Bereavement Consolation and the Recovery of Joy

Though bereavement is typically associated with a period of grief and mourning following a death, many forms of bereavement or grieving occur in life - a divorce and custody battle, a failed business, loss of a job, a surgical procedure that results in the loss or reduction of some physical capacity, Alzheimer's disease, a relationship break-up, retirement, loss of purpose, loss of faith, a home foreclosure, a theft of something dear, the sharp feeling of loss when recovering from a serious addiction, leaving friends and a church community to take a job in another city, the list goes on and on. Virtually every person from the youngest to the most senior in every parish has known the suffering and the challenge of loss. It can feel very much like God has abandoned us, even if intellectually we know that this is not true.

To mourn is to be given a second heart. It is to care so deeply that we personally show your ache. To mourn is to not be ashamed of the tears. It is to be broken, to be built up and to be healed all in the same moment. We are blessed if we can minister to others with an understanding of our own broken being. We are blessed if we have a heart that feels, a heart that hurts and a heart that loves. And we are blessed if we can minister to others with a heart that serves and a heart that sees the need before it's spoken. To mourn is to forget oneself for a moment and to share in someone else's pain and then to find oneself in the very act of sharing. To mourn is to be sensitive and thoughtful in the miracle of being careful with another's pain. It is to be forever willing to reach out, to pick up and to hold carefully those who hurt. To mourn is to lament with the grieving and eventually to be raised up together with the Risen Christ

When a death occurs in a parish then clergy, family and friends are quick to respond with loving compassion, consoling presence and assistance. This may be sustained for several weeks. But then what? Life moves on; people get busy; the priest has 1001 things to do including attending to many others who need pastoral care. All of this cries out for a continuing parish bereavement support program available to all who pass through one of these canyons of darkness when faith is challenged.

Grieving may express itself mentally, physically, socially, emotionally or spiritually. Feelings may include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness, despair, frustration, victimization, self-pity but also gratitude, joy, hope, love through connectivity with others, restoration and elevation of faith, purpose and reconciliation with God. "Weeping endures for a night (may last for years) but (eventually) joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

There are at least three emotional or psychological reasons why the bereaved easily drop off the general parish's radar screen: awkward feelings, discomfort with one's own mortality and unrealistic expectations.
1. Awkward Feelings

It’s awkward dealing with grieving people. Friends want to do something but are uncertain how to engage. They fear they will say the wrong thing or do something insensitive. Perhaps our awkward efforts may cause further emotional distress. We learn that oftentimes, saying nothing and yet somehow sharing in their profound grief is the best we can do.

2. Discomfort with mortality

A second obstacle to ministering to the bereaved is reluctance to focus on our own mortality. Acknowledging and accepting that our life in this world is limited can be uncomfortable.

Ideally, our disposition should be positive, present and cheerful when appropriate and so in the presence of tragedy affirming our faith, hope, trust and love in the ultimate wisdom, goodness and love of God – even when these are the most difficult feelings for the bereft.

3. Unrealistic expectations

It’s an easy to be impatient with those who grieve, which actually can last for years. They may be intensely angry, easily irritated, and arbitrary and saying all kinds of unexpected enraged things at God, the church, family, just about anything can be a target. We selfishly want to see a positive result of our contributions of time and effort on their behalf. We give them advice and foolishly expect them to follow it.

Everyone grieves in their own way. Pastorally, it is important to remember that there is no magic time period in which one needs to grieve. The pain of a death can be lessened by positive actions over time, but the sense of loss may never completely disappear in this life. At a time such as this, people want the priest to share their lives, especially their sorrows. He may not always have the words to say but he is there. This ministry to the bereaved lies more in powerlessness than in power; without genuine love and affection, there can be no gesture of solidarity. In shared bereavement the priest is a sign of the love of God for His people and a sign of His presence with them, especially in this time of sorrow.

Ministering to those who grieve can be challenging, frustrating, and rewarding. An advanced degree in counseling or psychology is not needed to support those who are grieving. Sensitivity, patience, flexibility, and a follow-up plan are the basic requirements. By initiating a compassionate and timely follow-up, caring ministry can help serve and bind up the broken-hearted.

Suggested Personal Support Initiatives

- Pray for the grieving and for those who have fallen asleep in the Lord.
Resist triteness: platitudes, bible quotes and suggestions of how to get over it. Leave all these at the door of their grief. If and when they want to talk about it, just be the best and most accepting listener possible - just like God is with us. There will be a time to talk if you are patient.

When a death or major loss occurs, enter the follow-up information into a digital calendar for the appropriate suggested action below. Set calendar reminders to help navigate personal involvement in bereavement ministry.

As soon as reasonably possible, make a condolence call to the family.

Within three days of death, send a sympathy card. Query “Orthodox sympathy cards” on Google and find a number of resources.

