

“Keeping Vigil” and the Response of a Believer to Grief and Suffering

JAMES G. SABAK, OFM
Providence College

The phenomenon of organizing a civic candlelight vigil in the face of violence and tragedy, while striking and powerful in addressing the moment, can be also religiously ambiguous in some circumstances, and insufficiently therapeutic in others. Keeping vigil in the Christian tradition is markedly different from its contemporary expressions. This article explores and evaluates—through the use of contemporary examples and the psychological and ritual analyses of Gotthard Booth and Victor Turner—the purpose and goals of vigils held in the public square with the nature and impact of keeping vigil in the Christian tradition, especially as celebrated in the Easter Vigil. This expository and diagnostic study suggests that a full expression of keeping vigil serves as an articulation of how believers are challenged to confront pain and suffering with a more profound theological and liturgical response that stands in stark contrast to contemporary cultural and social mechanisms.

Keywords: vigil, candlelight, light, Gotthard Booth, Victor Turner, Easter Vigil, eschatology, transformation

Introduction

THE experience of a vigil in the public square, an evening or nighttime public event occurring either within a public building or in the open of a public square, seems ubiquitous these days.¹ In reporting on tragic events, broadcast media and other public information platforms regularly mention that a vigil has been planned or organized as a

¹ Specific terminology for the type of vigil that occurs in response to public crises or to issues that disturb or damage the public commonwealth does not exist at present. The author provides the terminology “candlelight vigil” or “vigil in the public square” to describe these civic and social events and to distinguish them from vigils of a liturgical nature.

*James G. Sabak, OFM, is Assistant Professor of Theology at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, and an adjunct lecturer at the Franciscan School of Theology in Oceanside, California. He serves as chair of the American Franciscan Liturgical Commission. Fr. Sabak has published in *Worship and Studia Liturgica*.*

first response to a crisis. While there are no exact statistics for the number of public vigils held each year, and no study has yet been undertaken on the nature of such vigils, the phenomenon of responding to calamity and brutality with the almost immediate and reflexive organization of a vigil has become routine and expected. The frequency with which public vigils occur has seemingly increased in the last decade, with vigils assuming an honored and respected place in the wake of dehumanizing events.²

A public vigil is a pointed response for understanding a tragedy, and such vigils are often ad hoc and spontaneous. As a first response, the vigil plays a distinctive role, and it is rare that additional vigils follow the formation of the initial gathering. Interestingly, public vigils seem to dissolve or disband as quickly as they are formed. The expectation and regularity of the vigil have become etched or impressed not only on the psyche of citizens of the United States, but also, increasingly, on the minds and hearts of communities around the world. Anyone who has organized or attended a public vigil will testify that the emotional expression of human solidarity in the face of a crisis is an effective way to confront a tragedy.

For many, the experience of a public vigil is a transcendent encounter because it is held in the face of darkness and death, which are transcendent in themselves. Such encounters with the transcendent during a public candlelight vigil not only underline the broader impact of the vigil on its participants, but also suggest the liturgical vigil. The liturgical vigil, however, emerges from the perspective of theology and faith, and is distinct from the candlelight vigil in the public square in both tenor and emphasis. Indeed, one discovers interesting contrasts when one compares the liturgical vigil found in the Roman Missal or vigils celebrating extraordinary moments in ecclesiastical life, such as a canonization or the opening of a synod or a council, with public vigils such as those organized in Sandy Hook, Connecticut; in Ferguson, Missouri; and in Paris after the ISIS attacks in November 2015.

One superficial difference between the two types of vigil is that the liturgical vigil may be either annual or occasional depending on its implementation, while the public vigil usually occurs only once in response to a specific critical event. A more fundamental difference is evident in the nature of the liturgical vigil that is observed at the beginning of a festival. Liturgical texts for the vigil for a sanctoral feast day, and for the solemnities of Christmas,

² According to a Voice of America report in October 2015, the United States had experienced in that year nearly three hundred mass shootings with the approximately same number of vigils organized to respond to them. See Chris Simkins, “Stats: Nearly 300 Mass US Shootings This Year,” *VOANews*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/united-states-mass-shootings/2989301.html>.

Easter, and Pentecost, express celebratory if not joyful themes, themes that a vigil in the public square does not always and everywhere express. In addition, liturgical vigils usually take place around the time of Evening Prayer, which is not always prayed at night, the exception being the Easter Vigil, which must take place in the dark, between nightfall and dawn. Even the vigil for Christian burial in the *Order of Christian Funerals* is so constructed as to begin easing the experience of bereavement gently and gradually through growing attention to the joy of eternal life, moving from loss to hope.³ Christians themselves may be unaware of the distinctions between keeping a Christian liturgical vigil and keeping a secular or civic candlelight vigil, and consequently may fail to participate as earnestly in the former as they might in the latter.

Recognizing the existence of these two types of vigil at least within the social body, I propose that further study of these types will enhance our appreciation of their function in human life. Such study might focus on the differences between the two types of vigil; their respective effects on participants; how each enacts a response to despair and hopelessness; and the definitions of a vigil and the act of keeping vigil. It is the intention of this article to make observations about what seems to be unfolding in the present circumstances and to provide historical and theological background. Rather than present an ethnographic study of the role played by vigils in the public square, this article seeks to provide expository and diagnostic analysis derived from contemporary ritual theory and the ancient precedent of keeping vigil. It is hoped that such analysis may aid understanding and appreciation of the use of this ancient ritual form in modern contexts. This article will discover relationships between these two types of vigil, and inquire into whether an entirely new form of vigil is coming into being, which itself may be evolving from historical precedents. Such an enterprise opens the door for further conversation and debate, and I acknowledge that this argument is subject to revision by others who might test these claims through fieldwork. Yet I believe that this initial analysis of this social and cultural phenomenon has potential value.

³ "The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heartrending grief for the family and close friends. The ministry of the Church at this time is one of gently accompanying the mourners in their initial adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails. Through a careful use of the rites contained in this section, the minister helps the mourners to express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation through faith in Christ and his resurrection to eternal life." "Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers," in *Order of Christian Funerals*, trans. The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, §52 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), 21.

Initial Considerations

If one places the word *vigil* into an internet search engine such as Google, the result is over one million entries. Place the phrase *candlelight vigil* into the same search engine, and the yield is over 4.5 million entries, indicating that there exist many events that carry the name “vigil,” and that these receive some type of attention.⁴ A few examples of vigils from recent years serve to illustrate this reality:

On November 17, 2014, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* in Topeka, Kansas, reported on a candlelight vigil sponsored by the Tonantzin Society and Justicia, Inc., an event “organizers hope . . . will shed light on 43 missing students from Mexico.”⁵

On December 13, 2014, *Seven Days*, an alternative independent news source out of Burlington, Vermont, reported on a Black Lives Matter candlelight vigil where event organizers “read names of those who . . . have been ‘lynched by our justice system,’ [and followed] each name with ‘We love you.’”⁶

On December 21, 2014, ABC 7 News in San Francisco reported on a “Brooklyn candlelight vigil held for slain NYPD officers.” The report mentioned that “friends, family, and colleagues of the two New York City Police officers killed in the line of duty gathered in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood for a vigil held in their honor on Sunday. . . . Police officers and other mourners stood in silence Sunday during a candlelight vigil near the spot where the two officers were shot in their patrol car.”⁷

On February 19, 2015, the *Miami Herald* reported “a candlelight vigil was held . . . in downtown Miami to honor the life of . . . a 46-year-old transgender woman found slain inside her home on Sunday.”⁸

⁴ A Google internet search was conducted by the author on September 28, 2015.

