

LYING TONGUES, THANKING MOUTHS: RECLAIMING IMPRECATORY PSALMS AS COUNTER-VIOLENCE

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As the world enters the first quarter of the 21st century, it has seen in a global scale massive war, terrorism, political and ideological persecutions, massacres, ecological devastations. Within the confines of communities and homes, abuses of sexual, physical, psychological, financial, and spiritual natures have also plagued us. Nevertheless, against these evil and violence, we have also seen heroes, champions, and advocates of those who are marginalized, oppressed, and suffering, sometimes even from their own communities. In both camps, religion and its sacred scriptures have been used to justify their causes, for good or ill. In this contribution, I ask: how can we as biblical scholars provide a spiritual-theological resource for the victims and the marginalized and those who work for justice and inclusion? I suggest that one way to respond to these challenges we face is a contextual, inclusive, integrated and transformational interpretation of imprecatory psalms using the enhanced pastoral cycle will allow us to challenge the notion that these psalms which articulate the rawness of emotions of the psalmist by invoking judgment, misfortune, or curses, upon one's enemies or those perceived as the enemies of God are not "unchristian" and should actually be reclaimed liturgically as counter-violence. Using the enhanced pastoral cycle, I will include in see a more detailed and contextualized experience of violence today, especially in the Philippines. The JUDGE part will explore the imprecatory psalms and the various responses to it, including why it has been relegated in prayer and liturgy as "unchristian." In ACT, I will provide a short interpretation of Psalm 109 as an example of imprecatory psalms, a second look as to how it can be a theological-spiritual resource for today. In EVALUATE, I will expound on the double-edge character of imprecatory psalms. Finally, in RITUALIZE/CELEBRATE, I will show how

imprecatory psalms can be reclaimed and expressed in various ways and its necessity in responding against evil and violence in today's world.

INTRODUCTION

“Double-Edged Sword (Heb 4:12): God’s Word on Violence and Evil in the 21st Century” is a very apt theme for the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines (CBAP) Annual Convention at La Jardin Retreat House in Bulacan last 29 September to 1 October 2023. This topic represents the disturbing biblical texts, the various new methods of biblical interpretation, and the critical times we live in. Some examples of these new approaches that we can find at the Society of Biblical Literature focus on the biblical text and empire, contextual interpretation of the Bible, political biblical criticism, postcolonial pedagogy for biblical studies, return migration and exile/forced migration in biblical literature, racial-ethnic lenses (African, Asian, islanders, Korean, Latinx, etc.), Bible and practical theology, hermeneutics of trauma, ecological hermeneutics, gender and LGBTQI hermeneutics, minoritized criticism, slavery and resistance, and others.¹ At the European Association of Biblical Studies, we find themes on Bible, ecology, and sustainability, politicization of the Bible and biblization of politics, cultural trauma, intersectionality (gender, class, race, sexuality and disability), museums in the Bible, social identities under the empire, and others.² Locally speaking, we now also have a Bible and Social Engagement interest group at the CBAP. All these endeavors contribute to the creative response of exegetes and theologians to the

¹ See the various research units at the International Meeting and the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature at <https://www.sbl-site.org/default.aspx>.

² See the various research units at the European Association of Biblical Studies at <https://eabs.net/EABS/EABS/Research-Units/Research-Units.aspx?hkey=eb6d0b14-921c-4f83-bb90-20aa9069a854>.

demands of contemporary times and the double-edged character of God's Word. Given these advances in biblical hermeneutics and the evil and violence encompassing the world today, how can we as biblical scholars provide a spiritual-theological resource for the victims, the marginalized, and those who work for justice and inclusion? I propose that a contextual, inclusive, integrated and transformational interpretation of imprecatory psalms using the enhanced pastoral cycle will allow us to challenge the notion that these psalms which articulate the rawness of emotions of the psalmist by invoking judgment, misfortune, or curses, upon one's enemies or those perceived as the enemies of God are *not* "unchristian" and should *not* be brushed off liturgically. Let me first explain how we will do it using the enhanced pastoral spiral or pastoral cycle.

METHODOLOGY: THE ENHANCED PASTORAL SPIRAL

The established pastoral method of see-judge-act that the Belgian Joseph Cardinal Cardijn used in his ministry with the Young Christian Workers at the beginning of the 20th century³ has now been expanded by Christians all over the world into a five-step theological method which includes "evaluate" and "celebrate." The aim of using this enhanced methodology in situating the biblical interpretation of the imprecatory Psalm 109 is to help in making sense of and in meaning-making amidst the violence and evil we experience in today's world. This meaning-making underlines that exegesis, and biblical interpretation is not a neutral endeavor,⁴ it

³ See Justin Sands, "Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act as an Interdisciplinary Method to Move Theory into Practice," *Religions* 9, no. 129 (2018): 10 pages, doi:10.3390/rel9040129. For more information on the Young Christian Workers and see, judge, act as a method of theologizing, accessed 28 August 2024, see <https://ycw.ie/resources/see-judge-act-resources-2/>.

⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 3-17, doi:10.2307/3267820.

should be contextual, integrated, inclusive, and transformational.⁵ It is *contextual* as it looks at the historical world of the author. It is *integrated* as it appeals to the various senses, sensibilities, and emotions of the author and those who read and interpret the text through time. It is also *inclusive* in terms of intersectionality, i.e., gender and sexuality, age, race and ethnicity, dis/ability, social status, etc. Finally, this methodology allows for a more *transformational* biblical interpretation as the interdisciplinarity built into the pastoral cycle translates theory into a well-discerned praxis.⁶ Let me briefly explain the steps of the pastoral spiral and how I will use it in this contribution.

To SEE asks the questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how of an issue. It includes both objective (data) and subjective (the use of senses, impression, and intuition) information which articulate the concern from both lenses of individual and collective human experiences. Here, I will give some examples of violence and evil surrounding the Philippines and the world at the time of the

⁵ Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "The World and God's Word: Of Covid-19, VUCA World, and Visions for the Future," *Maryhill School of Theology Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 146–153; Niceta Vargas, "Toward a Contextualized, Integrated, Transformational and Inclusive Religious Formation," *Himig-Ugnayan: Journal of the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies* 1, no. 2 (1999): 64–78; Sandra Marie Schneiders, "Biblical Hermeneutics Since Vatican II," in *Beyond Dogmatism and Innocence: Hermeneutics, Critique, and Catholic Theology*, eds. Bradford E. Hinze and Anthony J. Godzieba (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 3–17. On p. 13, Schneiders explains, "Finally, interpretation, the full flowering of the hermeneutical project, which is an effort to assimilate the/a meaning of the text, involves the personal and transformative response of the reader or the reader's readers to what the text says and means. One's response may be positive or negative, accepting or rejecting, perplexed, or challenging or argumentative or exhilarating. But the act of interpretation involves the reader personally with the text's meaning. Interpretation is the heart of the hermeneutical enterprise. It is where exegesis and criticism terminate in transformative appropriation. In short, exegesis asks what the text says; criticism asks what the text means; hermeneutics engages the reader, individual and/or community, in the ongoing transformation that is required when one inhabits the text as Word of God."

⁶ Sands, "Introducing..."

