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Final Paper: A Demonstration of the Reflection Process on My Ministry Concern

This past March my mother passed away. She was 88 years old and lived a fulfilling life. She was a devout Catholic who was a regular Mass attendee and was particularly fond of praying the Rosary. Her passing could hardly be labeled as a tragedy or a sad event. On the contrary, it is fitting to rejoice in the life she led and the example she set for her four sons (me being the youngest). The fact that she was a devout Christian, who believed that God offers eternal life to those who follow in His ways, is all the more reason to celebrate a life well lived.

Her love of the Catholic faith has influenced my life in many ways. I also believe in what God has ready for us when our life on earth is complete. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John that “whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life.” (*New American Bible*, 5:24). I believe in my heart of hearts that my mother is in a better place than any of us and is enjoying the fruits of her labor and devoutness.

Despite all of these assurances, however, it has been a struggle for me since her passing. We had a very unique relationship, much more than a typical mother/son relationship. She was legally blind for much of her life, and in many situations I was her “eyes.” The only time we

were ever really apart was when I attended college. Following graduation, I returned to my home, in part to make sure that she was cared for. Even in the twilight of her life when she resided in a nursing facility, I visited her daily. I have made peace with her moving on to her next chapter. What has left a hole in my life is not being able to replace the companionship that she provided. It is still hard at times to walk into my house and not have anyone else there.

Through interaction on social media, my church community, and in talking to others, I have encountered people who are also struggling with the loss of a loved one. They may not go into detail, but they will say something to the effect of “I wish I could talk to my mother just one more time,” or “Even though it has been over 10 years, I still do not know why my husband had to be in that accident.” Jesus Himself grieved for the loss of loved ones, including His foster father Joseph and his follower Lazarus.

Currently in the Diocese of Belleville (IL) I am taking part in the second year of a two-year program called “Into My Vineyard,” in which two people from each parish are gathering one Saturday per month to learn about different aspects of lay ecclesial ministry. In this second year we are to identify a ministry that we feel our parish lacks or could improve on and give a short presentation about it. In talking to one of the program coordinators, she told me of her experience when her husband died several years ago. In searching for a religious-based support group or bereavement ministry, she could not locate one facilitated by a Catholic parish or organization, despite living in a relatively large metro area. She eventually attended a group organized by a local Lutheran church (Huett).

All of these factors have led me to the conclusion that a bereavement or grief ministry in my parish and larger community is needed, and fits under the guise of a minister being “one who is called to minister or serve as Jesus did” (Fleischer et al. 2). In His “Sermon on the Mount”, one of the Beatitudes Jesus gave us was “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (*New American Bible*, Matthew 5:4). Comforting the sorrowful is one of the Spiritual Works of Mercy in which all Christians are called to make part of their witness. The USCCB tells us that we should “Be open to listening and comforting those who are dealing with grief. Even if we aren't sure of the right words to say, our presence can make a big difference.”

I feel my parish does a good job in the immediate few days after a death in terms of arranging the funeral, providing a meal after the funeral service, and making arrangements for the internment. However, there is currently no organized ministry available that offers support for those who continue to grieve the death of a loved one. My ministry praxis then is to test the viability of beginning a grief/bereavement ministry in our parish and community. Using five different contexts, my hope is to gain a better understanding of the need for this ministry, and what would be effective ways to begin and develop this ministry.

Sociocultural Ministry Context

In gathering feedback for the sociocultural context of the value of grief/bereavement ministry, I did not feel that it was vital to seek out individuals of a particular economic class, because most everyone in their lifetime will experience some type of grief. I felt it more prudent to talk to people who were in different stages of time beyond a death of a loved one,

and to try to talk to people in different age groups, though the people I minister to tend to be an older population.

A symbol that frequently came up as a means of comfort were photos. In looking at photos of their loved ones, people were not only reminded of their physical traits, but also were reminded of positive experiences they had with that person. Many of the photos were taken at family gatherings, parties, husband/wife outings, etc. Photos were a source of comfort in letting the person once again become aware that their lives were fuller with that loved one as a part of it. One particular lady I talked to who lost her son when he was 25 said that her relatively short time with her son was more than worth the grief she has endured because she will have many lasting memories to hold on to (Keener).

A recurring theme that came up in my conversations is that these people do not want to let go of their loved one's memories. They do not want to leave the past in the past. They want to hold on to these memories as a source of comfort and strength. In the testing phase of this context I wanted to find information that affirmed or denied this observation.