⁵ Ann Marie Bush, “Tonantzin Society and Justicia to Host Candlelight Vigil,” *Topeka (KS) Capital-Journal*, November 17, 2014, <http://cjonline.com/news/2014-11-17/tonantzin-society-and-justicia-host-candlelight-vigil>.

⁶ Charlie Enscoe, “‘Black Lives Matter’ Candlelight Vigil Held in Burlington,” *Seven Days: Vermont’s Independent Voice*, December 13, 2014, <http://www.sevendaysvt.com/OffMessage/archives/2014/12/13/black-lives-matter-candlelight-vigil-held-in-burlington>.

⁷ “Brooklyn Candlelight Vigil Held For Slain NYPD Officers,” *San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose (CA) ABC7 News*, December 21, 2014, <http://abc7news.com/news/brooklyn-candlelight-vigil-held-for-slain-nypd-officers/445629/>.

⁸ Steve Rothaus, “Candlelight Vigil Held for Transgender Miami Woman Found Slain at Home,” *Miami Herald*, February 19, 2015.

On March 20, 2015, ABC News affiliate KABC in Los Angeles reported on a candlelight vigil held for an Orange County woman who had been missing since Valentine's Day.⁹

On April 12, 2015, Fox 10 News in Mobile, Alabama, broadcast a story with the title "Candlelight Vigil Held for Teen Drowning Victims." The story described "a candlelight vigil in Mobile last night [which] gave family members and friends a chance to remember and grieve the loss of two teenagers who won't be returning to their school Monday."¹⁰

On June 19, 2015, CBS News featured a report on the shooting of nine people at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, beginning the report with the following: "Thousands of people attended a vigil Friday in honor of the nine people shot and killed Wednesday night at Charleston's historic Emanuel A.M.E. Church. The service at the College of Charleston's arena began with the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, followed by a procession with the Charleston Pipe and Drum playing 'Amazing Grace.' . . . The program featured a variety of speakers, including Charleston Mayor Joe Riley."¹¹

On October 1, 2015, Portland, Oregon's CBS affiliate KOIN, Channel 6, reported that "hundreds . . . attended a vigil in Roseburg for the victims of the Umpqua Community College shooting Thursday evening."¹²

While they are anecdotal, a quick review of these examples suggests that for communities faced with the unthinkable reality and disturbing consequence of public tragedy, holding a vigil plays a significant and necessary role in the ability of communities to process a tragedy's immediate effects. As mentioned above, the phenomenon of holding a public vigil in communities affected, whether directly or indirectly, by disaster or misfortune appears to suggest that elements of this experience are worthy of further study. Although it is beyond this article's intent to specifically address the nature and function of each element in these vigils, they are mentioned to illustrate

⁹ Jory Rand, "Family Holds Candlelight Vigil for OC Woman Missing since Valentine's Day," *Los Angeles ABC 7 News*, March 20, 2015, <http://abc7.com/news/family-holds-vigil-for-oc-woman-missing-since-valentines-day/567530/>.

¹⁰ Rene Dials, "Candlelight Vigil Held for Teen Drowning Victims," *Mobile (AL) Fox 10 TV*, April 12, 2015, <http://www.fox10tv.com/story/28783142/candlelight-vigil-held-saturday-for-drowning-victims#ixzz3anHgaLUI>.

¹¹ "Thousands Gather at Vigil for Charleston Shooting Victims," *CBSNEWS*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/thousands-gather-at-vigil-for-charleston-shooting-victims/>.

¹² "Oregon Mourns for Umpqua Community College," *Portland (OR) KOIN 6 News*, October 1, 2015, <http://koin.com/2015/10/01/hundreds-gather-for-umpqua-community-college-vigil/>.

the religious dynamics engaged when a community organizes or participates in a public vigil. Among these elements might be the manner in which a candlelight vigil processes tragedy; the purposes a vigil serves beyond an immediate reaction or response to tragedy; the sense of catharsis, hope, closure, or resolution a vigil offers to human weakness and despair; how a public vigil galvanizes an authentic stance against evil and its machinations; and the answer a public vigil provides to the fundamentally human question of the existence of suffering and evil. Fundamental human questions are by nature religious questions. If a vigil in a public square is organized to undertake a stand, is this stance by association also religious?

This question is an important one. As experiences in the public domain, vigils in the public square are cultural or sociological phenomena, at one and the same time therapeutic, striking, and inspiring, but they may also be religiously ambiguous. Some vigils—such as those organized in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in December 2012, after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, and following the mass shootings at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015 and at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, in October 2015—featured representation or association with religious institutions, yet not every vigil includes or seems obliged to include such religious representation. The role played by religious elements in the orchestration of a public vigil is not inconsequential because these vigils have ancient roots, which were religious at heart. Consideration of a religious aspect inherent in a public candlelight vigil may help foster appreciation for and awareness of the reason or reasons for invoking a “higher power” in situations of loss and despair. Furthermore, such consideration may explain what is expected from such an invocation—comfort, strength, courage, or even a movement toward deepening faith itself.

Defining a “Vigil”

Let us begin this analysis, then, by defining what is meant by “vigil,” as this definition will provide an important departure point for discussing the term’s unique character in Christian practice, and by extension its practice in the public square. The etymology of the word is Latin; it derives from the noun *vigilia*. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* lists four definitions of the term: two definitions of a noun, one of an adjective, and one of a verb, in that order.¹³ The *OED* defines the noun *vigil* as “the eve of a festival

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed., s.v. “vigil,” http://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=vigil&_searchBtn=Search.

or holy day, as an occasion of devotional watching or religious observance,” and as “the watch kept on the eve of a festival or holy day; a nocturnal service or devotional exercise.” A vigil was one of the four watches into which ancient Romans divided the night. Other definitions found within the entry are “a wake” or “prayers said or sung at a nocturnal service, specifically for the dead.” *Vigil* is further defined as “a period of keeping awake for some special reason or purpose”; and without an article, as “watch” or “watching.”

Keeping these definitions in mind, the *OED* describes a vigil as “an approach toward something else” or “an expectation or anticipation of something to come.” The event in question, while it can concern observances for the deceased, such as a wake, is more prominently linked to something festive or to a feast day, as was mentioned above in the context of the Roman Missal. As also previously mentioned, the use of a vigil in the Christian context of death and dying is not solely focused on mourning, but is used to begin the passage from mourning to hope in the Resurrection. Curiously, when one reads to the end of the *OED* entry on *vigil* one encounters an addendum. The addendum, formulated in 1993, describes a vigil as “a stationary and peaceful demonstration in support of a particular cause, often lasting several days, which is characterized by the absence of speeches or other explicit advocacy of the cause, and frequently by some suggestion of mourning.”¹⁴ This additional understanding of vigil conforms with the contemporary cultural experience of a candlelight vigil, but one should note it is a recent incarnation of the term. A note corresponding to the addendum dates the earliest use of *vigil* in this way to around 1956 and associates it with a protest centered on undemocratic legislation in South Africa by a group of women wearing black sashes. This “vigil” was essentially an elongated demonstration until the end of the parliamentary session, punctuated by the women standing in silence for one hour before the Parliament building in Cape Town.¹⁵

The phrase *candlelight vigil*, frequently associated with the vigil of the public square, is not listed among the entries of the *OED*; and it is difficult to find a reputable definition for this category of nighttime event. The closest one may come to a definition is found in the online resource *Wikipedia*, which explains the practice of a candlelight vigil in concise, practical, and recognizable terms:

¹⁴ The copyright date of the second edition of the *OED Online* is 1989, while the “additions series,” in which this new entry is located, is dated 1993.

