

Filipino Spirituality of the Cross and Suffering: Healing and Re-Traumatization Among Natural Disaster Victims

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Abstract

In 2024, the World Risk Report ranked the Philippines among the nations which is most vulnerable to natural disasters. The country regularly endures typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and climate-related disruptions. At the same time, it remains deeply religious, with about ninety percent of Filipinos identifying as Christian. In this context, spirituality shapes how communities interpret trauma and sustain hope. This article examines the Filipino spirituality of the cross and suffering as a framework for resilience. Devotion to the suffering Christ, expressed in Holy Week rituals and popular processions, forms both personal piety and communal solidarity across Catholic and Protestant communities. While many studies emphasize the positive effects of religiosity on disaster survivors, few critically assess how certain doctrines and practices may retraumatize victims, especially when disasters are interpreted as divine punishment. The article demonstrates that in the different stages of disaster: devastation, disillusionment, reform, and wisdom, a pastoral and liturgical responses specifically in the stages of reform and wisdom, are necessary intervening factors of changing the worldviews and beliefs about disasters from the perspectives of the disaster victims.

Keywords: disaster risk; liturgy; reflection; spirituality; spiritual care; trauma-healing.

Abstrak

Pada tahun 2024, Laporan Risiko Dunia menempatkan Filipina di antara negara-negara yang paling rentan terhadap bencana alam. Negara ini secara teratur mengalami topan, gempa bumi, letusan gunung berapi, dan gangguan terkait iklim. Pada saat yang sama, negara ini tetap sangat religius, dengan sekitar sembilan puluh persen orang Filipina mengidentifikasi diri sebagai Kristen. Dalam konteks ini, spiritualitas membentuk bagaimana komunitas menafsirkan trauma dan mempertahankan harapan. Artikel ini meneliti spiritualitas salib dan penderitaan Filipina sebagai kerangka kerja untuk ketahanan. Pengabdian kepada Kristus yang menderita, yang diungkapkan dalam ritual Pekan Suci dan prosesi populer, membentuk kesalehan pribadi dan solidaritas komunal di seluruh komunitas Katolik dan Protestan. Sementara banyak penelitian menekankan efek positif religiusitas pada penyintas bencana, hanya sedikit yang menilai secara kritis bagaimana doktrin dan praktik tertentu dapat membuat kembali trauma korban, terutama ketika bencana ditafsirkan sebagai hukuman ilahi. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa dalam berbagai tahap bencana: kehancuran, kekecewaan, reformasi, dan kebijaksanaan, tanggapan pastoral dan liturgi khususnya dalam tahap reformasi dan kebijaksanaan, adalah faktor intervensi yang diperlukan untuk mengubah pandangan dunia dan keyakinan tentang bencana dari perspektif korban bencana.

Kata Kunci: risiko bencana; liturgi; refleksi; spiritualitas; perawatan spiritual; penyembuhan trauma.

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Introduction

Scholarship on faith and religiosity in relation to natural disasters within the Philippine context has been extensive. Many studies examine theodicy, where the usual findings revealed the traditional understanding that God sends the disasters as punishment for the collective sins of the community, and as a way of cleansing the community.¹ In other articles, the highlight is the advocacy of church leaders for rehabilitation and social justice where the government is called upon to respond to the basic needs and the rehabilitation of the victims by appealing to the moral conscience of the government leaders.² Other authors underscore faith as a source of resilience and call for renewed Biblical understanding and sound doctrine in times of crisis.³ Although they are not offering processes and steps of recovery but simply highlighted the people's response verbally that faith keeps them going and get back on their faith after a disaster.

While these contributions are valuable, relatively little attention has been given to trauma-informed spiritual care that attends to the psychological and communal wounds of survivors and to their capacity for meaning-making as a faith community. The main question we aim to answer is how the Filipino spirituality of cross and suffering contribute to the healing of disaster victims instead of retraumatizing them through holding these beliefs. The research method used is a systematic review of literature of analyzing of the Filipino culture and spirituality, and the underlying spiritual needs of every phase of a disaster.

