

# Loss, Grief and the Process of Healing

## I.

This is an especially difficult topic to address. It calls up all sorts of painful feelings, associated with personal experiences of loss throughout the course of our life. Those feelings we can basically identify as "grief," an overwhelming sense of sadness and depression, often amplified by anger that surges up within us from the realization that we have been somehow victimized, abused or simply ignored. Grief is a complicated, multifaceted reaction to the loss of something precious, something of personal value to us, which has been stripped away. Specialists have defined grief as "the conflicting group of human emotions caused by an end to or change in a familiar pattern of behavior."<sup>1</sup> This is a useful definition, but it is inadequate in that it considers the mind but not the spirit. To understand the interrelationship of loss and grief, and how it might be confronted and handled as an essentially spiritual problem, it would perhaps be useful to begin with some concrete examples familiar to all of us. As Kelsey and I talked about this conference, it seemed that it might be worthwhile for me to share some of my personal experiences of loss. I do so reluctantly, I must say. And I do so only because I hope my taste of loss and its accompanying grief might allow some of those here to face their own struggle with it, and to look for the healing that's possible.

Loss takes a multitude of forms throughout our life. It can be intensely personal, as in the case of divorce or the death of a loved one, whether an aged parent or a newborn child. Almost no miscarriage, and certainly no abortion, leaves the mother free from a sense of loss and its subsequent burden of grief. Loss can involve an entire nuclear family when the breadwinner loses a job and the family is deprived of income. Or when a child in the military comes home in a flag-draped casket.

Among the most acute forms of loss are those that occur in the framework of our family of origin, the home we grew up in. When that home environment is marked by alcoholism, for example, children and a spouse can experience massive loss. Here I can speak from personal experience. My father was an artist, a highly talented painter of portraits, still lifes and landscapes. He was himself a child of loss, most notably with the suicide of his mother when he was 19 years old. From that time on he began to drink. He could be charming, and my mother, totally enamored, married him when he was 30 and she was 21. I came along a year later. As I grew, my sense of personal loss was an ever-present memory, reinforced by daily experience. Dad's alcohol-fueled rages led him to smash furniture against the wall and to shriek expletives at or about anyone he found annoying. I

received the brunt of his outrage, even after my sister's birth when I was four. I don't recall ever being thrown down the stairs, but I do remember being tossed up them, from bottom to top, and landing in a heap outside my bedroom door. One of my most enduring memories is of incurring his anger over something or other, then finding myself sailing across our long, narrow living room floor to land against a standing lamp. Then I was yelled at again because I nearly tipped the lamp over. Home should be the safest place in the world for a child. In my case, it was the most dangerous. I never brought home school friends of mine, for fear that my father's excesses would bring down on me excruciating embarrassment and shame.

In short, I lost my father because of his drinking; and my mother, who loved him dearly, suffered her own acute loss when she was finally forced to divorce him when I was eleven years old. The destructive effects of his alcoholism made living with him impossible, a fact he acknowledged to me many years later. That loss meant that my mother, my sister, and even my mother's family members, experienced their own repeated losses, both during the marriage and after it ended. When my mother remarried several years later, my stepfather – a delightful, generous and gifted scientist – regarded me as a threat. Even when I was in my early teens, he saw me as “the other man” in the house, and our relationship remained cool at best. And in later years, my father-in-law had little use for me because I was a seminary student rather than a star athlete. As a consequence, the very notion of human “fatherhood” called up within me a profound sense of loss, together with a certain degree of shame, because in the eyes of my several fathers, I never made the grade, I was always in the way.

Further loss for me came when a beloved aunt of mine committed suicide. Her husband had passed away, her oldest son had fallen out of a window and suffered irreversible brain damage, and she assumed most of his care. Finally it became too much, and she began drinking in order to cope. Coping mechanisms of that kind, though, can never successfully palliate the grief that comes with the intensity of such intimate loss. Another person close to my wife and me committed suicide after a short lifetime of severe sexual abuse. That too creates an unbearable sense of loss – loss of personal integrity, loss of a trusted friend or family member, loss of childhood innocence. That abuse provoked such grief that she could no longer bear it, no longer face herself in the mirror, no longer tolerate the dissolute life she had fallen into as a result of having been repeatedly violated by someone who should have been a bastion of trust, support and protection. Nothing and no one spoke directly and adequately to her grief. So she dealt with it in the only way she knew how.