¹⁵ See “Black-Sash: Making Human Rights Real,” <https://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/our-legacy>.

A candlelight vigil is an outdoor assembly of people carrying candles, held after sunset in order to show support for a specific cause. Such events are typically held either to protest the suffering of some marginalized group of people, or in memory of a life or lives lost to some disease, disaster, massacre, or other tragedy. In the latter case, the event is often called a candlelight memorial. A large candlelight vigil will usually have invited speakers with a public address system and may be covered by local or national media. Speakers give their speech at the beginning of the vigil to explain why they are holding a vigil and what it represents. Vigils may also have a religious or spiritual purpose. . . . Candlelight vigils are seen as a nonviolent way to raise awareness of a cause and to motivate change, as well as uniting and supporting those attending the vigil.¹⁶

This definition encapsulates the perceived purpose of many vigils that arise when a community is faced with a crisis and has a need to respond to it immediately. Embedded within the definition is the impression that a candlelight vigil can be utilized as an act of protest over a situation that has created tension or distress within a community. Note, however, that the *Wikipedia* definition of a candlelight vigil differs from the addendum to the definition of *vigil* found in the *OED*: the former focuses on speeches and speakers, which the *OED* would say are not present at this type of public occasion.

The Vigil in the Public Square as a Ritual Event

Having set out the various parameters by which a vigil may be defined both culturally and religiously, let us turn to the phenomenon of the vigil in the public square or “the candlelight vigil” to attempt to discern as clearly as possible what it responds to, and to begin to consider its effects on and in the lives of its participants. As mentioned above, a vigil whose origin is societal and civic appears focused on facing or responding to a crisis, problem, or catastrophe on the level of immediacy. It is a response wrought of human emotion and a need to band together to face the unimaginable and the uncertainty that tragedy and catastrophe yield. The desire to be with and among other human beings in such circumstances is a natural reaction to the insertion of a reality that should not be occurring into human life either collectively or individually. These are times that call for “disaster rituals,” a term coined by Paul Post, Ronald Grimes, and others. A disaster ritual responds to a situation of “major, extensive destruction, and human suffering . . . collective in

¹⁶ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Candlelight Vigil,” last modified April 17, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candlelight_vigil.

nature . . . [and which] involves a sudden, unexpected occurrence . . . instantaneous in nature, and not chronic.”¹⁷ As Post and Grimes explain, “In a general therapeutic context rituals are recommended as an element in the process of handling grief and other emotions following a disaster.”¹⁸ The candlelight vigil fittingly serves as a reaction and a response, because on an urgent level it gathers a community together to stand as one in a moment of intense soul-searching and the desire for answers in conditions that appear insurmountable.

Such moments are “boundary situations,” because, as liturgical theologian Edward Kilmartin describes them, “these moments reveal an inability to control one’s own destiny. These are situations that cannot be manipulated but must be accepted and endured, manifesting the finitude of human being and raising the question about the meaning of life.”¹⁹ In a Western context, disasters may be “experienced as a sore assault on an order susceptible to control by management and technology.”²⁰ Observing a public vigil in the eruption of a boundary situation is a collective psychosomatic defense against the presence of a contagion seeking to disrupt a community’s knitted order of life. Pastoral psychiatrist Gotthard Booth views communal and societal crises as a sickness that triggers an acknowledgment that the interconnectedness of all things has been damaged by the disruption of harmony.²¹ The candlelight vigil observed in the wake of these situations helps to restore “a purposiveness” to the relational fabric that constitutes human society.²²

In his research on human physio-psychiatry and chronic disease Booth constructed a typology of disease-associated responses, which affect human hosts relationally and in their specific lifestyles.²³ One aspect of this typology—the response to cardiovascular or vasomotor diseases that affect the

¹⁷ Paul Post, et al., *Disaster Ritual: Explorations of an Emerging Ritual Repertoire* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 24–25. It is interesting that in their study of the various rituals employed to deal with disasters, human and natural, the authors make no mention of the use of a vigil in a public setting.

¹⁸ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 5.

¹⁹ Edward Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 22.

²⁰ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 27.

²¹ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, rev. ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 124.

²² Gotthard Booth, “Three Psychobiological Paths toward Death: Cardiovascular Disease, Tuberculosis, and Cancer,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 51, no. 3 (1975): 420.

²³ Gotthard Booth, “Healing the Sick,” *Pastoral Psychology* 13, no. 5 (1962): 11–24.

heart and arteries—submits that individuals afflicted with the complications and effects of such diseases express collectivist and conformist tendencies.²⁴ Diseases that affect the principal motor and life-sustaining conditions of the human body compel the afflicted to seek those environments that affirm the vitality and dynamism of human life. Such persons, according to Booth, are always in search of a supportive milieu. Apply Booth’s theory to a community, a body, in a crisis situation, and the organization of a vigil reveals something of a physio-psychiatric response. In times of cultural or societal emergency the community is affected by a disruption in the harmony of its social life. The “lifeblood” of the community is assaulted, and the community rallies to acknowledge together the reality of the pain with which it, or at least of portion of it, has been afflicted, and furthermore to offer solace, compassion, or resolve in the face of the pained reality.

The reaction to the mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 may exemplify Booth’s typology at work. The homicides of twenty first-grade students and six adult staff members severed an artery of the town’s vital communal system. On the evening of the shooting a candlelight vigil spontaneously materialized at St. Rose of Lima Church, where various religious leaders as well as the governor of Connecticut spoke to the crowd that had assembled there.²⁵ Why they assembled at this place, a church building, and not at the site where the shootings occurred, may be significant. While some may doubt that individuals instinctively assemble, there may be something instinctual at work in responding to tragedy. Whether because of an upbringing in a religious tradition, or from an innate need to commune with something greater than ourselves, a “non-specific, basic sacrality” appears to be rooted in human beings and our culture, and arises when we are faced with “the contingency of our life . . . radically experienced in disasters.”²⁶ Such sacrality may instinctively draw individuals to the transcendent at these critical moments, and enable human beings to “rise above the banality of the ordinary.”²⁷ It is an invitation to a type of unanimity that the simple and unstructured nature of the candlelight vigil appears to fulfill. When darkness, both proverbial and factual, descends upon a community, the lighting of candles, of lights in the darkness, provides immediate, visual relief in knowing that I or we are not alone.

²⁴ Gotthard Booth, “The Voice of the Body,” in *Religion and Medicine: Essays on Meaning, Value, and Health*, ed. David Belgum (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967), 106.

²⁵ In addition, a celebration of the Eucharist was also held, and the church building remained open throughout the night.

²⁶ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

In this context, the candlelight vigil, formed within the public square, functions primarily as a “redressive” or restorative action—the third element in the broadly sketched enactment of a “social drama,” according to British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. Social dramas are units of “aharmonic” or “disharmonic” processes, as Turner describes them, arising from conflict situations. Each social drama is made up of variations on a pattern: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration.²⁸ The third stage of the social drama, redressive action, is directed toward symbolic unification, temporarily bridging factions and rifts, which action or actions in turn, it is hoped, contribute to a real social process of reintegration.²⁹ That no two vigils celebrated civically and socially are ever exactly alike seems to support Turner’s assessment that ritual drama depends less on formal qualities of the performance itself than upon the connection of a ritual enactment with a “social drama.” The candlelight vigil appears to operate on two levels: the therapeutic and the bolstering. Therapeutically, the vigil offers those who attend the ability to weep, to mourn, to lament, to rant, to “rage against the dying of the light” (to quote Dylan Thomas)—not alone, but together.³⁰ As a mechanism for bringing strangers as well as neighbors together in a critical moment of shared life the vigil may bolster a community with an experience of what Turner terms *communitas*, an experience of “we” that exists beneath our human differences.³¹

Booth’s and Turner’s insights into the manner in which a community may observe a vigil are critical because public events attract a variety of participants, chief among them various forms of public media. Those who study ritual and its impact are divided on the contributions of media when reporting on civic ritual events. From a positive perspective, Gerard Lukken believes that for those who tune in to watch or to listen to public ritual, different forms of media allow greater participation on different levels, direct and indirect.³² In a more critical vein, Grimes questions whether media reporting on a disaster may distort or misrepresent the ritual enactment produced on these occasions, transforming it into something that it is not. Media may “mediate”

²⁸ Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37–41.