2023 CBAP convention. Nationally, I will quickly look at the Rodrigo Duterte administration's so-called "war on drugs" and "red tagging" or the labeling of political opponents as communists which have had dangerous and/or fatal consequences. Internationally, I will briefly present the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine which began on 24 February 2022. JUDGING includes the two-step analysis of the issue using the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, economics, politics, psychology, etc.) and theological disciplines. A well-discerned ACTION follows these steps of seeing and judging. As this contribution is primarily exegetical, the discerned action will center on the import and reclamation of imprecatory psalms as a theological resource and response with Psalm 109 as a focus text. The significance of the three-step see-judge-act method in pastoral action of the Catholic Church has been noted in papal documents such as in *Mater et Magistra*, 236-237 and its application in *Laudato Si*, 15.⁷

⁷ John XXIII, "Mater et Magistra," vatican.va, May 1961, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html; Pope Francis, "Laudato Si," vatican.va, May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. *Mater et Magistra* 236-237 states:

"There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act.

It is important for our young people to grasp this method and to practice it. Knowledge acquired in this way does not remain merely abstract but is seen as something that must be translated into action."

In *Laudato Si*, 15, Pope Francis the see-judge-act method is discernible in Pope Francis' outline of the encyclical:

"It is my hope that this Encyclical Letter, which is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity, and urgency of the challenge we face. I will begin by briefly reviewing several aspects of the present ecological crisis, with the aim of drawing on the results of the best scientific research available today, letting them touch us deeply and provide a

While the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference also adapted this discernment and action oriented pastoral process to strengthen the basic ecclesial communities,⁸ the Latin American believers in a congress in Cochabamba, Bolivia, especially the youth, have added two more steps in the pastoral cycle, namely, "celebrate" and "evaluate."⁹ Assessing the process, however, it seems that these steps could be more spontaneous, logical, and systematic if the flow would be see > judge > act > evaluate > celebrate. The EVALUATION of the effectiveness of the action should be done before celebration for the latter to be more fitting to the context of the community actors. In this step, this contribution will assess what we lose when imprecatory psalms like Psalm 109 are excluded from the liturgy and faith expressions. F. Hurtado Talavera describes "CELEBRAR" as a process of integrating life experience with the faith in celebrating where God the liberator is known, found, and experienced in the history of the people with their challenges,

concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows. I will then consider some principles drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent. I will then attempt to get to the roots of the present situation, to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes. This will help to provide an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings. Considering this reflection, I will advance some broader proposals for dialogue and action which would involve each of us as individuals and affect international policy. Finally, convinced as I am that change is impossible without motivation and a process of education, I will offer some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience."

⁸ X FABC Plenary Assembly, "FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia" (X FABC Plenary Assembly, Xuan Loc and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 2012), 4, in <http://www.fabc.org/10th%20plenary%20assembly/Documents/FABC%20-%20X%20PA%20Final%20Document.pdf>.

⁹ Frank Junior Hurtado Talavera, "El Método Catequético En La Sociedad Del Siglo XXI," *Revista Arbitrada Del Centro De Investigación Y Estudios Gerencial* 41 (2020): 257-260.

failures, sadness, and joy.¹⁰ However, as “celebrar,” mostly connotes happiness and joy, it seems that to “RITUALIZE” could be a more apt term and complementary figurative action to more emblematically integrate limits, failures, and other challenging outcomes of discerned actions through laments and symbols. It is in the various parts of these enhanced pastoral cycle made up of see > judge > act > evaluate > celebrate/ritualize that this contribution will explore the importance of reclaiming the imprecatory psalms as counter-violence.

**PURSUING THE POOR AND NEEDY AND THE
BROKENHEARTED
TO THEIR DEATH (PSALM 109:16)**

Sometime in 2018, the main lobby or the Ubuntu space of the Arete, the Creativity and Innovation space of the Ateneo de Manila University, were filled with several blue barrels. Since it is a newly constructed structure, one may think that workers were still finalizing some parts of the building and that they have another bunch of materials just delivered. However, when one goes near to investigating what they are, a feeling of horror may greet them. The barrels were an art installation by Filipino contemporary artist Felix Bacolor entitled *Thirty Thousand Liters*.¹¹ These were 150 steel drums which can contain 200 liters each. They signify the amount of blood spilled in our streets and land. They represent those who were killed in Rodrigo Duterte’s drug war from the time of his inauguration as Philippine President in June 2016 to January 2017 *only*. When he left the presidency in 2022, police operatives claim that “drug

¹⁰ Hurtado Talavera, 259. For him, “Este proceso conlleva a celebrar la experiencia de vida integrándola con la fe. Es aquí donde se celebran los logros, fracasos, alegrías, tristezas; la vida misma con solo saber la presencia del Dios liberador que hace historia con su pueblo.”

¹¹ Felix Bacolor, “Thirty Thousand Litres,” Photo, *Instagram*, April 2018, accessed 28 August 2024 https://www.instagram.com/p/BgFveWBF2q_/.

suspects” who were killed only numbered 6,252 people but human rights advocates assert that the death toll could even reach 30,000. Since the families of the victims were afraid that they will not be given justice in the Philippines because of Duterte being in power, they asked the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate and intervene.¹² Because of this action, Duterte withdrew the Philippines from ICC membership in 2018. Nevertheless, the ICC body can still investigate the cases from 2016 to 2018. The victims and those who advocate for them pin their hope on the fact that included in their evidence are the words, jokes, and directives of Duterte himself.¹³ Among the victims of the drug war were young people. One of them, Kian de los Santos, became a symbol for the youth robbed of their life. He pleaded with the officers who suspected him of drugs, “*Tama na po. May exam pa ako bukas* (Enough, please. I still have an exam tomorrow!).” He was shot twice. His three killers were meted out 40 years of jail time. In addition to de los Santos’ case, only one other case of torture, planting of evidence, and killing of two youths, Carl Arnaiz and Reynaldo “*Kulot*” de Guzman, was brought to justice in contrast with the thousands of those who were executed.¹⁴

At the height of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines was also shocked by the case of Reina Mae Nasino and her baby, River.¹⁵ Nasino was an activist jailed on an

¹² Sui-Lee Wee and Camille Elemia, “Years Later, Philippines Reckons with Duterte’s Brutal Drug War,” *New York Times*, June 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/29/world/asia/philippines-drug-war-duterte-justice.html>.

¹³ Kurt de la Pena, “Evidence in Duterte ICC Case: His ‘Kill’ Rhetoric, Words,” *INQUIRER.Net*, July 2024, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1961835/evidence-in-duterte-icc-case-his-kill-rhetoric-words>.

¹⁴ Abby Boiser, “Cop Found Guilty of 2 Teenagers’ Killing in 2017 Drug War,” *INQUIRER.Net*, March 2023, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1742298/cop-found-guilty-of-2-teenagers-killing-in-2017-drug-war>.

¹⁵ Nicole-Anne C. Lagrimas, “A River of Sorrow,” *GMA News Online*, December 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/specials/content/176/a-river-of-sorrow/>.

alleged crime of illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Not knowing that she was pregnant, she did not receive proper prenatal care in prison. She gave birth to Baby River in jail and the baby was taken by her relatives to raise her outside of prison. Unfortunately, the baby got sick, but the mother was not allowed to visit her. Sadly, River eventually died but Nasino was only given hours to mourn her child. At River's funeral, government agents even tried to take away the casket of the baby, consequently causing chaos on city roads as the relatives chased them to recover the hearse. Last July 17, 2023, Reina was acquitted by the court because of insufficient evidence.¹⁶ On August 9, 2023, the Supreme Court even voided the search warrants which led to their illegal arrest, citing abuse of discretion and recognition that their rights against unreasonable searches and seizures were evidently violated.¹⁷

On the international level, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 begun with the unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹⁸ The Russian aggression against the democratic and free nation of Ukraine has devastated the country,¹⁹ isolated Putin's Russia from the West and brought him closer to China,²⁰ and fueled economic, geopolitical, food and agricultural, and ecological

¹⁶ Mike Navallo, "Manila Court Acquits Reina Mae Nasino, 2 Others Due to Insufficient Evidence," *ABS-CBN News*, July 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/27/23/court-acquits-reina-nasino-due-to-insufficient-evidence>.

