

The People of God: Healing Through Mourning

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“Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness. Today we are challenged as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and spirit.”

— POPE FRANCIS

Today so many people are overwhelmed with grief, a consequence of the global revelations of appalling sexual abuse scandals and cover-ups. Church hierarchies, priests and religious feel demoralized by what has happened. Lay people feel betrayed, ashamed, disillusioned and angry, their trust in their leaders destroyed.¹

Beyond listening to and supporting victims of abuse, what can we do — as individuals, institutions and ministries — to heal our grief? We must, as William Shakespeare says in *Macbeth*, “Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak/Whispers the o’er-fraught heart, and bids it break.” The Scriptures have a simple, but profound, even paradoxical, answer to give words to sorrow. We actually are invited to mourn through complaining! Jesus on the cross agonizingly and publicly complained to the Father in the words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

GRIEVING AND MOURNING

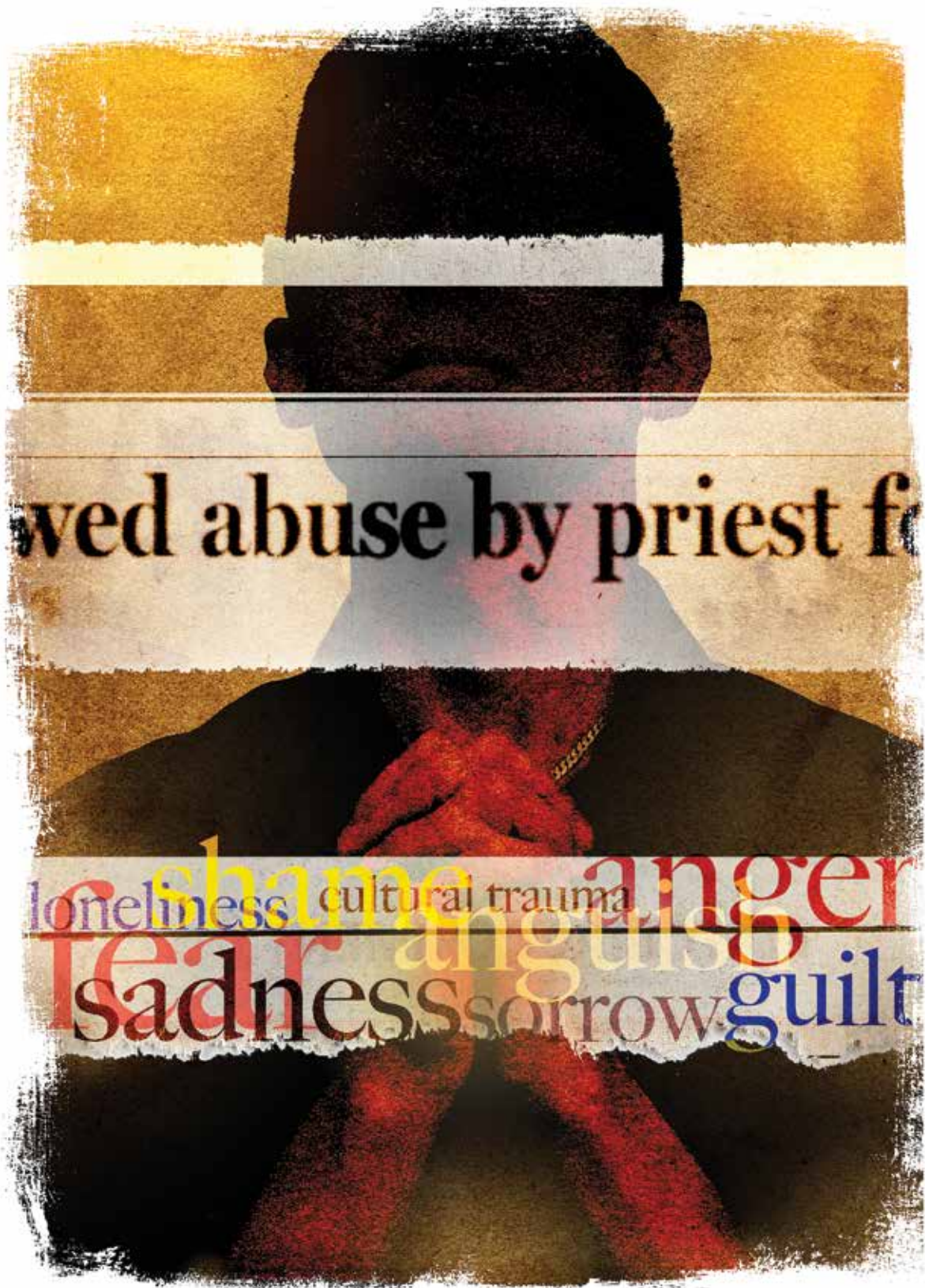
A clear distinction must be made between grieving and mourning. Grief is the internal experience of sadness, sorrow, anger, loneliness, anguish, confusion, shame, guilt and fear as a consequence of loss. Grief can be shared by an entire culture.² Recall how great was the international grief after the 9/11 terrorist disasters in New York in 2001 or the suffering in Haiti in 2010. We were collectively traumatized. Such is the case in the church today.

