

INTRODUCTION



When we lose a loved one in death, we find that life takes on a whole new meaning. To some of us life no longer *has* meaning. To others, many of the things that once seemed so important are no longer of any interest. Our world is shattered, and we don't even have the will or the strength to pick up the pieces. One of the greatest joys in life is sharing everyday happenings with those we love. Now one of those persons is gone from us, and we wonder if we will ever want to share again. We question, "Will there ever again be anything in our life worth sharing?"

This book can help.

There is nothing unnatural or unhealthy about the way you are feeling. You are going through the grieving process because of the death of your loved one. It's a process that is absolutely necessary if you are to heal from this loss. So no matter how difficult the struggle is and how much pain is experienced, unless you work at it and persist in your efforts to move through your grief, you will not be able to rebuild your future with new meaning and purpose.

No one can take away from you the struggle that you will encounter as you grieve. The task before you is not an easy one. There is no "proper" way to do it; no certain amount of time to accomplish it; no one who can do the grieving for you. But there are things you can do to help yourself grieve well.

There's a wonderful little story told about a young man who was out walking one day. He happened to look down and see a butterfly shuddering on the sidewalk, locked in a seemingly hopeless struggle to free itself from its now useless cocoon. Feeling pity, he took a pocketknife, carefully cut away the cocoon, and set the butterfly free. To his dismay, it lay on the sidewalk, convulsed weakly for a while, and died. A biologist later told him, "That was the worst thing you could have done! A butterfly needs that struggle to develop the muscles to fly. By robbing him of the struggle, you made him too weak to live."

You, too, cannot be robbed of the struggle of working through your grief, for it is in the struggling that healing can begin to take place.

There are a number of things that can be of help as you begin to grieve the loss of your loved one: talking to family and friends, reading books about the grieving process, going to a support group where you can share your thoughts and feelings, spending time in quiet reflection, journaling the story of your loved one's life, remembering and celebrating that life in prayer and ritual. All of these can strengthen you, especially if they can be done with others who love and cherish you, who have a listening ear to grieve and a compassionate heart.

One particular way to grieve that we will explore in this book is the use of prayer and ritual to commemorate your loved ones. This certainly was one of the first ways you honored your loved one at the time of death. You gathered with family, friends, and neighbors at the wake service or vigil and shared many stories and memories. The funeral liturgy was a fitting tribute in prayer and ritual, as was the committal service at the cemetery. You welcomed the candles and incense, blessings and readings because they symbolized a love and reverence on the part of those gathered. Prayer and ritual at the time of death are an important way for all of us to begin our grieving.

But what happens now? You are no longer at a Church service and yet feel a need to continually remember your loved one in

prayer. In the *Order of Christian Funerals*, prepared by a commission of Catholic bishops, we are reminded through the letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:26) that “if one member suffers in the body of Christ which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member.” The *Order of Christian Funerals* goes on to say, “The responsibility for the ministry of consolation rests with the believing community” (#9). As members of the body of Christ, we all are the believing community, charged with the privilege of consoling those who mourn. What better way can we do this than through prayer and ritual for the deceased within the atmosphere of a loving community?

Prayer “is the raising of the mind and heart to God” (*St. John Damascene*). We know that when we pray we ask God for what we need, and we thank God for what has been given us. We know that prayer can take place anywhere and that it can be either silent or vocal.

But what is ritual, and how does it interact with prayer, and how can it become part of struggling through the grieving process? “Rituals are repeated patterns of meaningful acts” (Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End*). Our lives are full of them; we conceive them, are shaped by them; they give us structure, and they have the power to transform the ordinary into the holy. Our day becomes holy as we constantly ritualize our remembrances; and in our remembering, we heed the words of the Lord, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19b).

Ritual and prayer both embrace and give meaning to our departed loved ones. Both give us the strength and structure to continue our journey through grief. Both can be an intricate part of our daily, family life.

You may not feel comfortable preparing these prayers and rituals, which perhaps you once thought could only take place in church. Hopefully, this book will help you in your “ministry of consolation,” by presenting reflections and suggestions for memorializing your loved ones in a meaningful way right within your home, surrounded by family and friends.