¹⁷ Ian Laqui, "SC Voids Search Warrants on Nasino, Companions," *Philstar.Com*, April 2024, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/04/27/2350881/sc-voids-search-warrants-nasino-companions>.

¹⁸ Michael Ray, "Russia-Ukraine War," *Britannica.Com*, August 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/2022-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>.

¹⁹ "Scale, Scope of Devastation in Ukraine Appalling,' High Representative Tells Security Council, Calling Invasion in Full Violation of Charter," *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases (www.un.org, March 2024)*, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15638.doc.htm>.

²⁰ Aadil Brar, "'Isolated' Putin Has Nowhere to Go except Beijing," *Newsweek*, October 2023, sec. World, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-russia-putin-beijing-partnership-test-1835249>.

insecurity in Ukraine and around the world.²¹ From being Europe's food basket and the main producer of global wheat products, a considerable area of Ukraine's land is now filled with mines planted by the Russians, endangering both agriculture and supply of potable water.²²

The psycho-emotional-spiritual toll on Ukraine has been too much just because of Putin's eschewed idealism of the Russian World, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kyrill.²³ In this so-called *Ruski mir* or Russian World, they believe, propagate, and intentionally misinform people that they have

a common political centre (Moscow), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv as the "mother of all Rus"), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow), who works in 'symphony' with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as upholding a common distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture.²⁴

²¹ See Klaus Dodds et al., "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Politics, Territory and Governance," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11, no. 8 (November 2023): 1519-1536, doi:10.1080/21622671.2023.2256119; Hamid El Bilali and Tarek Ben Hassen, "Disrupted Harvests: How Ukraine - Russia War Influences Global Food Systems - a Systematic Review," *Policy Studies* 45, no. 3-4 (May 2024): 310-335, doi:10.1080/01442872.2024.2329587; Patrick Flamm and Stefan Kroll, "Environmental (in)Security, Peacebuilding and Green Economic Recovery in the Context of Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Environment and Security* 2, no. 1 (2024): 21-46, doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241231332.

²² Oleksandra Shumilova et al., "Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Armed Conflict on Water Resources and Water Infrastructure," *Nature Sustainability* 6, no. 5 (2023): 578-586, doi:10.1038/s41893-023-01068-x.

²³ Andrii Krawchuk, "War and Religious Discourse in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," in *The (De)Legitimization of Violence in Sacred and Human Contexts*, ed. Muhammad Shafiq and Thomas Donlin-Smith (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 159-174, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-51125-8_10.

²⁴ Brandon Gallaher and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "A Declaration on the 'Russian World' (Russkii Mir) Teaching" (Orthodox Christian Studies Center - Fordham

With this mentality, the aggression of Putin's Russia against Ukraine as a Cain-Abel war falls under the same assumption that Russia and Ukraine are "brothers" of the same origin, race, language, culture etc., when in fact, they have stark differences.²⁵ For Myroslav Marynovych, a Ukrainian educator, human rights activist, former Russian dissident, and long-time vice rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University,²⁶

At least two points are important here. First, we see God's willingness to **hear the voice of the sacrifice**: "Behold, the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the earth." Second, the Lord recognizes **the merit of the curse** that falls on the criminal. If the soul of the slain Abel heard these words of God, it could surely feel that they were **just**.

Therefore, Ukrainians do not feel justice when they hear the words of Pope Francis that reach them these days. Because the Pope states that there are victims and mourns over them in a pastoral way, but he cannot say to Putin: "Here is the voice of your brother's blood calling to me from the earth." And, without naming the criminal by name, the Pope gives the impression that he seeks to separate the criminal from the deserved punishment.

University and Volos Academy for Theological Studies, March 2022), <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>.

²⁵ Andrii Krawchuk, "Narrating the War Theologically: Does Russian Orthodoxy Have a Future in Ukraine?" *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64, no. 2-3 (2022): 173-189, doi:10.1080/00085006.2022.2107836; Linda Bordoni, "Pope: 'The Drama of Cain and Abel Unfolding in Ukraine' - Vatican News," June 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-06/pope-audience-roac-middle-east-churches-ukraine-aid-peace.html>.

²⁶ Myroslav Marynovych, "The Cross of Abel and the Cross of Cain Are Different Crosses," Human Rights in Ukraine, April 2022, <https://khp.org/en/1608810411>.

Marynovych argues further,²⁷

our crosses, with which we go to Him [Jesus], are different: for some it is the cross of sacrifice, for others it is the penitential cross of the sinner. And our garments are different: the innocent slain have “white garments” (Rev. 6:11), and their murderers have blood stains (cf. Isa. 59: 3). And although the love of the Lord is one, He speaks to us differently: to the victims with compassion, and to the offenders with harshness.

And this is the meaning of the Lord’s justice.

Thus, the continuous collaboration of the Russian Orthodox Church with Putin has implications on theology, ecumenism, and international law.²⁸ Meanwhile, the people of Ukraine and the land itself suffer the devastations of Putin’s war of aggression.

In the face of these kinds of evil and violence happening in the world, what can we do as Christians, ministers, theologians and exegetes? I propose that reclaiming imprecatory psalms is a must in terms of its psychological-spiritual-theological-practical implications.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Andrew P. Follett, “Orthodox Christianity and the Russo-Ukrainian War Note,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 48, no. 2 (2023): [xxi]-352; Bojidar Kolov, “Ecclesiastical Populism in Contemporary Russia? ‘The People’ in the Political Discourse of the Orthodox Church,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 25, no. 2 (April 2024): 192–217, doi:10.1080/21567689.2024.2334032.

JUDGE: EXPERIENCES OF EVIL AND VIOLENCE AND THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Amidst the multifaceted insecurities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in the world, one would think that the killings related to the Duterte drug war would be lessened because of the lockdowns. On the contrary, Human Rights Watch noted that the drug war killings continued to spike, also targeting activists, community leaders, and rights defenders at the height of the pandemic in 2020-2021.²⁹ Still, amidst the health emergency and the drug war killings, Duterte's approval rating in November 2020, May 2021, and June 2021 was still high, even though it dropped from 84% to 75%, which is still almost equal to his initial September 2016 rating of 76%. For Elijah Roderos,

President Rodrigo Duterte's consistent high satisfaction rating stems from his strong base support from Mindanao, his help for the poor and fight against illegal drugs, and the attraction to aspects of his character such as his perceived decisiveness and diligence, according to the Social Weather Stations (SWS).³⁰

With this high rating amidst the ecological devastations brought about by several strong typhoons and flooding, poverty and food insecurity, and education crisis during the COVID-19

²⁹ Carlos H. Conde, "Killings in Philippines Up 50 Percent During Pandemic," *Human Rights Watch* (blog), September 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/08/killings-philippines-50-percent-during-pandemic>; "Philippines: 'Drug War' Killings Rise During Pandemic: Upsurge in Attacks on Activists, Community Leaders, Rights Defenders," January 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/philippines-drug-war-killings-rise-during-pandemic>.

³⁰ Elijah Roderos, "Strong Base Support, Help for the Poor, Drug War, and Character Keep Duterte Satisfaction Rating High - SWS," *VERA Files*, September 2021, <https://verafiles.org/articles/strong-base-support-help-poor-drug-war-and-character-keep-du>.

pandemic, one wonders why the faint outcry among Filipinos? Is it because of the Filipinos' happy disposition and resilience even if they are actually languishing?³¹ What have we lost or what are we losing as one of the predominantly Christian nations in Asia? Is the Church really "out of touch" in their attacks against the drug war and that they should "just pray"?³² How can faith, religion, or the Scriptures be a resource in facing these dire times?

