

Rowena Roppelt

Transformative Liturgy

Shaping an Ecological Spirituality

ABSTRACT 

This paper explores the role of liturgical worship in fostering an “ecological conversion” as envisioned by Pope Francis in *Laudato sí*. The discussion focuses on how liturgical worship helps participants to recognise their place within a transcendental horizon of meaning, to recover a sense of the rhythms of the natural world, to learn to perceive nature as “gift”, and to develop a Christian anthropology which understands human beings as part of creation. The conviction that liturgical celebrations can and should bring to expression horizons of meaning which nurture an ecological spirituality and encourage behavioural change, presents a task for liturgical theology: the objectification and evaluation of the mediation of meaning that takes place in the liturgical performance. Two case studies illustrate this concept: a Eucharistic prayer by Anglican Bishop Donald Philips and the poetic “Mass for the Earth” by Antjie Krog. Both examples demonstrate how liturgical prayer can deepen an awareness of creation and encourage a commitment to ecological care. Ultimately, the paper argues that an “ecumenical spirituality” should become a central element of Christian worship, permeating liturgical practice to inspire a more profound and enduring ecological responsibility.

Transformative Liturgie. Entwurf einer ökologischen Spiritualität

In diesem Beitrag wird die Rolle der Liturgie bei der Förderung einer „ökologischen Umkehr“ untersucht, wie sie Papst Franziskus in Laudato sí vorstellt. Die Diskussion konzentriert sich darauf, wie die Feier der Liturgie den Teilnehmenden hilft, ihren Platz innerhalb eines transzendenten Sinnhorizonts zu erkennen, ein Gefühl für die Rhythmen der natürlichen Welt wiederzuerlangen, zu lernen, die Natur als „Geschenk“ wahrzunehmen, und eine christliche Anthropologie zu entwickeln, die den Menschen als Teil der Schöpfung versteht. Aus der Überzeugung, dass liturgische Feiern Sinnhorizonte zum Ausdruck bringen können und sollen, die eine ökologische

Spiritualität nähren und Verhaltensänderungen fördern, ergibt sich eine Aufgabe für die liturgische Theologie: die Objektivierung und Bewertung der Sinnvermittlung, die im liturgischen Vollzug stattfindet. Zwei Fallstudien veranschaulichen dieses Konzept: ein eucharistisches Gebet des anglikanischen Bischofs Donald Philips und die poetische „Mass for the Earth“ von Antjie Krog. Beide Beispiele zeigen, wie die Feier der Liturgie das Bewusstsein für die Schöpfung vertiefen und ein Engagement für den Umweltschutz motivieren kann. Letztlich wird in dem Papier argumentiert, dass eine „ökumenische Spiritualität“ zu einem zentralen Element des christlichen Gottesdienstes werden sollte, das die liturgische Praxis durchdringt, um zu einer tieferen und dauerhaften ökologischen Verantwortung zu inspirieren.

BIOGRAPHY

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KEY WORDS

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“Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest, denial of the problem, indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions.” (*Laudato si’* 14)

A recurring theme in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* is the problem of motivation. Even those who are convinced of the seriousness of the crisis that faces our planet seem unwilling or unable to engage in concrete action. Pope Francis diagnoses a “value-action-gap”, that afflicts both individuals and societies: “An awareness of the gravity of today’s cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits” (*Laudato si’* 209). Christians need to experience, suggests Francis, “‘an ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (*Laudato si’* 217). For social ethicist Markus Vogt, the key to enabling sustainable action is the development of an ecological social ethic, characterized by intergenerational justice in the distribution of natural resources (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 90).¹ Both Pope Francis and Vogt agree that the motivation necessary for the active engagement in the care for and protection of the creation requires a new perspective and a widening of horizons.

The source of this new perspective and the key to bridging the “value-action-gap” is, Pope Francis suggests, “the rich heritage of Christian spirituality” which can “motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world” (*Laudato si’* 216). People nourished by this spirituality are enabled to recognize and act upon their relationship to the whole of creation, to which all are “joined in a splendid universal communion” (*Laudato si’* 220). Such a spirituality cannot be taught or “sustained by doctrine alone”; nor, as theologian Tonke Dennebaum points out, can it simply be legislated: “Transforming this sensitivity to the ecological issue into concrete political projects remains very difficult in the global context”.²

What is required, says Francis, is an “interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity” (*Laudato si’* 216). Drawing upon the work of Dennebaum, this paper will seek to demonstrate that the celebration of the liturgy provides a unique opportunity for the formation of individuals and communities in a spirituality that nourishes and motivates such an “ecological conversion”. It will begin by examining the perspectives that must be transformed, before moving on to discuss the relationship between liturgy and the trans-

¹ Citations from this article have been translated into English by the author.

² „Die Umwandlung dieser Sensibilität für die ökologische Frage in konkrete politische Vorhaben gestaltet sich im globalen Kontext weiterhin sehr schwierig.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 84)

formation of horizons, and the function of liturgy in the ecological conversion in particular. Using the categories thus developed, the paper will reflect upon two examples of liturgical prayer which seek to foster or nurture an ecological spirituality, and propose a task for liturgical theology.

