



“Communitas” in Liminal Spaces: Exploring Christian Spirituality from The Experience of the Displaced

ABSTRACT

Displacement, as a sociological, political, economic and cultural phenomena, is a very real experience especially among those who are living in “inner cities” or the communities of informal settlers and the indigenous peoples (lumads) who are ravaged by insurgency, militarization and other forms of human-made and natural calamities. In recent years, particularly in Mindanao, there have been waves of displacement among the indigenous peoples. Thousands of bakwits are forced to leave their ancestral lands and seek temporary shelters in evacuation centers and informal settlements. By employing a hermeneutical analysis, this paper offers a descriptive interpretation of the narratives of the displaced from the optic of liminality as a socio-cultural category. As displaced persons, the bakwits and the informal settlers are always in an in-between state of uncertainty, contradiction and ambiguity. Inherent to this condition is the reality of living in liminal spaces which is characterized by fluidity and the intersection of spheres and boundaries. It is also in this “space of encounter” that they form and experience communitas. From this analysis, this paper tries to map out some key elements of a Christian spirituality that is grounded on the experience of the displaced and relevant in today’s reality marked by a pandemic and an on-going political and economic marginalization.



Keywords: *Displacement* – Displacement refers to a broad spectrum of phenomena generally associated with spatial dislocation with its sociological, cultural, political and economic consequences. *Bakwit* – A Cebuano terminology referring to the forcibly displaced persons specifically the indigenous peoples. *Liminal/Liminality* – A condition or a space characterized by transition, unsettlement, uncertainty, marginality and ambiguity or being thrust into a median state, that is, outside of the established categories, status, structures of the society. *Communitas* – The intense sense of solidarity, comradeship, egalitarianism, humility and communion developed by those who are living in liminality.

INTRODUCTION

Displacement has been a common feature of the everyday experience of today's people. As Edward Said says: "Our age, with its modern warfare, imperialism and quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers... is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, and mass immigration."

In the context of the Philippines, this culture is precipitated by various factors such as urban migration, war, and natural and human-made calamities.¹ Such experience is very real especially among the *lumad*² communities or indigenous peoples who are ravaged by insurgency, militarization, and other forms of human rights violations. In recent years, there have been waves of displacement and evacuation among the indigenous peoples who, in their defense of their ancestral lands, have been labeled as insurgents and sympathizers of the New People's Army (NPA). Thousands of "*bakwits*"³ have been forced to leave their ancestral lands and seek temporary shelter among concerned civil and

¹Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, R. Ferguson, M. Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 357.

²"Lumad" is a Cebuano term used by Filipinos, primarily in Southern Philippines, to refer to indigenous peoples. Literally, it means "native" or "indigenous."

³"Bakwit" is the Filipino transliteration of the English word "evacuee." It generally refers to persons who are displaced either by war, violence, calamities and disasters.

religious groups. The United Nations Refugee Agency records that in 2019, in Mindanao alone, “a total of 387, 722 persons have been forced to flee their homes of which a majority of these have been repeatedly displaced due to armed conflict and generalized forms of violence including human rights violations.”⁴ Reflecting on the condition of the displaced based on the real-life narratives of the *bakwits*, this paper is a humble contribution to the on-going efforts of developing a relevant missionary spirituality for the Church to exercise her mission in a world largely characterized by displacement, migration, and homelessness.

THEORIZING DISPLACEMENT: DISPLACEMENT AS LIVING IN LIMINAL SPACES

To be “placed” is to have a sense of connection, loyalty, affection, and identity within a particular context or space – a location, a house, a community, a nation.⁵ This concrete experience of being intimately connected to a place is what makes that “place” a home. To be “home” is to experience some place as “primal,” as first, as a place to which one has a profound sense of connection, identity, and even love.⁶ Displacement generally refers to a broad spectrum of phenomena “which is usually associated with spatial dislocation, both in its sociological component and cultural implications.”⁷ To be displaced is to be “excluded from some place and have no remaining connection to it at least physically or geographically.”⁸ In other words, at the heart of displacement is the experience of being homeless. It is not just the

⁴United Nations Refugee Agency, “Displacement Dashboard: Mindanao, Philippines Forced Displacement Report, 2019 (November 2019),” <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Mindanao-Displacement-Dashboard-NOVEMBER-2019.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2020).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷Sandra Ponzanesi, “Diasporic Subjects and Migration,” in *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, eds. Gabrielle Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed Books, 2002), 208.