Loss, however, does not always involve violence or abuse. To lose a close friend who

dies, or simply moves away to some distant town, also provokes grief. In my case, there is lingering grief over our move back to the United States from France in 1984. France is where we met and entered the Orthodox Church in the mid-1960s, where we were welcomed with warmth and deep affection by old Russian immigrants, people who had suffered their own terrible losses at the time of the October Revolution. All of those people are dead now. Yet their photos on our walls evoke waves of nostalgia that will never be fully calmed this side of the Kingdom. If I return to France several times each year, it's not only to teach at the Saint Sergius Theological Institute. It's also to continue a journey, marked by grief but also by hope, that some day the longing created by those people and those experiences might be fulfilled, that some day the pain of separation might be transformed into a deep and enduring communion with those who showed us such love before they departed to their eternal rest.

Finally, we can note more common losses that appear to be less severe but that can nevertheless trigger severe grief. The children leave for the university, or else they marry; and the parents experience what is known as the "empty nest syndrome." A man or woman retires from a job they have held for decades, and once the farewell ceremony is over, they feel forgotten. They can experience grief from the loss of work, loss of appreciative colleagues, or loss of their "P.I.L.," their purpose in life. From years of often frenetic activity, they are reduced to puttering about the house, looking for ways to pass the time. In the worst cases, a suddenly empty existence of this kind can push a person into depression, or lead them to commit suicide. Then again, there is the loss and grief associated with gestation. A mother carries a child for nine months, then she suffers postpartum depression, sometimes for months after the birth. As improbable as it may sound to those who have not experienced it, something similar can happen with a student who completes a difficult project, for example a doctoral thesis, just as it can with an author who finishes writing a book and submits it for publication. Day and night the student invests heart and soul into a particular subject in order to give shape to the chosen thesis. Then there's the submission and the defense, and it's over. A novelist struggles for months or years with characters and dramatic movement to express an idea. Finally the work is completed, and he or she sends it off, turns it over to an editor, and that too is over. It's like the death of a loved one: a part of one's self dies with completion of the project. Postpartum depression, in other words, can be induced by many things other than the birth of a child.

Each of us has our own story of loss and consequent grief, and for some of us, the weight of it pushes us repeatedly toward the edge. You as a Vicariate – and now a Deanery – have suffered your own collective loss. And your grief is compounded by a sense of

victimization and frustration. In 1 Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul admonishes the faithful to deal with their legal matters among themselves, and to avoid taking them to a court of law. Even if, as he declares, we are “to judge angels,” nevertheless, in the world we live in today, it is sometimes necessary to resort to lawsuits, as regrettable and lamentable as that might be. Yet when Christian opposes Christian (or patriarchate opposes patriarchate) in a secular courtroom, the entire affair is tinged with tragedy, whatever the outcome. And when things go as they have for your former Vicariate, the sense of pain, frustration, anger and even fear can easily get the upper hand. In your case this is practically inevitable, for you have lost not only a cathedral, but also a bishop. And the accumulated losses have impacted directly on the harmony and unity of the Deanery, calling into question your ecclesial identity and posing what many must consider to be insuperable challenges.

But we are where we are. And the question is how to deal with the situation: not from a legal point of view, since that’s already settled, but from a spiritual perspective that places ourselves and the entire matter into the loving, merciful and all-powerful hands of God.

## II.

I firmly believe that a workable response is provided for us by the Scriptures, and by one image in particular. That image – of the Gerasene (or Gadarene) demoniac – speaks directly, and in a strikingly graphic way, of the connection between loss and grief, and of the process by which that burden can be overcome, or at least lessened to manageable proportions.

The earliest form of the encounter between Jesus and the man possessed of demons is almost certainly the one given in Mark 5:1-20. The passage in general is something of a nightmare for our priests, since it is read at the Divine Liturgy at least three times during the liturgical year, and those called to preach on it tend in short order to run out of ideas. That account, nevertheless, is a wellspring of inspiration, especially if we interpret it in light of the demoniac’s personal experience.