1 Debunking myths of modernity

Before discussing the role of liturgy in ecological conversion, it is important to examine the elements contributing to the lethargy that plagues concrete solutions to the environmental crisis. What perspectives need to change before people and societies become actively involved? Pope Francis points to the need for “a critique of the ‘myths’ of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset”, and the need to develop an “ecological equilibrium” (*Laudato si’* 210).

A lethargy that plagues concrete solutions to the environmental crisis

1.1 Individualism

The first “myth” that Francis names, is the myth of individualism: “We lack an awareness of our [...] mutual belonging” (*Laudato si’* 202). Dennebaum agrees:

“One of the key difficulties in implementing a genuine awareness of sustainable action in the world is the question of individual motivation. The utilitarian reference to the provision of the same amount of resources for the current generation as for their children and grandchildren is obviously less effective the more a society is characterized by individualized lifestyles and by accelerated and spatially unbounded work and leisure behavior.”³

Exaggerated individualism makes it impossible to implement sustainable structures and policies that guarantee all people access to globally available resources, while avoiding the exploitation of the environment (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 94).

3 „Eine der entscheidenden Schwierigkeiten bei der Umsetzung eines echten Bewusstseins für nachhaltiges Handeln in der Welt ist die Frage der individuellen Motivation. Der utilitaristische Hinweis auf die Zurverfügungstellung einer gleichen Menge an Ressourcen für die gegenwärtige Generation wie für deren Kinder und Enkel greift ganz offensichtlich umso weniger, je mehr eine Gesellschaft durch individualisierte Lebensformen und durch beschleunigtes und räumlich entgrenztes Arbeits- und Freizeitverhalten geprägt ist.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 101)

1.2 Shortsightedness

A second challenge is the myth of unlimited progress. Francis says, “We lack an awareness of [...] a future to be shared with everyone” (*Laudato si’* 202). We behave as if our accelerating use of resources and our pollution of the environment can continue indefinitely, thereby endangering the rights of future generations (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 90). Dennebaum suggests that this “shortsightedness” is related to the question of how we experience time:

“The imbalance of time scales in ecological, social and economic processes can lead to irreparable damage to the ecological balance. Extremely short product life cycles, the industrialization of agriculture, fast food, recreational stress or inappropriate use of telecommunications can lead to long-term concerns being pushed into the background. [...] The only way out is to find the ‘right measure of space and time’.”⁴

1.3 Anthropocentrism

Another challenge is the need to recover an “ecological equilibrium”. In *Laudato si’* Francis stresses repeatedly the relatedness of all of creation and emphasizes that an awareness of “our common origin” could encourage concrete action for the care of creation. In other words, the myth of anthropocentrism needs to be debunked. Human beings need to recognize that “we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures [...] we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings” (*Laudato si’* 220). Vogt argues for a “relative anthropocentrism” as the basis for an ecological social ethic: the protection of nature is grounded in this case not primarily in its own value, but rather in its long-term usefulness or necessity for human beings. Such a relative anthropocentrism demands nonetheless that humans take responsibility for their behaviour and “avoid any false alternative between anthropocentrism and the value of fellow non-human creatures”.⁵

1.4 Ecocentrism

A further characteristic of a sustainable ecological social ethic therefore is, according to Vogt, a network of relationships, “retinity”, among the various fields that contribute to the problematic. There must be a balance be-

⁴ „Das Ungleichgewicht der Zeitmaße in ökologischen, sozialen und ökonomischen Prozessen kann zu irreparablen Schädigungen des ökologischen Gleichgewichts führen. Extrem kurze Produktlebenszyklen, Industrialisierung der Landwirtschaft, Fastfood, Freizeitstress oder ungute Nutzung von Telekommunikation können dazu führen, dass langfristige Anliegen in den Hintergrund rücken. [...] Einen Ausweg bietet lediglich das ‚rechte Maß für Raum und Zeit‘.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 94)

⁵ „[...] jede falsche Alternative zwischen Anthropozentrik und dem Wert der nichtmenschlichen Mitgeschöpfe zu vermeiden.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 91)

tween social, ecological and economic processes of development, and an absolutization of any one of these fields must be avoided (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 92). This balance would undermine the myth of “ecocentrism”. Similarly, Francis stresses the need for networking: “ecological equilibrium” requires the nurturing of “a harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (*Laudato si’* 210).

1.5 *Taking the world for granted*

For Francis the perspective that brings together all of these categories is “the recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity” (*Laudato si’* 220). The tendency either to take the resources of the earth for granted, or to assume that we have the right to use them as we will, is the final myth that needs to be undermined. The awareness of ourselves as recipients of God’s great goodness, calls us to engage in care for that which we have received.

2 **Liturgy and the mediation of horizons of meaning**

If these are the perspectives that need to change in order to bridge the value-action-gap, the next question that needs to be addressed is how ritual or liturgy could contribute to this transformation. What does liturgy have to do with ethics and with concrete action outside of the worship space?

Ritual plays a decisive role in the dynamic development of societies.

According to ethnologist Victor Turner, ritual plays a decisive role in the dynamic and ongoing development of societies. Rituals generate, critique and transform meaning. They bring beliefs and values to expression. By participating in ritual, individuals assimilate the values of a society and develop a horizon within which to make sense of their world. Turner describes ritual as “distinct phases in the social process whereby groups become adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment” (Turner 1967, 20). He presents ritual as a dynamic system of symbolic objects, actions, words, gestures, relationships and arrangements of space, by means of which societies and the individuals within them are constantly in the process of formation (cf. Kelleher 1991, 100).

