

Examining the Celebratory Aspects of Death: From A Psychological Perspective, the Slametan Tradition, and Catholic Church Leaders

Ade Satria Yuda Andhika

Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, Indonesia

Email: yudaandhika149@gmail.com

Keywords:

Death; Grief; Slametan Culture;
Celebration of Death; Gratitude

Abstract

Death is often regarded solely as an occasion of grief that brings profound sorrow to those left behind and may even challenge an individual's faith in God. This study offers an alternative perspective by proposing that death carries not only a dimension of mourning but also a dimension of celebration and gratitude, an aspect that has received limited scholarly attention. Using a qualitative method through descriptive-analytical library research, this study examines the phenomenon of death from three perspectives: psychological, cultural, and theological. From the psychological perspective, the study draws on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—as a framework for understanding the inner processes experienced by bereaved individuals on their journey toward healing. From the cultural perspective, the study examines Indonesian death rituals such as Rambu Solo' of Toraja, Ngaben of Bali, and slametan of Java, which contain elements of celebration and interpret death as a transition toward perfection or union with the Creator. From the theological perspective, the study explores the views of Catholic figures Saint Francis of Assisi and Edith Stein, who regarded death as a "sister" to be welcomed with joy rather than solely feared. The findings show that, despite their different foundations, the three perspectives converge on the understanding that death can be interpreted as a pathway toward the perfection of life with the Creator. The bereaved are therefore encouraged to reconcile with the reality of loss and transform their understanding from one of suffering toward gratitude, allowing death to be viewed not merely as a wound but also as a celebration of life.

INTRODUCTION

In reality, two inseparable aspects characterize human existence: life and death (Subagya, 1981). They are intrinsically connected, as one cannot be fully understood without the other. However, people often overlook or avoid reflecting on death (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Many individuals focus primarily on life while neglecting the inevitability of death, even though death is an unavoidable part of the human experience. Therefore, both life and death must be acknowledged and accepted, as accepting life also requires accepting the reality of death (Nugroho et al., 2014). Death represents an absolute certainty and an inherent aspect of human existence.

Death affects not only the individual who passes away but also those who remain. For example, the death of a parent can profoundly affect their children, just as the loss of a close friend can deeply impact those around them (Doornik & C, 1977). The consequences of such losses are often expressed through emotional responses, such as crying, sadness, and difficulty accepting the reality of the event. Consequently, death may evoke fear not only in those

approaching the end of life but also among the bereaved. Grief (Kastowo & J, 2021) is therefore commonly perceived as an experience that individuals seek to avoid.

Death is an event closely associated with human existence, whether experienced personally or encountered through the loss of another person. Humans cannot escape this reality because death is an inherent component of life. For those left behind, feelings of loss are inevitable. The loss of a loved one produces both direct and indirect consequences. The direct impact involves sorrow (Rupp, 2004) and the absence of a significant person in one's life, while the indirect consequences relate to the psychological effects experienced by the bereaved. These effects may reduce emotional resilience, create psychological distress, and influence the survivor's perspective and attitude toward life (Kimmel, 1990). Therefore, the impact of death requires a process of healing. Although complete recovery may not always be possible, the healing process can help individuals experiencing grief regain strength and continue their lives.

Death is commonly associated with mourning, as reflected in the tears of mourners and the atmosphere of sorrow surrounding loss. However, death does not only contain an element of mourning but may also involve celebration. In several cultures, funeral ceremonies are accompanied by meaningful rituals and communal celebrations that honor the life and journey of the deceased. This celebratory dimension emerges because death is interpreted as a transition and a significant culmination of human existence (Rout, 2001). Thus, alongside mourning, an element of celebration may also exist within the experience of death. Nevertheless, this perspective is often overlooked because death is generally perceived primarily as a moment of sadness rather than as an opportunity for reflection, gratitude, and celebration.

Research on the celebratory dimensions of death remains limited, particularly studies that integrate psychological, cultural, and theological perspectives simultaneously. Previous studies have generally examined death from a single disciplinary perspective without comprehensively connecting these dimensions. However, a holistic understanding of death requires a multidisciplinary approach that bridges psychological experiences, cultural practices, and religious interpretations. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by proposing that death encompasses not only mourning but also celebration and gratitude.