²⁹ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 149–50.

³⁰ Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 2003), 239.

³¹ For a description and discussion of the function of Turner’s understanding of *communitas*, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; New York: Routledge, 2017), 109–64.

³² See Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form, and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 190–92, 200–202.

such events in a particular way, creating a “virtual world free of sensory ritual performance.”³³ As some in print and broadcast media reported, those who attended the vigil at St. Rose of Lima Church came “to stand in solidarity and face an unimaginable horror, offering quiet prayers and talking in eerily hushed voices.”³⁴ Media described the gathering as the product of the “need to reach out to support one another, and to grieve,”³⁵ where the community faced together the implausible reality that an event so heinous could occur in a place described as “idyllic,” “peaceful and serene,” “where crime is rare and the biggest thing that happens each year is the Labor Day parade.”³⁶

The reporting may describe true facts about the communal experience, but it may also sensationalize or sentimentalize it, creating for those who view or listen to such reporting a context too idealized for a ritual like a vigil to function properly. For Grimes, media are not just a conduit for information; they compose it through selection and editing, and provide a virtual world separated from physical ritual performance. In these cases, ritual becomes idealized, and the expectations derived from ritual become too high.³⁷ The visceral, instinctive need to know that I am not alone runs the risk of being manipulated. Attention to the objectives of a candlelight vigil, and to the conclusions or effects society and culture may draw from such an occasion, seems necessary to safeguard the power and depth of such a public activity for a community.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, holding a candlelight vigil is almost unanimously affirmed not only in the United States but worldwide as “the right thing to do” in the aftermath of a critical situation. Yet the role played by rituals in response to crises, according to Post and Grimes, has received little attention, even in studies about coping strategies during disasters.³⁸ Indeed, often there is too much focus on the immediate outcome of vigils and not enough concern about the long-term effects of such observances on the individuals who share in them. If we follow Grimes’ critique, media coverage of public events such as communal vigils in the wake of

³³ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 235–36.

³⁴ Kerry Wills and Christina Boyle, “Hundreds Attend Packed Vigil for Connecticut School Shooting Victims,” *New York Daily News*, December 15, 2012.

³⁵ Bill Chappell, “In Grief-Stricken Newtown, Vigils and Support for Victims and Families,” *NPR-The Two-Way*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/12/14/167293608/in-grief-stricken-newtown-vigils-and-support-for-victims-and-families>.

³⁶ Jim Zarroli, “Small Town Tries to Cope with Unimaginable Reality,” *NPR-Special Series: Shootings in Newtown, Conn.*, December 15, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/15/167312421/small-conn-town-still-trying-to-cope-with-scale-of-mass-shooting>.

³⁷ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 256.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

disaster may not fully or accurately depict the purpose or effect of such rituals as described by Booth and Turner. In the absence of appropriate or adequate communal knowledge of the reasons for holding a vigil, what is portrayed in print and televised sources may falsify what is happening.

Ritual is symbolic activity. "Disaster" ritual seeks to offer comfort and explanation, as far as each is possible, and to return order and meaning to lives disrupted by disaster. As disaster ritual, a public candlelight vigil marks the beginning of the navigation of the often torturous journey to "normalcy," even if that normalcy must be lived on a different level. Grimes claims, however, that we cannot always assume that symbols are analogous to their referents, since symbol and meaning often appear in metaphoric tension, rather than in analogical parallel to one another.³⁹ As Lukken describes it, what may be occurring in communities that organize public rituals is a turn to "inductive ritual," ritual that emphasizes "personal wishes and creativity more than ceremony and protocol," in which symbols are attuned to "extravagance, dominance of emotionalism, consumption and commercialism."⁴⁰ If candlelight vigils are meant to work symbolically within the social drama of crisis and identity, we should trust that these vigils will communicate what truly needs to be communicated in such times. Media misappropriation of the situation may inadvertently impede a vigil's symbolic power to express a fulfillment of the need it was organized to address, conveying instead "wishful thinking" for a healing that can never be fulfilled.⁴¹

For example, in the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a local CBS News affiliate reported:

A day of anger over a fatal police shooting of an unarmed black teen in suburban St. Louis turned to mayhem as people looted businesses, vandalized vehicles and confronted police in riot gear who tried to block access to parts of the city. . . . The tensions erupted after a candlelight vigil Sunday night for 18-year-old Michael Brown, who police said was shot multiple times Saturday after a scuffle involving the officer. . . . KMOV-TV reports at least 12 businesses near the shooting scene were looted, including a convenience store, a check-cashing store, a boutique and a small grocery store. People took items from a sporting goods store and a cellphone retailer, and carted rims away from a tire store.⁴²

³⁹ Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 156–57.

⁴⁰ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 264.

⁴¹ See Gotthard Booth, "Values in Nature and Psychotherapy," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 8, no. 1 (1963): 22–32.

⁴² "Michael Brown Shooting: Vigil for Dead Teen Turns Violent," *CBS News*, August 11, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/michael-brown-shooting-vigil-for-dead-teen-turns-violent/>.

This news report chronicles the violence that overtook Ferguson before and after a vigil in the public square had been organized as an acknowledgment of the painful situation of Michael Brown’s death. Mention of the vigil, however, included no details, and was sandwiched between descriptions of aggression and violence, and the report seemed to downplay or ignore any effect the vigil may have had on those who participated in it.

When they occur in the public square most if not all candlelight vigils are cloaked in a context of mourning, expressed in actions of silence, frustration, grief, and regret. The human condition such as it is can feed on these types of emotion—consider how highway traffic practically grinds to a halt with “rubbernecking” around accident sites. One may ask if the way the media report on public vigils may serve to exacerbate such emotions, which may not be the only emotions participants wish to experience during these times.

Another example from a newspaper reporting on the search for a missing woman in Le Sueur, Minnesota, remarks that a vigil took place, but again supplies little detail:

It was with shaky hands that many in Le Sueur lit candles in honor of a missing woman Monday night. During a vigil held at one of the city’s parks, they wiped tears from their eyes and sang in broken voices, trying to put as much heart into “Amazing Grace” as they could, knowing that the next day the search for Moriah Zwart would begin afresh. “We want to find her, but I know most of us are still holding up hope that . . .” Tom Gerlich, first assistant fire chief with the Le Sueur Fire Department, trailed off. “We’re always dealing with tragedy,” said George Grafsky, chaplain for the fire department.⁴³

Some media will note that vigils are held in places of worship, but there seems to be faint acknowledgment that the presence of divinity will offer solace. The *Hartford Courant* reported the Sunday following the Sandy Hook shootings:

The faint glow of candles in the darkness showed somber expressions everywhere, the signs of sorrow shared by women, men, and children, of every race. Mothers held their children close. The emotions that brought 100 people to West Hartford United Methodist Church Saturday evening were shared by people around the state, the nation and the world, as news of the death of 20 innocent first-graders sank into the hearts of

⁴³ Jessica Bies, “Candlelight Vigil Held for Woman Missing in Le Sueur,” *Mankato (MN) Free Press*, May 4, 2015, http://www.mankatofreepress.com/news/candlelight-vigil-held-for-woman-missing-in-le-sueur/article_01f5fe64-f295-11e4-85f5-0bb33edb6715.html.

people in every time zone. Vigils, online expressions of sorrow, offers of help from funeral directors, and tributes of all kinds.⁴⁴

In this article, the vigil is named as one of several things offered to help the trauma of loss, without specific description as to how this ritual activity could indeed help. The failure of news outlets to appreciate the unique function of vigils in response to tragedy might lead to questions about a vigil's usefulness or to the judgment that a vigil plays no significant role at all. Among the 108 comments on an NPR piece on the Newtown shootings one individual remarked concerning the state of the families whose children had died: "Their injuries won't be healed by any number of vigils or expressions of sympathy. Their injuries won't *ever* be healed, only buried for the rest of their lives."⁴⁵ A lack of insight into the phenomenon might unfortunately leave some with the impression that a candlelight vigil in the public square, while a valiant effort to respond to a situation of disharmony and disruption in human life, may offer nothing more than an affirmation of the phrase "Misery loves company."