So great is the grief of many Catholics that we must call it “cultural trauma.” Sociologist Neil Smelser defines cultural trauma as “an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to under-

mine or overwhelm one or several ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole.³ People lose their established sense of belonging. They feel stunned and rudderless. Psychiatrist Arnon Ben-tovim describes cultural trauma as an incident when helplessness is overwhelming, normal defenses and responses fail, and the memory of the event intrudes and replays itself repeatedly.⁴ These descriptions of cultural trauma and its impact on individuals aptly describe how many Catholics feel today as more and more scandals of abuse are revealed.

Mourning, on the other hand, shows us how we are to handle grief or cultural trauma so that healing can occur. It embraces two simultaneous

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loneliness shame cultural trauma anger
tear anguish
sadness sorrow guilt

and complementary dynamics. First, it refers to the cultural rituals which publicly acknowledge that the people who are bereaved are experiencing real grief.⁵ Second, it also connotes the agonizing inner journey that the bereaved must make to let go of what is lost in order to be able to move on in life.

Unless grief can be publicly articulated in mourning rituals, it will haunt the living, evoking both heartache and anxiety.⁶ The Roman poet Ovid wrote centuries ago: “Suppressed grief suffocates.”⁷ It is of overriding significance for people to say grief hurts and to be able to express this freely and unashamedly.⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson offers this crucial advice: “Ring out the grief that saps the mind.”⁹ And in the words of the psalmist: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning... You have turned my mourning into dancing,” (Psalm 30:5, 11). Through mourning we can rediscover inner peace, joy and energy to move forward in hope to a revitalized spirit. True, we must not forget the past and its lessons. But we must be released from excessive attachment to it.

An example illustrates this point. One day in 1987 I accidentally visited the central square of Onset, a small village in Massachusetts, where an anonymous Vietnam war veteran had erected a large notice board that featured these amateurishly painted words:

Please understand that we are not asking for a parade, a monument or pity. But we do ask you to remember in your own way the 58,129 Americans who died at the [Vietnam] war ... We as individuals and as a nation learned something of human value for having been in S.E. Asia. *Give us space to mourn.*

All they were asking for was the public space to mourn and tell their stories. Without this there could be no final healing for them. “Healing,” wrote Henri Nouwen, “means, first of all, the creation of an empty, but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention.”¹⁰

**LAMENTATION PSALMS:
MOURNING RITUALS OF HEALING**

The scriptures are a plentiful source for mourning or lamentation rituals that provide welcoming spaces for people to tell their stories of loss.

The lament psalms teach us how to mourn by complaining in the midst of the dark nights of our great sadnesses: “You have put me into the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep” (Psalm 88: 7). These psalms are rituals of mourning through which griefs are recognized and then yielded in order to allow the bereaved to look to the future with hope. If bereaved people truly complain to God from the very depths of their souls and trust in God’s willingness to listen, hope will come alive once more: “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.” (Psalm 40:4) This is the message of the lamentation psalms.¹¹

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, developed her well-known dynamic for a ritual of mourning by identifying its five stages: denial-isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.¹² Her ritual process contains two key functions of all rituals: it articulates/legitimizes how people move through the process; it also prescribes how they should act in expressing their emotions. Anger, the second stage of Kübler-Ross’s model of grieving, has its counterpart in the lament psalms. In her model the person who is suffering may lash out at loyal friends, even blaming them for the misery they feel. The friends and family, who are part of a culture that tends to deny loss, rarely know how to cope with such anger. Instead, they themselves become annoyed and frustrated at what they see as ingratitude on the part of the bereaved.

Kübler-Ross	Lament Psalm
Denial and isolation	Address to God
Anger directed at friends	Anger directed at God
Bargaining	Trust in God/Hope
Depression	Petition
Acceptance	Assurance
	Vow to praise God

However, the pattern in the lament psalms is significantly different, in that they recognize that anger as a powerful human expression that should not be suppressed. Because the people are united in one covenant with God, they have every right to let God know what they feel about their sufferings and how God is expected to help them. They know God can “handle it.” The Israelites want to make their problems God’s problems. Then, it

is hoped, God will be obligated to do something about them. Ponder the public lament of the Israelites as they agonizingly view the destruction of the temple, the most pivotal symbol of God's presence in their midst. Desolation reigns supreme. God gets all the blame, but once their sadness has been so dramatically proclaimed and put aside, the Israelites discover space within their hearts for a hopeful trust in God:

O God, why do you cast us off forever? ...
Your foes have roared within your
holy place ...
with hatchets and hammers, they smashed
all its carved work ...
Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember
how the impious
scoff at you all the day long (Psalm 74:1, 4,
6, 22)