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine begun when the world was just trying to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, one cannot underestimate the psycho-spiritual crisis that it posed against the Ukrainians, from the youngest to the elderly.³³ As the war drags on, "shock, anger, and war fatigue" over the loss of life, livelihood, home, and communities pervade the country.³⁴ The experience becomes more brutal when faith and religion are being used to divide a people and conquer a nation because of ideologies.³⁵

³¹ Francesca Viernes, "Michael Tan on Filipino Resilience: 'True Resilience Allows People to Thrive, Not to Languish,'" *GMA News Online*, November 2021, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/811808/michael-tan-on-filipino-resilience-true-resilience-allows-people-to-thrive-not-to-languish/story/>.

³² Manuel Mogato and Clare Baldwin, "Philippines Government Says Church 'Out of Touch' in Attacking Drugs War," *Reuters*, February 2017, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/philippines-government-says-church-out-of-touch-in-attacking-drugs-war-idUSKBN15K08O/>; Tina G. Santos and Christine O. Avendaño, "Palace on CBCP Apology for Silence: Just Pray," *Inquirer.Net*, January 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1079126/palace-on-cbcp-apology-for-silence-just-pray>.

³³ Julia Pavlova, Aleksandra M. Rogowska, and Stephen X. Zhang, "Mental Health and Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Journal of Community Health* 49 (2024): 173-182; Yaroslav Galan et al., "Impact of War in Ukraine and Post-Pandemic Covid-19 Period on the Psychophysiological State of Ukrainian Schoolchildren Aged 12-13," *Retos* 58 (2024): 727-736, doi:10.47197/retos.v58.106256; L. M. Yena and G. M. Khrystoforova, "Assessment of Social, Physical, and Mental Health of Elderly People During the War in Ukraine," *Pain, Joints, Spine* 13, no. 3 (October 2023): 155-164, doi:10.22141/pjs.13.3.2023.380.

³⁴ Shaun Walker, "Shock, Anger and War Fatigue: Ukraine's Two Years of Agony," *The Observer*, February 2024, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/18/shock-anger-and-war-fatigue-ukraines-two-years-of-agony>.

³⁵ Krawchuk, "War and Religious Discourse."

Last 29 July 2023, an online public webinar was co-sponsored by the CBAP's the Bible and Social Engagement (BASE) and New Testament interest groups, the Department of Theology and Religious Education of the De la Salle University, and the Department of Theology of the Ateneo de Manila University on *The Use of the Bible Amid the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*. In this forum, exegete Halyna Teslyuk of the Ukrainian Catholic University, Ukraine and St. Angela's College, Ireland presented "Women between Sacrifice and Defense: Reading the Bible amid the War in Ukraine."³⁶ She explored the war from a gender lens and drew from the Scriptures examples of women as defenders whose smartness, wisdom, and bravery changed the course of war and violence to protect her people such as Deborah, Jael and Judith. In the same webinar, the two presentations of Reimund Bieringer of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven critiqued religious institutions on their role in the war. He presented "Another War of Religion? Widespread Misuse of the Bible and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" and "Paralyzed Between 'Just War' and 'Just Peace': Roman-Catholic Attitudes Toward Ukraine's Right to Self-Defense Against Russia's War of Annihilation."

Amidst the challenges of the war on the ground, Taras Tymo, a theologian, and the vice-dean of the theology faculty at Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, also shared a vital insight to the world,

The psalms are sometimes very brutal, and we never understood. We thought this was outdated Near Eastern thing that must be explained away because Christians are too nice and refined to curse our enemies...

³⁶ See De La Salle University - Religious Educators Association of the Philippines - REAP Facebook page, accessed 1 September 2024, https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=676832591127758&id=100064030695979.

But in days like this it becomes extremely necessary to be able to voice your outrage, your anger, your panic — all your dark emotions — and to voice them in a way that is before the face of God...³⁷

This kind of real talk and raw emotions are what we find in lament and imprecatory psalms.

At first glance, imprecatory psalms seem to shower curses upon an enemy, and some Christians are disturbed by the content of these prayers even if these texts are part and parcel of the canonical Bible. This disturbance towards these psalms may have something to do with anger as being part of the so-called seven deadly, capital, or cardinal sins compose of pride, greed, wrath/anger, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2302,³⁸ it says that while anger or desire for revenge is “praiseworthy to impose restitution ‘to correct vices and maintain justice’,” it becomes a mortal sin when it leads to a willful desire to kill or seriously wound a neighbor. In CCC, 2303, it further warns that “[D]eliberate hatred is contrary to charity. Hatred of the neighbor is a sin when one deliberately wishes him evil. Hatred of the neighbor is a grave sin when one deliberately desires him grave harm.”³⁹ In the *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (CFC), 381, anger as a capital sin is described as “destructive aggressiveness.”⁴⁰ The emotion of “anger” has, thus, been vilified, associated with inadequate faith, and

³⁷ Ann Rodgers, “For U.S. Catholics, Ukraine Rescue Missions Come in Many Forms,” March 2022, <https://angelusnews.com/news/nation/catholics-saving-lives-in-ukraines-war-zone/>.

³⁸ “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” accessed September 1, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, New Edition with Expanded Index and Primer (Manila: ECCCE Word & Life Publications, 1997).

consequently, guilt.⁴¹ It is not also very helpful that in *Laudis canticum*, the Apostolic Constitution promulgating the revised book of the liturgy of the hours, Paul VI says,

In accordance with the ruling by the Council, the weekly cycle of the psalter has been replaced by an arrangement of the psalms over a period of four weeks, in the latest version prepared by the Commission for the Neo-Vulgate edition of the Bible, which we ourselves established. In this new arrangement of the psalms a few of the psalms and verses that are somewhat harsh in tone have been omitted, especially because of the difficulties anticipated from their use in vernacular celebration (no.4).⁴²

With this liturgical complexity, how can one grapple with evil and violence in the world? Erich Zenger explains that,

[T]he psalms articulate violence, whether experienced or feared, as a relational phenomenon. As poetic prayers they are the media of linguistic fettering of violence and they open routes away from violence – in light of a God, who as the “God of Vengeance,” reveals God-defying and life-destroying violence *for what it is and* keeps alive the vision of a life free from violence.⁴³

⁴¹ Mildred M. Bateman and Joseph S. Jensen, “The Effect of Religious Background on Modes of Handling Anger,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 47 (1958): 133.

⁴² For the English translation, see Paul VI, “Laudis Canticum,” catholic-resources.org, November 1970, <https://catholic-resources.org/LoH/LiturgyOfTheHours-ApostolicConstitution.pdf>; For the Spanish, Italian, and Latin originals, see Pablo VI, “Laudis Canticum,” vatican.va, November 1970, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/es/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19701101_laudis-canticum.html. Italics mine.

⁴³ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda Maloney (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), viii.

Addressing the predicament which Paul VI mentions above, Zenger argues,

Of course, it is true that the biblical psalms speak of and to this God in a disturbing and often shocking way. In particular, the “psalms of cursing,” a label that invites misunderstanding – because they do not curse; they present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God – are a puzzle and stumbling block for many Christians. For this reason, the postconciliar liturgical reform has even rejected certain psalms as unsuitable for the Catholic church’s Liturgy of the Hours, and in an act of magisterial barbarism, it destroyed the poetic form of some psalms by simply eliminating individual verses. I will indicate in this book that this censorship is unnecessary and unacceptable and will show why that is so. In particular, I will show how the psalms of enmity can help us, so that, in the world of violence in which we must live, we will not despair or be broken.

