



Journey

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GOOD NEWS IN THE MIDST OF TEARS

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For twenty-five years, I have been deeply involved in the ministry of Catholic Evangelization locally and nationally and, with so many other facets of evangelization to attend to, did not for the most part recognize the exceptionally rich opportunity that grief offers for sharing the Gospel. Until now.

Every year approximately one-half million Catholics die in the 19,000-plus parishes in the United States. That means that one-half million Catholic families are grieving, and when friends of the deceased are added in, the total number of people affected by the death is staggering. Millions.

How can individuals and parishes evangelize during times of such deep grief? How do parishes make the connection between evangelization and bereavement ministry? Some parishes are already taking the essential steps of training ministers of bereavement; others continue to minister informally to the grieving. Much has been written about the formation of bereavement ministries. In this article, I would like to add another facet to Catholic bereavement ministry and Catholic evangelization.

“THE MOST HURTING”

The purpose of evangelization, stated by the U.S. bishops, includes this statement: “The validity of our having accepted the Gospel does not only come from what we feel or what we know; it comes also from the way we *serve* others, especially the poorest, the most marginal, *the most hurting*, the most defenseless, the least loved” (*Go and Make Disciples*, 1993, emphasis mine).

Mourners certainly qualify as “the most hurting.” I know this personally from the pain that I felt when I lost two of my children. The circumstances of their deaths were different but the pain was the same.

Statistics are one thing. The death of a son, one of the half-million for 1994, is another. Our lives turned upside-down ten years ago when our youngest child Danny, 25, was killed instantly by a drunk driver who plowed through a red light at 80 mph on Christmas Day, 1994. “Unfair!” I cried.

Tragedy struck again last year when my oldest child Debbie was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer which had spread into her lymph glands and bones. Incurable, inoperable. A life-long nonsmoker and athlete (marathon runner, cyclist, deep sea diver, line skater, snow skier), she died on January 5, 2004, exactly eight weeks after her diagnosis, leaving a young husband and seven-month-old infant daughter. “Unfair!” I cried again. In both cases, also, I felt the

*There are no dead
people, Lord.*

*There are only the living,
on earth and beyond.*

*Death is nothing but a
moment, a second,*

*A step from provisional to
permanent,*

from temporal to eternal.

*From The Funeral by
Michel Quoist*

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worst "deep-down-to-the-soul" pain that I believe is possible for a person to feel. Yes, mourners are among "the most hurting."

Needless to say, all of the funeral rites at both funerals were a great comfort to us. The fact that five priests came to concelebrate the Mass and over a thousand people filled the Church each time were even greater consolations and rich sources of Catholic evangelization for all who attended. The support of the faith community was a powerful witness to unchurched or inactive friends. (One actually joined the RCIA after Danny's funeral, with Debbie as her sponsor. She was baptized the following Easter.)

After Debbie's death, however, I found that I needed more support during the grieving process than I was able to find. I searched for a structured, Catholic faith-based support group and could find only unstructured ("drop in anytime") groups available. A friend invited me to her local Presbyterian Church which was just starting a new session of a faith-based support group, *Walking the Mourner's Path*, founded by the Episcopal Church (www.mournerspath.com). I, one of the "most hurting" mentioned above, was welcomed, *well loved, and well served* by my new Protestant friends.

NEW CATHOLIC GRIEF PROCESS

Yet, I yearned for a Catholic support group which could address specifically Catholic approaches to the meaning of suffering and death, to the role Jesus (especially in Eucharist) could play in comforting us and helping us make sense out of these senseless deaths. I yearned for the beauty, the imagery, the art, the music, the tradition of the Church, the forgiveness and healing of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick.

As a veteran designer of Catholic evangelization training programs and spiritual growth processes, I began to design a Catholic grieving process myself, which addressed so many of my own specific spiritual needs.

Since I was stepping out into the deep waters of bereavement ministry for the first time, I read everything I could get my hands on; I was certified nationally as a Minister of Consolation (NCMB) and in the Hospice of America "End of Life" certification program. My creative juices began flowing, the Holy Spirit touched me, and a new eight-week, multi-media

program, "Harvesting Our Tears," practically wrote itself. The imagery of the *Paschal mystery* fit in so naturally; passages from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* practically jumped off the page at me. Appropriate Scripture passages and quotations from saints and other wisdom figures came to my attention; music, such a vital part of Catholic spirituality, flowed into my thoughts as I wrote each of the sessions.

Some of my friend, Fr. Fred Schott's, original compositions such as "Love Never Fails," "Broken and Shared," and "Fly Like an Eagle" fit perfectly with the themes of each session, so, with his permission, the manual/workbook is now accompanied by a CD of his songs performed by *Anawim*, the music ministry of the Basilica Cathedral of Covington, Kentucky. The beautiful lyrics introduce each chapter.

In January, 2005, "Harvesting Our Tears" and its detailed Facilitator's Guide was published and is now available for Catholic parishes to use as an outreach to *welcome, love, and serve* the "most hurting." (While this program is primarily designed for the use of small grief support groups, I also found through field-testing that it is equally helpful to individuals when no support groups are available.)

My prayer is that God will use this program as a tool to comfort the grieving, to strengthen their faith, and to reassure them of Jesus' presence and promise, "Whoever believes in me shall not die but shall have everlasting life." Also, since people of other faiths or of no faith at all are also encouraged to participate in this group process, my hope is that "Harvesting Our Tears" will be as effective an evangelizing tool as is the Protestant program. If my Catholic faith had not been so strong, or if I had been an inactive Catholic or unchurched person, I probably would be a Presbyterian today!



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Paul II. "Harvesting Our Tears" is available at www.JeremiahPress.com.