Margaret Mary Kelleher draws upon the work of Turner to explain the function of Christian liturgy. She describes the liturgy as “ecclesial ritual action” (Kelleher 1988, 5; Kelleher 1991, 100). That which the assembly performs in the liturgy is its own corporate meaning. The symbolic system of the liturgy embodies the shared memories, beliefs, values, hopes and commitments of the assembly, and thus in the performance of liturgy, the Church and individuals within it participate in their own ongoing realization (cf. Kelleher 1988, 6). Similarly, Teresa Berger has emphasized that “[t]he meaning of liturgy [...] comes to be seen as always actively negotiated (and ‘produced’) by those present” (Berger 2006, 75).

The process of ecclesial becoming is the mediation and appropriation of a public horizon.

This process of ecclesial becoming is, Kelleher suggests, the mediation and appropriation of a “public horizon”. This horizon is a “world of meaning”, which sets out the public spirituality of the assembly, and provides a vision of what it means to live as a member of the Christian community. This horizon is received, passed on in the ritual action, yet it is not static, nor is it necessarily identical with meanings identified in official liturgical texts or commentaries. Decisions made within the collective subject about the concrete performance of the liturgy may alter the public horizon, even while this is being transmitted (Kelleher 1988, 7). Berger suggests that such critical and transformative decision making continues even when the liturgical performance itself has finished: “Much liturgical meaning-making happens outside of the specific time-frame of the liturgy itself, as people ponder, find solace in, resist, and subvert liturgical celebrations and their powers in lived life” (Berger 2006, 76).

According to ritual theorist, Ronald Grimes,

“What is unique to liturgy is not that it communicates [...], proclaims [...], or exclaims [...], but that it asks. Liturgically, one approaches the sacred in a reverent, ‘interrogative’ mood, waits ‘in a passive voice,’ and finally is ‘declarative’ of the way things ultimately are. In liturgy, ritualists ‘actively act’ in order to be acted upon.” (Grimes 2013, 45)

In liturgy, participants wait upon the divine, experience the world as it really is, learn to see beyond the way things seem to be. It is this encounter with the divine that shapes a new horizon, a new perspective, and thus

a new way of being in relation to the world and to other human beings. Grimes says, “Liturgy is a way of coming to rest in the heart of the cosmos. Liturgy is how a people becomes attuned to the way things are – the way they really are, not the way they appear to be” (Grimes 2013, 45). Liturgy thus involves a cosmic dimension, helping us to recognize our place in the midst of creation.

Liturgy helps us to recognize our place in the midst of creation.

Orthodox liturgist, Alexander Schmemmann describes the function of the liturgy in a similar fashion:

“The liturgy of the Church is cosmic and eschatological; but the Church would not have been cosmic und eschatological had she not been given, as the very source and constitution of her life and faith, the experience of the new creation, the experience and vision of the Kingdom which is to come.” (Schmemmann 1990, 58)

The liturgy can be transformative because it is eschatological. It is the experience already – but not fully – of the world as God means it to be. In participating in the liturgy, worshipers grow into this identity. This experience has the potential to change the way people live and act in the world. Bruce Morrill explains,

“giving oneself over to the radical otherness, the transcendent, messianic, and eschatological content of the liturgy, changes the way one perceives and prioritizes all aspects of life – interpersonal, economic, familial, political.” (Morrill 2000, 106)

These various descriptions of the nature of liturgy offer insight into the way that ritual performance or praying of the church might effect an ecological conversion in the participants. The texts, music, symbols and rituals of the liturgy invite participants not only to experience but to take part in the ongoing formation of a horizon of meaning – namely, the “new creation”, the world as God meant and means it to be. At its best, liturgy is an encounter, a gifted experience, that can help to transform the perspective of its participants, so that a change in behaviour becomes not only possible but necessary.

3 Nurturing an ecological conversion

From the theory that the performance of liturgy can and ought to shape horizons of meaning, we move to concrete examples of the way that liturgical worship could nurture a specifically ecological spirituality. Dennebaum has suggested that liturgical worship offers “a unique opportunity to address the ethics of creation as a theme of the human world”.⁶ Specifically, he points to elements of liturgical celebration that address the perspectives in need of transformation, if an ecological conversion is to take place.

3.1 Communion

The common celebration of the liturgy, when the assembly joins together in praise of the God of creation, stands in stark contrast to the individualism that hinders the just and sustainable distribution of resources among people around the world. Dennebaum asserts that,

A communion, which extends to the whole of creation

“The joint celebration of liturgy [...] can convey the value of community and social responsibility – especially if the sustainability aspect is an explicit part of the praise of creation – without making a cost-benefit calculation with a view to one’s own offspring. The celebration of the praise of creation makes community tangible and thus becomes a source of motivation for a sustainable and just treatment of creation.”⁷

In *Laudato si’*, Francis points to the celebration of the Eucharist as the summit of this communion, which has its foundation in the God who became part of our world, and which extends beyond human beings to the whole of creation:

“Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: ‘Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world’.” (Laudato si’ 236)⁸

The local celebration of the Eucharist is the opportunity for those gathered together to experience in Christ their relatedness to each other and to the whole of creation, and to grow ever deeper into the realization of the consequences of this relationship.