In another study on this same vein, Walter Brueggemann categorizes the psalms in relation with the different seasons of life: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.⁴⁴ “Orientation” consists of a life without tension, constantly blessed and ordered like the creation psalms (8; 33), Torah psalms (1; 119), wisdom psalms (37; 14), and retribution psalms (112). Moments of “disorientation” displaces the psalmist to a dark space or a pit, challenging the psalmist to relinquish the stability of orientation (Pss 13; 22; 25). Laments verbalize with rawness the experiences of pain, estrangement, suffering and death including the different emotions of anger, frustration, self-pity, and rage against a perceived enemy

⁴⁴ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg, 1984), 20-23.

who could be another person or group of persons, or even God. “New orientation” are psalms of praise and thanksgiving which do not forget the scars of disorientation, the existence of evil, the lure of doubt, and human’s quest for vengeance (Pss 30; 40; 66; 114; 27; 103). These psalms integrate the whole range of human experiences and understand the emotions from a new vantagepoint. With this lens, Brueggemann underlines the importance of embracing disorientation, expressed by laments, including imprecatory psalms.⁴⁵

In his two-volume commentary on the Psalms from an Asian perspective, exegete and pastor Rico Villanueva “filipinizes” the lament psalms as either *pagtatampo sa Diyos* or *pagsumbong sa Diyos*.⁴⁶ *Pagtatampo sa Diyos* expresses a sense of being hurt by the failure of someone intimately close to a person to do what was expected of them (like God). The concept of *pagsumbong sa Diyos* “suggests a person of vulnerability going to a person with authority to ‘report’ and make an appeal over what is perceived to be an unjust act.”⁴⁷ Villanueva underlines that the *sumbong* is addressed not just to anyone but to someone who is so trusted to have one’s best interest at heart and an authority figure powerful enough to redress the injustice.⁴⁸ From this lens, imprecatory psalms can be considered as *pagsumbong sa Diyos*. As intercessory prayers, these psalms utter curses or petitions that something bad or evil happens to the perceived enemy. These psalms express the honest petitions of the one who prays, that one believes in the justice that the LORD brings, and that they are addressed *to the LORD*.

⁴⁵ See Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57-71, doi:10.1177/030908928601103605.

⁴⁶ Federico Villanueva, *Psalms 1-72: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, Asia Bible Commentary (Cumbria, United Kingdom: Langham Global Library, 2016), 274-276.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Let us now briefly explore Psalm 109 as a psalm of vengeance, of disorientation, of *pagsusumbong sa Diyos*.

ACT: PSALM 109 AS *PAGSUSUMBONG SA DIYOS*

At first glance, Psalm 109 is a not an easy prayer for Christians. As the “angriest” psalm, it is not even included in the Liturgy of the Hours. For some, its raw expression of vengeance undermines the New Testament command to love one’s enemies (Mt 5,43-48; Rom 12:17-21). The editors of the New Revised Standard Version even add “They say” at the beginning of v.6 to make it appear that those who are uttering the harsh petitions are the enemies of the psalmist. In the Hebrew text, however, it is David who prays the imprecations against the enemy.⁴⁹ In this contribution, I will highlight some of the key words, phrases and verses that tightly weave the poetry and message of the psalm, meriting a second look at it.⁵⁰

Psalm 109

- v.1 For the leader. A psalm of David
- v.2 O God, whom I praise, do not be silent, for wicked and treacherous mouths attack me. They speak against me with lying tongues.
- v.3 With hateful words they surround me, attacking me without cause.

⁴⁹ For a more extensive discussion, see Steffen G. Jenkins, “A Quotation in Psalm 109 as Defence Exhibit A,” *TynBul* 71, no. 1 (2020): 115.

⁵⁰ In this contribution, I will use *The New American Bible with Revised New Testament and Revised Psalms, and with Roman Catholic Deutero-Canon (NAB)* (Washington, District of Columbia: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1991), BibleWorks, v.8.

- v.4 In return for my love, they slander me, even though I prayed for them.
- v.5 They repay me evil for good, hatred for my love.
- v.6 Appoint an evil one over him, an accuser to stand at his right hand,
- v.7 That he may be judged and found guilty, that his plea may be in vain.
- v.8 May his days be few; may another take his office.
- v.9 May his children be fatherless, his wife, a widow.
- v.10 May his children wander and beg, driven from their hovels.
- v.11 May the usurer snare all he owns; strangers plunder all he earns.
- v.12 May no one treat him with **MERCY** or pity his fatherless children.
- v.13 May his posterity be destroyed, their name rooted out in the next generation.
- v.14 May his fathers' guilt be mentioned to the LORD; his mother's sin not rooted out.
- v.15 May their guilt be always before the LORD, till their memory is banished from the earth,
- v.16 *For he did not remember to show **MERCY**, but hounded the wretched poor and brought death to the brokenhearted.*
- v.17 He loved cursing; may it come upon him; he hated blessing; may none come to him.
- v.18 May cursing clothe him like a robe; may it enter his belly like water, his bones like oil.
- v.19 May it be near as the clothes he wears, as the belt always around him.
- v.20 May this be the reward for my accusers from the LORD, for those speaking evil against me.

- v.21 But you, LORD, are my Lord, deal kindly with me for your name's sake; in your great MERCY rescue me.
- v.22 *For I am poor and needy; my heart is pierced within me.*
- v.23 Like a lengthening shadow I am gone, I am shaken off like the locust.
- v.24 My knees totter from fasting; my flesh has wasted away.
- v.25 I have become a mockery to them; when they see me, they shake their heads.
- v.26 Help me, LORD, my God; save me in your MERCY.
- v.27 Make them know this is your hand, that you, LORD, have done this
- v.28 Though they curse, may you bless; arise, shame them, that your servant may rejoice.
- v.29 Clothe my accusers with disgrace; make them wear their shame like a mantle.
- v.30 I will give fervent thanks to the LORD; before a crowd I will praise him.
- v.31 For he stands at the right hand of the poor to save him from those who pass judgment on him.

As the space provided for in this contribution is not enough for a more thorough exegesis, here are some preliminary observations on the text.

Primarily, the psalm is discernibly composed of four sections: (a) the introductory prayer addressed to God implored not to be silent on the complaint/*sumbong* of David (vv.1-5); (b) the petition of David to God to appoint an adversary-accuser against the enemy/enemies, one who has the power to confront the enemy and do something for the plight of the psalmist (vv. 6-15); (c) the reason and wishes of David for the enemy to have a commensurate suffering

for every action and inaction, in word and in deed, that were done against their community (vv.16-20); and (d) the main contrast between what God will do to the enemy/enemies and who God is to David based on his complaints/*sumbong* (vv. 21-31).

Likewise, in Psalm 109, we find the characterization of the three main actors: God who is petitioned to not be silent (v.1), the enemy/enemies with wicked, treacherous mounts and lying tongues (v.2); and David who praises God alone (v.2), who utter imprecations against the enemies (v.5), and who express gratitude and praise to the LORD before a crowd (v.30).