This article seeks to provide space for appropriate spiritual care in the recovery process of victims of natural calamities and disasters. This article proceeds in four movements. First, it situates the discussion within the socio-cultural and religious context of the Philippines, where popular religiosity profoundly shapes interpretations of disaster. Second, it offers a critical reinterpretation of the cross and suffering, exploring how these central symbols may generate salutary rather than retraumatizing effects. Third, it considers the phases of disaster and the discernment required in mediating community rituals and pastoral responses appropriate to each stage. Finally, it proposes a framework for trauma-informed spiritual care embodied in liturgical acts, communal storytelling, and public rituals—practices deeply rooted in Filipino culture and capable of fostering healing, solidarity, and renewed hope.

¹ Jesus Deogracias Principe, "Writing the Disaster: A Philippine Case Study of the Challenge to Traditional Theodicy in Popular Media," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 14, no. 42 (2015): 172–197.

² Maria Cecilia T Medina, "15: Religion in the Public Sphere in the Aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan," in *Disasters in the Philippines* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023).

³ Dave Johnson, "A Christian Response to the Filipino Understanding of National Disasters," *Journal of Asian Mission* 18, no. 2 (2017): 51–70.

The World Risk Index Report in 2024 placed the Philippines as the number one in Southeast Asia and the whole world in terms of susceptibility to devastation due to natural calamities such as typhoons and earthquakes.⁴ The country has been battered by numerous typhoons, even super typhoons like Haiyan in 2013 that killed more than 5000 people and destroyed billions of properties, and the super typhoon Odette in 2021 with similar proportions of damage and loss. Despite all these natural calamities, Filipinos have been known as resilient people, able to rise and move on with their lives after the storm.⁵ Although many commentators would disagree that the resilience shown is not really the whole truth. People became resilient because they had no choice, since the government was inadequate in responding to the needs of the victims over time. Yet, the Philippines emerged as one of the happiest countries in the world, and the second happiest in the Southeast Asian region next to Singapore.⁶ Where do Filipinos get this resilience and happiness amid experiencing and becoming victims of natural disasters as frequent as at least once every year? Or is happiness simply a facade to an internal turmoil and spiritual crisis?

Resilience and happiness have been attributed to people's religiosity. The Philippines has a population of 114.9 million people, where close to 90% are Christians, and the majority of these are Roman Catholics. According to the latest survey on religion, 73% of Filipinos believe that their religion is very important to their identity.⁷ Religiosity among Filipinos cannot be denied, as fiestas are celebrated all year long nationwide. Every year, the devotion to the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila, draws hundreds of thousands of devotees. The elaborate Holy Week observances are highlights of religiosity, which include chanting of the passion narrative, self-flagellation of devotees, and voluntary nailing on the cross during Good Friday.

The Roman Catholic church clergy criticized and do not endorse these practices, as they are risky and harmful to the body, but those who practice them cannot be prevented. As we can see, religious teachings are not identical to how people express them in their lives. Spirituality as a lived-faith experience of the people is shown in their focus on the crucifixion and suffering of Jesus Christ by enacting them bodily and psychologically through these practices.

⁴ GMA Integrated News, "Philippines Has Highest World Risk Index Anew in 2024 Report," *GMA News Online*, last modified 2024, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/920021/philippines-highest-world-risk-index-2024/story/>.

⁵ Abu Al-Rasheed Tanggol, "[OPINION] Challenging the Narrative of Filipino Resiliency," *Rappler*, last modified 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/ispeak/opinion-challenging-narrative-filipino-resiliency/>.

⁶ Michelle Abad, "Filipinos' Happiness Back to Pre-Pandemic Levels – Report," *Rappler*, last modified 2024, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/philippines-ranking-world-happiness-report-2024/>.

⁷ Ayie Licsi, "73% of Pinoys Believe Religion Is Very Important to the Filipino Identity—Study," *Life*, last modified 2025, <https://philstarlife.com/news-and-views/231475-73-percent-pinoys-believe-religion-very-important-to-filipino-identity#>.

Discussion

Role of Religion and Spirituality in Natural Disasters: Healing and Retraumatization?