We are familiar with the details. In St Mark’s telling, a man with an “unclean spirit” lived and roamed about among the tombs, a place of impurity, death and corruption. His mania was such that he shrieked and howled in that place of the dead, cutting his flesh with sharp stones in a frantic gesture of self-mutilation. People in the surrounding area were terrified of him. Some tried to restrain him by subduing him, then binding him with shackles and chains. These he broke in his rage (just as I once saw my father tear in half a fairly thick telephone book). Crisis can call forth superhuman strength. Nothing could

hold this man, and so the townsfolk abandoned him, hoping he would stay put, a virtual dead man dwelling among the dead.

When Jesus approached him, the possessed man ran up to him and threw himself at his feet. The Lord's first response was to perform an exorcism, to command the unclean spirit to come out of him. This provoked a retort on the part of the spirit or spirits, speaking through the demoniac: "What have we and you to do with each other?" To which it added a significant confession of faith, acknowledging Jesus to be the Son of the Most High God. Jesus spoke these same words to his Mother (*ti emoi kai soi*; "*what is there between us?*"), when at the wedding in Cana of Galilee she advised him that there was no more wine. These words were no rebuke, but a way of setting the stage for the miracle by which he changed water into an abundant quantity of wine. Here, when the unclean spirit addresses Jesus, it does so as a kind of self-protection. The world is the devil's domain, it implies, and the Lord should remain in his heaven... To this, Jesus responds with another miracle, one that effects a transformation in the life of the demoniac as striking and significant as the changing of water into wine. First, however, Jesus continues the dialogue, asking the demon its name. To know the name of an adversary is to have power and authority over him (as the angel asks Jacob his name but refuses to divulge his own, Genesis 32). The demon answers Jesus' question by revealing its very nature: "My name is Legion, for we are many!" As we all recall, the exorcism proceeds with Jesus sending the "many spirits" into the herd of swine. These, like the place of the tombs, were considered by the Jews to be impure, taboo. Thus it's quite fitting that the impure demons be allowed to enter the swine, in which they themselves are entombed as the animals rush down the cliff and drown in the sea.

Crowds of people gather, gaping in wonder at the former demoniac, now in his right mind, clothed and talking coherently. And the people's fear-driven and all too predictable reaction is to beg Jesus to leave. It's dangerous to meddle with demonic powers, as this rabbi has done. Better, then, that he simply get out of their neighborhood. As Jesus steps into the boat, the man in turn begs Jesus to allow him to go with him. But Jesus refuses. He sends the man back to his own town, so that he can proclaim there and throughout the entire Gentile region of the Decapolis just what miracle Jesus had wrought in his life.

This poor and yet blessed demoniac had suffered immeasurable loss: the loss of his humanity because of demonic possession, leading to the loss of friends, family and all living human contact. He became the ultimate victim, experiencing day and night the truth St John expresses in his first epistle when he declares, "The whole world lies in [the hands of] the Evil One!" (5:19). The demoniac's marginalization by society is symbolized

by the chains with which the people bound him, a quintessential sign of rejection, since the gesture, futile as it was, was to protect the townsfolk rather than the possessed man. Great was this man's loss. Yet in the presence of Jesus, he moved step by step towards healing. That movement involved three essential stages. First came *recognition* and *acknowledgement*, then *submission*, and finally his active *response*. These are steps or progressive stages through which the grief-stricken must pass if they are truly to be healed.

Recognition of his actual state, which implies acceptance of it, is indicated by the name he gives: "Legion." By that name he acknowledges that he is no longer master of his own life, that another power has taken possession of him. He carries within himself a multitude of forces, demonic influences that determine his behavior, incite his mania, and turn him into a madman. As tragic as his state has become, recognition of its severity, and especially of its origin, is an indispensable first step in the healing process.