⁸Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, 45.

mere opposite of having a place or space to stay. It is losing a sense of permanent and stable connection to a certain place that is intimately tied with one's cultural identity. It is on this particular understanding that I would like to frame the reality of being a *bakwit* as experienced by the *lumads*.

Being a *bakwit* is one of the most profound experiences of displacement. The United Nations refers to them as “internally or forcibly displaced people.” They are “persons or group of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights, and natural or human made disasters.”⁹ This leads to a continued disruption of their lives, a cutting off of their connection from the place they have considered home, and an increase in their socio-economic and political vulnerability. Considering the seemingly endless armed conflict in Mindanao, the *bakwits* face the risk of continued and constant displacement.

The word “liminal” has been discussed in many academic disciplines and has been used in a variety of ways. It was the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep who coined the term “liminal” particularly in his work on the rites of passages in cultural traditions. Gennep describes those rites of initiation such as passage from age groups as liminal stages.¹⁰ The other well-known author who elaborated on this concept is the British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner who defines the liminal as a condition “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”¹¹ It is a state of standing between both sides of two walls of definition or categories. It generally refers to a condition characterized by

⁹The United Nations Refugee Agency, “Internally Displaced People,” <http://www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html> (accessed July 15, 2016).

¹⁰Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 10.

¹¹Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), 95.

transition, unsettlement, uncertainty, ambiguity or being thrust into a median or in-between state – outside of the established categories, status, structures of community or society. It is in this sense that the displaced, specifically the *bakwits*, can be considered as being in a liminal condition. The characteristics which sum up such reality are very much real in their experience. This will be discussed further in the next section.

THE LIMINAL STATE OF THE BAKWITS

To be in-between is to be in a condition that refuses any clear cut or definite representation and categorization. The *bakwits* are in a state of liminality because as displaced people they are in a period of transition – a seemingly endless process of waiting and journeying. They are standing between the two poles of leaving and going back home or between being settled and being not. This is concretely exemplified in their life inside the temporary shelters and evacuation centers. Since the places where they stay are merely temporary, their life is always characterized by transience and transition. They remain to be at the threshold or *limen* of what remains to be an unknown future. This is also the background of Homi Bhabha's assertion that the liminal movement arises from those who are living at the margins or borders of the society; the ones who are considered as the "minoritized," that is, the displaced.¹²

The lived reality of the *bakwits* necessarily indicates that they are living in liminal spaces. As liminal beings (*liminal personae*), they have no status, property and they elude the network of classifications that normally locate states or positions within the geographical, socio-economic and political space.¹³ To be in the liminal state is to be in a liminal space. Homi Bhabha calls liminal spaces as "borders." According to him, displacement creates a "borderline existence."¹⁴ It puts the people in a "border condition"

¹²Ibid., 154.

¹³Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 359.

¹⁴Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 13.

wherein they become representatives of an “in-between reality.” When one is displaced, “the borders between home and the world become confused; and, uncannily, the public and the private become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”¹⁵ In the border, there is the blurring of boundaries and there a constant mixing, touching, and encounter of different identities, languages, perspectives, ideas, traditions, practices, and the like. It is a field of constant interaction and negotiation. To be displaced is not just losing one’s home. It is a cultural displacement as much as it is geographical or spatial. It is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations¹⁶ – the mixing up of the private and private sphere.