The word trauma comes from the Greek word *troma*, meaning ‘a wound,’ ‘a hurt,’ ‘a defeat.’ Yet trauma is not only physical but also penetrates the whole dimension of a person. Traumatic events can be re-experienced in specific ways, such as in recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections and dreams, and triggering factors. Some victims of typhoons, especially children, panic when it rains and the wind blows. Natural disasters such as floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and typhoons are recurring traumas as they come frequently. Trauma, then, is accumulated without being unburdened and released in healthy ways.

When religion tells people to get over it without proper processing of experiences, psychological disruptions can emerge, and it may have a detrimental effect on a person. Religion needs to assist rather than impede the healing of traumatized people. So, what is the connection between spirituality and natural disasters? Several studies from different parts of the world revealed the positive effects of belonging and the practice of religion among victims of natural disasters. Religion helped to buffer the community against psychological distress caused by calamities by sharing similar concerns and offering sympathy to one another.⁸ Religion is positive in terms of relinquishment of control and eventual acceptance of fate, sense of empowerment through cooperation, and stabilization and security.⁹ Religious activities helped victims cope with the effects of the natural disaster by holding on to something familiar, such as rituals and rhythms in life. Religion is social capital and forging a sense of coherence.¹⁰

In the research conducted by Rogen Alcantara among victims of natural calamities in Bohol and Cebu, Philippines, it was found out that people’s religious observances and religious activities increased as a form of coping mechanism and moving on after a disaster took place.¹¹ Although this might look like a positive coping mechanism, there might be hidden motivations for increased religiosity, as this could be a sign of covering up the trauma and numbing the senses. There were young people who immediately decided to enter seminaries after the storm

⁸ Paolo Stratta et al., “Spirituality and Religiosity in the Aftermath of a Natural Catastrophe in Italy,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 52, no. 3 (September 7, 2013): 1029–1037, <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s10943-012-9591-z>.

⁹ Mikiko Sato et al., “The Role of Spirituality in Family Adjustment and Resilience among Puerto Rican Families Post-Hurricane Maria,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 90–103, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15426432.2021.2000553>.

¹⁰ Bayram Nejati-Zarnaqi et al., “Factors Challenging the Spiritual Rehabilitation of Iranian Men Affected by Natural Disasters: A Qualitative Study,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 61, no. 4 (August 20, 2022): 3129–3150, <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s10943-022-01590-w>.

¹¹ Rogen Ferdinand E Alcantara, “Quality of Life, Spirituality, and Resiliency among Survivors of Natural Disasters in Negros Oriental and Bohol, Philippines” (Silliman University, 2017).

but then found out their internal turmoil was not addressed by the environment, and they couldn't cope with the demands of theological education. They thought seminaries were the best way to pay back God's pardon from their sins, which they paid for by enduring and surviving the storm.

Increased religiosity, or as we refer to it as spirituality, ways and means of connecting to a higher being, self, and meaning making, can be rooted in fear. In fact, in relation to those who engaged in self-flagellation, voluntary nailing on the cross, and chanting the passion narrative until one has exhausted the voice and strained the vocal cords are not actually imitating Jesus' suffering. They do these as '*panata*' or a sacred vow to perform in gratitude for protection from the storm, for convincing God not to send storms again, and for asking for miracles and favors.¹² This means these spiritualities of the cross and suffering are borne out of fear.¹³ Evangelicalism, which focuses on the shedding of blood and suffering for salvation, is also the prevalent belief even among mainline protestant church members.

This toxic spirituality reinforces the image of God as vindictive, angry, and punitive, who needs to be pacified by rituals that induce suffering both physically and psychologically. This verges on blaming the victims of calamities as if they are the ones bringing these upon themselves.¹⁴ Most victims of natural calamities attribute their suffering to the will of God, making a parallel comparison to Jesus' crucifixion, death, and suffering as the will of God the Father. Suffering is a form of God's punishment that causes mental disturbance in finding what sins they have committed. Sometimes, those who suffered less blamed those who suffered more as the culprits for the punishment from God and that the calamities are God's ways of cleansing the locality of the corporate sins. A victim of a typhoon recalled in my interview that during the storm, when the roof of his house was gone and the storm was still raging, they hid beneath their bed mattress and kept on asking forgiveness from God for all their sins as a family.