⁶ „[...] eine einmalige Gelegenheit, die Ethik der Schöpfung als Thema der menschlichen Lebenswelt zur Sprache zu bringen.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 102)

⁷ „Die gemeinsame Feier von Liturgie hingegen kann [...] den Wert von Gemeinschaft und gesellschaftlicher Verantwortung transportieren, ohne eine Kosten-Nutzen-Rechnung mit Blick auf die eigene Nachkommenschaft aufzustellen. Die Feier des Schöpfungslobs macht Gemeinschaft erfahrbar und wird so zu einer Quelle der Motivation für einen nachhaltigen und gerechten Umgang mit der Schöpfung.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 101)

⁸ Compare Teresa Berger (2022, 22): “[...] this sense of communion in worship with everything created runs through the whole encyclical. It comes to a highpoint in the Pope’s claim that in the Eucharist, ‘the whole cosmos gives thanks to God’.”

3.2 Foresightedness

The liturgy also offers the context within which to recover “the right measure for space and time”. In contrast to the “breathless acceleration of life” that characterizes postmodern society, the liturgy offers “a way to bring the marked times of the year and the rhythm of natural processes to expression and make them tangible”.⁹ The feasts of the liturgical year and the patterns of the liturgy of hours, for instance, invite worshipers to take the time to recognize and rejoice in God’s presence in the midst of everyday life and in the world around us. The ancient Church Order, the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, for instance, which instructed Christians to engage in prayer at regular intervals during the day, explains the particular significance of prayer at midnight:

“[...] at this hour all creation is still for a moment, so that they may praise the Lord stars and trees and waters stop for an instant, and all the host of angels [that] ministers to him praises God at this hour together with the souls of the righteous.” (TrAp 41,15, in: Bradshaw et al. 2002, 200)

Teresa Berger explains that this directive “insists that midnight prayer joins human beings to a vast primordial, cosmic communion of praise” (Berger 2022, 12). The liturgy of the hours grounds participants in the natural patterns of time, and reveals these patterns as the opportunity to encounter God in creation. Gordon Lathrop explains, “To pray according to the motions of the sun is to do not just any ritual but to use the sun’s passages as occasions to remember God’s deeds with praise and to beseech God’s mercy” (Lathrop 1993, 37).

Moreover, the encounter with God in the liturgy challenges worshipers to expand their temporal and spatial horizons (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 98–99). In the liturgy, the shortsightedness which plagues postmodern society meets with an experience of time that brings together past, present and future. This involves not merely the recognition of the divine in time and space, but the inbreaking of a new time, a new creation, or, as Schmemmann has it, a “new aeon”. The renewal of creation has already begun, and we are invited to experience it, and join in bringing it forward. The celebration of the “Lord’s Day” is the source of this new horizon. Schmemmann explains,

“The Lord’s Day is not ‘one out of the several’ days of the week and does not belong to time, just as the Church is ‘not of this world,’ and cannot be a part of it. But at the same time the Lord’s Day, the first and eighth

⁹ „Liturgie im Allgemeinen und liturgisches Schöpfungslob im Besonderen können jedoch einen Weg weisen, wie man die geprägten Zeiten des Jahres und den Rhythmus der natürlichen Prozesse ins Wort bringen und erfahrbar machen kann.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 101)

day, does exist in time and is revealed in time, and this revelation is also the renewal of time, just as the existence of the Church in the world is its renewal and salvation.” (Schmemmann 1986, 183)

The Eucharist, which is celebrated on Sunday, rather than on the Sabbath, is the sign of this new eschatological understanding of time. While the Sabbath is the day to celebrate God’s work in creation and to rest with him, Sunday marks the resurrection of Christ, the transformation of the world as we knew it. In the early Church, Sunday was described for this reason as the “eighth day”, the day when God’s good creation, broken by humankind, is renewed – already, but not yet. Lathrop says,

“To encounter Christ risen is to encounter God’s spirit and God’s mercy, things that have been promised for the last day, when God’s dwelling is to be with humankind and tears are to be wiped away. Christians believe the eighth-day meeting is already the dawning of that day. The eighth day is the beginning of a new creation.” (Lathrop 1993, 40)

The eighth day as a motivation to work towards the world as God always intended it be

The eighth day is not an escape from the world, but the reason, the motivation to work towards the renewed creation, the world as God always intended it be. Christians can hope and work for a renewed world, because they have already had a taste of it.

3.3 Harmony

The liturgical prayer of the Church also provides the opportunity to situate human beings within the whole of creation. People, trees, stars and waters join together in praising God. The psalms which play such a central role in the liturgy of hours, form worshipers in a sense of the relatedness of all that is, and focus attention upon the one who creates and sustains the world:

*“Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!*

*Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.” (Psalm 148,9–13)*

Worship as a corrective to anthropocentrism

Dennebaum suggests that the praise of God in creation provides a necessary corrective both to anthropocentrism and to an ecocentrist mentality that tends to absolutize the natural world at the expense of social and economic realities (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 101–102). Liturgical worship offers the opportunity to experience and to practice “ecological equilibrium”, until it becomes second nature. Berger encourages the rediscovery of Christian worship as “the primordial posture of everything created”. According to this perspective, worship

