piety, a pretentious and intoxicating mysticism – or rather, mystification of sound, sincere, and prophetic spirituality. It is an aesthetical derailing of the ethical and nothing less than a distraction from genuine religious comportment – which subsists in an ethical relation to the divinity through the encounter of the face of human others (Levinas 2002: 202-3). Ultimately, for Levinas, “the vision of God is a moral act. This optics is an ethics” (Levinas 1990: 275) and “the Justice rendered to the Other, my neighbor, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God. It is as intimate as the prayer and liturgy which, without justice, are nothing . . . the pious man is the just man” (Levinas 1990: 18).

As the above quote already hints at, Levinas has more to say on liturgy – but not primarily as a cultic or ritual act *sui generis* and, as such, primordially disengaged from every other activity of life. Rather, going back to the Greek origins of *leitourgia*, he suggests that liturgy is the enactment of the “ethics of welcome – the first religious service, the first prayer, the first liturgy” (Levinas 1998: 151). But above all, liturgy is work for Levinas.³ Liturgy is work “conceived radically” as a “movement of the Same toward the Other which never returns to the Same” (Levinas 1996: 49). It is a completely gratuitous work, or as Agamben might put it, “onerous,” since it is often done at a loss to oneself, a work without recompense. “Liturgy, as an absolutely patient action, does not take its place as a cult alongside of works and of ethics. It is ethics itself” (Levinas 1986: 349-50). Such an absolutely patient action – liturgy – is a dually vectored movement: toward God and toward the other.

If we think of liturgy as a doxological response to the self-disclosure of God, Levinas invites us to at least consider liturgy as a kind of doxology that is no less significantly embodied and expressed in righteous action toward and in solidarity with all those whose suffering and wretchedness summon us to recognize and honor them as *imago Dei*. In our own tumultuous times, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers comprise the unenvied ranks of the wretched of the earth *par excellence* – widely feared, despised, suspected, and exploited precisely as “pawns on the chessboard of humanity” that Pope Francis laments (Francis 2014). They are one of the most pivotal catalysts of righteous action precisely as *liturgical* action that worshipfully participates in God’s salvific work in creation in all times but particularly so in these times of

³ This approach to liturgy is best expressed in his essays “The Trace of the Other” and “Meaning and Sense,” available in the collection of essays *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Levinas 1996).

fear, resentment, and globalization of indifference toward migrants and refugees. Their often crucified existence and presence, as a *theological* catalyst, play a key role in discerning the proper theological structure and scope of liturgy as migration from praise and contemplative surrender to vicarious action of service, in the power of the ever unpredictable and uncontrollable Spirit of God, toward the abundant life of God's whole commonwealth of creation – and back again to praise, intercession, confession, lament, and repose.

Below, in conclusion, I will offer a few illustrations alongside final reflections about how the ambiguously fecund and synergistic model of liturgy that constantly migrates from ritual doxology to the doxology of solidarity is already revealing and inserting itself in the convoluted migratory realities in North American context. By no means is this a comprehensive list of illustrations. It is meant to suggest that what on the level of theological and liturgical methodology might appear to be a vigorous shift in perspective, is already a lived reality in the lives of those who seek to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the strangers, and visit the imprisoned “least of these” (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Toward a Polyphony of Doxologies: Righteous Action as Liturgical Action

Only an imaginary of liturgy that allows for a coalescence of ritual acts of praise and righteous actions in relation to our neighbors in need can engender the veritable and sacramentally undivided integrity as a macrocosmic and microcosmic divine liturgy in which all followers of Christ are called to participate if they desire to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). Such doxologies through righteous action most credibly and transformatively manifest through the life-giving yet often ritually invisible (or at least ritually “minimalistic”) liturgies of welcome, accompaniment, and healing for the people rightly seen as being among the most vulnerable today – migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and torture survivors.

These virtually invisible yet existentially important liturgies are bodied forth by ordained clergy and attorneys; by vowed religious as well as lay professionals and volunteers serving deportees in border areas; by social workers, psychologists, healthcare workers, community advocates, and all those who materially and spiritually support their services among the detained migrants and asylum seekers; by all who work to heal, empower, and integrate vulnerable and stigmatized migrants by rescuing them on the high seas and in high deserts; by all volunteers who visit migrants locked up detention centers; by those who volunteer their professional medical services to care for refugees and migrants in refugee camps and in inner cities; by those who call and write to their elected legislators despite frustrated exhaustion to advocate for humane immigration laws and to stop deportations of parents who are torn apart from their children; by those taxi drivers who boycotted the JFK airport when the so-called “Muslim Ban” was first executed to keep out Muslim migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the winter of 2017 – and this is just to name a few (and often anonymous) liturgies of service and justice that uphold the life and dignity of all those who are regarded as redundant, disgusting, and ultimately expendable.

