

CATHOLIC & MOURNING A LOSS

5 CHALLENGES AND 5 OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

When we human beings have suffered a loss of any kind, we expect to go through a grieving process of some duration, depending on the nature and intensity of the event. It is part of our nature to mourn what we have loved.

Our grief may be caused by the death or sudden absence of a spouse, child, parent or sibling, friend, relative, or other loved one; or a colleague at work, companion in some activity, neighbor, member of a church or organization, or other acquaintance; or even a dog, cat, or other beloved pet. It could entail the loss of a job, home, financial security, health, youth, reputation, memory, lifelong dream, or prized possession. It could even be the loss of something or someone in the public arena that meant a lot to us.

Here is the reality: Unless we mourn that loss sufficiently and successfully, we will not be able to move on with our life and live it to its fullest. Our mourning can have no self-imposed time limit; it will not proceed logically or step by step; and it may surround us over and over again. There is no way around our grief. We cannot go over it or under it or around it; we must work *through* it, and that may be the hardest work we ever attempt.

What can help us navigate our grief journey? There are innumerable therapists, support groups, books, movies, music and lectures available. There are experienced church personnel, family, and friends who are willing to listen to and support us as we try to make some sense of what has happened. We should make use of as many of these resources as are helpful.

But we may ask ourselves: “Where is God in what I am going through?” We may temporarily lose our sense of God’s presence in the throes of our grief: “Why does God allow such pain and suffering?” These are questions for which we try to find answers over and over again throughout our life. We may even find it difficult at times to pray; it may seem we are only able to cry and be angry and be in pain. Trusting in God’s power and ability to intervene in our life may be a very difficult thing for us to do at these times.

However, precisely *because* our loss, no matter what its nature, is forcing us to assess our spiritual life, the act of struggling with our grief can actually help us experience the presence of a loving God in an even stronger way. And our Catholic faith, with its strong emphasis on forgiveness and healing and prayer, can help that happen.

We Catholics believe Jesus taught us that God, whom he experienced as a loving Father, wants only good things for us. We believe Jesus showed us by his own example how to accept and overcome sorrow and loss, even the most unjust. And we believe Jesus never judges or abandons us as we struggle with our grief.

Catholic prayer and ritual can therefore be an important element of the healing process. They provide a framework of faith for us to overcome our sadness and anger through the use of repetition and familiarity. They allow us to express our deepest thoughts and feelings about loss and death. In times of grief they can bring us a sense of balance and peace. They give us a way to say goodbye, to express our pain, to adjust to transitions, to remember treasured times and people and things that have brought beauty and meaning to our

life. They help connect us with our past, define our present, and show us a path to the future.

Certainly we all need to rely on faith and trust in God if we are to embrace the healing that can take place after experiencing a loss of any kind. Our Catholic faith prompts us to understand that life is not just happy or just sad; it is a combination of the two. Our faith can help us begin to realize that even though loss always produces suffering and pain, we can recover from it and move on with life. We need only look at the happenings in Christ's life here on earth from Good Friday to Easter Sunday to realize that out of suffering can come great joy and the promise of new life.

Mourning a loss has its challenges. When we grieve we become extremely vulnerable. We stand with open, raw wounds in need of healing and compassion. We wonder if we are strong enough to meet the tasks before us. "How can I ever heal?" we may say. "How can I begin to live a new life when the life I have been living, which was so happy and full, has been lost forever?"



Catholic prayer and ritual can bring us a sense of balance and peace, a way to remember people who have brought beauty and meaning to our life.

In my work over decades with people like you, dear reader, who have suffered a loss, I have found that facing head-on the challenges of mourning is really the only way to move successfully through the grieving process. You will be challenged; there is no doubt about that. But with each challenge there will arise an opportunity to grow stronger as you struggle to face the changes that inevitably come because of every sorrow you endure.

FIRST CHALLENGE

Our ability to work through the grieving process will be tested.