Moreover, from these characterizations which have something to do with the various body parts for speaking (mouth, tongue), we find that this psalm has several echoes of key words, phrases, and verses. For example, the **bold fonts** bracket the psalm with the wicked and deceitful mouths and lying tongues in v. 2 and with the thanking mouth in v. 30. They highlight the difference between David and his enemy, addressed to a God implored to not be silent. Likewise, the *italicized* verses particularize the unnamed “wretched poor” and the “brokenhearted” that the enemy hounds and brings to death (v.16), indicating that David himself is one of them, one “poor and needy” with a “pierced heart” (v.22).⁵¹ Furthermore, v.6 directly confronts v.31. David’s enemy is challenged both by the wished-for accuser (v.6) and the LORD (v.31) who are both on the side of the psalmist.

Finally, the God who is addressed and complained to is supposed by David to be a God of vengeance, the one who has all the power to carry out the imprecations of David against his

⁵¹ For Villanueva, the “I” could represent a collective identity. See Federico G. Villanueva, *Psalms 73-150: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, Asia Bible Commentary Series (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2022), 202; For a contrary opinion that the psalmist is misrepresenting the poor for his own good, see Eben H. Scheffler, “Pleading Poverty (or Identifying with the Poor for Selfish Reasons): On the Ideology of Psalm 109,” *OTE* 24, no. 1 (2011): 192–207.

enemies/enemy. The vengeance hinges on the sin of commission and omission against “mercy” (IN BOLD SMALL CAPS) by the enemies/enemy. This key word threads together subdivisions b (May no one treat him with mercy or pity his fatherless children, v.12), subdivision c (for he did not remember to show mercy, but hounded the wretched poor and brought death to the brokenhearted, v.16), and subdivision d (Help me, LORD, my God; save me in your mercy, v.26). Martin Ward affirms Franz Delitzch’s claim that the imprecation comes from David’s deep consciousness that he is the LORD’s anointed and that he is imbued by the spirit of Sinai.⁵² Against this background, one can understand how important “mercy” (*hesed*) is in the theology of the psalm. While the choice of using the NABRE translation in this work is because of its consistent translation of *hesed* as “mercy” throughout the psalm, I am more inclined to translate it as “steadfast” or “covenant love,” one that can be commanded as it has something to do with the loyalty and moral obligation enshrined in the covenant agreement between the LORD and Israel as Nelson Glueck proposed.⁵³ For Walter Brueggemann, the absence and presence of *hesed* is the core issue in the psalm, that it is centered on the covenantal origins and its vital relevance to daily communal-societal life.⁵⁴

By underlining these observations, it is clearer now that Psalm 109 is not just an angry psalm. The imprecations found in the psalm is very much rooted in the covenant between the Lord and Israel. With David as anointed one, the enemy who does not follow

⁵² Martin J. Ward, “Psalm 109: David’s Poem of Vengeance,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 18, no. 2 (1980): 164; See also Franz Delitzch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959), 177, <https://archive.org/details/biblicalcomment00boltgoog/page/n94/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁵³ See Robin L. Routledge, “Ḥesed as Obligation : A Re-Examination,” *TynBul* 46, no. 1 (1995): 179-196.

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Psalm 109: Three Times ‘Steadfast Love,’” *Word & World* 5, no. 2 (1985): 144-154.

the demands of the covenant and is instead against it, is considered both an enemy of David and an enemy of God.⁵⁵ If people like the enemy are allowed to hound others to death, what will happen to the community? How can people cope with this kind of horrific individual and collective experience? What is lost when imprecatory prayers are not said or prayed?

EVALUATE: SAVE THE POOR FROM THOSE WHO PASS JUDGMENT ON THEM (PSALM 109:31)

Discerning the structure of Psalm 109, we find descriptions of the LORD, of David, and of the enemies/enemy as well as the tightly woven themes connected by key words, phrases and verses, especially “mercy” (*hesed*). Brueggemann underlines that the psalm “is concerned *with reliable social structures and procedures of vengeance*, i.e., reliable courts, and the certain sovereignty of Yahweh’s judgment,” or of “*human institutions and divine guarantees of fidelity*.”⁵⁶ If the enemy is allowed to thrive as such, the community will descend into a society without mercy, one which hounds the poor and brought death to the brokenhearted (v.16). It will be a community that curse and not bless, speaking evil (v.20), using hateful words coming from their wicked and treacherous mouths as well as lying tongues (vv.2-3). Therefore, David’s enemy deserves all the imprecations that results in a hope “for *economic ruin* (VV. 8-11), *disintegration of the family and its disappearance from social existence*” for someone who did not practice the covenantal *hesed* that should ensure an equal, free, and just community.⁵⁷ The annihilation of the enemy and his family is brought to prayer so that absence of *hesed* will not be perpetuated for the sake of the community. The

⁵⁵ Ward, “Psalm 109,” 164.

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, “Psalm 109,” 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

enemies/enemy's conscious denial of *hesed* justifies that the “prayer addressed to God is for retaliation as brutal as the initial offense.”⁵⁸ In short, the imprecatory psalms express the hope for God's retribution, a *maranatha*.⁵⁹ From this lens, we can even say that the imprecatory psalms become double-edged: the imprecations of the oppressed against the perpetrator becomes the former's source of hope and consolation from the God of vengeance against the perpetrators satisfaction in causing unutterable sufferings in a society they deny of *hesed*.⁶⁰

Above, I already mentioned that when the imprecations are prayed, David is said to be imbued by the spirit of Sinai, which is very much the memory of Exodus and a covenant to build an alternative community.⁶¹ Based on the preliminary observations discussed above, this community can somehow be described by the following characteristics. First, it is a community where the vengeful prayer is not enacted but addressed and entrusted to God as the mighty executioner of the imprecations.⁶² Second, this is a community which takes serious the power of words, that words have world-making capacity and, therefore, members should not be afraid to bring before God their articulation of what is happening with them and with the greater society.⁶³ Third, as we have already mentioned, this angry psalm of David is laden with covenantal

⁵⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁹ Sarel Johannes Petrus Slabbert, “Maranatha as a Hermeneutical Key to Reinterpreting the Imprecatory Psalms” (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/104865>.

⁶⁰ I am grateful for Dr. Rico Villanueva's insight and commentary here about the double-edged character of the imprecatory psalms. This idea complements well the current theme of the CBAP on the double-edge sword character of the biblical texts.

⁶¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Alternative Community of Moses,” in *Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1978), 11–27.

⁶² John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *BSac* 159 (2002): 169.

⁶³ See Brandon L. Fredenburg, “The World-Making Power of the Psalms,” *Leaven* 19, no. 3 (2012): 122–127.

promises, especially expressed by *hesed*. It is, therefore, juridical and binding in nature as v.6 introduced and v.31 ended.⁶⁴ It has something to do with God and with how people live together in a community.

Likewise, we can also deduce from our observations above that denial of imprecatory psalms or of “disturbing” passages in the psalms (and even in the whole Bible), lead us to lose something very significant.⁶⁵ First and foremost, we lose our identity as being made in God’s image and likeness, including all of our human emotions. Praying the imprecatory psalms allows us to realize that evil and violence still exists not just in the psalms but more threateningly within us and in our actual world and time,⁶⁶ just like the extrajudicial killings associated with the drug war, the communist-labelling or red-tagging of the Duterte administration, and the devastating Putin’s war of invasion of Ukraine. For Shiela Carney,

anger - and all other emotions - are constitutive of human nature, a nature created by God and reflective of the divine nature; suppression of emotions results in harm, not sanctity; there is no Biblical foundation for the conception of an emotionless God worshipped by emotionless people.⁶⁷

From this loss of shared identity, we also lose God’s vision for the world that is rooted in the covenant. It is for this reason that Psalm 109 is centered on *hesed*. As David describes, those who are poor and needy, those who are treated inhumanely (animalization, being a locust, v.23), weakened and mocked will have God’s hand in mercy and, thus, in vindication, in blessing, in honor, and in joy

⁶⁴ See Sheila Carney, “God Damn God: A Reflection on Expressing Anger in Prayer,” *BTB* 13, no. 4 (1983): 117.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Brueggemann, “Costly Loss.”