Some of those who perform these liturgies of service and justice are fully aware and intentional about their deepest spiritual and doxological motivation and are equally invested in both sides of the liturgical coin – ritual praise and righteous action. Others may have a vague idea of how the life-giving service among the most vulnerable relates to formally

conceptualized worship. Still others may have grown disillusioned in institutionalized religion and its worship rituals so that they find in these liturgies a much truer expression of their spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1) than singing hymns on Sunday mornings. And there are still those whose willingness to entertain the connection between their vicarious service or responsible exercise of their professional duties and any explicitly religious act, let alone an act of worship, remains known to them alone and very often open to more questions than answers, at least from an explicitly theological point of view.

Be that as it may, but these seemingly mundane ministries of welcome and restoration reveal one of the most meaningful ways today to practically embody the radical relationality of the divine liturgy in its doxological, theological, and ethical fullness. From the context of global migration crisis, however, the liturgy of praise sings loudest and most true to itself through righteous action serving the deeply wounded and demonized wretched of the earth.

From a perspective of liturgical political imaginary, such unvalorized – and sometimes even vilified as “unpatriotic” – acts of service and justice for, with, and among disinherited strangers are doxological acts with just as strong liturgical pedigree as genuflecting before the disinherited and crucified Christ. Analogously to the eucharistic remembrance of Christ, the *anamnesis* of our suffering migrant neighbors ought to indwell the meditations of our hearts and the praise and lament of our voices. On the other hand, it would be theologically negligent and pastorally foolish overlook the onerous and draining dimensions of liturgy in the fullness of its double helix of doxologies – praise and righteous action. To remain faithful but also humanly sustainable and to continuously abide in the living waters of eternal life (John 4:14), righteous action in its myriad of expressions cannot do otherwise than migrate to worship rites and contemplative wellsprings of prayer for renewal to unburden the “strain of toil, the fret of care”⁴ in repose, lament, contemplation, confession, absolution, intercession, praise, and thanksgiving.

Without doubt, none of such doxologies of mercy and justice can ever be merely “the work of the people” alone in exactly the same way as none of worship rites could. As I have explored it here, liturgy is always a work radically conceived, to underscore a Leviansian theme: in Christian context, it is a work that is inspired, rooted, and upheld in, with, and through the work of the Triune God – the *opus Dei* through the incarnate Word and Wisdom, and in the power of the Spirit who gives life and sets free from sin and death (Romans 8:2). In the words of the Anglican theologian Norman Pittenger, through all of these actions “the Christian himself is a *liturgy* – that is, as the Greek word *leitourgia* would show, a publicly manifest expression of God in Christ to the world” (Pittenger: 48; italics in the original). Why would anyone really want to insist that such a publicly manifest expression of God can only happen – or only should happen – within the limits of ritual conventions alone to truly delight God: only during designated times, only in enclosed spaces, and only through scripted rituals?

This imaginary of liturgy as an incessant “migration” from praise to righteous action – and back again – is unintelligible apart from a consistently relational ontology in which the

⁴ The words are from Washington Gladden’s 1879 hymn “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”: “O Master, let me walk with Thee / In lowly paths of service free / Tell me Thy secret; help me bear / The strain of toil, the fret of care.”

divine and human agency is resolutely relational and reciprocal albeit asymmetrical. In such a relational imaginary, divine and human agencies inter-abide in liturgy where the divine gift of love and freedom elicits a doxological response through both ritual thanksgiving and praise as well as righteous action within God's creation. And the result of such liturgy, such dually vectored doxological action for the life of the world oscillates from singing the most captivating Gregorian chant or praise song to participating in something as existentially humble and materially real as preparing and serving food to exhausted deportees at the *Comedor* just steps from the US-Mexico border in Nogales that is run by the Kino Border Initiative, to mention merely one tiny example among many.

The Anglican theologian Graham Ward has put his finger on the liturgical dynamic that obtains in liturgy envisioned as the “work of the people” in its fullest and all-encompassing sense:

The object/objective of the Christian act is the manifestation of what is just, good, beautiful, and true in, with, and beyond whatever is the grammatical object upon which the agent labours. In such laboring, the agent is priestly, the act liturgical, and the object sacramental. [. . .]

[W]e might characterize Christian acting as a *praxis* that participates in a divine *poesis* that has soteriological and eschatological import . . . As we have noted this acting is liturgical, but . . . it is also political, ethical, and aesthetic (Ward: 36-37, 41-42).

To sum it up: Liturgy obtains as faithful, meaningful, and life-giving in God's creation and among “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine” with whom Jesus identified himself (Matthew 25:31-46) only if it relentlessly, omnilaterally, and intentionally migrates to cross the stereotypical and dualistic borders between devotional worship and service to the neighbor; between aesthetics and ethics; between the sheer Godwardness of praise and the salvific utility of healing action for and with vulnerable neighbors and disinherited strangers – all toward a conviviality of flourishing in the power of the Spirit “who gives life” (John 6:63).

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