I noted above that Post and Grimes recognize that, among many studies devoted to responses to disasters, "ritual rarely enters the picture." Ignorance of the power of ritual may result from the unease experienced when one admits that rituals, like vigils, are a symbolic act and therefore not easily interpreted or defined. They can be, then, easily ignored or reduced to a supplemental role in the response to tragedy.⁴⁶ Media coverage, or noncoverage, of the vigil could unintentionally skew or mask desired outcomes, be they therapeutic or inspirational. Interpretations derived from such coverage perhaps transform the event into something inconclusive, and present a powerful challenge to a vigil's participants. Such a challenge may leave a community with the uncomfortable and unsettling realization that while it does not wish "to go quietly into that good night," it is at a loss regarding how to rectify the natural imbalance brought about by the illness of violence and anguish in our human lives.

The complex and variable nature of what constitutes a candlelight vigil and its desired effect (if any) may involuntarily introduce ambiguity into its response to tragedy and sorrow. The failure of many, including media outlets, to appreciate what is occurring in the rising phenomenon of public vigils reveals that more study is needed to grasp the power of public vigil

⁴⁴ Mara Lee, "Solidarity, Unity in Connecticut and around the World," *Hartford (CT) Courant*, December 16, 2012, http://articles.courant.com/2012-12-16/news/hc-local-reactions-newtown-shootings-12-16-2-20121215_1_candlelight-vigil-newtown-school-choir.

⁴⁵ Zarroli, "Small Town Tries to Cope."

⁴⁶ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 245.

observances. While a religious presence is not necessarily prescribed, what is overlooked or perhaps not fully understood is the connection between the practice of keeping vigil and the Christian tradition. Compared with its social and civic counterpart, however, the Christian practice displays an almost dichotomous character. In the Christian tradition, keeping vigil is in some way anticipatory of something else, rather than a response to something, as may be true of a contemporary civic candlelight vigil. It is essential, therefore, to explore the origin and nature of Christian vigil keeping and to consider what it indicates about the function of a vigil, and more importantly what it communicates as a response to situations that dehumanize and degrade the human condition.

The Use of the Vigil in Christian Liturgical History

Having provided a definition for what constitutes a vigil and having demonstrated ways vigils are employed in contemporary culture, we turn now to uncovering its earliest use particularly within a Christian context. While neither the term *vigil* nor the practice of keeping vigil derives from Christianity, historically the practice, particularly in the Christian Latin West, as liturgical historian Robert Taft notes, “acquires a consistency and importance” not observed in other areas of Christianity after the fall of the Western Roman Empire.⁴⁷ Keeping vigil, particularly on the eve of certain feasts, became an integral part of Christian prayer life. Augustine of Hippo affirmed that the Easter Vigil is called the *mater* of all vigils, suggesting that the practice—keeping vigil or “vigil-ing”—may have been common and widespread in his time. Various theories about the ancient sources of the multifaceted phenomenon of the Christian vigil have been proposed, including that it may have been an extension of the private nighttime prayer practices of the faithful, or an imitation of, or a development in opposition to, non-Christian ritual practices that take place at nightfall.⁴⁸

In the earliest extant liturgical documents the vigil plays a unique role in the observance of a feast. In the ancient sacramentaries, as well as currently in the third edition of the Roman Missal, the term is infrequently implied as a liturgical element in the celebration of feasts of the calendar, indicating, perhaps, that the addition of *vigilia* to the name of a feast conveys something of the *style* in which the feast ought to be celebrated. When viewed from a

⁴⁷ Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 177.

⁴⁸ Carlo Marcora, *La vigilia nella liturgia: Ricerche sulle origini e sui primi sviluppi (sec i-vi)*, Archivio Ambrosiano 6 (Milan: S.A. Tipografica Sociale, 1954), 87.

historical perspective, the nighttime rituals that accompanied the memorials of the martyr-saints appear to be the most ancient liturgical practices of the early church, and are perhaps the earliest examples of public acts of keeping vigil. Cultic practices that arose in early Christianity to honor the saints were local in origin and in conduct, reflecting a popular religiosity that combined the tenor and emphases of cultural and communal customs for the deceased, and occasionally featured ritual practices that mimicked those performed for non-Christian deities.⁴⁹ Many ancient sources reveal that early Christians kept some type of “watch” *ad corpus*, at the tomb of the saint rather than in a sacred building or shrine, and this “watch” lasted through the night and often concluded with a celebration of the Eucharist at daybreak.⁵⁰ Official accounts and especially popular understanding suggest that these vigils offered the living faithful a glimpse of the promise of resurrection through the “deep peace of the sleep” of the departed faithful “before the resurrection shows in their bones.”⁵¹

Two developments that shaped the ancient Christian practice of keeping vigil were embodied in the commemoration of the deaths of martyr-saints in antiquity. The first development was the transformation of the understanding of death within Christianity, which in turn shaped the social and cultural approach to death itself and the honor that was due to the deceased. The second development equated the commemoration of the martyr with festivals in honor of the gods of antiquity. Both developments had an effect not only on the meaning of a Christian vigil, but also on the style of keeping vigil.

In contrast to their contemporaries, the early Christians did not face death with the despair expressed by their non-Christian neighbors. The Christian perspective was born of the understanding that Christ embraced the horror of the cross to transform it into an instrument of salvation. As Dirk Lange suggests, the early Christian community did not remember the Christ event “on a facile, representational level,” but as “a force that continually disrupts our usual forms of remembering and ritualizing.”⁵² The early Christians took

⁴⁹ Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: An Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 99–100; Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 2011), 193.

⁵⁰ Antoine Chavasse, “La célébration *In Vigilia*, veille du *Natale* d’un saint,” in *La liturgie de la ville de Rome du V^e au VIII^e siècle*, *Studia Anselmiana* 112, *Analecta Liturgica* 18 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 247.

⁵¹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 76–77.