The prevalent focus on Christ's suffering and crucifixion has shaped fatalism and reinforced passivity in the face of suffering. Even the common mantra of people suggests this mentality, "*mag-antos aron ma santos*" [We need to suffer to become saints]. Beltran observed this, and he writes,

¹² Julius Bautista, *The Way of the Cross: Suffering Selfhoods in the Roman Catholic Philippines* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

¹³ Fernando N. Zialcita, "The Way of the Cross: Suffering Selfhoods in the Roman Catholic Philippines," *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 69, no. 2 (2021): 311–314.

¹⁴ Terri Daniel, "Toxic Theology as a Contributing Factor in Complicated Mourning," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing theory and professional practice through scholarly and reflective publications* 73, no. 4 (December 12, 2019): 196–204, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1542305019858289>.

“In a country where poverty, deprivation and oppression are the common lot of the masses, where typhoons and earthquakes frequently occur, it is not surprising that the image of the Crucified One, head bowed, mouth agape in excruciating agony, provides consolation and an outlet for pent-up emotions of sympathy and tragedy for the ignorant and the heavy-laden.”¹⁵

When this type of mentality or beliefs persists, people accept this as normal, sound, and healthy theology. This will have an impact on the way people respond to calamities. There is a tendency for acceptance of negligence by the government, and a negative view towards God and nature.

A Reinterpretation of the Spirituality of the Cross and Suffering

Whereas theology is the language by which we articulate beliefs and are the official pronouncements of a church, spirituality is how people live out these beliefs in daily life. Therefore, spiritualities are free to be expressed in many different forms. However, proper and sound theology is first and foremost needed to guide people in their spiritual expressions. Hilary Jerome Scarsella writes about the kind of theology of the cross which is balanced in approach:

“A theology that remembers and narrates crucifixion as traumatic, both is and cultivates space that constructs, preserves, and models narrative re-membrance of traumatic events in which the reality of catastrophic devastation is acknowledged alongside the possibility of remaking ...” “Christian theology is in itself a response to trauma.”¹⁶

Focusing solely on the crucifixion is incomplete, with the entirety of the gospel where Jesus has risen from the dead. While not denying the severity and horror of crucifixion, we also do not deny the effects of traumatic events of typhoons and natural disasters. What happened to Jesus is not the act of God but the acts of human beings who put him to death in connivance with the political and religious leaders of his day. The same could be said when we consider climate change as the result of human activities borne out of greed and abuse of power over the environment. The resurrection of Jesus is not part of the linear succession of events of a God-planned and sanctioned suffering, but a testament that God is victorious over forces of evil and death.

Salvation is holistic. Asis asserts that “the focus is not on the cross as the sole salvific event, but on Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection in its entirety as key to human

¹⁵ Benigno Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1987).

¹⁶ Hilary Jerome Scarsella, “Trauma and Theology: Prospects and Limits in Light of the Cross,” in *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory Accounts*, ed. Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto (Ipswich: Fordham University Press, 2018).

redemption in its fullness, including the physical and spiritual dimensions.”¹⁷ The entire life of Jesus, who championed the poor and marginalized and strived to free people from all forms of oppression, should be the focus of salvation as a holistic concept. Spirituality of the cross and suffering, which exclusively uses them as means to ends, which is to gain favor from God like a magician, is both faulty and dangerous to the spiritual and psychological well-being of the people. Therefore, beliefs like these need to be reinterpreted, revised, and debunked when necessary for the overall well-being of the people.