In the liminal space, the “private and the public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy.”¹⁷ It serves as the site for the emergence and formation of new identities that goes against the imposed representations or categories of the powerful in society. This is what makes the places where the displaced are staying or settling “liminal.” It is the sphere that escapes any signification and identification from the dominant or totalizing power relations, language, and knowledge. It is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.¹⁸ It is a space of passage and translation where new meanings are borne out of the interaction or what Bhabha describes as the “intertextuality” of various cultural differences. As “the space of the minoritized and the marginalized,”¹⁹ it is the condition wherein a borderline or marginal culture arises. In the context of the *bakwits*, temporary shelters and evacuation centers have become the liminal spaces where they encounter people with different cultural backgrounds and identities, who, just like them, have become displaced due to factors beyond their control. The evacuation

¹⁵Ibid., 9.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 13.

¹⁸Ibid., 9.

¹⁹Ibid., 152-157.

center becomes a “melting pot” of various cultures wherein *lumads* from various ethno-linguistic groups are gathered and are living together in the same space. In such a situation, there are no clear borders. One does not have a space that he or she can call as a domestic or private sphere. What happens is the blurring or perhaps distortion of boundaries which Bhabha refers to as the “emergence of the interstices.”²⁰ In these spaces of liminality, the “overlapping of differences” rather than strict differentiation is the normative condition.

LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS AMONG THE BAKWITS

Liminal spaces such as the evacuation centers of the *bakwits* are spaces of encounter where hybrid identities are formed. It is in such context that a transformed culture can possibly emerge – a “marginal and minoritic”²¹ culture of the displaced. This emerging cultural identity which cannot be represented into the established categories of the society gives witness to the fact that liminal places can become spaces for “solidarity.” These people from different “ethnicities,” dispersed and displaced from their homelands, are now gathered in a shared space where cultural differences are negotiated and transformed into a kind of a shared reality. Their common experience of being thrown into the “borders” of the society has enabled them to form and develop a sense of solidarity. As Homi Bhabha puts it: “For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between us into a kind of solidarity.”²² The displaced are the ones who are very much capable of crossing borders and boundaries of differences.

This emergence of a culture of solidarity is very much discernible in the narratives of the displaced wherein by living under the same condition, they have developed a strong sense of

²⁰Ibid., 2.

²¹Ibid., 170.

²²Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2-3.

connection and togetherness. I have personally encountered this reality among the *bakwits* in my various engagements with them in the evacuation centers. Their shared struggles have led them to help and work for the good of each other and to advance their common goals. This is a concrete expression of their “new shared identity” which corresponds to Turner’s concept of *communitas*.²³ *Communitas* refers to the intense sense of solidarity, comradeship, egalitarianism and communion developed by those who are living in liminal spaces. It is a byproduct of their encounter and engagements. It emerges in the margins and fringes of a formal social structure.²⁴ It is a marginal and structurally inferior condition developed by those living in a state of liminality. For Turner, *communitas* is a symbol of mystical danger and the power of the weak.²⁵ It becomes the very expression of their common struggle and vision. The *bakwits* who are in the periphery of the socio-economic, political, and cultural landscape of the society concretely embody such characteristics. It was their shared condition of being displaced – of living in liminal spaces – that brought them precisely to a state of *communitas*.

DISPLACEMENT AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The reality of being forced to cross borders and to leave one’s homeland as a refugee and alien is a very common theme in the Old Testament.²⁶ Wandering in the “desert or wilderness,”²⁷ a major element in the history of the Israelites, profoundly shaped their character and identity as the people of God.²⁸ Being displaced and homeless as they wandered in the desert/wilderness is

²³Victor Turner prefers to use the latin term “communitas” to “community” to distinguish this modality from an area of common living.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 371.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Arsene Brice Bado, *Dignity across the Borders: Forced Migration and Christian Social Ethics* (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2011), 35.

²⁷In the context of the bible, desert also means wilderness. See John Manuel Lozano, “Desert,” *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2005): 213–218.