⁵² Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 9.

seriously Saint Paul’s instruction that a believer faced suffering and the grief of death not through the eyes and heart of despair, but with hope (1 Thess 4:13-14).⁵³ A perspective on the fragility and weakness of human life was based not upon a fantasy, but rather was grounded in a great faith and trust in the promises of Christ, that death was not an end. Christian dead were memorialized and honored as the first fruits of those who in remaining faithful to Christ would greet the new creation promised by God. Commemorating the death of believers included none of the professional extravaganzas of grief and mourning that accompanied non-Christian funerals; rather praise was offered to God for the soul of the deceased by his/her surviving family members, and prayers were offered for his/her redemption.⁵⁴ Hence, in place of dirges, songs, and laments that exaggerated the futility of human life in accord with cultural standards of the time, the early Christians sang psalmody that spoke of God’s power to rescue humanity from all that stood in the way of fulfillment.⁵⁵ The celebration of the Eucharist crowned remembrances of the deceased, as did graveside meals and the singing of psalms.⁵⁶

The *memoria* of the martyr-saint was conducted neither in remorse nor as a nostalgic remembrance of a hero of the faith, but rather as an act of eschatological promise, however primitively this may have been understood. Accordingly, a nighttime vigil preceding the feast of a martyr incorporated kerygmatic elements.⁵⁷ Keeping vigil connoted much more in the church’s tradition than just “waiting around” for something to happen; rather, the vigil, especially when kept at the tombs of the martyrs, seems to have functioned as an active witness of faith in the final resurrection of all believers, and as a demonstrative expression of the arrival of that promised fulfillment. For this reason, keeping a Christian liturgical vigil contributed to acknowledging the death of a martyr as a *natale*, a second “birthday” into everlasting life.

As the practice of keeping vigil developed in the Christian tradition and the tradition was acculturated into Greco-Roman culture, elements reminiscent of feasts in honor of the heroic demigods of antiquity were infused into the ritual action. This development may also have been a logical extension of the exceptional place the martyrs held in the church as “the very special

⁵³ “We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:13-14 NABRE).

⁵⁴ See Augustine, *Epistola* 158.2, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle: New City, 1993).

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessions* 9.12, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

⁵⁶ Johannes Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Washington, DC: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), 169.

⁵⁷ Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 2004), 37.

dead.”⁵⁸ Vigils celebrated at the place of a martyr-saint’s burial on the eve of his or her feast day focused on the *potentia* of the martyr-saint, who was capable of confronting and subduing demonic and wicked powers in the world. Recognition of this *potentia* was often expressed in wild and enthusiastic celebrations, which exemplified the thoroughly dynamic and even festive nature of this style of keeping vigil in the ancient church.⁵⁹ These celebrations could become so animated that many of the ancient Church Fathers condemned them as unseemly for a Christian believer.⁶⁰

The energy and vibrancy associated with keeping vigil in the early Christian tradition were part of a greater desire to fulfill Saint Paul’s exhortation to ceaseless perseverance in prayer and praise as a way of building up the Body of Christ.⁶¹ Vigils expressed and aroused an expectation of the Lord who has come, has risen, and will come again, and contributed to a progressive deepening of the faithful’s participation in the saving mystery of Christ.⁶² The ritual pattern of the Christian vigil in antiquity highlighted the eschatological aspects of God’s transformation of creation and history through the risen Christ in acts of praise, thanksgiving, and watchful anticipation.

In the fourth century, vigil practices became more formally integrated into the life of the Christian community. Vigils occurred on the eve/early morning of Sundays and on the eves of major feasts and solemnities in the developing calendar of the Christian community.⁶³ The structure of these services varied from place to place, but elements of prayerful watch emphasizing paschal themes were prominent. Those vigils celebrated from Saturday night into Sunday morning, for example, utilized a petitionary text from Isaiah, a prayer of nighttime yearning for God’s justice (Isa 26:9), as an invitatory verse at the beginning of the celebration, or drew on Psalm 118, which expressed thanksgiving to God for the many ways God rescues humanity in times of hostility. A description from the travelogue of the pilgrim Egeria (ca. 381–384) of a weekly “Resurrection Vigil” on the eve/morning of

⁵⁸ See Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 69–85. Polycarp of Smyrna (martyred ca. 155) is perhaps one of the first martyrs whose memory was recalled in this manner. See *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14–15.

⁵⁹ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 106–11.

⁶⁰ For example, Saint Augustine, in a letter to Bishop Alypius of Tagaste in North Africa, dated around 395, explains how his preaching has worked to restrain the faithful populace from their more enthusiastic expressions of honoring the martyrs at night—much to the chagrin of the populace, however. See Augustine, *Epistola* 29.8–9.

⁶¹ See, for example, Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:17; and Rom 12:12.

⁶² Rubén M. Leikam, “The Liturgy of the Hours in the First Four Centuries,” trans. Lisa A. Twomey, in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol. 5, *Liturgical Time and Space*, ed. Anscar J. Chupungco (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20.

Sunday in Jerusalem contains an interesting expansion on these themes. Egeria comments that the reading of the “paschal gospel” was greeted with “groans and laments,” “weeping,” and “tears.”⁶⁴ As Taft notes, “From Egeria’s description of the expression of grief that this reading provoked, it is clear that the gospel lesson included the whole paschal mystery, not just the resurrection but also the passion and death on the cross.”⁶⁵ Egeria’s remarks demonstrate that the tradition of keeping vigil in the ancient church did not mask the realities of human life with an empty, imaginary hope in God’s promises, but rather expressed an eschatological hope in the fulfillment of these promises in Christ’s resurrection.

Vigils could also be used in these early centuries for political purposes, as in the case of the vigil organized by Ambrose at his cathedral when the Arian party of the empress Justina laid siege to it during Holy Week of 385.⁶⁶ While the truth of these manifestations of keeping vigil cannot be denied, keeping vigil primarily served to express a fundamentally compelling perspective on the eschatological dimensions of Christian life. The practice of keeping vigil correlated with the watch of the prudent and wise virgins of Matthew’s Gospel,⁶⁷ and with the ceaseless prayer of the angels before the throne of God. It is unfortunate that by the sixth century the gradual monasticization of liturgical practices would prevent lay participation in the services and weaken the role vigils played in the life of the community. By the eighth and ninth centuries the popular occasional vigil, with psalms, readings, preaching, and prayers, had disappeared.

The Easter Vigil as Principal Enactment of Christian Vigil-Keeping

This short survey of the early history of keeping vigil in the Christian tradition highlights the fact that the Christian origins of the practice focused on an event of expectant waiting for the fulfillment of what God has promised and revealed. The liturgical reforms of Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) and of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) sought to retrieve the

⁶⁴ “Et tunc ubi stat episcopus intro cancellos, prendet euangelium et accedet ad hostium et leget resurrectionem Domini episcopus ipse. Quod cum ceperit legi, tantus rugitus et mugitus fit omnium hominum et tantae lacrimae, ut quamvis durissimus possit moueri in lacrimis Dominum pro nobis tanta sustinuisse.” Egeria, *Itinerarium* 24.10, trans. Pierre Maraval (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002).

⁶⁵ Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours*, 53.

⁶⁶ Rubén M. Leikam, “The Liturgy of the Hours in the Non-Roman West,” trans. Lisa A. Twomey, in Chupungco, *Liturgical Time and Space*, 104.

⁶⁷ Matt 25:1–13. Even though the “wise” virgins also fall asleep, they are still prepared to greet the bridegroom when he arrives.

essential purpose and practice of keeping a liturgical vigil, which had been obscured after the ninth century. Today, when enacted by believers, the vigil articulates the tension of the already and the not-yet in which believers live as a redeemed people. Keeping a Christian vigil accomplishes a transformation of the experience of time and creation, a transformation that at once reveals and restores the vigil's divinely intended holiness. It is a sacramental action, a revelation of and communion with God, toward which the high solemnities and feasts of the church point.⁶⁸ Participation in a Christian vigil celebration engages one in a night of prayerful watch, an active and contemplative stance, which awaits the day when God will overcome night, and death will be defeated by life.⁶⁹

A Christian understanding of what it means to keep vigil may be clearly encountered in the celebration of the Easter Vigil, the premier celebration of the church's liturgical calendar and the "high point" of the Easter Triduum. This vigil is recognized from very early in the church's history as that night that "initiates" faith, because it holds together both the creatureliness of the Christian and the reality of the same as a redeemed, restored, and reborn person with an individuality affirmed by God.⁷⁰ In the ancient church, even before it became the paramount evening for the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, the Easter Vigil commemorated the Lord's *pascha*, not only his passion and death, but more importantly his passage, his transformation through the resurrection. As liturgical historian Patrick Regan notes, "The fast that preceded the vigil in these centuries commemorated the absence of 'the bridegroom,' and expressed hope for his imminent return," a hope that the Eucharist at the conclusion of the vigil sacramentally fulfilled.⁷¹

The ritual structure of this annual vigil awakens the eschatological foundations upon which Christian faith and human destiny are built. The Easter Vigil is not itself a passage from Lent to Easter, from the death of Christ to his resurrection; it is, rather, the full commemoration of Christ's resurrection.⁷² It is not a mere prelude to the celebration of the Easter Eucharist, but a hopeful rite, earnestly engaged in and awaiting the promised fulfillment of Christ.