Phases of Disaster¹⁸

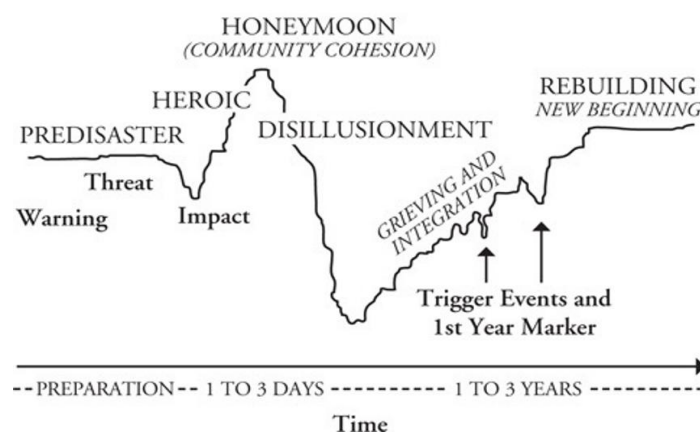


Figure 1. Phases of Disaster
Source: Kraus et al (2017)

How does a reinterpretation of the spirituality of the cross and suffering offer a better perspective to have a healing effect on the community of faith affected by natural disasters? The phases of disaster can be a journey through which spiritualities can be practiced that facilitate healing and restoration.

The people of the Philippines are already familiar with the pre-disaster phase of natural calamities like a typhoon. They almost take it as part of life and a natural occurrence occasionally. Some people take warnings lightly and wouldn't evacuate until the last minute when the typhoon comes. The government gives sanctions and penalties to those who violate protocols.

¹⁷ Michael Demetrius H Asis, “Suffering, Salvation, and the Filipino: Francis Schussler Fiorenza’s Theology of Divine Emancipatory Solidarity in the Context of Poverty and Marginalization,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁸ Kraus Laurie, Holyan David, and Wismer Bruce, *Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters: A Guide for Pastors and Congregations After Violence and Trauma* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

Usually, during and after a typhoon, heroic acts can be seen and are experienced in communities. Fisherfolk in the locality where I grew up help each other carry and move the boat inland away from the reach of the tidal waves. Neighbors would stay in a house strong enough to withstand the storm. It is a fun time for children to eat together with other families. Each family brings food for everyone to share. After the storm, those whose houses were completely damaged can stay with neighbors until a house is rebuilt for them.

Usually, when the disaster is severe, people become disillusioned and try to deny the impact of the disaster; they turn to religious activities. Usually, when there are casualties, there is no one to blame; inwardly, people attribute it to punishments from God. It is in the grieving period that families find it hard to move on. Integration and returning to normal cannot be guaranteed to move at a fast pace. Sometimes, loss of properties and lives are carried in the memory if they last.

The Four Phases of Human-Caused Disaster Response¹⁹

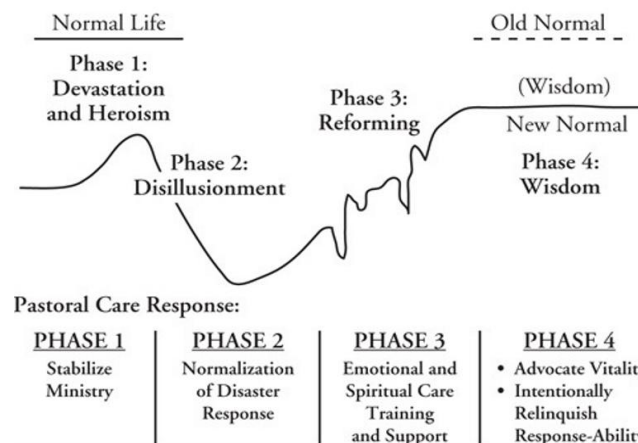


Figure 2. The Four Phases of Human-Caused Disaster Response
Source: Kraus et al (2017)

The diagram above is a modified and enhanced representation of the phases of a disaster. It is now agreed that even natural disasters can be considered human-caused disasters. In the case of typhoons, they are the result of human activities that caused global warming, increased air temperature, and the rapid formation of storms in the ocean.

Like the other diagram on phases of natural disaster, in the four phases of Human Caused disaster response, phases 1 and 2 are periods of impact on the storm where physical, emotional, psychological, and financial impact are endured. These first two phases need to be

¹⁹ Ibid, 13.

met and stabilized before moving to the next phases. Phases 3 and 4 are the phases where confrontation of toxic beliefs and unhelpful spiritualities takes place.