²⁸Bado, *Dignity across the Borders: Forced Migration and Christian Social Ethics*, 35.

particularly recorded in the book of Exodus and Numbers. In the book of Exodus, their desert/wilderness experience started when they were displaced from the land of Egypt. It was this experience that “brought out” a new reality in the history of the Israelite people. When they left Egypt, God led them into the desert and wilderness. They went through the harsh realities of the desert of *Shur* and the desert of the *Sinai* Peninsula. In such an uncertain and ambiguous condition, the Israelites had to totally trust in God’s providence. Their journey through the desert/wilderness served as a “new path of conversion and purification, which was necessary before entering the land of Canaan.”²⁹

The desert/wilderness is both physically and figuratively beyond “normal” and “familiar”. It is a place of constant threat and danger. It means being stripped of the usual conditions that people have been used to. The Israelites’ journey through the desert/wilderness was a way of leaving behind the “onions of Egypt,” the symbol of security, though in captivity.³⁰ Such situation of uncertainty and ambiguity became a place and a condition to encounter God. Later prophets would even describe this as “desert ideal”³¹ because it was in the desert that they experienced God’s graciousness although they have oftentimes grumbled against Him. It was in the midst of the death-dealing condition of the desert/wilderness that they witnessed the life-giving power of God. It was in the place of hardship that God came to succor His people. The trials and tests that they went through transformed and helped them to learn their new identity according to the will of God. It was there that their being God’s people emerged and started to take shape. It became a place of dying to the old ways of living³² and entering into a special relationship with God – a

²⁹Fabio Baggio, *Theology of Migration* (Quezon City: Scalabrini Migration Center, 2005), 7.

³⁰Fabbio, *Theology of Migration*, 7.

³¹Allen C. Myers et al., eds., “Desert,” *The Erdmans Bible Dictionary*, 279.

³²Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (NY: Random House, 1991), 16.

“covenant whereby they became God’s people.”³³ This covenant became the fundamental basis on how they were to live as God’s people. The difficult situation of being in the desert/wilderness also instilled in them that sense of solidarity for one another, of being one as a covenantal people of God.

THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

Another significant story in the Old Testament was the period when the Israelites fell at the hands of the Babylonians. It happened during the time of prophet Jeremiah around the middle of the 7th century BCE. He foretold the devastation of the Kingdom of Judah and their deportation and exile to Babylon as punishment because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant.³⁴ It was disastrous for the people of Israel because they had to go through another time of forced displacement. As Maria Boulding puts it: “The exile was the greatest disaster they had ever suffered; it was crushing and horrifying not simply that war always is for prisoners and refugees, but because it seemed to call into question the whole meaning and validity of their faith.”³⁵ As exiles in Babylon, they had to relearn once again how to live according to the ways of God. It allowed them to rethink their relationship with God, to repent, and to hope for their great homecoming.³⁶ They were asked by God to live, work in solidarity with one another, and serve the king of Babylon (Jeremiah 27: 8). The prophet Jeremiah announced that it was a path for conversion and he offered a promise that God will bring them back to their homeland (Jeremiah 32: 37-40). The new experience of *alienness* would bring the “chosen people” to the original oneness, ideally reconstituting

³³John Manuel Lozano, “Desert,” *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 214.

³⁴Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, 8.

³⁵Maria Boulding, *The Coming of God* (Conception, MO: The Printery House, 2000), 16-17.

³⁶Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, 9.

the great kingdom of Israel, blessed by the Lord himself.³⁷ Finally, in 538 BC, an edict from the Persian Emperor Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland as recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

These narratives of displacement and homelessness in the Old Testament demonstrate how the history of the salvation and the history of God's people were significantly shaped by their experience of being displaced and by their encounters with other peoples and cultures. It also shows how God can be encountered in such situation. It is a testament that displacement is not alien to God and His people and reveals how God expresses His transforming love and mercy in the midst of such reality.