⁶⁸ W. Jardine Grisbrooke, "A Contemporary Liturgical Problem: The Divine Office and Public Worship, III: Considerations towards a Solution of the Problem," *Studia Liturgica* 9, nos. 1-2 (1973): 10.

⁶⁹ Graham Woolfenden, *Daily Christian Prayer in Christian Spain: A Study of the Mozarabic Office* (Colorado Springs: International Academic, 2000), 146.

⁷⁰ Kenneth Stevenson, *Jerusalem Revisited: The Liturgical Meaning of Holy Week* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1988), 80.

⁷¹ Patrick Regan, *Advent to Pentecost: Comparing the Seasons in the Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 202.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 199.

The Easter Vigil, recalling the pivotal act of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ, applies the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection to the church, attentive to the word of God, and focused on the presence of the risen Christ, awaiting his return.⁷³ The initial rubric in the Roman Missal for this liturgy states the purpose of the celebration:

By most ancient tradition, this is the night of keeping vigil for the Lord (Ex 12:42), in which following the gospel admonition (Lk 12:35-37), the faithful, carrying lighted lamps in their hands, should be like those looking for the Lord when he returns, so that at his coming he may find them awake and have them sit at his table.⁷⁴

The liturgy on Easter eve is essentially and radically one of expectation and anticipation, and the full beginning of the feast of Easter.⁷⁵

The prayer, which blesses the new fire and introduces the service of light, expresses the anticipatory nature of what the vigil hopes to accomplish:

O God, who through your son bestowed upon the faithful the fire of your glory, sanctify this new fire, we pray, and grant that, by these paschal celebrations, we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires, that with minds made pure we may attain festivities of unending splendor.⁷⁶

The blessing of the paschal candle proclaims Christ as beginning and end, alpha and omega, and when it is finally lit, the presider proclaims, “May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.”⁷⁷ These initial rituals introduce a cosmic element, which accentuates the vigil’s quality of looking forward, joyfully, to Christ’s return. The candle is imbued with great eschatological significance as the symbol of the risen Christ in the midst of the community called together in his name. In contrast to the

⁷³ Pierre Jounel, “The Easter Vigil,” in *The Liturgy and Time*, vol. 4, *The Church at Prayer*, ed. A. G. Martimort et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), 38–39.

⁷⁴ “The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night,” in *The Roman Missal*, trans. The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 3rd typical ed., §1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 343.

⁷⁵ This is also a significant acknowledgment in the celebration of the Easter Vigil. White vestments, not purple, are worn from the beginning of the ritual; the altar is already adorned with flowers; music and hymnody are markedly joyous. Popular practice, however, keeps trying to return this event to the turning point between the dysphoric and the euphoric by adding bits of drama like keeping the church dark after the *Exultet* and all through the readings. Such nuancing is unnecessary and may serve in the end to cloud the symbolic nature of the vigil.

⁷⁶ “The Blessing of the Fire and Preparation of the Candle,” in *The Roman Missal*, §9, 344.

⁷⁷ “The Blessing of the Fire and Preparation of the Candle,” in *The Roman Missal*, §14, 346.

night that leads to Jesus' betrayal, the light of Christ in the paschal candle is a light dawning from beyond the world, from beyond death, uncreated and unending, shining in darkness, which darkness cannot overcome.⁷⁸ As Regan states, "The light allows itself to be seen precisely in the darkness, making the darkness itself luminous even as the passage makes the passion glorious."⁷⁹ The candle's significance is augmented in the singing of the Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*), particularly in its final stanza, where its light alludes to that final night when Christ as the Morning Star ushers in everlasting day: "May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns for ever and ever."⁸⁰

The series of lections, which follow the community's entrance into the church, led by the paschal candle, speak of the great deeds of salvation. The lessons are far from morose and foreboding; they are in fact "filled with messianic and eschatological hope, and never are sad. . . . A certain joyous quality appears, for the Old Testament is the hope of the New."⁸¹ The readings cover the broad expanse of salvation history from creation to covenant to redemption to prophecy of fulfillment. The proclamation of the word of God, not only during the Easter Vigil, but as constitutive of all liturgical vigils, gives voice to God, who speaks in profound ways of the truth and destiny of humanity, that those present at the celebration might remember and believe. The collects, which follow each of the lessons, echo the spirit of the proclamations; some in ways that earnestly and fervently pray for eschatological realization.⁸² Rupert Berger sums up the whole focus of this vigil:

During the night of waiting for her Lord, the Church tries to do as the prudent virgins did in the parable. . . . Therefore the community lights

⁷⁸ Regan, *Advent to Pentecost*, 219.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁸⁰ "The Easter Proclamation" (*Exsultet*), in *The Roman Missal*, §19, 356. See also Rupert Berger and Hans Hollerweger, eds., *Celebrating the Easter Vigil*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 42.

⁸¹ The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, schemata no. 278, D16-17, "In Genere," March 21, 1968. See Paul Turner, *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 135.

⁸² For example, "Almighty ever-living God, surpass, for the honor of your name, what you pledged to the Patriarchs by reason of their faith, and through sacred adoption increase the children of your promise, so that what the saints of old never doubted would come to pass your Church may now see in great part fulfilled." "Prayers after the Readings, after the fourth reading (on the new Jerusalem: Is. 54:5-14) and the Psalm (30[29])," in *The Roman Missal*, §27, 366.

the lamps for the Easter Vigil and, in their light, sits and listens to the great deeds which God did for their fathers, for only thus can the Church persevere . . . in a world such as ours [and] wait in faith for the Lord’s coming.⁸³

As a true Christian expression of keeping vigil, the Easter Vigil affirms the cosmic connection that exists between heaven and earth, and attempts to retrieve the sacramental understanding of creation as the locus both of divine intervention and of human encounter with God.⁸⁴ Anthonius Scheer interprets the Easter Vigil principally as a vigil in which people celebrate a night of redemption for which there is no replacement in the actual existence of the faithful, a night charged with salvation because it is the night of the Lord’s saving deed—the trampling down of death itself.⁸⁵ It is incorrect, Scheer proposes, to solely focus the vigil on the transition from death to life; rather, the Easter Vigil is indeed a time of watching with the Lord:

A night of reflection, with the great witness of scripture in hand and heart. It is a night during which we identify with the story of Jesus Christ. It is a night of intense believing trust in the events of his life, in the hope of the eschatological working out of his life in us, our world, our time. It is a night of intense silence . . . in which one listens to stories, which . . . relate how . . . resurrection comes about out of complete ruin and disaster It is an acceptance of the darkness—Jesus’ passion—through which light dawns—his resurrection.⁸⁶

Analysis and Conclusions

This article began by acknowledging that the increase and popularity of public candlelight vigils may signal, or have signaled, the introduction of a new element into the ways that society and culture address and respond to the upheavals that result from disaster. It suggested, in agreement with Post, Grimes, and others, that the contributions and effects of these types of vigils in response to tragedies have not been studied as they ought. The article described how the public candlelight vigil represents a new genre of rituals termed “disaster rituals,” and then considered the role vigils play in helping communities navigate through troubled times, discussing the benefits they provide to participants. Certain elements, which might preempt a

⁸³ Berger and Hollerweger, *Celebrating the Easter Vigil*, 39.