As disasters became frequent, people have already built in their own responses in terms of preparing for physical safety and the immediate needs after the storm. However, the part that is not directly addressed but left to individuals' ways is Phase 3, Reforming, and Phase 4, Wisdom. Reforming the beliefs about natural disasters, especially the belief about God, can be liberating for the mental health of people, and thus will pave the way towards spiritual vitality.

Liturgy: The Work of the People in Restoring and Rebuilding

The task of the church as a community of faith is to facilitate healing and, in the long run, will avoid re-traumatization of people. Rituals, ceremonies, and worship practices can facilitate healing. Instead of using them as means to gain God's favor, rituals and ceremonies and worship services declare God's grace already present and at work in the lives of people. These liturgical acts are stories of the Scripture and the experiences of the people interwoven together so that a similar thread of God's grace can be palpably seen. Indeed, the task of Christian theology was to create space for narrative remaking, the work of narrative reconstruction.²⁰ Al Fuertes concedes that storytelling transforms the negative impact of traumatic events into a constructive story.²¹ By retelling stories, catharsis happens since it is a way to unload burdens and equip the person to name the experiences. Naming and telling stories empower the person to claim control mentally at the present and as a way of pointing out God's active involvement and presence in the lives of the people.

There are many ways to retell stories of traumatic events. One is to hold a memorial service every year where individuals are given the opportunity to share how they have moved on and progressed in their lives. This is a chance for everyone to share wisdom with each other, thus becoming a pool of hope for everyone in the community.

In terms of the healing effect of symbols, the lighted Easter cross is a potent symbol in a sanctuary, which proclaims Christ's victory over forces of death and evil. It is a testament that God did not come to steal life and property like a storm but has come in Jesus Christ to give life and to have it abundantly.

²⁰ Scarsella, "Trauma and Theology: Prospects and Limits in Light of the Cross."

²¹ Al Fuertes, "Storytelling and Its Transformative Impact in the Philippines," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (March 6, 2012): 333–348, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/crq.21043>.

The role of a minister in terms of leadership for the community cannot be ignored. We need to be a green Church²² which proclaims that God is amid creation, and we are part of God's beautiful world. We need to confront and detoxify the habits of the mind through sermons and Christian education. We need to be proactive in environmental protection and conservation efforts. The food pantry during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of solidarity with those in need. Community gardens can be set up for food security and as expressions of solidarity and cooperation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the distinct spirituality of Filipinos, which focuses on the cross and the suffering of Christ, as manifested in both cultural traditions and public religious practices. Such a spirituality holds a dual potential: it can serve as a source of healing or, conversely, as a mechanism of re-traumatization, especially in the wake of natural disasters. It is imperative, therefore, that pastoral caregivers and those in positions of spiritual leadership critically engage with and confront toxic theologies and unhelpful belief systems that perpetuate a distorted image of God, one that associates divine will with inflicted suffering like disasters.

Instead, theological reflection must return to the image of God revealed in Jesus Christ: the crucified, risen Lord who suffers with humanity rather than causes harm as a form of divine punishment. This Christological image offers a more pastoral and life-affirming theological vision. In the context of trauma, particularly those that are caused by climate-related disasters such as typhoons, the phases 3 and 4 of the disaster response of theological reform and the acquisition of spiritual wisdom become essential in undoing internalized harm and facilitating communal resilience. Given the accelerating realities of climate change, churches must take a proactive role not only in spiritual care but also in environmental stewardship, becoming advocates for the protection and preservation of creation.

This article is limited to the Filipino context and from a Christian worldview and perspective. This is also a community trauma healing instead of a clinical intervention of traumatized people. Future research might usefully examine the spirituality of clergy themselves, particularly how they interpret and articulate experiences of calamity. This is especially crucial, as clergy are entrusted with shaping and guiding the spiritual consciousness of their communities. Furthermore, clinical trauma healing can expand this article by exploring

²² Eleazar Fernandez, "Disciples of the Green Spirit," *Asia Journal Theology* 38, no. 1 (April 2, 2024): 17–32, <https://ajt.atesea.net/index.php/ajt/article/view/126>.

different levels of trauma within a community of faith and the impact of a spiritual care intervention in this community.

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