JESUS AS A *PAROIKOS*: THE DISPLACED AND HOMELESS MESSIAH

The background of the Israelite people as a nation of migrants, refugees, and exiles is continued in the New Testament. And it is concretely portrayed in the life of its central figure – Jesus Christ. All the gospel writers depict Jesus as a “*paroikos*”, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word “*ger*” or “*gerim*” which can be translated as exile, stranger, resident alien, sojourner, and immigrant.³⁸ The gospel of Matthew and Luke attempt to wrap up the origins of Jesus himself in the experience of a displaced people.³⁹ Luke narrates that Jesus was born at the time when Joseph and Mary had just arrived in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7). From the very beginning of his life, he already experienced being displaced and homeless. Jesus was basically born “on the road” and not in a comfortable room or palace but among the shepherds and animals in a stable. As Donald Senior puts it: “Jesus began his earthly

³⁷Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, 9.

³⁸Nguyen, “Asia in Motion: A Biblical Reflection on Migration,” 25.

³⁹Donald Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles: New Testament Perspectives on Migration,” in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspective on Migration*, eds. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 20–33.

journey as a migrant and a displaced person.”⁴⁰ The experience of alienness and homelessness of Jesus is even vividly portrayed in the gospel of Matthew wherein after his birth, the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt in order to avoid the infanticide in Bethlehem ordered by Herod. When the Holy Family returned to Judea from Egypt, Mary and Joseph had to take Jesus and migrate once again to Nazareth because the new ruler of Bethlehem, Archelaus, was also as despotic and cruel as Herod.⁴¹ This reality shows that Jesus, even at an early age, already experienced constant displacement.

Donald Senior strongly emphasized that the entire adult life of Jesus is portrayed as an itinerant who is often viewed by others as an outsider and a vagabond.⁴² Jesus was constantly on the move – “a temporary resident alien who is constantly crossing borders.”⁴³ In the Markan gospel, Jesus is vividly depicted leaving his family and asking those who follow him to do the same (Mark 10: 28-31). As an itinerant preacher, he was always moving from one place to another, from one town to another without the security of having a place to stay. Jesus was always seen with those who are at the margins of the society: the poor, the women, the sick, and the Gentiles. His itinerant preaching often happened on the road, on a mountain, on a shore; only rarely in synagogues.⁴⁴ In the synoptic gospels, we can see that Jesus’ whole life was seen as journey – “a geographical movement that finds its ultimate meaning in the journey of Jesus from death to life in the Paschal experience that awaits him at journey’s end in Jerusalem (Mk. 10:32-34).”⁴⁵ Finally, Jesus dies as a criminal, hanging between

⁴⁰Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles’: New Testament Perspectives on Migration,” 23.

⁴¹Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, 11.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Van Than Nguyen, “Asia in Motion: A Biblical Reflection on Migration” in *Asian Christian Review* 4, 21 (2010), 26.

⁴⁴Baggio, *Theology of Migration*, 11.

⁴⁵Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles’: New Testament Perspectives on Migration,” 23.

heaven and earth and buried alone outside the city wall in a stranger's tomb.⁴⁶ With this, we can see that Jesus was indeed a "*paroikos*" – an exile, a displaced person, foreigner, stranger, refugee, and immigrant in this world.

THE NARRATIVES OF DISPLACEMENT IN THE BIBLE VIS-A-VIS LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

The desert/wilderness in the bible as a geographical space is characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and danger.⁴⁷ Its condition is very unforgiving as it renders human beings vulnerable. It is literally being outside of the normality of life – beyond the categories of domestic space and settlement. The desert/wilderness theme in the bible can be seen as a literal and symbolic space wherein there are no points of certainty. In their journey, the Israelites were vulnerable and were in the "median state" between life and death and were totally dependent on the mercy and providence of God. Such condition of insecurity, uncertainty, and ambiguity makes the desert/wilderness a liminal space. Geographically, it was the "in-between" of their journey from Egypt to the promise land. Their life in the desert/wilderness was basically a life that was always "on the move." To be in transition and not to be fully settled is at the heart of liminality. It was in the desert/wilderness that their new identity as God's people started to emerge and take form. We can recall here the analysis of Bhabha that the liminal space is the site where new identities are molded and formed. It was their shared experience of being in the desert/wilderness that transformed and brought them together into becoming "God's people."