Unlike Kübler-Ross's model, in which there is denial and a sense of isolation, the lament psalms proclaim from the beginning that the psalmist or the community is profoundly afflicted. There is no camouflaging of the loss. So miserable is the sufferer that there is nothing left but to trust God. The declaration of trust sparks a hope-filled petition to God that is counter to the stage when in Kübler-Ross's framework where the bargaining that leads to depression sets in. In the lamentation psalm, no matter how horrible the situation may be, there is still the hope that God will intervene, just as God has done in the past. Listen to the psalmist as he ponders the desperate situation confronting the Israelites after the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians:

Give hear, O Shepherd of Israel ...
Stir up your might, and come to save us!
Restore us, O God, let your face shine,
that we may be saved ... (Psalm 80:1, 2, 3)

Later in the psalm, the psalmist recalls the very actions that God has taken to mold the Israelites into God's chosen people: how he led them out of Egypt and brought them to the promised land. These interventions of God gave meaning to their lives then; the hope is that God will again intervene to restore meaning in the midst of their misery and chaos. The lament proceeds from petition to trust and then praise: "give us life and we will

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call upon your name."

The words of assurance in the lament psalms and the stage of acceptance in Kübler-Ross's model of mourning may at first appear to have an identical function. For Kübler-Ross, "acceptance" seems to mean a stoic resignation in the face of the inevitable. But this view is contrary to a fundamental assumption in the lament psalms. While loss or death is inevitable at some point, there is always the belief that God can transform every crisis into a stunning new beginning. The task of covenant members is never to give up hope. This is the mark of every true Israelite.

Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann does not denigrate the importance of Kübler-Ross's model of mourning (or other stage theories of mourning). Rather, his focus is to show that those whose faith is like the Old Testament believers — those who believe in their covenant with God — see things at a quite different level.¹³ They do not deny trauma or loss of any kind. On the contrary, they see chaos in its many forms as the occasion to rediscover the historical fact that God can intervene in human affairs to "create new heavens and a new earth ...[where] no more will the sound of weeping be heard" (Isaiah 65:17, 19).

PASTORAL HEALING IN THE CHURCH

Today the lament psalms can still teach us how to complain to God prayerfully in the midst of our shame and sadness, resulting from the revelations of sexual abuse. Our loud faith-based laments become rituals of mourning through which our griefs can be exercised and abandoned so we can again look to the future in hope. But mourning rituals need ritual leaders. At Emmaus, Jesus himself was the ritual leader, challenging the two disciples to own up to the trauma of loss. He gave

them space to express their anger and sadness that things did not turn out as they had hoped. Jesus did not judge or condemn their anger (Luke 24: 17-24).

To be effective, rituals must also be carefully planned. For example, Moses was sensitive to the fact that the experience of intense mourning throughout the Exodus, was a pre-condition for forming a new people, but if it were not guided prudently, it could lead to further collective trauma. Therefore, he sought the advice of his father-in-law Jethro, who instructed him to group the people into small units for mourning, under the direction of “men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain” (Exodus 18:21).

An example of a simple lamentation-based mourning ritual could be the following.¹⁴ The paschal candle is lit and the ritual leader invites people to come together into small groups and in silence. The leader reads Matthew 27:57-61 and invites all to enter into the darkness of the tomb so that they may discover the newness of the resurrection. A moment of silence is held until Psalm 143 is read. Participants are invited to ponder the tragic trauma of abuse survivors and the church. After a period of silence, they are encouraged, if they wish, to call out in a word or phrase what they feel. There is no discussion. The paschal candle is extinguished followed by a period of short meditative silence. Lamentation Psalm 88 is read. After a longer period of silence, the leader invites people to identify some newness emerging in the church, again in a word or phrase. When all are finished the paschal candle is relit. The group reads Revelation 21:1-7, which is followed by sharing the sign of peace.

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NOTES

1. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Abuse and Cover-Up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019).
2. See Ron Eyerman, “Cultural Trauma: Emotion and Narration,” in eds. Jeffrey Alexander et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 564-82.
3. Neil Smelser, “Psychological and Cultural Trauma,” in eds. Jeffrey Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Behavior* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 38.
4. Arnon Bentovim, *Trauma-Organized Systems: Physical and Sexual Abuse in Families* (London: Karnac, 1992), 24.
5. See Kenneth J. Doka and Terry L. Martin, *Grieving Beyond Gender: Understanding the Ways Men and Women Mourn* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 28-30.
6. Doka and Martin, *Grieving Beyond Gender*, 18-25; Therese A. Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993), 146-47, 177-78, 185-240, 380-81, 584.
7. Ovid, *Tristia*, Book V, eleg.1, line 63.
8. See C. Charles Bachmann, *Ministering to the Grief Sufferer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 46-51.
9. Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, cvi.st.3.
10. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (London: Collins, 1976): 88.
11. The lamentation psalms constitute a third of all the psalms. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Grieving for Change: A Spirituality for Refounding Gospel Communities* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991): 61-85.
12. See Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).
13. See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984): 54; “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 31, no. 3 (1977): 265-75; “Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17, no. 1 (1980): 3-32.
14. This ritual by Gerard Whiteford is more fully explained in Gerald A. Arbuckle, *The Francis Factor and the People of God: New Life for the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015): 220-22.

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