⁸⁴ Anscar J. Chupungco, *Shaping the Easter Feast* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1992), 16–17.

⁸⁵ Anthonius Scheer, “Is the Easter Vigil a Rite of Passage?,” in *Liturgy and Human Passage*, ed. David Power and Luis Maldonado (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 55–56.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

full appreciation and understanding of the impact of a public vigil on personal and communal life, such as the media, were also examined. Finally, the article surveyed the origins of keeping vigil in Christian liturgical tradition, to help explain what a public vigil in contemporary contexts might convey to participants and the community within which it is observed.

The manner in which culture and society observe candlelight vigils and the manner in which Christian believers are called to keep vigil differ. The distinction between the two may not be intentional, but rather perhaps is the product of a lack of study of the role played by ritual in addressing human need in the face of disaster, particularly in the civic arena. At present, differences may be found in ritual practice, and in the end or purpose of each type of vigil. In the ritual practice of a Christian vigil, assembling at night, in darkness, is done not out of convenience (allowing people to gather at the end of a work day) or for effect (darkness representing the evil that has descended upon the community); rather gathering at night is a critical detail because it calls the Christian community to remember that God creates out of darkness and moves creation always forward into more profound light. Candles are lit not merely to illumine—clutching one small lamp in the midst of an enveloping darkness—but to express the anamnetic nature of Christian life, that all life is lived through the light of Christ, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Speeches are not given to protest one thing or another, or to offer comfort and consolation only, but God’s word is heard, and words of praise, thanksgiving, and watchful anticipation serve to heighten an eschatological awareness of God’s transformation of creation and history always through the paschal mystery of the risen Christ. An appreciation of these facets of vigil keeping by those who observe candlelight vigils in the public square might offer some balance between expressions of grief and anxiety, while permitting movement to true healing and resolution.

In the Easter Vigil the nighttime context is revealed as one of passion and resurrection, beginning in darkness and leading into light. The vigil, understood from this perspective, becomes that moment of waiting for God in Christ, whose breath is hushed by the events of Good Friday, by events of agony, viciousness, and death, to breathe again. The nature of this type of waiting involves hopeful expectation of Christ’s return and fulfillment, for that time when “every tear will be wiped away,” and “there will be no more sadness, no more death.” The vigil offers us a “glimpse” of the eschatological in the tension-filled time between creation and redemption. The Christian liturgical vigil accentuates the recognition of that tension, while simultaneously revealing to its participants how much more needs to be done.

In this fashion the Easter Vigil, and every act of Christian vigil, narrate the necessity of transformation. This transition is not merely from one state to

another, but an authentic conversion to who and what human beings, inclusive of more than members in a religious association, are called to be as the Body of Christ. The eschatological act of keeping vigil through listening to the word of God and responding to that word in prayer and action enables us to learn to live in the horizon of God’s love by appropriating images, symbols, language, and stories from others who have participated in a similar process of transformation.⁸⁷ By incorporating more and more the goal and theology of “keeping vigil,” believers more and more express themselves as an eschatological people, who are then transformed by the events they remember and celebrate.

Such a perspective does not represent a false hope or an inability to face the pain and suffering of human life: rather it accepts the challenge, nay even the dare, to remember that a believer is called to be a person of hope in every day and age—one who is able to give a reason and answer for the hope that they possess (1 Pet 3:15). Lament we must, but a Christian can never lament in vain. Christian liturgical vigil challenges and encourages its participants to embrace the difference this truth makes in the lives of a people called to bear witness to something more than the pain and suffering of human existence. This conviction is evident in the practice of the “wake” in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. The wake is an integral part of the funeral liturgy, not in the sense of a final farewell to or lament for the deceased, but more profoundly as a vigil that precedes a funeral mass. As stated above, the whole program of services for the dead leads the mourners from grief to hope step-by-step. Its ritual focus acknowledges grief and tempers emotions with assurances and hope of the Resurrection, which is the stronger inflection of the ritual moment: “Through careful use of the [funeral] rites . . . the minister helps the mourners to express their sorrow and find strength and consolation through faith in Christ and his resurrection to eternal life.”⁸⁸ The celebration of vigils, that movement from evening through night to day, manifests the process of Christian life as it prays and hopes for continual transformation and deepening of faith until we experience fulfillment and union with God.

Christians must remember the manner in which they are called to keep vigil remains a source of the key eschatological perspective of Christian life, a perspective that cannot be lost or distorted in acculturating the faith to contemporary society. A more frequent celebration of vigils, as a celebration through psalmody, Scripture lections, and prayer of God’s *hodie*, reveals not only for believers, but also and most importantly for all societies, the

⁸⁷ Margaret Mary Kelleher, “Liturgy and the Christian Imagination,” *Worship* 66 (March 1992): 143.

⁸⁸ *Order of Christian Funerals*, §52, 21.

present reality of salvation in our day-to-day existence and contributes to expressing the anamnestic reality of Christian life.⁸⁹ Keeping vigil in a Christian context proclaims that the eschatological age has dawned as it develops the eschatological sense of who Christians are.

Candlelight vigils in the public square, as a window on the current dynamic of cult and culture, are “symbolic acts in the context of sacrality and assigning meaning,” but they may suffer from a lack of fully formed eschatological and anamnestic perspectives on human life and destiny.⁹⁰ Some might critique them therefore as incorrectly bearing the name “vigil,” classifying them instead as memorials or civic assemblies, with purposes and goals appropriate to such cultural events. To enact a vigil, as in Egeria’s time, not only conscious of the forces of pain and suffering in human life but also conscious and cognizant of God’s power in such situations, is to make a robust stand against those forces in opposition to the new courses onto which the Christ event has jerked the destiny of creation.⁹¹ Such consciousness defies a tortured lament that often sees God as either indifferent or incompetent when it comes to addressing human suffering. It refuses to affirm a determinism preaching indiscriminately that evil is everywhere, that there is no place that can escape it, that we are pawns before it, and that we are lucky to avoid the tortured pain and suffering it inflicts on us if we can.

A more conscious and resolute understanding of the origin of the public vigil in the practice of the Christian liturgical vigil might help obviate tendencies toward any type of determinism. The Christian liturgical vigil proclaims boldly that such conclusions are not the *terminus ad quem* for humanity, as it reinforces the eschatological proclamation of salvation received in Christ, and a glorification and thanksgiving to God for that gift. In this way, the Christian vigil asserts the sanctification of life in the present, and simultaneously carries the process of sanctification forward into eternity. In many ways, the Christian liturgical vigil challenges the barriers to religion and ritual in the public square that society and culture may consciously or unconsciously erect. It enacts a courageous stance against those things that dehumanize and desecrate human society, asserting a firm trust in the power of God to redeem and transform humanity. Thus, when the candlelight vigil in the public square is conscious in its own way of the origin and purpose of its ritual form, it may become clear that it echoes other types of vigil in a variety of contexts and arenas.

⁸⁹ Chupungco, *Shaping the Easter Feast*, 81.

⁹⁰ Post et al., *Disaster Ritual*, 229.

⁹¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 42.