

Grief and Loss series, #5 from Fr. Tom Konopka

Now what?



We never get over the death of someone we loved or the loss of something of value to us, but life and time continue. As we negotiate the process of grief, the loss becomes a part of us. In narrative therapy, one question that is asked is very important: “How will I write the person I have lost into the next chapter of my life?” We could rephrase for parishes: “How will we write the history of what was or what we had into the next chapter of the parish history?”

Too often in our relationships and in our community life, we try to keep things the way they have always been. It appears safer that way, but in reality, it could be a sign that the individual or community is stuck in the grief process. Fear is a powerful emotion, but it does not need to trap us into inaction. The energy of fear and/or anger can become the energy we need to heal and rebuild our lives. Unresolved grief can trap an individual or an institution into a time warp that does not allow growth.

As Christians, St. Paul says that we grieve, but in hope. From a faith perspective, death never conquers us. By the Cross and Resurrection, Jesus gives us hope of something more. I have been reflecting on obituaries which mention “A celebration of life” - meaning the life of the person. As Christians, in our grief, we celebrate the life of Christ. As a pastor, when I stand with a family who is in grief, I hope to bring Christ’s life and light into that dark hour. All the prayers, symbols, and rituals we use during the funeral rites speak volumes about our faith. Too often, at the time of death, many who are not practicing the faith or have walked away from the faith, are lost. Not knowing how comforting our rituals are, they often try to add in things that do not fit in with our faith.

I have stood with parish communities who are grieving the loss of their church, their identity of parish, when they have had to share a priest (this is not the first time I have pastored more than one parish), and our brothers and sisters who struggle with what it means to be Catholic, and realize they must give up the past to grow. In one instance where, one church family was merged with another, I presided at a wake service for the church community. As we prayed, we honored the feelings of those who were saying goodbye. We prayed in thanksgiving for what this parish had meant to those who worshipped there. And finally, we prayed that the Lord would form a new community from the two.

One thing we all need to remember as we move forward is that we need to open the new chapter that God is calling us all into. For some reasons that we do not know, the Lord has asked all of us to walk together at this time of history. It is my prayer what we do not spend our time looking backward or having turf wars (being stuck in the process of grief). As a priest and pastor, I am being challenged to practice ministry in a whole new way. Therefore, I ask you to “be church” in a whole new way. We will grieve the changes together. Jesus, who is the reason we exist, will lead us, His people, into a new day filled with His light and grace.