

03 Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

Condolence Ministry

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
John 2:13-25

It's been said that when someone dies there are actually three deaths that occur—the physical death of our loved one, the emotional death of a part of us as we mourn their loss, and the death of our image of God.¹ Two things recently made me think of this. First, our readings this weekend talk a lot about our image of God. For example, in the first reading we heard about the Israelites image of God as the Law Giver. Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, wrote about the image of God found in Jesus Christ that is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). In the Gospel reading, we heard about Jesus' attempt to purify for the people of His time the image of the Father, Whose house they had turned into a marketplace. The other thing that made me think about the three deaths that come when we lose a loved one was an article from Liguori Publications that I recently found in my mailbox entitled, “What can parishes do for those who have lost a spouse?”

Ministry to the grieving is something that I think and pray about a lot. Most often, I feel like my ministry is a movement from one crisis to the next in parishioners' lives and that I do a horrible job following up with those who have lost loved ones. Condolence Ministry is very important in the life of any parish, yet it often gets a very brief treatment after a funeral. For a few weeks, I have been reflecting on the condolence ministry that we do here at Christ the King and looking at ways we might improve it—especially in regards to the three deaths that occur when someone dies. I would like to share with you some of my reflections.

We are blessed at Christ the King to have a number of individuals and groups that help to make the grieving process and the funeral a special time. For example, when someone in our parish dies, several things happen almost immediately—

1. The Altar Society ensures that the church is properly prepared for the funeral service. This includes making sure the Easter Candle, pall, incense, and holy water are set up and ready to be used. They also place boxes of Kleenex in the pews for the family members, which is a particularly meaningful touch to their work.
2. Patti Pinter arranges for altar servers if there is a funeral Mass. Our servers do a great job at the funerals, usually arriving 30 minutes early in order to prepare themselves.
3. Judy Weisenfels contacts choir members to let them know what music will be done at the service. Judy works with the family to provide music that is both meaningful and consoling. Our funeral choir is made up of many dedicated men and women who desire to bring consolation to the grieving families through their singing.

¹ There's a great article about this topic at <http://www.griefwork.org/articles/Journey08May.pdf>

4. Terry Olsen contacts the Condolence Committee to begin preparing food for the family of the deceased. These funeral luncheons provide such a wonderful opportunity for the grieving families to continue to share stories about their deceased loved ones.
5. Donna Marcum prepares a condolence card from our parish staff and we all sign it and mail it to the family of the deceased. We also pray by name for those who have died and for their families during our weekly staff meetings.

All of these things help to make the time before and right after the funeral a little less stressful for the grieving family members. However, there is much more that can be helpful to those who are grieving the loss of spouses, parents, or children. One such help is the Beginning Experience retreat. We have been hosting two of these a year in Fort Smith for the last couple of years. People have driven from Oklahoma, Missouri, Central and Northwest Arkansas to come to these retreat in order to find healing from the pain of losing a spouse. Yet, I have never seen someone from our parish at a Beginning Experience weekend. There is going to be only one more held in Fort Smith before the retreat is moved to another part of the state, so I highly recommend those who are grieving the loss of a spouse to take advantage of the retreat. There are brochures about it in the back of church.

Another thing that we do to help those who are mourning is providing free Care Notes on grief. These can be found in the back of the church at the top of the book shelf. There are topics specifically about grieving as a family, mourning the death of a mom or dad, getting through the first weeks after a funeral, helping a child mourn the loss of a grandparent, and many others.

Now that I've shared a little about what we *currently* do in Condolence Ministry in our parish, I would like to offer some suggestions for the *future*. First, we really need more people to join the Condolence Committee. This usually means being put on a call list to help provide food for the family when someone has died. Some people cannot actually cook a dish, but they help pay for the food. This can be just as helpful as actually cooking the food. If you want to donate some of your time, talent, or treasure to this important ministry, there is information about it in the bulletin.

Another thing that I would love to see happen for our parish is a grief support group. There are already programs that offer structure and content for such groups, but we simply need a volunteer who is willing to get it started. I think a group specifically designed for men and women who have lost spouses would be particularly helpful.

Something else that could be helpful is if I preached sometime on the role of our image of God in how we deal with crises and loss. Often, when something bad happens, people inadvertently say things about God, whether implicitly or explicitly, that are very twisted and can perpetuate a warped image of God. It might be helpful for some of us to be given the spiritual tools necessary to let go of an unhealthy image of God so as to grasp a healthier one. Hopefully, I'll have an opportunity to preach more about this in the upcoming weeks.

Let's continue to pray for the many people who have lost loved ones recently. May God comfort them in their grief through the power of His Holy Spirit and thru our presence, prayer, and support.