Someone once said that the work of grieving is the hardest work we ever do. There are many things we have to face when we have lost someone or something that enriched our life—emotions we must look at, some we might never have experienced before.



Madeline, a seventy-four-year-old lady I work with as a grief counselor, confided to me that she had never really been an angry person. She found little to be angry about—until, that is, her landlord told her she had to get rid of her dog because it barked too much and disturbed the neighbors.

“I found myself furious with him,” she told me. “How dare he try to take away my Toby when he was all I had left after my husband died?” Her realization that she could get so angry was new for her, and she didn’t like the feeling. She and I discussed at length that the loss of her dog was part of her grieving the death of her husband and that it added to her feeling of abandonment. “I’m not sure I can work through this grieving process,” she said. “It’s too hard, and I’m not strong enough to handle it anymore.”

My friend was questioning her ability to be able to face

the sense of sorrow and loss she was going through. It was hard work, and she was tired and sad and lonely.



“I was downsized last month in a job I had held for fifteen years,” a man named Jack said to me one day. “I loved my job and did it well. I even received commendations from my supervisor. People often remarked that the company would never have grown as it did if it wasn’t for me and the work that I did. And then, out of the blue, I was let go! Now, I don’t know what to do. That job was my whole life. I almost feel there is nothing to live for, nowhere to go. I know I have to mourn the loss of my job, but I can’t face working through the whole grief thing.”

Madeline and Jack are both going through losses they need to work through but feel they don’t have the strength or even the ability to do so. They are tired, discouraged, questioning, and confused. Madeline feels there is now absolutely no one there for her. Jack, who worked so hard to gain an important role in his company, feels that he is no longer useful. Both are mourning their loss but lack the strength to face their grief.

There may be times we find ourselves unable to understand the losses we have gone through. We may consider them just part of life or decide to try and forget them or put them aside until we get the time to really think about them. In the meantime, we may be feeling the effects of not facing the grief these losses have caused.



There may be times we find ourselves unable to understand our losses.



Here are some ideas to think about as we question our ability to face our grief and try to find the strength to work through it:

- **Because grief-work is so difficult, we need to be prepared physically as well as emotionally to face what will be demanded of us.** We must take the time to eat properly, to rest when we are tired, to see a doctor if we are feeling sick. This is a time when we need to pamper ourselves a bit. If we feel like doing something, we need to do it! If something we want to avoid can wait until tomorrow, we need to let it wait! We mustn't push ourselves to overdo when we are grieving. Let those who offer to do something physical for us (like, go grocery shopping or mow our lawn or give us a massage) be of help. We need to acknowledge the fact that a rested, healthy body is important as we tackle the hard work of moving through our grief.
- **We should pay attention to our emotions.** Grief can give rise to feelings that we may never even realize we have. We can come to terms with those emotions

by talking about them to a trusted friend or counselor. Our emotions are neither good nor bad; they are just how we feel. It's what we do with those emotions and how we express them that really matters. Loss and the change it brings can cause our emotions to fluctuate over and over again. Unless they are acknowledged and worked with, they can hinder our moving through the grieving process.

- **We cannot ever compare ourselves to others who are grieving.** Everyone lives and loves differently from those around them. So, too, will we all mourn differently. Two people may lose their jobs on the same day, even in the same company, for example, but each may react differently—even oppositely—to their loss. Neither will do it “perfectly,” because there is no perfect way to grieve. The only thing that will be the same is the knowledge that they will have to persevere through the grief process if they are to face the possibility of a new life after their loss.
- **We have to avoid looking for strength in things that can harm us.** Alcohol, drugs, junk food, even smoking may give us relief for a time, but that is only temporary and may become addictive. We need to use this time to turn to God, who knows us intimately and has promised to be there for us. In this we can lean heavily on our Catholic faith, which can sustain us, and its sacraments, which can nourish us, and its prayers and rituals, which can lift us up. Let us follow the Jesus of the New Testament. His life on earth was filled with sorrow and loss: father, friends, followers, perhaps

even his hopes and dreams. He knew what it is to experience pain and suffering. Yet he held out to all of us, even at the moment of his deepest anguish, the promise of new life.