“is not simply about creation as a theme [...] or about praise and thanksgiving for creation in the liturgy. Rather this insistence is about something more radical, namely a new – or better ancient – understanding of who is included in the worshipping assembly. In this understanding, liturgical communio is inter-creaturely, and exercised in the praise of God offered by all that has been called into existence.” (Berger 2022, 9)

It is not only, however, the content of liturgical texts and prayers that shapes the ecological spirituality, but the very way that liturgy works – bringing a variety of genres and forms into relationship with one another. Dennebaum remarks,

“There is hardly any area of human experience that contains as much potential for retinity as the liturgy. [...] it is possible within the liturgy to relate very different areas of life to each other, e.g. in intercessions the concrete needs in work and the environment, in the psalm the joy and gratitude for creation and, in meditation, awareness and empathy for nature and the beauty of the world.”¹⁰

Liturgy teaches participants to recognize the interconnectedness of all things, and thus counteracts the tendency to focus upon one area of development at the expense of another (cf. Dennebaum 2010, 99–100).

Lathrop may shed further light on the potential of liturgy to encourage retinity. He has argued that it is precisely the “setting of one thing next to an-

¹⁰ „Es gibt wohl kaum einen Bereich menschlicher Erfahrung, der so viel Potential für Retinität enthält wie die Liturgie. [...] So kann es innerhalb der Liturgie gelingen, sehr unterschiedliche Bereiche des Lebens miteinander in Bezug zu setzen, z. B. in Fürbitten die konkreten Nöte in Arbeit und Umwelt, im Psalm die Freude und Dankbarkeit über die Schöpfung und in Meditationen das Bewusstmachen und Nachempfinden von Natur und Schönheit der Welt.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 99–100)

other” (Lathrop 1993, 33) that produces meaning in Christian worship. The juxtaposition of word and table, of praise and beseeching, of teaching and bath communicate the paradox that “the very God who is praised as creator of all is also known as present in the cross to all the misery that everywhere cries out for mercy” (Lathrop 1993, 80). This structure or *ordo* of the liturgy draws worshipers in and produces “a new view of the world, a response to the wretched of the world” (Lathrop 1993, 81). The liturgical *ordo* is replete with paradox, and resists the acceptance of simplistic or one-sided solutions. Lathrop says, “The truth about God is proclaimed in juxtapositions, not in solitary and univocal statements or actions, and always is announced by beggars who pray” (Lathrop 1993, 66).

3.4 Gift and task

Finally, liturgy contributes to an ecological spirituality by enabling participants to recover a sense of wonder at the beauty of the world God has given us. Dennebaum says,

“The liturgical praise of creation focuses in particular on the beauty and meaning of creation and in this way creates a space for perceiving and appreciating the intrinsic value of creation. In contrast to the direct perception of nature, this is less about the concrete beauty and design of the world but rather an understanding of nature as creation and as a gift to be glorified and at the same time protected.”¹¹

Learning to wonder at the beauty of the world and to perceive it as a gift means acknowledging the responsibility to care for what has been given.

¹¹ „Das liturgische Schöpfungslob richtet den Blick besonders auf die Schönheit und den Sinn der Schöpfung und schafft auf diese Weise einen Raum, um den Eigenwert der Schöpfung wahrzunehmen und wertzuschätzen. Dabei geht es – anders als im direkten Wahrnehmen der Natur – weniger um konkrete Schönheit und Ausgestaltung der Welt als um das Verständnis der Natur als Schöpfung und als zu verherrlichendes und zugleich schützenswertes Geschenk.“ (Dennebaum 2010, 100)

4 A task for liturgical theology

Out of this conviction that liturgical celebrations can and should bring to expression horizons of meaning which nurture an ecological spirituality, arises a task for liturgical theology. The initial mediation of meaning that takes place in the liturgical performance must be objectified, made explicit. The challenge for the liturgical theologian is to put into words what is being communicated or performed, in other words, to engage in a second mediation of meaning. A further aspect of this task is the evaluation of the adequacy of the horizon mediated in the liturgical action. Is a particular ritual or prayer form an adequate expression of an ecological spirituality

(cf. Kelleher 1988, 10)? While participation in liturgy can contribute to the formation of an ecological spirituality, a liturgy may also serve to obscure problematic perspectives or to stabilize the status quo. Part of the task of liturgical theology is thus the recognition and restructuring of “broken liturgies” (Berger 2006, 78).

The recognition and restructuring of “broken liturgies”

As a contribution to this task, two very different examples will now be considered.

4.1 A new Eucharistic Prayer

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, named the liturgy, and above all, the celebration of the Eucharist, the “primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14). In *Laudato si’*, Christian spirituality is shown to be essentially ecological in nature, and the Eucharist is described as the source of a spirituality of creation (cf. *Laudato si’* 236–237). It thus matters very much how the Church celebrates this liturgy, and what comes to expression in the performance. Central to this performance is the *Great Thanksgiving*. This prayer might be described as a confession of the faith of the Church: here the memories, beliefs, values, hopes and commitments of the assembly come to expression in narrative form. The *Great Thanksgiving* is characterized by an “anamnetic-epicletic” structure: It is first of all the remembrance and thanksgiving for all that God has already accomplished, as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. On the basis of this remembrance of what God has accomplished, the prayer dares to ask for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, the renewed world, which, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has already begun. It asks that God transform the gifts of bread and wine that the assembly offers, so that the assembly itself may be transformed, and participate in the realization of this new world (cf. Gerhards/Kranemann 2019, 218–219).

