

## **Grief and Loss Series, #1 from Fr. Tom Konopka**

One of the tasks that the Bishop gave me, when he asked me to come and be the pastor of these three communities, was to help facilitate a process of healing due to all the grief and loss you all had experienced. Fr Jerry's death, Fr Connery's death, Fr Tony Diacestis's death, the removal of a priest, the loss of one priest per parish, a change in how the parishes operate, the fear of being closed - and I am sure there are a few more losses that I have heard of in the last few months. Grief and loss is not always about a physical death. We grieve when we lose something or someone that we are emotionally attached to. The level and intensity of grief is determined by the depth of our investment. For example, some people will mourn the death of a pet more deeply than the loss of a friend. It is most likely that the pet was their constant companion and comfort.

Whenever we go through loss and change, there is a process that individuals and groups go through. The very first is the reaction of "this is not really happening" and "now what?". When we lose a person we love, what enables us to get through those first few days are the rituals of our faith. We have all the details to attend to, we gather and pray at the wake, the funeral Mass is offered, and we bury or cremate and bury our loved one. Often, a person's feeling level is shut down or the emotions are so raw that the person cannot function very well. The intensity of our reaction is directly linked to who the person was and how emotionally connected we were with that person. When it is a marriage or friendship that dies, we often are shocked because we didn't expect it. We are jolted because what we feared is now real.

One of the problems we encounter is that our American society often shuts down the process of grief at this point. "Get on with your life," "it has been a month, you should be over it by now," "X wouldn't want to feel like this," are all some of things that people will say. It seems that we do not have funeral Masses; we have "celebrations of life." We can learn so much from other cultures. Our Jewish brothers and sisters will sit shiva after the funeral for up to seven days; the deceased are remembered on the Sabbath and High Holy Days by their family for a year. Our Muslim brothers and sisters also have certain rituals as they mourn. After 40 days, the Quran is read, alms are given, and prayers are said. In the Orthodox tradition, after forty days, there is a special service of prayer for the repose of the deceased. In our Catholic tradition, we have our prayers for the deceased and mourners, Month's Mind Mass, All Soul's Day, the entire month of November, and we have the person remembered on the anniversary of their death.

How long grief lasts is unpredictable. In the world of grief and loss, the thought that we go through stages of grief has gone by the wayside. The reason is that this approach gives the impression that at some point we are done with our grief, and we only have a certain amount of time to grieve. Today, it is about the process of grief, not getting stuck in our grief, moving ahead and honoring the memory of our loved one. Plus, this approach does not limit the reactions that a person has and broadens out the experience.

This type of reaction also happens on a communal level. The sad thing is that this is often ignored. When a pastor is transferred, the parish he is leaving grieves his loss. The fear of change looms in the consciousness of the parish community. This fear is intensified when the change is unexpected. From a parish level: What next? Will we like the new guy? Will we

close or be merged? Just as the individual is in denial about the change, so too a parish community. The fear of the future can cause people to grab on to the past and not let go. This wanting to stay the same and not change is a response to the fear. If we don't change anything that we were doing, then it will be ok. Although this will work short term, it will keep a group or individual stuck in the past. Some would argue that getting stuck anywhere in the process can cause a real experience of depression and episode of anxiety. I think this can also happen on the group level. Thinking such as: "I do not want to go to church there anymore because it isn't the same," "Fr X never did it that way," "We always did it this way," and other similar statements could indicate a community that is so depressed and afraid. By the way, the new pastor is also going through a similar grief process.

So, what do we do to move out of the "I can't believe this happening" line of thinking? The more important way is to face the reality up front and acknowledge your feelings. Often, when the grief is fresh, it is an hourly reality. As we move forward, in our grief, the reality grows into fact in our minds and hearts. The best way to approach it is to allow the emotions to flow and do not dam them up. No matter the loss, it hurts. No matter the change, it creates fear. Bringing it to prayer and using the rituals of our faith is our best coping skill as Christians. God is with us in our grief, and He is our rock in our fear.

*This series of articles is based on Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's stage theory of the experience of the dying and current approaches of grief and loss.*



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