⁶⁶ Carney, “God,” 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

(vv.21-26). This plight of David is contrasted with the enemies who curse and who will be shamed and disgraced. This alternate world is where the *sumbong* is brought before the one who can execute vengeance and be the power beside the hounded, standing at the right hand of the poor to save him from those who pass judgment on him (v.31). Not to lament means losing the covenant interaction and dialogue with God, the one who brings people from Egypt to Sinai. Not to lament means becoming “yes people” who *always* wear their Sunday’s best clothes and demeanor, totally disempowered to question, to do, and demand what the covenant entails, and thus, more easily, fall prey to fascist, populist, authoritarian regimes.⁶⁸

Finally, we lose the notion that the imprecatory psalms are not just done by the individual for himself or herself but for the community. In Psalm 109, David’s corporate reference to the adversary (from plural to singular) is meant to highlight what they have done to those who were poor, needy, and brokenhearted, David being one of them. Not praying the imprecatory psalms cut us off from the pain, struggles, suffering, threats of deaths of those at the margins, those living in another street or village, or even another country or continent. To paraphrase a saying in Filipino, *sakit ng kalingkingan, ramdam at aray ng buong katawan* (pain in the pinky finger, felt and expressed by the whole body). Thus, not praying the imprecatory psalms is to deny the covenant, to resist the spirit of Sinai, to prevent the building up of an alternative community that is not ruled by “us and them politics,”⁶⁹ by pharaoh’s “build, build,

⁶⁸ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York, New York: Random House, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York, New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

⁶⁹ Stanley, *How Fascism*; Reuters, “Putin Attacks West as ‘Satanic’, Hails Russian ‘Traditional’ Values,” September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us/putin-attacks-west-as-satanic-hails-russian-traditional-values-idUSS8N2Z80G1/>.

build” and “kill, kill, kill,”⁷⁰ and by the religion of the gods of Egypt who were deaf and silent on the crying out of the oppressed and the enslaved.⁷¹ David ends the psalm in gratitude and in praise because he knows that in God, in the LORD, he has someone to complain about his enemies, the enemies of God’s covenant. *Meron siyang mapagsusumbungan.*⁷²

RITUALIZE: RECLAIMING THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

How then do we reclaim the power of imprecatory psalms? By being in solidarity with those victimized by the system and by praying with and for them, especially in their grief, anger, and suffering. Brueggemann rightly challenges that when one encounters a disconcerting psalm, one must ask: “Whose psalm is this? If I am not able to pray that way today, then I can ask, who needs to pray that way today? Who is justified in praying that way today?”⁷³ Is it the kin of those killed by the drug war, including the youth, like Kian de los Santos?⁷⁴ Is it the family of the 15-year-old girl who accused PO1 Eduardo Valencia of *palit-puri*, of forcing her to have sex with him in exchange for setting her free after the police arrested her and her parents on drug charges?⁷⁵ Would they be the mothers, widows, or

⁷⁰ Aika Rey, “Build, Build, Build: Mapping the Duterte Administration’s Infrastructure Legacy,” *Rappler.Com*, June 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/business/build-build-build-mapping-duterte-administration-infrastructure-legacy/>; Kurt Dela Peña, “‘Kill, Kill, Kill’: Duterte’s Words Offer Evidence in ICC,” *INQUIRER.Net*, September 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1489259/kill-kill-kill-dutertes-words-offer-evidence-in-icc>.

⁷¹ Brueggemann, “Alternative Community.”

⁷² See Villanueva, *Psalms 73-150*, 205.

⁷³ Brueggemann, *Message*, 87.

⁷⁴ Lian Buan, “Court Verdict: Cops Lied, Kian Delos Santos Helplessly Killed,” *Rappler*, November 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/217812-calocan-court-verdict-cops-lied-kian-delos-santos-helplessly-killed>.

⁷⁵ See Aie Balagtas See, “NGO: Drug War Worsens ‘Palit-Puri,’” *Inquirer.Net*, November 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1050369/ngo-drug-war-worsens-palit-puri>.

orphans featured in the extra-judicial killing documentary produced by the St. Vincent School of Theology?⁷⁶ Should it be Reina Nasino, baby Rivers' mother, and her family?⁷⁷ How about Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine which is theologically fueled by the ideology of the "Russian world"? What are its effects on Ukrainian men, women, children, elderly and even its ecological and other tolls?⁷⁸ In July 2024, it has been reported that there are "[s]ystematic and widespread patterns of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, filtration, and related crimes against Ukrainian civilians in Russian-controlled territories [which] may constitute crimes against humanity."⁷⁹

Psalm 109 verbalizes a resolute rage that seeks expression, recognition, ritualization, and vindication. For Brueggemann, the psalmist submits rage and relinquishes vengeance to the LORD who "is not a soft, romantic god who only tolerates and forgives, but one who takes seriously his own rule and the wellbeing of his partners. The raw speech of rage can be submitted to Yahweh because there is reason for confidence that Yahweh takes it seriously and will act."⁸⁰

The horror of these test cases of violence and evil in the Philippines and in Ukraine have reached the International Criminal Court (ICC), an independent global judicial institution which

⁷⁶ *Huwag Kang Papatay (Thou Shall Not Kill)* (SVSTQC, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML1wOiQApVg>.

⁷⁷ Lagrimas, "River."

⁷⁸ "In Focus: War in Ukraine Is a Crisis for Women and Girls," *UN Women*, February 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/03/in-focus-war-in-ukraine-is-a-crisis-for-women-and-girls>; Galan et al., "Impact of War in Ukraine and Post-Pandemic Covid-19 Period on the Psychophysiological State of Ukrainian Schoolchildren Aged 12-13"; Yena and Khrystoforova, "Assessment of Social, Physical, and Mental Health of Elderly People During the War in Ukraine."

⁷⁹ Francesca Pezzola, Stanislav Miroshnychenko, and Iryna Ivachenko, "Ukraine: New Report Reveals Deliberate Torture Policy by Russian...", OMCT World Organization Against Torture, July 2024, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/reports/ukraine-new-report-reveals-deliberate-torture-policy-by-russian-forces-and-potential-crimes-against-humanity>; Shumilova et al., "Impact"; "Scale."

⁸⁰ Brueggemann, *Message*, 85.

investigates “war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the crime of aggression.”⁸¹ In the case of the Philippines, due to the difficulty of the kins of those killed in the drug war to file cases because of fear of reprisal as well as of impunity, they and other concerned groups have filed a case against Duterte at the ICC. Because of this legal action, Duterte withdrew the Philippines from its membership in the ICC. Fortunately, the ICC still has jurisdiction over the Philippines on the cases which happened from June 2016 to 17 March 2019 when Duterte's single-handed withdrawal from the ICC took effect. On 26 January 2023, the ICC authorized the court's prosecutor to resume investigation on the Philippine situation. The government appealed this ruling, and it is still pending in the court.⁸² In terms of the Russian war of invasion against Ukraine, the Pre-Trial Chamber II of the ICC considered last 22 February 2023 that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ms. Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation have a “responsibility for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population and that of unlawful transfer of population from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, in prejudice of Ukrainian children” and ICC has now issued a warrant of arrest against them.⁸³

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, “International Criminal Court's Philippines Investigation,” February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/13/international-criminal-courts-philippines-investigation>.