Throughout the history of the Church, this central prayer has had many different incarnations, each with its own unique emphasis. A new Eucharistic Prayer, composed in 2015 by Donald Phillips, a Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, attempts to bring to expression an ecological spirituality, and to empower worshipers to act upon their praying (cf. Phillips 2015). Within the traditional structure of a Eucharistic canon, this prayer dares

to expand the perspective of the assembly, using a Trinitarian address to invite the assembly to join in creation's praise of the creator-God, to realize the redemption of all creation in God the Word, and to reaffirm its own vocation to the care of creation in communion with Holy Wisdom.

The anamnestic portion of the prayer begins with the blessing and thanksgiving of the God who made himself known in his creative and redemptive activity in history. The grateful recitation of the divine action since the beginning of the world reminds the worshipers not only of God's great goodness, but also of their own identity. The celebrant prompts: "We give you thanks", and the people respond, "For we are gifted with your likeness, O God." The prayer tells us what God is like, and thus sets forth a Christian anthropology: God is the one who out of love created the universe: "you formed this world and everything in it as your Garden; calling it good, and giving this created order to the humanity you formed in your image." The world is good, and human beings, created in the image of God, are "gardeners", "charged [...] with caring for this fertile gift". God is also the one who "made a covenant with Israel; and through them called the peoples of all nations to live in peace, justice and righteousness with all of humanity". Those who are "gifted with God's likeness" must therefore also be concerned with peace, justice and righteousness for all people.

Gifted with God's likeness, and failing to realize this likeness

Human beings are, however, also those who fail to realize this likeness with God, those who have "abused the responsibility and freedom you gave us, and used the gifts you provided to injure your creation, each other, and ourselves". They are those who "break faith" with God, setting other priorities, making "other things the gods of our lives". Another, more traditional prayer in use in the Anglican Church of Canada, speaks of how human beings "turned away from you in sin" (Anglican Church of Canada 1985, 193). In this new prayer, the sin is specified. Humans are sinful beings when they fail in their task to be gardeners and peacemakers, when they fail to image the God of creation. In spite of this failure, God remains faithful to the people he created, seeking them out "as a lover does their beloved". The celebrant prompts: "We give you thanks," and the people respond, "For your unfailing, redeeming love." It is this unfailing love that enables people to continue to hope and to engage in the task given to them.

This prayer sets human beings firmly in the context of the whole of creation. The integral relationship between humanity and creation comes to

expression very clearly in the introduction to the *Sanctus*: “Therefore, with all of the beauty and wonder of your creation we lift our voices in praise to you: Holy, holy, holy ...” The *Sanctus* itself is a reference to Isaiah 6,3, the prophet’s vision of the Seraphim in heaven praising the Lord of Hosts. In other Eucharistic Prayers of the Anglican Church of Canada, this song of praise is extended to include human beings. For instance: “Therefore we praise you, joining with the heavenly chorus, with prophets, apostles and martyrs, and with those in every generation who have looked to you in hope.” (Anglican Church of Canada 1985, 202) This new prayer, reminiscent of psalms of creation, invites worshipers to join with the whole of creation in praising God.

The focus upon the relationship between humanity and creation continues following the *Sanctus*, in anamnetic prayer addressed to the second person of the Trinity: “Living Christ, you indeed are blessed and worthy of all thanks and praise.” Christ is praised for his redeeming work, beginning with his incarnation and culminating in the gift of his life on the cross “for the sake of the whole world”. Following the pattern of the West Syrian anaphoras, the *Institution Narrative* serves as the climax of this anamnetic portion of the prayer (cf. Gerhards/Kranemann 2019, 219).

The redemption of Christ reaches the whole of creation.

The redemption in Christ is not limited to human beings, but reaches the whole of creation. The incarnation is “the ultimate gift of your love for the whole of creation”; the birth of Christ is the answer to the groaning of creation “for our restoration as your stewards of this world”. Christ comes to renew the whole of creation by recalling human beings to their role within it. He models what it means to care for the whole of creation: reaching out to all people, especially those on the fringes of society, “moving beyond acceptable boundaries, to heal a foreign woman, to call a society outcast to become one of your colleagues”. Redemption in Christ means turning perspectives upside-down, initiating a “politics of God’s Kingdom [...] where the great ones are those who serve”. The foot washing at the Last Supper is offered as an example of how this transformative love works, and as a command to follow the example.

The strength to participate in the transforming love of Christ is the subject of the epicletic portion of the prayer. Following the *Institution Narrative*, the celebrant prays, “Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts and upon us, uniting us to Christ as your children forever.”¹² This section of the prayer

¹² Here the prayer slips back briefly to addressing the first person of the trinity – disturbing the otherwise consistent structure. Perhaps due to concern about the validity of the consecration?

demonstrates two particularly innovative structural elements: From this point on, the addressee is the third person of the Trinity. Also at this point, the assembly takes over the main speaking role, praying together for “empowerment”. The celebrant is cast in the role of the respondent, summing up the quintessence of the people’s petitions. Each of the four petitions elaborates the ways in which the assembly needs to be supported by the Holy Spirit in the realization of their task as children of God and stewards of creation. There must be a transformation in perceiving:

People: Life-giving God, empower us to recognize the beauty and integrity of creation and to order our lives to be good stewards of its gifts.