⁴⁶Nguyen, "Asia in Motion: A Biblical Reflection on Migration," 26.

⁴⁷See Section 2.2, par. 5-7, pp. 25-29.

The category of liminality and *communitas* can also be employed in analyzing the life in exile. An exile is settled in a given area yet there is always that feeling of being foreign in relation to others and of not totally belonging to the community. A person in exile is neither completely one with his/her community nor totally disconnected with his/her homeland. This was also the very experience of the Israelites when they became exiles in Babylon. While they were there, they always longed of going back to the land of Judah. It was in such condition of being half-settled, of continuing with their lives and yet not being totally assimilated by the life in the foreign land that made their exilic existence a form of living in liminal spaces. The exile was again another kind of an in-between state (a liminal space) where they were reminded of who they were as a people. It served as a site for the re-emergence and relearning of their identity as God's people. While in Babylon, they were asked by God to continue with their lives but they must always hold on to the promise of a homecoming. They were to be a pilgrim people or "liminal sojourners"⁴⁸ who are not to feel totally at home because they will be returning to their true homeland. The Israelites' encounter with the different culture and tradition of the Babylonians led them to re-appreciate, strive to preserve and uphold their own tradition and practices. The common experience of living as exiles brought them closer as a nation- a deeper sense of connection to one another. It allowed them to re-create a common vision of themselves as a people bound to God.⁴⁹ Such experience is the Israelites' very own experience of *communitas*. A renewed sense of being God's people spurred them to live out their identity in the midst of a foreign context. Exiles try to re-create their life and experience of living in their homeland in a new and totally different reality.

⁴⁸See Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, 294-304.

⁴⁹Ibid., 485.

JESUS' LIMINAL SPIRITUALITY AND COMMUNITAS-FORMING MISSION

Jesus is portrayed in the gospel as a displaced and homeless person; an itinerant preacher who was always crossing geographical boundaries and spaces by living like a stranger without any sense of certainty and security. He was always on the move. The life and mission of Jesus therefore is significantly linked with liminality. While doing his ministry, he was always emphasizing that his true home is with the Father in heaven and that his life and mission on earth is a period of transition – a liminal or in-between period. As Victor Turner notes, to be a follower of Christ is to live a life in liminality. He writes, “The Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveler, with no place to rest his head.”⁵⁰ Hence, the missionary spirituality of Jesus was indeed a liminal form of spirituality. As a wandering preacher and miracle worker, he was always seen with the excluded, the abject, the oppressed and the marginalized of the society which, according to Bhabha, are the prime examples of those living in liminal spaces. He paid special attention to those who are ritually, symbolically, and socially unclean, and thereby rendered deeply homeless.⁵¹ In his missionary activities and encounters with these “little ones,” his attitude was always for them to experience liberation from their suffering and experience acceptance and re-integration. He empowered those who were powerless and weak. This is reflective of Turner’s description of *communitas* wherein there is an intentional redistribution of power and reconsideration of who are powerful.⁵² Jesus consistently challenged the “attitudes, practices, and structures that tended arbitrarily to restrict or exclude the marginalized in the community.”⁵³

⁵⁰Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 107.

⁵¹Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, 23.

⁵²Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 102.

⁵³David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 27.