An article authored by Terence Curley titled "Grief's Changing Landscape" addresses this issue. In the past ministry to the bereaved has been based on what is known as the "grief work hypothesis," which "embraces the premise that people need to confront their loss, go over events, memories, dreams and reflections, working toward detachment." (Curley 95). This process requires a painful and emotional severing of ties to the deceased.

Curley goes on to stress that the new science of bereavement ministry "contends that we have an enduring bond with those who have died. In other words. someone may be

physically absent, but still psychologically present in a person's life. We do need or want to sever our relationship with the deceased." (Curley 95). So we now know that though different from a physical bond, a meaningful relationship with the deceased is still attainable, and in fact is "central to the process of grieving" (Curley 96).

The most recent findings about bereavement are more compatible with Catholic theology, in which "we believe that we have an ongoing relationship in faith with those who have gone before us. Our belief is that death is only the horizon and that the limit of our sight is enhanced by embracing memories and the spiritual presence of our loved ones." (Curley 98). I feel this confirms my original findings that people who are grieving do better when they access memories through photos, stories, and other means.

Personal Context

In receiving feedback from a colleague to critique my communication skills, I chose to talk to my Pastor, Fr. Gene Wojcik. We have worked together for 15 years and he is very familiar with my communication style, especially since we have been in many meetings together in which I have been the facilitator. Initially I felt that I was strong in the use of "I" statements, and Fr. Gene agreed with this. He noted that I take ownership of the meeting using my perceptions and background. As far as other expressive skills, he noted that at times some members of the group are allowed too much time for self-disclosure. This is not an issue that other group members have noted as a problem. However, it may at times hinder those who have concerns about the length of a meeting.

In terms of responding skills, initially I perceived the use of reflecting as a weakness, due to the fact that I was fearful I would misunderstand what the speaker was trying to convey. However, Fr. Gene noted that I was strong in another aspect of reflecting, which is active listening, and that I am able to draw input from people by asking the proper questions, which flows into the skill of inviting more information. A strength that Fr. Gene felt was important is that I can be encouraging in allowing people to express their thoughts without delaying the progress of the meeting. Also, I demonstrated the ability to create a trusting environment in which people were not afraid of being attacked.

Almost all of our meetings take place in a group setting, typically with 8 – 10 people. In my initial self-assessment of my communication skills, the area that I least focused on was the group-specific skills. However, this was the area Fr. Gene was most enthused about. He felt that I exhibited the skill of gatekeeping in that I was able to discern the mood of the room at a given point. He also indicated that I was able to take the entire discussion and characterize what the major points were with clarity. This flows into the skill of Connecting Ideas/Building on the Ideas of Others.

To summarize my findings, I felt that I was able to confirm the strengths I possessed, while at the same time becoming aware of other strengths that I had not previously thought about. These may have been skills that just came naturally without having to identify them. In terms of weaknesses, I learned that I need to continue to self-assess as well as seek feedback from others. If I do not ask specific questions, then I may not ever be made aware of these weaknesses.

In turning to the results of the Kiersey – Bates personality profile, I felt that it did a good job of identifying me as an ISFJ. None of the scores were close to each other in range, so the results in each area were convincing. The “I” component indicates a tendency toward introversion. I feel I am more comfortable in a large group situation than in a small group. I thrive in a situation such as a Parish Council setting, particularly when I am the facilitator, because I am in control of the room. I am less comfortable in a one on one situation, or in a group of 3 or 4. In this case I feel forced to contribute to the group, which is more intimidating because people have an opportunity to call me out on what I say. This is something I would have to improve on when counseling those who are grieving, or turn this responsibility over to someone else.

The “SJ” component, or the Epimethean Treatment, also appears to fit my temperament. The person that fits this profile tends to take on as many tasks as necessary to get things accomplished, even if it means overburdening oneself. I admittedly do this in my ministry since I have my hand in many tasks. When beginning this ministry, I will have to improve on designating tasks in order to get things done, and not just take the attitude of if I want something done, I have to do it myself.

Institutional Context

The vast majority of my ministry work occurs within the confines of my home parish, Mary Help of Christians in Chester, IL. Ministries such as being a catechist for our Parish School of Religion, Parish Council President, and maintaining our website and social media presence are geared toward the educational and spiritual growth of the parish. In examining this context

there are two issues that I considered: 1) Why was a previous attempt to establish a bereavement ministry unsuccessful, and 2) Whose needs do I intend to serve in this ministry?

