



# Journey

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to the Bereaved

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## CELEBRATING LIFE INSIDE THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

by Ron Rolheiser, OMI

Recently I led a memorial service for a friend who had died four years ago. Everyone who came to this service had also been at his funeral. Why another memorial service four years later? This is the background:

My friend had been diagnosed with a particularly aggressive type of cancer and was told by his doctors that his only chance for survival was to undergo a bone-marrow transplant which given his age, mid-fifties, was a high risk. His chances, the doctors told him, were one in three. But that was his only real option.

The day before he went into the hospital to begin the transplant procedure he gathered a number of family and friends around him to say goodbye, should this indeed be the end. We gathered at noon, had a simple lunch, took a short walk with him, huddled together while he took a needed siesta to gather his strength, and then took him to a chapel where we celebrated the Eucharist and gave him the anointing of the sick. We then went to his favorite restaurant for a long supper, a "last supper", at which he ate all his favorite foods and was able to express his gratitude and love for us and we were able to do the same for him. It was a great evening and we used every ritual we knew, earthly and sacramental, to try to make this farewell special.

The doctors were accurate in their predictions. He didn't make it. He died in recovery and so our supper with him was indeed a "last supper".

We had a large funeral for him, laid him to rest according to his wishes in an unmarked grave in small rural cemetery within which there were only one or two other graves, and we all went home.

In the years that followed we prayed daily for him and then, after four years, some of us who had been at that original farewell decided to come together again in the same chapel and the same restaurant. But to do what? Why repeat a farewell we had already done? Why were we doing this?

Because basically all of us, either at some inchoate place in our hearts or at some more explicit place in our faith, believe in the communion of saints, namely, that our loved ones who have died are still in relationship to us and that this relationship continues to change and grow even after we are separated by death. And, given the truth of that, we realized too that, at a time, a further kind of letting go was being asked of us. What is meant by this?

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In the late 1970s, a Virginian writer, Sheldon Vanauken, wrote a book entitled, *A Severe Mercy*. It tells the story of love, of death, and of relating beyond death. As a young man still in his early twenties, he was blessed to find his soul mate, a woman he affectionately calls Davey. Their love almost overpowered them in its singularity and yet, through it, they found God — and they also found C.S. Lewis (who became their spiritual director and mentor). But their earthly love was to be short-lived. Still in her mid-twenties, Davey was stricken with cancer and died. Vanauken was disconsolate, beyond grief, in a darkness that had him contemplating suicide. Fortunately, he had C.S. Lewis as a spiritual guide.

After his wife's death, he had her body cremated and kept the ashes. As well, he carried her wedding ring in his pocket. One night, a couple of years after her death, he was on a ship crossing the Atlantic and he went outside at night, alone with her ashes and her wedding ring, to pray. In his prayer he got a clear signal from her that essentially said: "It's time for something new. Scatter the ashes lovingly into the ocean. Drop the wedding ring into the sea. Let go of the grief you are carrying! We will be together again in the future, but for now, on this earth, it's time to move on."

In essence, that's the reason we gathered again in memorial for our friend. After four years, we were hearing him say (however we hear these things in our hearts) that it was time to further scatter his ashes, to drop the wedding ring in the ocean, to let go in a further way so that the mystery of a deeper love can continue to grow.

And it was a wonderful, joy-filled evening. We prayed, shared stories, drank wine, but mostly just laughed in gratitude because our lives had been so gifted by this man, William Manfield, whose warmth, love, humor, empathy, faith, and love for the Eucharist, helped make our own lives more bearable, more understandable, more joyous, more faith-filled, and more complete. He wasn't always Mother Theresa, he had some foibles she didn't, but, like her, he's now a saint and a saint with whom we got to celebrate the "last supper".



*Used with permission of the author, Oblate **Father Ron Rolheiser**. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com).*

Dates to Remember

**Saturday, November 10 to  
Sunday, November 11, 2007**  
**Ministry of Consolation  
Training**

Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia  
Ivone Vreland: 404-885-7584  
lvreeland@archatl.com

**Saturday, February 23, 2008**  
**Retreat**

**"A Time to Care for Me"**  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
TeipenKM@AOL.com

**Saturday, March 1 to  
Sunday March 2, 2008**  
**Ministry of Consolation  
Training**

Diocese of Scranton,  
Pennsylvania  
Fatima Renewal Center  
Dalton, Pennsylvania  
Mary Ann Paulukonis:  
570-207-2213  
mary-ann-paulukonis@dioceseo  
fscranton.org

**Friday, April 25 to  
Saturday April 26, 2008**  
**Ministry of Consolation  
Training**

Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey  
Our Lady of Good Counsel -  
West Trenton  
Marilyn Schipp:  
609-406-7400 x5557

**Wednesday, April 16, 2008:**  
**1:30 pm - 4:00 pm EDT**  
**Hospice Foundation of  
America**

**National Bereavement  
Teleconference,**  
*"Living With Grief: Children and  
Adolescents"*

## “EL DOLOR; NO, NO ESTAMOS ENLOQUECIENDO”

**Diácono Ray Ortega**

En la vida no hay nada más doloroso, que enfrentarse a la muerte violenta y sin razón, de un ser querido. A lo largo de nuestra vida es posible que en alguna ocasión nosotros hemos tenido que enfrentarnos a alguna experiencia como esta, pero ese dolor que es terriblemente fuerte aún no se puede comprender.

El dolor que ocasiona la muerte repentina y violenta de tu ser querido, es posiblemente como ningún otro dolor que jamás hayas experimentado. Es muy posible que te sientas más enojado y triste de lo que creíste poderte sentir. Es posible que sientas y hagas cosas extrañas y puedas hasta pensar que te estas volviendo loca o loco.

Si estas pasando por esta situación no te alarmes. Casi nadie que ha pasado por un dolor semejante se ha vuelto loco, pero al atravesar esa época tan miserable la misma lo hace sentir a uno tan devastado por el dolor, que uno hasta comienza a dudar de su propia cordura y funcionamiento.

Hay dos clases de muertes. La esperada y la repentina. Es mucho más difícil aceptar una muerte repentina que una muerte que ya se esperaba. Cuando una persona muere violentamente, esa muerte violenta es mucho más traumática, por ejemplo un accidente automovilístico, un accidente aéreo, un asesinato, etc. Porque son más difíciles de asimilar estas muertes?, simplemente porque estas formas de morir no tienen sentido.

Sin embargo, si ha habido un tiempo de enfermedad que ha servido de preparación, y se ha podido aceptar la partida como algo inevitable y conciente de que esta separación no es el final de la vida sino el comienzo de la Vida Eterna, entonces es más fácil asimilar la muerte.

Recordemos siempre que nosotros nunca vamos a estar preparados para aceptar enteramente la muerte, porque?, porque hemos nacido para vivir. entonces por ende es aún mucho más difícil aceptar el hecho de que un ser querido haya muerto de una forma repentina y violenta, y siempre vamos a sentir la tristeza de que ese ser querido ha muerto trágicamente y que la larga relación que pudimos haber disfrutado se haya acortado pronta y repentinamente.



**Deacon Ray Ortega** was ordained in 1979 for the Archdiocese of Miami. He is a certified Pastoral Bereavement Specialist from the World Pastoral Care Center and a member of the South Florida Chapter of ADEC. He is Master of Ceremonies for the Auxiliary Bishop, the Most Rev. Felipe de Jesus Estevez. Ray currently serves on the NCMB Board.

### LEAVE A LEGACY

You can make a difference in the lives of others. Please remember the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved, Inc., in your will.