

*The  
Joy of*  
Being a  
Bereavement  
Minister



Nancy T. Stout



**Resurrection Press**

An Imprint of

**CATHOLIC BOOK PUBLISHING CORP.**

Totowa • New Jersey

# Contents

Foreword.....	9
Introduction .....	13
Chapter 1.....	17
Touching Others' Pain	
Chapter 2.....	27
Care for the Orphans and Widows	
Chapter 3.....	37
Companions on the Way	
Chapter 4.....	55
Looking Beyond Loss	
Chapter 5.....	67
Go Out into the World	
Appendix .....	75
Prayer Service.....	75
Books and other Resources .....	77

## Introduction

**A**re you looking for a resource for your parish bereavement committee? Have you been wondering if God is calling you to minister to the grieving? Do you have questions about exactly what bereavement ministry is? This small book can serve to provide helpful information, stimulate prayerful personal reflection, and facilitate discussion and lay development within your parish community. It is intended to be a resource for laity and clergy who are already engaged in bereavement work or who are exploring the possibilities for individual ministry and/or ministry in a parish.

Bereavement ministry is becoming more prominent within the life of parish communities today as we deepen our awareness and understanding of the Christian call to comfort the grieving among us. The pastoral basis is firmly rooted in Christian theology and Holy Scripture, as well as in Church tradition. We find examples and stories of “reaching out” to the bereaved as far back as the Old Testament and certainly in stories of Jesus in the Gospel. We have official instruction about this work in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in Vatican II documents. Learning about this rich background of the ministry helps establish a foundation for parishes and priests who seek to serve.

If you've been doing this work for a while, you know that it is not necessarily one of those "fun" ministries that everyone in the parish is lining up to do. But you also know the reward and satisfaction that comes from being present to a person in times of loss and sadness. It is certainly not for everyone; it can even be a bit intimidating. There must be a true discernment process before entering this ministry. However, the challenge of ministry to the grieving strengthens and deepens one's faith. It nurtures the bond of connection we have with each other as human beings. It teaches about the mystery of God's love for all, especially the suffering, and it shows the model of Jesus in his own ministry.

Bereavement ministry provides an opportunity for personal spiritual growth, and in some instances the ministers receive far more than they give. The sense of community within a parish is enhanced as members learn a new way to "care for" those in need, to offer the gift of Christian love, to experience again the mystery of Jesus Christ alive in our actions and words.

I have truly been gifted these past two years by the generosity of those who joined me to do this work. It has been a privilege to provide leadership and guidance, to share stories and listen to one another, and to join together in prayer. The deeper blessing comes from the powerful witness of the very ones we serve—those grieving the loss of a loved one. Their strength and faith and gracious reception of our contact are all

an inspiration as we live out the Christian call to service.

I hope that what I've written here might inspire you as you develop a bereavement ministry in your parish or support what already exists. There is helpful information for getting started, for recruiting volunteers, and for preparing the ministers to go out and to serve. It is a story, in part, of my experience in a parish that needed and was ready for a special ministry to the grieving. It starts at the beginning—with a proposal on paper submitted to the parish staff. The book goes on to describe the step-by-step process of organizing and sustaining our "Lazarus ministry." It includes real stories of the encounters of the volunteers as they interacted with grieving members in our parish. The story is unfinished, of course, as this ministry becomes rooted in the parish. Perhaps with the help of this book, you can begin your own story!

## Chapter 1

# Touching Others' Pain



**B**EREAVEMENT ministry can be defined as the act of being present with someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one. It happens within the context of faith, and, in this context, is a caring, supportive, and compassionate ministry on the part of one parishioner for another.

Let's look at these adjectives for a moment. Compassion—“*com passio*”—means “with feeling,” to “suffer with.” An act of compassion draws one into the inner feelings of another who is suffering . . . consequently, the pain and sadness are shared by both. The ministers are called to comfort and to support. Bereavement ministry does not involve taking away the pain of the grieving person. Rather it is journeying in that pain with the one who is grieving.

We are all familiar with the gestures associated with expressing sympathy at the time of a death or loss. The act of sympathizing usually involves something immediate such as sending a flower arrangement, writing a card, visiting at the wake, and/or attending the funeral liturgy. Often our expression of sympathy ends right there; it tends to be short term.

All of these gestures are very appropriate and mean much to the grieving relatives of the deceased. And these same gestures can certainly be incorporated into any bereavement ministry. But ministry . . . ministering to others . . . serving . . . can go well beyond these gestures.

It involves being present more deeply, more completely, and for the longer term. Ministry asks for an entering into the feelings of sadness and loss in a more personal way. And, finally, it requires exposing oneself, if you will, to the more “raw” feelings of anguish that might not be shown in public. Herein is the risk in serving in this ministry. One commits to being present, to following through, and to “walking with” the bereaved through some unknown and possibly unfamiliar emotional territory. Everyone’s grief is personal and unique, and it can be unpredictable—a true roller coaster of emotions, memories, even regrets. The bereavement minister agrees to ride that roller coaster with the one who is grieving.

Consider a woman who has experienced a series of significant losses—the deaths of three loved ones in less than a year’s time. She is in the midst of a very complicated grief journey. Her pain is raw; the tears and the deep feelings of sadness and confusion and anger are right on the surface and seemingly “uncontrollable” to the woman. It takes courage for the bereavement minister to approach the bereaved initially. And then it takes great patience and sensitivity

for the minister to hear this woman's story. Yet this is the call of the ministry.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross worked with dying populations in various settings for many years, and she studied the process that unfolds with the "letting go" of dying. She observed that the dying and their loved ones went through these common stages: shock and denial, anger and rage, grief and pain, and finally peace and acceptance. At first glance, the stages are presented as a neat and tidy process. There are steps to go through; one leads to the next until the end comes . . . that of peace and acceptance of the loss. Would that it were so! The minister's work would be so simple and so much less intense, to say nothing of the bereaved's experience!

While these stages of grief are quite legitimate and descriptive of the grief journey, it is rarely a straight line from point A to point B. The grief journey twists and turns and doubles back on itself. The grieving person passes through anger and denial to bargaining, and just when acceptance appears within reach, the anger rises up again and takes over—surprising and maybe even shocking. Stages, yes, but a predictable order? A timeline for resolving the pain of grief and loss? Not very likely in my personal and professional experience.

So the bereavement minister comes into the process to offer aid and care and to attend to the person in pain. The minister wishes to contribute to the