I was not personally involved in the original attempt to begin a bereavement ministry, which occurred about 15 years ago, but my recollection was that it was limited in scope. The only aspect which was tried was to hold a gathering at the parish and allow people to share their feelings about what they were going through. In other words, a support group format was the only thing that was offered. In speaking to our then Director of Religious Education who was the organizer of the original attempt at offering this ministry, she felt that there were 2 things that caused it not to work. One was that it was another evening in which people had to make room on an already busy calendar, and also people didn't appear comfortable in sharing their feelings among a group of people, particularly people they did not know well (Gross). It is my assertion that this method may have been too ambitious as a starting point. There may have been other ways to initially reach out to the grieving.

The website holyfamilycaldeonia.org offered other ideas for a grief ministry to offer to help people emotionally and to build community. These included having an informal monthly breakfast for the grieving, providing references to books and articles, sending follow up cards and notes the year following the death, and providing contact and support during the holiday season.

The other issue I considered is who I intend to serve in this ministry. Unlike other ministries I am involved with, I see this as being offered to everyone regardless of religious affiliation. As stated earlier, most everyone will experience some sort of grief in their lifetime. I

also am making the assumption that there is no other offering of grief support in the community. After consultation with several people, the closest grief support group that meets is 20 miles away. There previously had been a group that met at the local hospital, but the facilitator retired and no one took her place. So there is a definite need not only in the community, but perhaps in surrounding communities as well.

Christian Tradition Context

All Christians are called to be disciples of Jesus with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “The Risen Lord calls everyone to labor in his vineyard, that is, in a world that must be transformed in view of the final coming of the Reign of God; and the Holy Spirit empowers all with the various gifts and ministries for the building up of the Body of Christ” (USCCB 7). Therefore it is essential that all ministries, including bereavement ministry, should begin with the basic concept that this is part of our Lord’s call to missionary discipleship.

Jesus is the ultimate role model in that He is fully divine and fully human. He experienced the same emotions that all humans do, including grief following the death of a loved one. This was demonstrated upon hearing of the death of His close friend Lazarus. As stated in the Gospel of John, “when Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ““Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”” (*New American Bible*, 11:32-36). Even though Jesus knows that He will raise Lazarus from the dead, He still

stands before the tomb weeping. He is not afraid to show His own emotions about death. He perhaps may have been contemplating His own death. He showed Himself as one who could “sympathize with our weaknesses” (*New American Bible*, Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus also shows His sensitivity for the grieving when He comes upon the couple on the Road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his companion do not recognize Jesus, but instead of telling them right away who He was, Jesus allows them to share their feelings about what had happened. Jesus asks them why they are saddened, and they replied He “was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people ... our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel” (*New American Bible*, Luke 24:19-21). The couple is grieving not only the loss of a friend, but the loss of a cause. They think the One who would redeem Israel is gone. However, even in their sadness, they invite the man who they think is a stranger into their home and provide hospitality for Him, not forgetting the beliefs of their faith.

It would stand to reason, then, that even though most everyone will experience some form of grief in their lifetime and would be welcome to participate in the offering of a grief ministry, it would be better served to be organized keeping in mind Christian beliefs. This is addressed in a journal article addressing the role of religion and culture on bereavement. “Geoffrey Gorer (1965) in his study of grief and mourning in contemporary Britain forms the opinion that the decline in formal religious belief and ritual has itself removed an important form of guidance. His survey concludes that mourning was treated as if it were a weakness

instead of a psychological necessity, and that neither help nor guidance in misery was left available to the majority of contemporary Britons” (Mantala-Bozos 2).

Natural World Context

In the Roman Catholic Church the month of November is traditionally a time to especially remember those loved ones who have passed away. Part of the reason is because of the natural surroundings this time of the year brings. The trees lose their leaves and become barren. The harvest season comes to an end and the earth loses its bounty. This is reflected liturgically, as we see the church year come to an end and the focus of the scripture readings turns toward the end of the world.

It is known that for some people “changes of the seasons can trigger a change in mood, including the onset of a form of depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Most commonly, SAD usually occurs during the fall and winter, when the days are shorter, and usually goes away in the spring and summer, when the days get longer. Some experts think the shorter days, with less sunlight, upset the body's internal clock” (Potash 27-28). It would stand to reason, then, that changes in the seasons can also affect those who are grieving.