After 30 days or the 40th day memorial, make a follow-up call to see how the person is doing and if more support is needed.

Every three months, send a brochure dealing with grief/bereavement along with a personal letter or note of support. (See possible sources for appropriate brochures below.)

On the anniversary of the death, send a letter or note acknowledging the occasion and offering ongoing support. A phone call might be even better.

**Suggested Parish Support Initiatives**

Death and calamity bring people together as nothing else. All differences vanish, all barriers fall down. To the bereaved, the involvement of the community is essential for as Christians we believe that we have not only a common dignity, but also a common destiny. We are members of the people of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and are destined for the Father's kingdom: 'the life and death of each of us has its influence on others." (Romans 14:7) The continuing presence of the community is of great support and consolation for the bereaved. There should be a continuing involvement of the community in the weeks and months that follow the loss - when the real grief work has to be done.

Orthodox parishes are almost always supportive through priestly pastoral care, community gatherings, liturgical services and meals of mercy.

Yet many, perhaps even most, Orthodox churches do not have an ongoing program to support those who have suffered a major loss. This is not done intentionally. It is more a case of benign neglect and sometimes under-staffing. Here are suggestions:

1. Let the priest first inform himself regarding a bereavement ministry program. There are several excellent resources available. Of special note are the following:
a. St. Paul Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Hempstead, New York has a well-developed bereavement ministry that has assisted over 400 people since it was initiated. They may have very useful suggestions on organizing and facilitating the ministry.

b. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Orthodox Church in America and the Antiochian Archdiocese also have resources, though it may require a bit of searching to find them on their websites. Try the word bereavement or grief in their respective local search function.

c. Several books on starting and maintaining a bereavement ministry are available on Amazon including one sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church “The Bereavement Ministry Program”. Any priest can extract the most useful material and include Orthodox resources as well.

2. Following self-education, the priest might carefully recruit a couple of people to lead the ministry providing them with materials for self-education prior to launching. He even may have professionals within the parish who would volunteer their time in this regard. Another alternative in line with leadership development in the parish would be to send them to bereavement program training seminars by means of the parish’s ministry educational fund.

3. Publicize the ministry ensuring that people understand that though those who have lost a loved one are often the focus of bereavement ministry, there are many forms of grief and that this ministry is open to anyone suffering a major loss.

4. Order an array of books on the subject and place them in the parish library. Make a collection of brochures also available. One source below has videos on this topic.

Other Possible Resources for Helping the Grieving

One Caring Place: www.onecaringplace.com

Grief Digest Magazine. (Yes, just about everything is available on the Internet.) Order from Centering Corporation: www.centering.org

Various resources including a DVD video series. Order from: www.griefshare.org

Hospice Foundation of America

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

AARP Grief and Loss Page: Offers articles on bereavement as well as information on finances, paperwork, and other practical issues which bereaved persons often face; http://www.aarp.org/families/grief_loss/
Ave Maria Press: Offers many pastoral and religious ministry books and items, including bereavement resources: 800-282-1865 x1 or avemariapress.1@nd.edu or http://www.avemariapress.com/

CareNotes: Sells booklets and other good, well-written resources which mainly help people deal with grief and illness.

The Compassionate Friends: A national nonprofit, self-help support organization that offers friendship, understanding, and hope to bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings; offers much helpful information and online support groups.

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families: Provides support and resources for children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death, and an interactive search engine for grief support centers near you; http://www.dougy.org/

Grief Healing: Website offering information, comfort and support to the bereaved; also offers online e-mail courses about grief: http://www.griefhealing.com/

GriefHelp: Website offering a free downloadable grief resource guide titled "Road to Recovery"; http://www.griefhelp.org/

In-Sight Books: Offers grief books and other resources, as well as resources on elder care transition; 800-658-9262 or http://www.insightbooks.com/

National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved: Goals: to offer spiritual support and the healing comfort of God to all who mourn a loss through death; to develop and provide the resources and training programs to support ministries of consolation; and to increase networking, collaboration, and partnering with ministers of consolation, parishes, dioceses, and national organizations 314-638-2638 or http://www.griefwork.org/

New Hope: Offers many resources and book suggestions, especially for widows and widowers; http://www.newhope-grief.org/

Pauline Books & Media: Offers many excellent books on various subjects, including bereavement and grief; 617-676-4458 or 1-800-836-9723 (ordering from a parish) or http://www.pauline.org/

An Empty Cradle, A Full Heart: Reflections for Mothers and Fathers after Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death, by Christine O’Keeffe Lafser (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1998); Beautiful little book offering individual small reflections and scripture passages for and from both mothers and fathers on the experience of the loss of a baby; To obtain: 800-621-1008 or http://www.loyolabooks.org