Based on this background, the research questions of this study are: (1) what is the psychological experience of bereaved individuals according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief?; (2) how do Indonesian (Sunoto, 1983) cultural traditions interpret death as a celebratory event?; and (3) how do Catholic Church figures perceive death as an experience that can be welcomed with hope and joy? Accordingly (Neimeyer, 2015), this study aims to analyze and integrate psychological, cultural, and theological perspectives in understanding death and to demonstrate that death can be interpreted not only as an occasion of grief but also as an expression of celebration and gratitude. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of multidisciplinary death studies and practical contributions for individuals experiencing grief, pastoral caregivers, and the wider community in developing a more holistic and transformative understanding of death.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method using a descriptive-analytical library research approach. Primary data were obtained from written sources, including scriptural texts, the writings and faith testimonies of Catholic figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi and Edith Stein

(Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), literature on grief psychology based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage theory, and cultural-anthropological studies of Indonesian death rituals, such as Rambu Solo' (Toraja), Ngaben (Bali), and slametan (Java). These data were complemented by brief interviews with five individuals who had experienced the loss of a loved one to provide contextual insights. The collected (Gelber et al., 1993) data were analyzed using a descriptive-interpretative approach by integrating psychological, cultural, and theological perspectives to develop a broader understanding of death as an experience that involves not only grief but also celebration and gratitude.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Psychology of Those Left Behind by Death

In the event of death, there will always be those who feel a sense of loss as a result. According to Chrisostomus Abineno, grieving is not limited to what one feels, but also encompasses what one thinks, what one wills, and what one does. Grief is a normal response for a person who has experienced loss (Saptaka & Pr, 2010). Such an experience of grief leaves a wound within the person that needs to be healed, although the time required for healing differs from one individual to another. There are several stages that emerge within the experience of grief on the way to the healing of that wound (Gerejawi, 2018).

According to Dr. Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*, there are five stages that a grieving person passes through, namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Denial is typically the first stage to occur, marked by disbelief toward the loss that has taken place. Denial functions as a defense mechanism aimed at protecting one's emotional attachment to the person who mattered in one's life, characterized by shock, disbelief, or refusal to accept reality, as well as a tendency to withdraw from others; the duration of this stage varies from person to person and may last briefly or for an extended period.

The next stage is anger, which continues from the stage of denial, in which pent-up emotion reaches its peak as an outlet for the pain and disappointment caused by the loss. This anger may be directed at oneself or at others who are, in fact, entirely unrelated to the event, and is often triggered by memories that resurface together with the person who has passed away. Once the anger subsides, the bargaining stage emerges, in which the grieving person begins to make a kind of agreement with God concerning the event that has occurred. This stage may be regarded as the final form of defense, as it is at this point that a person begins to recognize and become open to the reality of the loss, often accompanied by feelings of guilt or regret, expressed through statements such as "if only..." or "if only I had realized sooner...".

The fourth stage is depression, marked by a decline in self-confidence toward life due to the loss of the person who mattered most. If left unaddressed, this condition may give rise to prolonged sadness, worry, doubt, restlessness, or loneliness, as well as a tendency to withdraw, feel worthless, and lose trust in others. The final stage, acceptance, is marked by openness toward the loss that has been experienced. Acceptance at this stage does not always mean joy or renewed enthusiasm for life, but rather a reduction in the anger that previously arose. This stage should not be interpreted as a final phase that entirely eliminates sadness, but rather as an invitation to accept the reality of the loss and begin to look toward the future.

These five stages proposed by Dr. Kübler-Ross can serve as a depiction of the psychological condition experienced by a person facing loss. From a psychological standpoint,

the event of death brings suffering to the grieving person, affecting various aspects of life, namely the physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects. The emotions of grief need to be fully acknowledged so that the person may eventually reach the stage of acceptance regarding the event of death.

Cultural Perspectives on Death

There exists a dilemma in how societies perceive death and the grief that accompanies it. This dilemma arises from the different ways in which people respond to death—some express condolences to those closest to the deceased, while others respond with joy, as seen in several cultural traditions in Indonesia. In Toraja culture (Duli & Hasanuddin, 2003), for instance, the "Rambu Solo" ceremony is held to commemorate the deceased in a lavish manner, containing both religious and social dimensions, marked by the slaughter of dozens of buffalo whose meat is then cooked and distributed to the community. Likewise, in Balinese culture, the "Ngaben" ceremony requires substantial expense and involves a tall, magnificent funeral tower befitting the deceased's social status, based on the belief among Balinese Hindus that the ceremony accelerates the return of the Panca Maha Bhuta elements to their origin, while also involving the participation of many people.