Jesus' mission was a mission of *communitas*. He reached and lived in solidarity with the excluded. He shared table with them.⁵⁴ The experience of sharing a meal with those considered sinners and outcasts of the society is a poignant imagery of the *communitas*-forming mission of Jesus. Through the act of table fellowship, Jesus was able to gather together the marginalized. The gospel of Luke presents many instances wherein Jesus was in table fellowship with them. Sharing a meal is very important in Jewish culture. It is an intimate encounter for them. Jesus' table fellowship is distinctive in that they were even open to women, the morally and ritually impure.⁵⁵ When Jesus was being anointed by a sinful woman at a meal (Lk. 7: 36-50), allowing a woman to sit in a place of honor during a meal while she ignored her traditional role (Lk. 10: 38-42), attending a banquet held in his honor by a despised tax collector (Lk. 15: 1-2), receiving sinners (Lk. 19: 1-10), or appearing to his disciples at a meal before his ascension (Lk. 24: 36-49), he used the *communitas* experience around a meal to redefine who was included in the Kingdom of God.⁵⁶ Jesus transgressed the rules, ritualism and legalism of Pharisaic Judaism that tended to create barriers and borders of exclusion. He went beyond purity laws and customs. He touched the lepers,⁵⁷ dined with tax collectors,⁵⁸ and was seen together with prostitutes.⁵⁹ This attitude of Jesus corresponds to what Turner underlined that within *communitas*, laws are suspended.⁶⁰ His *communitas*-forming message went beyond legalistic considerations by including the outcasts, the poor, the oppressed, and those set aside by the society.

⁵⁴See Mark 2:15-17.

⁵⁵Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 108.

⁵⁶J. Derrick Lemons, "Communitas at the Tables: Jesus, the Marginalized, and the Modern Church" in *The Asbury Journal* 70 (2015): 162.

⁵⁷Luke 4: 12-16; Mark 1: 40-45 and Matthew 8: 1-4.

⁵⁸Luke 15: 1-2 and Matthew 11: 19.

⁵⁹Luke 7: 36-50.

⁶⁰Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

Furthermore, a sense of *communitas* was also formed among those who followed Jesus in his missionary activities. Those who experienced the liberating missionary praxis of Jesus and have followed him are led to share in his liminal condition and develop a greater sense of togetherness, of solidarity and of belonging in Him. As Bhabha had said, the sense of being a community is born out of those who are living in liminality especially those who are at the borders and margins of society. In this sense, “liminality and the resulting *communitas* is the normative situation of those who have followed the way of Christ.”⁶¹ When Jesus sent his disciples to preach and witness to God’s Kingdom, their mission too was to announce and invite others, especially the poor and the excluded, to share in the *communitas* inaugurated by the Messiah!

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY OF LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

In the previous sections, I have discussed how the condition of the *bakwits* can be interfaced with the narratives of displacement in the sacred scriptures using the interpretative category of liminality and *communitas*. From this hermeneutical reflection, I will map out some identifiable features of a Christian spirituality born out of a context characterized by displacement – a spirituality of liminality and *communitas*.

⁶¹Alan Hirsch and Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook: A Practical Guide of Developing Missional Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 170.

LIVING WITH CHRIST IN LIMINALITY: AN INCARNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is commonly understood as a way of being in the world born out of one's encounter with God in a particular context or experience.⁶² In other words, any expression of Christian spirituality is always contextual in nature. It is a lived-reality, a manifestation of faith-life experiences. The spirituality of the *bakwits* is based on an awareness that God is present and is truly among them. Those who have become baptized Christians articulate how their Christian faith have influenced the way they reflect on their experience of displacement. They identify Jesus as someone who is sharing in their condition which gives them further strength in their hope for a homecoming. These faith affirmations reveal a certain spirituality that is anchored on the conviction that God is present among them in liminality.⁶³ It is in their experience of uncertainty, ambiguity and "in-betweenness" that they encounter the presence of Jesus in a concrete and intimate manner. The liminal spirituality of the displaced, rooted on such faith and confidence, is an incarnational spirituality. Consequently, a Christian spirituality in a context of displacement is a way of being through which the follower of Jesus "incarnates" himself/herself in the concrete condition of the displaced and follows the footsteps of Christ among those who are living in a state of liminality.

⁶²Anthony Gittins, *Reading the Clouds: Mission Spirituality for New Times* (Barnhart, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1999), 1.

⁶³See Cecilia Menjivar, "Serving Christ in the Borderlands: Faith Workers Respond to Border Violence" in *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*, ed. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 111.