FIRST OPPORTUNITY

We can learn to use the gifts that working through grief has offered us.

A man named Phil called me one day to ask for help. “Church help,” he explained, and then he proceeded to tell me his story. His wife of twelve years had just left him and his four children—ages two, four, six, and eight—and he was devastated. “I can’t even get out of bed in the mornings,” he said. “How am I going to be able to take care of my kids, much less myself?”

Phil soon learned that he needed to help himself first, before he could be there for his children. At my urging he joined a Catholic support group that helped him face and then work through the sadness and sense of loss caused by his failed relationship with his wife. “It was probably the best thing I have ever done for myself,” he told me later. “That group reached out to me and showed me that God was walking with me every step of my journey, no matter how painful it was.”

“And not only that,” he continued, “I soon began to realize that God was giving me the ability to stand up again for myself and my kids, with his help, of course.”



To Phil, being able to turn to God and receive the ability to “stand up again” was a great gift. He had come to the

group beaten down, confused, discouraged, filled with pain and suffering. He thought he was a weak man, not realizing that all his emotional strength had been zapped out of him. Once he realized that turning to God could give him great strength, he was able to do what he (and his children) needed him to do. "I never thought that out of all this mess I could become strong again," he said. "What a gift!"



Let's look at some of the gifts we can receive as we work through mourning various losses—some big, some small:

- **Finding new meaning in and appreciation of life.** I am now in my sixties. So many of us dread "old age" and the diminished capacities it often brings. Many times our health deteriorates, friends and family pass away, the ability to take part in activities or late-night get-togethers fades. Simple tasks become challenges that many times seem beyond endurance. But we older folk use our extended age as a true gift. Our wisdom has been tested and tried, and we find we are no longer afraid to share it with others. Our experience far surpasses that of the young, our capacity to love and to forgive has widened and stretched, and we have learned to share these insights and lessons with the next generation and even the generation after that!
- **Encountering the love of God in a new and real way.** When those of us who mourn feel we have lost "everything," when we feel completely empty and alone,

we often seem to be “pushed” or even “forced” to turn to God, and there we discover a power that loves us—one we were often not able to feel before our loss. It’s almost as if our emptiness becomes a gift, for we finally realize that only God can fill the void and only our faith can sustain us. As painful as learning that lesson is, we recognize it as a blessing.

- **Opening up and sharing.** One of the best things we learn to do for ourselves as we work through the grieving process is to share our thoughts and feelings with others, especially those who have gone through a similar loss. No longer do we have to bury our grief if we can learn to speak about it. A wise poet once said, “...grief shared is grief diminished.” For in sharing our pain and suffering we are able to learn from one another. Understanding, compassion, and wisdom are many times born within a community or with friends who are open to grieving together the losses we are going through.



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- **Saying final goodbyes.** There is holiness to saying goodbye to a loved one, a pet, or even a beloved thing or life situation. These have been with us throughout our life, and now we get to appreciate just how much they have meant to us. We are allowed to “let them go” while still loving them. Of course we mourn the fact that we cannot see or hear or touch them again, yet we long for a way to feel their presence. Our Catholic faith tells us that there is more to life than what we see, and we come to believe this in a very deep and real way.
- **Treasuring our memories.** Another gift that comes from grief is a new-found ability to remember. We know we need to find a new place in our emotions for our lost loved ones. They can no longer be physically present to us, but they can become emotionally and spiritually present. In order for that to happen, we must begin to create “cherishable memories” of them by actively reviving and reviewing the stories of our relationship with them. The remembering and the telling of those stories can be transformed into images capable of becoming part of our very being. There will certainly be tears—lots of them—as we remember, but eventually they will transform into tears of joy. We will come to realize that the images of our beloved people, animals, and things will never desert us if we can hold on to our memory of them.