Both ceremonies reveal differing perspectives on death: an event generally regarded as a cause for grief is instead celebrated with great festivity. Setting aside the social status attached to those holding such ceremonies, the considerable expense involved raises the question of whether this truly reflects grief on the part of those left behind, or whether it instead suggests that death need not always be regarded as a sorrowful event. In addition to "Rambu Solo" in Toraja and "Ngaben" in Bali, Javanese (Endraswara, 2004) culture recognizes the slametan ceremony, derived from the word "selamat" (safe/blessed), signifying that death leads to salvation—namely, the union of the deceased with the Divine toward perfection, in line with the concept of manunggaling kawula lan Gusti (the union of humankind with God) and sangkan paraning dumadi (the origin and purpose of life). The series of slametan rituals takes place from the moment of death through the third, seventh, fortieth, and hundredth days, one year, two years, and up to one thousand days after death, aimed at guiding the deceased toward perfection through union with the Creator.

In the Javanese (Geertz, 1981) worldview, the concept of death is associated with the end of bodily life in this world, yet it does not end there—death is understood as a transition from the physical world to the unseen realm. The slametan ceremony in this context seeks to affirm that death does not bring suffering, but rather signifies a willingness to let go of the departed loved one. Broadly speaking, various cultural traditions in Indonesia show that the event of death is often regarded as an occasion for celebration, reflected in the festive elements and the sense of gratitude embedded in the various funerary ceremonies practiced across different regions.

The View of Death According to Figures of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church's view of death may be traced through figures in Scripture as well as through the exemplary faith of the saints. In the New Testament, it is recounted that Jesus sacrificed Himself to save humankind from sin, an act that brought sorrow, disappointment, confusion, and a loss of direction to those closest to Him, given that Jesus was the sole way of truth for their lives. Several figures in Scripture are depicted as experiencing loss at the death

of Jesus on the cross, among them Mary, the apostles particularly John and Peter and the women who followed Jesus.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is depicted as present at various significant moments in Jesus's life, from conception, birth, and upbringing to His death, as recorded in John 19:26. Mary's presence at the death of Jesus—which, moreover, occurred through crucifixion, a form of execution regarded in Jewish tradition as reserved for those who had violated the Law—placed her in a profoundly difficult situation as a mother losing her only son. Nevertheless, Mary's demeanor did not display overt signs of loss, consistent with her character of treasuring all things in her heart, which enabled her to remain steadfast in facing whatever befell Jesus.

Peter's experience of loss is portrayed more visibly, marked by confusion, disappointment, and a refusal to accept Jesus's death evident in his absence from the accounts of the Passion, the crucifixion, and the burial of Jesus. Peter reappears in the resurrection narrative, as recorded in Luke 24:12, when he runs to verify whether the tomb of Jesus was indeed empty—an act reflecting his longing to encounter Jesus once more, even though he had not believed in His death. Peter's journey illustrates a progression from denial toward acceptance, culminating in his rising up to faithfully proclaim the teachings of Jesus to many people.

Meanwhile, the women who followed Jesus from the time of His suffering through His resurrection are portrayed as remaining constantly at His side, and thus experienced a profound sense of loss over the figure who meant so much to them. However, through Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus at the tomb, a new hope emerged that became a source of strength enabling them to continue living. Overall, these figures closest to Jesus display various reactions to the loss of someone deeply significant in their lives, yet they did not remain mired in sorrow; as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples gradually began to proclaim the good news to many people. The death of Jesus, while inflicting the wound of loss, also cultivated courage in the disciples to bear witness, for Jesus continued to accompany them through the Holy Spirit, who granted them strength to rise from sorrow.

This perspective on death is further reinforced through the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome concerning "dying and rising with Christ." Romans 6:5 states, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his," in line with Romans 14:8, "For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Through his writing, Saint Paul sought to affirm that death is not an event to be mourned, for the one who has died has now been united with God, the Source of Life, and therefore those left behind need not fear death, for death is not something terrifying, but rather a path toward eternal salvation with God. Based on this account—both through the figures who experienced the loss of Jesus and through Paul's letter to the church in Rome—it may be concluded that loss is not something to be feared.