If this man had rejected Jesus' offer, turned away and left the scene, there would have been no miracle. God can heal any illness and correct any defect in our life; but only if we want him to, only if we open ourselves to the grace he offers, to receive it without condition, like a little child. In this case, the demoniac's act of acceptance and submission allows Jesus to perform the exorcism. Unable to save himself, the man surrenders to the only one who can free him from his sickness and its consequences. Jesus manifests his full power and authority by sending the evil spirits into the herd of swine. But he does so only because the man allows him to do so, allows him to shake him to the depths of his being and to bring about in his life what is nothing less than a "new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

Finally, the man offers his response: an active gesture that enables him to participate directly in the work which was Jesus' own, the work of salvation and liberation for which the Son of God took flesh and shared fully our fallen human condition. The man, now healed, wanted above all to accompany Jesus, to follow him as one of his disciples, and to benefit from his awesome healing presence. But Jesus sends him away – not as a rebuke, but so that this man might proclaim all that Jesus had done for him. Thus this former demoniac becomes the first Christian missionary, the first to go home to his own people and to those who dwelt throughout that entire region, in order to proclaim and bear witness to the Good News of Jesus' presence, power and authority. "Go and proclaim," Jesus tells him. And with this restored human being – formerly broken, possessed and outcast – there begins the Church's mission to the world beyond Israel.

Recognition and acknowledgement of our vulnerability in the face of loss, surrender to the

One who alone can bring wholeness and consolation, and an active response on our part, to transform the grief of loss into a powerful witness to God's grace: these are the indispensable steps or stages that can lead to authentic and lasting healing of the pain that substantial loss incurs. There is a great deal we can do to make this journey. There are initiatives we can and must take, if grief is to lessen its grip on us, and we are to avail ourselves of what both medical science and our faith have to offer. For a few minutes, then, let's consider some of the ways we can most profitably undertake a process of healing from the burden of grief, whether or not that grief is conscious, whether or not we really want to share that burden with other people.

### III.

Perhaps a necessary first step is to recognize that the loss-grief complex involves entire communities, particularly when it is shaped by events and experiences within the life of the Church. With the loss of the London cathedral, each parish of your Deanery is directly impacted. Your ecclesial identity has been called into question and even denied by others who have emerged victorious in this long and painful struggle, one with roots in a time long before the death of Metropolitan Anthony. Your loss is not unlike the one experienced by large ethnic groups that during the last century were displaced, disowned or exiled: Jews, Armenians, Russian immigrants, and so forth. And like them, the loss is intergenerational. Second generation children of such groups often lack both a personal and a national identity. This occurred in the experience of many children of Russian immigrants in Paris: they were both Russian and French, which meant that on an emotional level they were neither.

Similar experiences of loss can occur when the faithful are subjected to abuses by Church authorities. We in the United States are still reeling from the malpractice and moral failings of two of our former Metropolitans. Other bishops, with few exceptions, acted like the codependent spouse in an alcoholic family system. They "enabled" their superiors in their dubious behavior, for fear of rocking the boat or exposing themselves to censure. The wife of an alcoholic husband will often sacrifice the time and energy she owes to her children, in order to maintain "homeostasis" or equilibrium – that is, some modicum of stability – within the family system. Many of our priests and bishops who were aware of what was going on within the Church did the same. Rather than speak out and expose the wrongdoing, they maintained the image of "the good-looking family," for fear that they would scandalize the faithful and jeopardize their own ecclesial position. And consequently, the scandal became all the greater. "Silence kills," they tell those who embark on a Twelve-Step program. Silence kills in the Church, too, when there occurs a continual abuse of power. Finally, the entire ecclesial edifice is threatened with collapse,

as everyone involved is caught up in a mood of anger, frustration and grief.

As a help along the way to recovery from grief in its many and complex forms, I would recommend to you the book from which I quoted a definition of grief at the beginning of this talk. It's the work by John James and Russell Friedman, titled *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, published in 1998 by HarperCollins. I won't try to summarize it here, just to say that it leads a person, usually hand in hand with a close friend or relative, along a pathway that can free one quite successfully from the grief that stems from loss. It points out the many myths and misconceptions most of us have regarding appropriate responses to grief. For example, exhorting a grieving person, "Don't feel bad, look at all the good things in life"; or "You must be strong for others;" or the deceased person "is in a better place." The authors rightly warn against intellectualizing or rationalizing losses in this way. In most cases, this does nothing more than offer temporary relief, if that. For grief-work has to involve not the intellect, but the *emotions*. As they assert, "Grieving people want and need to be *heard*, not fixed" (p. 45). But our tendency is so often to want to "fix," to make wounded people "feel better," without knowing how to lead them through the grieving process toward authentic health at the level of their feelings, their emotions.