Celebrant: Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see your truth.

The Spirit is asked to help change the way we see the world and our role within it.

Not only individual perception needs changing, however, also structures and institutions need to be renewed, so that sustainable development becomes possible. This requires a transformed understanding and the responsible use of reason:

People: Life-giving God, empower us to use our freedom to set people, institutions, and governments free to be sources of life and support for all people.

Celebrant: Holy Spirit, open our minds to receive your wisdom.

Empowered by a renewed ability to recognize the world as a gift and ourselves as stewards, and facilitated by sustainable structures, individuals need the strength to act out of self-giving love, as Jesus did:

People: Life-giving God, empower us to witness to greatness by serving those around us, especially the poor and marginalized.

Celebrant: Holy Spirit, open our hearts to offer your love.

A final petition asks for the transformation of the assembly:

People: Life-giving God, empower us to entrust our lives to you, and to each other; making us a community of Jesus’ disciples living in faith and hope.

Celebrant: Holy Spirit, open our lives to embrace your will.

Realizing our identity as beings created in the likeness of God and following the example and command of Jesus Christ requires the formation of community. It means learning not only to trust one another but to *entrust* our lives and the lives of our loved ones first to God and thus to each other.

To entrust our lives first to God and thus to each other

The communion in faith and hope for which the assembly prays is mirrored and practiced in the structure of the prayer itself. That the *Great Thanksgiving* is fundamentally the prayer of the whole assembly, has been demonstrated in Eucharistic Prayers throughout the history of the Church by the fact that it is composed in the first person plural and framed by the opening dialogue of the *Sursum Corda* – “Lift up your hearts”, “We lift them up to the Lord” – and the concluding great *Amen* that is spoken by all and which signals the consent of the assembled people of God. In this new prayer, the joint action of all participants is emphasized still further by the inclusion of regular acclamations on the part of the people in the anamnestic section, but above all by the exchange of speaking roles that takes place in the epicletic part of the prayer. Here the assembly takes the initiative, speaking in unison the petitions to the Holy Spirit. Based upon the history of God’s creative and redemptive actions which they have heard, the people proclaim together their longing for transformation and their willingness to be transformed.

This *Great Thanksgiving* demonstrates effectively how the central prayer of the Church might help to transform the perspectives of the assembly, nurturing the sense of their integral place within the whole of creation, revealing the wonder of God’s gift, recalling them to their vocation as stewards of creation, and shaping them as a community committed to working towards the renewal of creation.

4.2 Broken Earth. Mass for the Universe

In his exploration of the possible role of liturgy in the cultivation of an ecological ethics, Dennebaum focuses almost exclusively on “doxology”, arguing that the liturgy can help participants to realize their place in the midst of a creation which offers praise and thanks to its creator. While this transformation of perspective is certainly central to the ecological conversion, it overlooks the need for the expression and cultivation of other emotions: sorrow, anger, or repentance. The Eucharistic Prayer which we

have examined brings to expression not only praise for the creating and redeeming acts of God, but also the regret that human beings have destroyed God's gift, instead of caring for it. Praise and thanksgiving are juxtaposed here with confession. It must be admitted, however, that this expression of remorse is rather restrained, if not understated.

In the collection of poems entitled, *Broken Earth. Mass for the Universe* (Krog 2020; translation Rondaij 2023), by South African poet Antjie Krog, the lament for the destruction of the earth is far from understated. The *Mass for the Universe* is an "ode to the earth", which uses the elements of a requiem Mass to challenge readers to recognize their complicity in the brokenness of our world: "It is an impressive appeal and indictment at the same time: how can we take care of each other if we do not take care of our fragile earth that is about to break. Do something while you still can!" (Meppelink 2022; machine trans. from Dutch by deepL.com) The collection of poems might also be understood as a challenge to widen the language of liturgical praying, to provide space for the expression of pain and brokenness, and our own culpability. This is a liturgy in which the creation gives voice to its sorrow and its anger, and in which it demands justice.

The divine one herself cries out for help.

For instance, the *Introitus* and *Miserere Nobis* is an invocation of the universe, using "the un-disclosed name God". The divine is recognized in the beauty of creation, "I am God! Calls the winter grass that colours the meadows white with ripe." But God is also addressed in the wounded creation: "I am God! Calls the family in the heaving dinghy / I am God! Shines the plastic polluted sea." The images of the refugee family, at the mercy of the ocean, or the sea clogged with garbage challenge the reader to recognize God even, or especially, in the midst of misery. In the image of the suffering creation, the divine one herself cries out for help.

The *Dies irae*, with seven pages and eight sections, is the longest part of the collection. Here the reader is confronted with the anger of those who suffer because of the unjust distribution of the world's resources and the destruction of the environment:

*"From the ends of the earth
the poor come to us
they shout and clench their fists on the mountain slopes
they throng together in the voids*

*and however you may turn they are with us
and with our inability to lead a virtuous life
in relationship to them.”*

The Day of Wrath becomes almost tangible in this description of the suffocating, inescapable hordes of people, screaming for justice. The reader is trapped by her own feeling of powerlessness, impotence, and inability to change her way of living.