A similar perspective is shown by Saint Francis of Assisi, who, while ill, welcomed death with the words "Welcome, Sister Death," as also reflected in a stanza of the "Canticum of the Sun" (1225): "Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no living man can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm." This verse reveals Saint Francis's profound acceptance of death, which he welcomed with familiarity and joy, addressing it as a sister—an indication that he did not fear death. It is further clarified that the

death referred to by Saint Francis was bodily death, for he understood that he would rise to a new life in union with God. Saint Francis recognized that a deeper peace lay beyond the death he faced, namely union with God. This attitude reflects an optimism within Saint Francis, born of the certainty that he would one day be with Jesus Christ in heaven—an optimism rooted in inner peace, arising from having secured what mattered most, so that everything surrounding it, including death, could proceed smoothly. Conversely, when one's relationship with what matters most is not secure, the world becomes an unsafe place, and death is feared as an emotional threat to the self.

According to Eric Doyle OFM, the tranquility and inner peace possessed by Saint Francis stemmed from his devotion to the suffering and death of Jesus, which offered the understanding that Christ's suffering and death had been transformed into union with His glorious resurrection, transcending the boundaries of the grave—a perspective that gave Saint Francis the courage to face his own death. In a similar vein, Murray (Bodo & M, 1995) explains that death is not something to be feared, because the joy found within suffering is united with the joy found within the suffering experienced by Jesus, such that the Cross of Christ cannot be separated from His resurrection. Surrendering oneself to Jesus in facing death, though initially accompanied by anxiety, fear, and anger, ultimately leads to a kind of resurrection of the soul—namely, a willingness to release all that God asks to be relinquished, as reflected in Saint Francis's disposition of embracing death with complete surrender.

A similar perspective is likewise found in the faith experience of Edith Stein, or Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In her testament dated 9 June 1939, she wrote, "Even now I accept the death that God has prepared for me in complete submission and with joy as being His most holy will for me... I beg the Lord to accept my life and my death... so that the Lord will be accepted by His people and that His Kingdom may come in glory, for the salvation of Germany and world peace," reflecting her readiness to accept the death awaiting her. She further declared, "Ave, Crux, Spes unica" ("I welcome you, O Cross, our only hope"). The cross referred to here signifies death itself, as the Nazi regime had by then occupied the Netherlands and was arresting Catholics of Jewish descent, Edith Stein (Stein, 2002) among them. Amid this dire situation, Sister Teresa of the Cross remained calm within the internment camp, continuing to serve her fellow prisoners without fear, viewing death as a path toward the light—namely, toward Jesus Christ Himself.

Through the suffering and death experienced by Sister Teresa of the Cross as a victim of Nazi cruelty, it becomes evident that death need not be feared, but rather accepted as a path toward light and salvation in Jesus. Both figures of the Church—Saint Francis and Edith Stein—demonstrate that death is not a sorrow to be mourned, but an event that may be met with gratitude, for although the physical body comes to an end, the human spirit returns to union with God. Returning to God is not a cause for grief, but for joy in union with Him, as God is the most essential part of human life; thus, those left behind need not be overly anxious, for the sorrow that arises from shared memories with the deceased is in fact an invitation to understand death not as the severing of relationship, but as the strengthening of a more eternal relationship in God.

Embracing the Event of Death

Based on the discussion of the experience of grief from the perspectives of psychology, culture, and the Church, several key insights concerning the event of death can be identified:

that death wounds those left behind, yet at the same time can be understood as an occasion for gratitude.

It cannot be denied that death wounds those left behind, in the form of sadness, disappointment, or fear. Sadness arises from the loss of a person who mattered and who can no longer offer companionship in this life, while disappointment may develop into anger toward God for allowing good people nearby to be taken away. Fear likewise arises in facing the future, since the figure upon whom one once relied is no longer present.

On the other hand, death can also foster growth, namely when the grieving person is able to move forward in the process rather than remaining fixed in anger or wounds. This process begins with accepting the loss that has occurred (Worden, 2008), followed by adjusting to the new life that follows, until hope grows as a support enabling one to continue living, even amid a temporary loss of direction and purpose. This hope ultimately becomes the source of salvation for a person experiencing grief.