Winter brings us the holiday season, which brings a special challenge to those who grieve. “The holidays are special times of sharing and may contradict or add pain to the experience of grief. They are often associated with family members and our memories of them may be pleasant or unpleasant, depending on our personal history. Our traditions and rituals develop over time and provide structure for our connection with family and friends. The absence of loved ones will be felt deeply” (Pathways 1).

Spring brings about growth and renewal. We also celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of eternal life for those who follow the ways of God. This season, however, can cause mixed emotions for those who grieve. “No matter how dark our grief experience, we cannot help but feel the increasing warmth of daylight and the beauty of blooming trees and budding flowers. This can bring feelings of anxiety as we feel discord between our outside world and our inside feelings. Sometimes a glimpse of warmth and beauty can be a momentary relief from grief as we rejoice in new life. At other times it can make us feel pain and sadness as we think of past Springs enjoyed with our loved ones” (Pathways 1).

Summertime can be equated with a more ordinary, relaxing time. But for those who are grieving, the time can be anything but ordinary. “The glare of the sun may feel too harsh and high, shining on everything that is missing. Children’s exuberant play may scrape raw nerves. Or the absence of children and families – gone on their annual vacations— may amplify the silence to a deafening level” (Pathways 1).

Autumn is a season of transformation. Trees change colors and the landscape becomes barren. “People in grief may feel this emptiness in every level of their being. The empty chair, the unheard laughter, and the absence of touch are painful reminders of loss. An array of feelings from fear, loneliness and anger to guilt, shock, and relief may move through us like a powerful wind” (Pathways 1).

Decision and Future Pastoral Strategy

My own recent experience dealing with the loss of a loved one led me to examine the need for a grief/bereavement ministry in our parish and our community. Initially I gauged the

need for this type of ministry through interaction on social media and informal conversations with friends who had also recently experienced loss. Through this I discovered that there was interest in having some sort of structured support system to aid in dealing with grief. I then did testing through five different contexts to determine whether my initial assumption were accurate and also whether a grief ministry would be feasible for our community.

In researching the sociocultural ministry context, I discovered that many people do not want to leave the past memories of their loved ones behind, and that they want to maintain an enduring bond with them. This concept is supported by Curley, who states that the new science of bereavement is more compatible with Catholic theology, which tells us that “we believe that we have an ongoing relationship in faith with those who have gone before us” (98).

My analysis of the personal context focused on two areas. The first was a consultation with a close colleague concerning my skills in a group setting. This proved to be fruitful as I was able to verify my perceived strengths as well as discovering that some areas which I thought to be weaknesses were actually strengths. The other area of analysis was based on the Kiersey – Bates personality profile, which shows that I am an ISFJ. Of particular interest was the “I” component, which indicates a tendency toward introversion. This shows that I would be comfortable in a group setting, but may need work in a one on one setting. The one on one setting may be better served by a different personality type.

In examining the institutional context, I explored why a previous attempt at beginning a bereavement ministry failed, and also if there was a need for it not only in the parish, but in the community. Through conversations, I discovered that the time element and the support group

setting may have been factors in the initial failure, and that other means of initiation should be explored. I also discovered that there was no active bereavement ministry in the community, and that the nearest support system met about 20 miles away, so there is a great need in the local community.

The Christian tradition context revealed that Jesus, our ultimate role model, was involved in consoling those who grieved and also experienced grief himself. This ministry should call upon the Holy Spirit for guidance in its work. A journal article indicated that the decline in religious belief had removed an important element of guidance from bereavement support.

The focus of the examination of the natural world context was the seasons, and how this can affect the mood and outlook of people. In particular, the Catholic church recognizes the month of November as the time to remember those who have gone before us in part due to the barren natural surroundings that the time of year brings. Research indicates that the change of seasons can affect the grieving in various ways.

The testing of each of these contexts point to the conclusion that a grief/bereavement ministry is needed in our parish and community. The next step is how to begin to establish it. Instead of immediately diving into a support group stage, the ministry should be implemented in phases. In the book titled *Hundredfold*, which talks about establishing a parish vocation ministry, the author states that “the point of phases is to implement activities in an order that the ministry’s human and financial resources can handle ... Achieving success with smaller, simpler, but meaningful activities before tackling the larger, more expensive, and more complex

ones will keep attitudes in the ministry and parish positive” (Gruenewald 41-42). Initial phases may include further consultation with those who have recently lost loved ones, consultation with those who have led grief ministries in the past, consultation with the diocesan Pastoral Services office for materials and connections with other parish grief ministries, and establishing a social media presence to lay initial groundwork.

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