



Journey

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Catholic Ministry to the
Bereaved

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THANKSGIVING DAY IN ITALY:

MOURNING IN THE CHURCH'S ORDINARY TIME

By Fr. Kevin McDonough

If you have lived for a time overseas, you know the dislocating experience of celebrating a special holiday of which those around you are totally unaware. I remember how strange the last Thursday of November was while I lived in Italy — an ordinary work day for Italians, but a national holiday for expatriate Americans who sought each other out and huddled together for Thanksgiving. My sense of intimacy with compatriots was deepened, while hidden resentments of “those strangers” popped up unexpectedly. And through it all, loneliness hung like a pall over everything.

Mourning has its seasons as well. We all expect to experience sharp pain and a deep sense of loss at the holidays. My family recently went through our first Christmas since our father's death. So many people around us were aware of that fact — and went to great lengths to remind us of it — that it actually became a private familial joke. We would tilt our heads slightly, adopt a sad look, and say to each other: “Your Christmas will be terrible”. Then we would dissolve into laughter. Such hyper-awareness at special times can create a zone of protection around mourners, as faith communities remember the year's dead and friends extend their (sometimes overwrought) sympathies.

But mourning in Ordinary Time (those 220 or so days of a Christian year that are not Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter) is a little like Thanksgiving Day in Italy. Almost no one else has even the slightest awareness of our pain as mourners. The rest of the world goes on about its regular schedule. It seems as if everyone else is cruising in fourth gear, while we mourners are stuck in first.

Even more confusing is the mourner's own ambivalence. The rhythm of ordinary responsibilities and daily schedules dims my awareness of a recent loss. I forget for hours, and eventually for days, that a loved one is no longer nearby. And then, suddenly, the oddest stimulus slaps me in the face with his or her absence. I want to cry out: “I lost my dad, you know!” But our culture has no socially-acceptable way to express that reality: sudden tears, choked speech, or hurried departures from a meeting or party only earn one a combination of unfocused concern and embarrassed irritation from colleagues who “have their game face on”.



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Another Italian snippet: while many of us are aware of that nation's custom of clothing its widows in black dresses, few foreigners know that any Italian who wishes may wear a black lapel pin in the first year following a loved one's death. The pin, although more subtle than an entire black outfit, speaks clearly of its wearer's vulnerability to unprogrammed moments of distraction and sadness.

Living as we do in a super-productive society without a socially-sanctioned sign of mourning, how can one mourn with integrity, especially in Ordinary Time? Here are some suggestions:

1. Declare a year of mourning for yourself. You are not supposed to "get over it" in a few days or weeks. Give yourself permission to be out of step with the rest of the world. For example, I keep my father's "mass card" in several hard-to-miss places, so that I remember him every day.
2. Have a few people with whom you can share "sightings" of the one who has died. My siblings and our mother e-mail one another when we have those "slap in the face" reminders of our absent dad. If you have no one else to tell them to, keep a little log and tell your priest or minister — I can guarantee you that he or she is hearing such sto-

ries constantly, and is likely to be able to tell you that you are, indeed, not crazy!

3. Attend daily Mass. As a parish priest I am constantly reminded that the small congregation that worships together on weekdays includes both "the old faithful" and those who are drawn by an occasion: preparation for surgery, for example, or the anniversary of a loved one's birth or death. In what I view as an overreaction to abuses in the "selling" of Masses, many parishes now no longer accept Mass stipends or publish the names of the dead for whom a particular Mass is being offered. Even if you pray in such a parish, make your own act of devotion in dedicating that day's worship for the eternal rest and peace of your beloved.

To mourn well in Ordinary Time can be a lonely exercise. Know, nonetheless, that you are never alone in your sadness, but are surrounded by a cloud of invisible witnesses, the saints.

With them, may your loved ones enjoy eternal life!



Fr. Kevin McDonough, former vicar general for the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and pastor of St. Peter Claver parish, St. Paul, MN and is pastor of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús parish in Minneapolis, MN.

NCMB MEMBERSHIP MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved will hold its Annual Membership Meeting on Saturday, October 17, 2009 at 12:30 pm. The meeting will be held at the Fatima Retreat Center in Indianapolis, Indiana during NCMB's Annual Conference. As a member of NCMB you are invited and encouraged to attend. We will be reviewing the past year's work and ministry and also proceed with business matters related to the NCMB. This meeting is a time for the membership to review and discuss the work, needs, and plans for the next year of the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved. Please plan to attend. Your input is valued and appreciated.

CALL FOR BOARD NOMINATIONS

The NCMB Board of Trustees is seeking candidates for election to the Board of Trustees. Candidates should submit a 150-word biographical sketch plus a current resume with 3 contacts for reference and recommendation. Deadline for nominations is June 1, 2009. Candidates can be self-nominated or proposed by an NCMB member. Each candidate must be a member of the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved. For more information and to submit nominations, please contact the NCMB office: PO Box 16353 St. Louis, MO 63124. Ph (314) 638-2638; Fax (314) 638-2639; NCM-Bereave@aol.com.

LA SOLEDAD.

Mis queridos hermanos.

Nosotros los seres humanos somos entre muchas otras cosas un compendio de emociones y sentimientos. A lo largo de nuestra vida tenemos ocasiones en que nos sentimos muy cerca del Señor, y otras veces un poco más lejos. Tenemos momentos que a pesar de estar completamente solos nos sentimos acompañados y momentos que aun estando acompañados nos sentimos completamente solos, y de eso es lo que les quiero hoy comentar.

Cuando un ser querido nuestro parte a la casa del Padre deja en nosotros un gran vacío. Si es la esposa o esposo, hija o hijo todavía el vacío es mucho mayor y más difícil de llenar. Tendemos a sentirnos destruidos, abandonados y completamente solos. Pero en realidad la soledad es algo que la mayoría de las veces se obra en nuestro interior. Pudiéramos decir que es algo que elaboramos nosotros mismos y que tenemos que tratar de salir de ese estado de soledad lo antes posible para nuestro bien y nuestra sanación interior.

Recordemos siempre que nosotros nunca vamos a estar solos aunque creamos que si. Hay un pedazo del Evangelio donde Cristo nos dice: "Yo estaré con ustedes hasta el fin de los tiempos", y mis hermanos las promesas de Cristo no fallan.

Desafortunadamente muchas veces somos nosotros los que nos alejamos de nuestros familiares, amigos y hasta del mismo Dios por eso nos sentimos solos aunque tengamos muchas personas a nuestro alrededor y estemos acompañados.

Salgamos de este estado de soledad aunque nos cueste un poco de trabajo, tengamos siempre presente que el dolor compartido toca a menos.

El Señor nunca nos abandona, por eso debemos estar alegres y nunca sentirnos solos, porque El camina a nuestro lado.

Muchas bendiciones para todos.



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.

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