A third insight is that death may be regarded as an occasion for gratitude, inviting those left behind to view death not only from the perspective of the one experiencing the loss, but also from the perspective of the one facing death itself. When death is understood as a path toward union with God, it is no longer perceived as suffering but as joy, allowing those left behind to view their loss with gratitude, knowing that the one who has been called has been united with God.

Embracing the event of death is thus an effort undertaken by a grieving person to free themselves from the suffering caused by the event of death, by fully accepting all that has taken place. Embracing one's grief (Wiryasaputra, 2019) in this sense does not mean dwelling in it endlessly, but rather making peace with the event of death while remaining open to the invitation to move forward toward the life ahead.

CONCLUSION

Whether an individual experiences suffering or gratitude in the face of death depends largely on their understanding and interpretation of the event. This is reflected in the three perspectives discussed previously: psychological, cultural, and Catholic theological perspectives. Although each perspective provides a distinct interpretation, the cultural and Catholic theological perspectives share a common understanding that death can be viewed as a transition toward perfection, specifically through union with God or the Creator. Therefore, individuals experiencing grief are encouraged to understand death as a pathway toward perfection. This perspective may provide hope and prevent the bereaved from becoming overwhelmed by despair or experiencing prolonged psychological distress. Consequently, the meaning attributed to grief and loss requires transformation.

Making peace with the reality of loss is essential for individuals experiencing grief. This process involves reconciling the tension between expectations regarding the deceased and the reality of their absence. Resolving this tension allows death to be understood not merely as a painful experience but also as an opportunity for gratitude. This transformation requires shifting the perception of loss from a source of suffering toward an expression of gratitude, based on the understanding that death represents a transition toward perfection. In this context, perfection refers to union with God or the Creator, symbolizing the transformation from mortal existence into eternal life in the presence of God or the Creator.

REFERENCE

- Bodo, M., & M, O. F. (1995). *The Way of St. Francis – The Challenge of Franciscan Spirituality for Everyone*. St. Anthony Messenger Press.
- Doornik, V., & C, M. S. (1977). *Fransiskus Nabi Masa Kini*. Vicaria Missionaria OFM di Indonesia.
- Duli, A., & Hasanuddin. (2003). *Toraja Dulu dan Kini*. Pustaka Refleksi.
- Endraswara, S. (2004). *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa: Alam Misteri, Magis dan Fantasi Kejawen*. Narasi.
- Geertz, C. (1981). *Abangan, Santri, Priyayi dalam Masyarakat Jawa*. Pustaka Jaya.
- Gelber, I., Leuven, R., & D, O. C. (1993). *Self Portrait in Letters 1916-1942 – The Collected Works of Edith Stein*. ICS Publications.
- Gerejawi, S. D. (2018). *Relatio Finalis: Panggilan dan Misi Keluarga - Laporan akhir Sinode Para Uskup Kepada Bapa Suci, Paus Fransiskus 25 Oktober 2015*. Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia.
- Kastowo, W. B., & J, S. (2021). *Berduka dan Bersungkawa: Mengolah Musibah Menjadi Berkah*. Kanisius.
- Kimmel, D. C. (1990). *Adulthood and Aging an Interdisciplinary, Developmental View*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death & Dying*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Neimeyer, R. A. (2015). Techniques of grief therapy: Assessment and intervention. In *Techniques of Grief Therapy: Assessment and Intervention*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692401>
- Nugroho, B. E. A., Benidiktus, W., & Prayogo, Y. (2014). *Fransiskus dari Amerika Latin*. Obor.
- Rout, P. (2001). *Fransiskus dan Bonaventura*. Kanisius.
- Rupp, J. (2004). *Your Sorrow Is My Sorrow “Dukacitamu adalah Dukacitaku.”* Dioma.
- Saptaka, R., & Pr. (2010). *Jalan Terang Menuju Kematian, Sebuah Refleksi Kehidupan*. Yayasan Pustaka Nusantara.
- Stein, E. (2002). *The Science of the Cross*. ICS Publications.
- Subagya, Y. T. (1981). *Menemui Ajal: Etnografi Jawa tentang Kematian*. Pustaka Jaya.
- Sunoto. (1983). *Pemikiran Tentang Kefilsafatan Indonesia*. Andi Offset.
- Wiryasaputra, T. S. (2019). *Grief Psychotherapy*. Pustaka Referensi.
- Worden, J. W. (2008). *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. Springer Publishing Company.