⁸² Human Rights Watch, As of 12 March 2025, ex-Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte has been arrested by the Interpol in the Philippines in accordance with an arrest warrant issued by Pre-Trial Chamber I for charges of murder, torture, and rape as a crime against humanity. He is currently under the custody of the ICC in The Hague, Netherlands. See <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-philippines-rodrigo-roa-duterte-icc-custody>, 12 March 2025; accessed 24 March 2025.

⁸³ Fadi El Abdallah, “Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova,” *International Criminal Court*, March 2023, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.

In addition to these legal remedies, artists and theologians have also expressed thoughts and actions to counter these evil and violence. One example is *Bloodlust*, a book of protest poetry from the time of the Martial Law during the Ferdinand Marcos regime up to the time of Duterte.⁸⁴ Another instance of creative response are the various homilies and denunciations of Bishop Pablo David from the Diocese of Kalookan against the drug war.⁸⁵ The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) also asked the faithful to ring church bells to protest the drug war.⁸⁶ Before stepping down as CBCP President, Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan's homily became a public apology and contrition for the time that took them as leaders to even more strongly speak out against the drug war.⁸⁷ Along with these responses, some leaders of the Catholic Church also instituted a more systematic way of helping the kin survivors of the drug war victims such as parish-based responses to the drug war,⁸⁸ the Program *Paghilom* (Healing)

⁸⁴ Gémino H. Abad and Alfred A. Yuson, eds., *Bloodlust: Philippine Protest Poetry from Marcos to Duterte* (Reyes Publishing, 2017); Peter Gordon, "Bloodlust: Philippine Protest Poetry (from Marcos to Duterte)' Edited by Alfred A Yuson and Gémino H Abad," *Asian Review of Books*, September 2017, <https://asianreviewofbooks.com/content/bloodlust-philippine-protest-poetry-from-marcos-to-duterte-edited-by-alfred-a-yuson-and-gemino-h-abad/>.

⁸⁵ Pablo Virgilio David, "A Prophetic Oracle against Murderers," Rappler, accessed July 16, 2019, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/209840-prophetic-oracle-murderers-bishop-pablo-david>.

⁸⁶ Manuel Mogato, "Filipino Bishops Urge Bell-Ringing, Prayers to Protest Bloody Drugs...," *Reuters*, September 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-drugs-church/filipino-bishops-urge-bell-ringing-prayers-to-protest-bloody-drugs-war-idUSKCN1BX19K>.

⁸⁷ Socrates B. Villegas, "FULL TEXT: Villegas Homily on 'Lord, Heal Our Land' Sunday," Rappler, accessed November 5, 2018, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/187399-full-text-soc-villegas-homily-lord-heal-land-sunday-edsa-shrine>.

⁸⁸ Steven Brooke and David T. Buckley, "Parish-Based Responses to the Philippine Drug War," Working Paper (The Program of Governance and Local Development, 2021), <https://www.ssrn.com/abstract=3966268>.

including exhumation for dignified interment,⁸⁹ and the Support for Orphans and Widows project which provide psycho-social-spiritual-economic assistance.⁹⁰ In the case of Reina Mae Nasino and baby River, then Auxiliary Bishop of Manila Broderick Pabillo, opened his office to their family, listened to their plight, presided a mass for the baby, and issued a pastoral letter for other priests to also offer masses for the baby.⁹¹ Arceli Beli from the United Methodist Church also commemorated the story of Reina and baby River in relation with another political detainee, Amanda Lacaba Echanis, in comparison with Mary of Nazareth in the Magnificat by reflecting on the theology of reversal in the Magnificat (Luke 1:49-53).⁹²

Various artists likewise express dissent against Putin's invasion of Ukraine but the Kremlin hounded them.⁹³ At the beginning of the war in 2022, there were even around 10,000 Russian cultural and art workers who expressed dissent against the war.⁹⁴ A protest poetry book, *Poetry of the Last Times*, is a collaboration of around a hundred authors whose protest cover the

⁸⁹ Caroline Heidigger, "Fr. Flavie: Documenting Exhumation Is History in the Making," *VERA Files*, April 2022, <https://verafiles.org/articles/fr-flavie-documenting-exhumation-history-making>.

⁹⁰ Joseph Peter Calleja, "Philippine Priest Seeks Work for Drug War Families," *Ucanews.Com*, September 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/amp/philippine-priest-seeks-work-for-drug-war-families/89595>.

⁹¹ Gabriel Pabico Lalu, "Manila Bishop Pabillo to Offer Mass for Baby River," *INQUIRER.Net*, November 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1358052/manila-bishop-pabillo-to-offer-mass-for-baby-river>.

⁹² Arceli Bile, "Balik-Tanaw: Mary, Reina Mae, and Amanda," *Bulatlat*, December 2020, <https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/12/20/balik-tanaw-mary-reina-mae-and-amanda/>.

⁹³ Charlotte Higgins, "Stalin Erased One Generation of Ukraine's Artists. Now Putin Is Killing Another - Including My Friend," *The Guardian*, July 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/14/stalin-ukraine-artists-vladimir-putin-victoria-amelina>.

⁹⁴ Anastasia Tsioulcas, "Some Russian Performing Artists Are Speaking Out Against Putin," *NPR*, February 2022, sec. Culture, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/28/1083496491/russian-performers-speak-out-putin-ukraine>.

first six months of the invasion.⁹⁵ Other artists used their talents satirizing Putin.⁹⁶ Project Hope, for its part, encourage the international community to donate for their cause, for those in Europe to offer help in sending humanitarian aid, for those who can to host Ukrainian refugees, to be a medical volunteer, to join the foreign legion, to cover the news and write and talk about Ukraine, to stop disinformation by reading and sharing only verified news.⁹⁷ Even Mark Hamill, one of the main characters of the famous *Star Wars* movie franchise used the cultural power of the film to show support for Ukraine and denounce Russia (the “empire”) and even participate in sending them military drones.⁹⁸ In a 2022 webinar with Prof. Taras Tymo, the Vice Dean of the Ukrainian Catholic University, sponsored by the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, participants asked him how the Ukrainian people are coping amidst all the hardships they must face every day and after he shared about the worry that parents like him who have teen sons have as they can be easily called on active duty in the army. One of the conclusions we all realized at the end of the conversation was that cursing – or imprecatory psalms, especially Psalm 109 - can be healing in times of extreme cruelty.

The wisdom of the imprecatory psalms about what goes on within the human heart, about what happens in human

⁹⁵ Elena Balzamo, “Against Putin and His War, Russian Poets Publish Their Anger and Dismay Online,” July 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/literary-review/article/2024/07/20/against-putin-and-his-war-russian-poets-publish-their-anger-and-dismay-online_6691766_71.html; Balzamo.

⁹⁶ Sandra Knispel, “Dmitry Bykov: Satirizing Putin,” *University of Rochester - News Center* (blog), May 2024, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/review-spring-2024-dmitry-bykov-satirizing-putin-606642/>.

⁹⁷ For more details, see <https://www.projecthope.org/region/europe/ukraine/>.

⁹⁸ Thomas Buckley and Bloomberg, “Star Wars’ Mark Hamill Is Leading the Drive That’s Sent over 500 Drones to Ukraine,” *Fortune*, October 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/10/20/star-wars-mark-hamill-leading-drive-sent-over-500-drones-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskiy/>.

communities, cannot and should not be suppressed, or repressed. Omitting them in personal prayers and community liturgies will only lead to emboldening those who do evil and violence. To hear the sentiments, sighs, weeping, and groaning of those who may be praying Psalm 109 and be present with and for them is to allow the Lord, to be like God who is not silent in front of evil and violence. To ritualize rage is to be filled with courage.

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