A very different tone is set in the final poem, *Lux aeterna*, a reworking of the *Lord's Prayer*. After the terrifying visions of the Day of Wrath, this prayer is a plea for the forging of a new relationship with the earth and all its creatures:

*“Our Fragile Earth that extends under the universe
let Your Existence be holy to us,
let us see You as a kingdom
let us take good care for You,
for Your surface
as for Your depths.”*

The earth itself is the object of this prayer, and the petition to be enabled to recognize its holiness is at the same time an expression of the commitment to care for the earth. The earth is acclaimed as the giver of life: “You give us everyday / our daily light, tempered water, photosynthesis and bread.” Rather than asking for forgiveness for that which is unpardonable – “our pollution you cannot forgive / neither the way we abuse and destroy each other” – this prayer asks that we be tempted to transform our way of being: “Lead us into the temptation to love You above all else / to redeem You from all festering disgrace”. The doxology with which *Lux aeterna* concludes is an affirmation of the wonder of the earth, which speaks of the hope that all is not lost: “Because to You belongs this point in the cosmos / and its power, its abundance and its delightful equilibrium / in eternity.”

Broken Earth. Mass for the Universe might serve as an inspiration for the liturgy of the Church. In this collection of poems, the liturgy provides the framework for words and images that are capable of rousing readers to sorrow or remorse. These poems demonstrate the way that liturgy might provide the opportunity to express anger and frustration, but also to nourish hope and courage in the face of the destruction of our earth. Our churches would be well served to cultivate poets capable of giving voice to such powerful liturgical texts.

5 Performing horizons of meaning

While the written or spoken word is an integral element of the mediation of meaning in the liturgy, it is not the only means, nor can it function in isolation. As Turner and Kelleher insist, ritual is a dynamic system that communicates and allows the assimilation and further development of personal and societal or ecclesial meaning. It involves not only text, but symbolic objects, actions, gestures, music, the use of space and time. It is the interaction – or, as Lathrop would have it – the juxtaposition of all these elements that bring the Christian horizon of meaning and its ecological spirituality to expression.

Ritual is a dynamic system, involving not only text.

In attempting to demonstrate the task of liturgical theology, this paper has focused on texts. This is, however, only the first step, for the mediation of meaning must take into account the way that the liturgy is performed. For instance, both the content and structure of the Eucharistic Prayer by Donald Phillips bring to expression the communion among participants, challenging an individualistic perspective. An important next step in the mediation of meaning would be the observation and interpretation of the performance of this prayer. Does this communal identity come to expression in the arrangement of space and in the gestures of the participants? Does the celebrant stand apart from the assembly, raised above them? Do the people gather about the table together, or face the front? Are there varying postures during the prayer – who stands, kneels or sits? Does the communion that follows the prayer resemble a feast, or does it bring to mind rather the line-up at the fast-food window of a McDonald's?

The prayer also emphasizes the beauty and wonder of the creation we have been given. Does this wonder and the realization of giftedness come to expression in the symbolic objects used in the liturgy? Do the bread and wine look, smell and taste appetizing? Are they recognizable as bread and wine? Where do they come from? Did those who grew the grain and baked the bread receive a living wage? Are the bread and wine presented as gifts, for instance, in a procession to the altar? Do other elements of creation play a role in the ritual – for instance, in the decoration of the worship space, or in the presentation of the gifts? Might the liturgy be celebrated outside?

That performance plays a central role in the mediation of meaning becomes very clear in watching and listening to a performance of Krog's *Bro-*

ken Earth. Mass for the Universe.¹³ The collection has been set to music by South African composer Antoni Schonken, and performed in Rotterdam and Doesburg. The performance in Doesburg took place in a church building, the instruments and choir arranged in the chancel, with a simple cross as background. The text, spoken by Krog herself, is juxtaposed with both music – instrumental and choral – and with raw cacophonies of voices. Although spoken and sung in Afrikaans, the meaning of the poetry comes to expression in sound: it is disturbing, haunting, chilling and, at the last, peaceful and uplifting. The *Mass for the Universe*, performed in this setting, reinterprets the other liturgies that have taken place here, bringing to expression in a new way what the Christian message of sin and redemption means, and what relevance it might have for a broken earth and for guilty human beings.

6 Conclusion

What motivates people to care for the earth? This paper has argued that the ecological spirituality called for by Pope Francis must become a central aspect of the liturgical worship of the church. It is not enough to relegate our prayer for the “Common House” to one special day or season¹⁴ of the year (cf. The Holy See 2015). The liturgical celebrations of the Church need to be permeated by a spirituality that is capable of widening the horizons of the praying assembly. Drawing upon the tradition of the Church, we need to expand – and sometimes reform – the vocabulary, symbols and performance of our liturgical celebrations so that they authentically reflect and shape the memories, beliefs, values, hopes and commitments of the assembly, challenging us to live and act in the world in a manner consistent with our praying. As Morrill asserts,

“Christians need to know a way of living in relation to God, humanity, and all creation that can transform what they – due to arrogance, selfishness, indifference, resignation, or despair – already know and take for granted about the way the world is.” (Morrill 2000, 107)

Participation in the liturgy is – or should be – the opportunity to experience and to embody a transformative way of being in the world.

¹³ My comments are based on the performance in Doesburg, which took place on September 10 and 11, 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ21F4gpCVs> [19.03.2024].

¹⁴ In her introduction to *Full of Your Glory. Liturgy, Cosmos, Creation* (2019), 7, Teresa Berger notes the development of “a whole new season in the liturgical year dedicated to creation”.

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