FORMING COMMUNITAS IN LIMINAL SPACES

The shared struggles and engagements of the *bakwits* amidst their diverse cultural backgrounds are manifestations of how their experience of living together in liminal spaces has allowed them to become instruments of *communitas* to one another. Their respective faith-traditions, with its innate values of harmony and solidarity, also played a vital role in such a process. This aspect of the spirituality of the *bakwits* is a form of “missional solidarity.” Forming *communitas* in liminal spaces is a spirituality of solidarity. Just as Jesus expressed his *communitas*-forming ministry by living in solidarity with the least and the marginalized, a spirituality of liminality and *communitas* should also be concretely expressed by being and living in solidarity with those who are in the uncertain condition of liminal spaces. Such spirituality challenges the Church to share the *communitas* that they have experienced in Jesus to those who are radically excluded and are in the fringes of the societal structure.⁶⁴ An experience of *communitas*, that is, among the displaced can lead to a deeper sense of compassion and commitment for the advancement of their rights and a recognition of this special place in the table of the Lord’s banquet. Living a spirituality of liminality and *communitas* means becoming channels of deep solidarity among those who are in the sacred space of the liminal. It is animating and embodying their very own hopes and dreams.

A SPIRITUALITY OF HOPE BASED ON THE CERTAINTY OF THE “GREAT HOMECOMING”

The everyday struggle of the *bakwits* is deeply founded on a certain hope that one day, they will be able to finally return to their ancestral land. The vision of a homecoming is always anchored on this hope.⁶⁵ The *bakwits* see beyond their daunting

⁶⁴J. Derrick Lemons, “*Communitas* at the Tables: Jesus, the Marginalized, and the Modern Church” in *The Asbury Journal* 70, 162 (2015), 159.

⁶⁵See Stephen Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, 315.

condition and hold on to that hopeful vision. Hope sees beyond what is easily perceivable, challenges what the current situation presents and transcends the devastating reality of the present. The displaced refuse to be paralyzed by the face of the present. They hold on to the memory of their homes – the hope of a homecoming. They are powerful witnesses of hoping in the midst of hopelessness and believing in the possibility of the impossible. This is not just mere optimism. It is rather “an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored beyond its horizons.”⁶⁶ The spirituality of the displaced then, is also a spirituality of hope. Gustavo Gutierrez once underlined that any theology about displacement must be grounded on a hermeneutics of hope. In the same vein, a Christian spirituality of liminality and *communitas* is fundamentally configured by this radical hope. By incarnating one’s self among the displaced and by sharing in their experience of *communitas*, this spirituality also requires that the follower of Jesus become a sign of radical hope for them by providing a vision of a certain liberation and homecoming.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The spirituality of liminality and *communitas* radically challenges how we, Christians, are to live out our faith in a context characterized by displacement. As followers of Jesus Christ we are bound to become liminal sojourners. We are called to be willing to incarnate ourselves among the displaced and to journey with those who are in living liminal spaces. We are to become instruments of *communitas* and bearers of hope among them. A Church animated by a spirituality of liminality and *communitas* is a Church that is on the move, going and crossing through borders and frontiers. It is a

⁶⁶Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), 181.

⁶⁷Gustavo Gutierrez, “Poverty, Migration, and Option for the Poor” *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspective on Migration*, eds. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 84

liminal Church that is not confined within its very own structures, but a Church that is in a constant process of becoming by reaching out to those who are in the marginal and cultural boundaries of our society. It is a Church that is willing to be weak and vulnerable by going out of the insulated space of the “comfortable.” It is when we walk with Jesus in liminal spaces that we are challenged and transformed by the faith experience of the displaced. In such act of radical humility, we embrace Jesus through the face of the displaced.

This spirituality can also be very much relevant in relation to the current pandemic. The reality of COVID-19 has shown to us that no one is saved by himself. As Pope Francis puts it: “It is either we help each other or we shall all perish!” The problems and challenges brought about by the pandemic will have to be addressed in a spirit of intense solidarity and a particular care for the most vulnerable and those who are in the peripheries (in the liminal spaces!). Through this, we will be able to move forward with hope and strengthened by the mysterious presence of Christ who calls us to be gathered together in the *communitas* of his love.

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