Grief needs first of all to be recognized for what it is and to be acknowledged. Insofar as possible, its cause needs to be identified, then accepted. What led to the sickness and death of this person I love? What regrets do I have now that I can no longer speak to them or relate to them in a personal way? To what degree does guilt underlie my sense of grief? How can I make amends, offer forgiveness and seek reconciliation, even if the cause seems hopeless, even if the person is lying in their grave? How can I achieve what specialists call "completion"? That is, how can I finally, and freely, say "Goodbye" to the person who has died or the accomplishment I wanted so much to achieve, or the marriage I have seen deteriorate to the point of divorce?

These are questions that apply not only to death, divorce and the like. They should also be raised with regard to events in the Church, particularly those of the kind you have experienced with the loss of the cathedral, your bishop, and even friends and pastors who decided to remain with the Moscow Patriarchate.

As with the Gerasene demoniac, the first step we need to take is one of recognition and acknowledgement. The second step is equally important. How do we, how does each one of us individually and in communion with each other, surrender the situation into the hands of God? Again, the answer requires first that we accept our powerlessness over the matter, the fact that we cannot change things except in ourselves.



Here we need to remember that each of us belongs to a common, universal “royal priesthood,” as described in First Peter ch. 2. The primary task of the priest is to *offer*. In this case, it means holding ourselves and our communities up before God, acknowledging our hurt, our confusion, our anger, and our loss. It means bringing to God our noble efforts and our poor failures with regard to the Church and its organization, recognizing that everyone involved, including ourselves, has in some way contributed to what has happened, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly. This is not to browbeat ourselves or to heap guilt on top of grief. It is to acknowledge, in silence before an icon or perhaps in some appropriate public setting, that no one is without sin, that even our best intentions can go awry.

To offer the entire matter to God means also that we pray: not only for ourselves, but for those whom we perceive to be in some way or other our adversaries, those by whom we feel victimized. But it means doing so with complete honesty, acknowledging to God at the same time that we still bear hurt and perhaps bitterness because of what we have endured; that we are living with a degree of fear because of the unresolved financial consequences of the lawsuit; that we are living – within the One Holy Orthodox Church – a tragic separation among the brethren that leaves many of those in the Deanery feeling wronged, abandoned and marginalized. The unclean spirits both within us and beyond us are Legion. But like the demoniac, we can come before the Lord in pain and confusion, yet with confidence that “with God all things are possible,” even healing from an excruciating loss.

That healing, however, demands a response on our part. It requires a synergy or cooperation with God in his own work of restoration and reconciliation. We may never know such reconciliation in this lifetime of ours. That, however, we can leave to the workings of the Holy Spirit within the total life of the Church. Our responsibility is to seek healing that can bring peace to ourselves, and the *possibility* for reconciliation with those from whom we have become separated. The demoniac wanted, as it were, to become a monk, and Jesus made of him an apostle. We may want to isolate ourselves, create our own ecclesial body marked off by clear boundaries, simply as a way to protect ourselves. But that doesn’t work. What Christ needs of us is to “go and proclaim.” That proclamation might be simply to ourselves, to recall for ourselves that this earthly life finds its only real fulfillment in the glory of the Kingdom. It might also be made to others around us, within the Deanery, to offer strength and affirmation to those who are wounded, suffering their own loss, and bearing their own grief.

That proclamation should, it seems to me, also be one of *forgiveness*. Forgiveness that frees both us and those who have offended us, while it brings sanity and the potential for

reconciliation to the whole affair. One point in James' and Friedman's book that I strongly disagree with has to do precisely with the question of forgiveness. They take a dictionary definition of the term, limiting it to a conscious but unspoken end put to feelings of resentment against an offender. "Never forgive anyone directly to their face," they repeatedly admonish. This is because, they claim, "an unsolicited statement of forgiveness is almost always perceived as an attack" (p. 140).

A deeper Christian approach to the act of forgiveness sees it not only as a change within ourselves, but as active reconciliation with other persons. If we acknowledge our own limits, our faults, our sinfulness, making not an accusation but a compassionate affirmation of our desire to clear away the debris of conflict and to achieve genuine reconciliation with those we feel have wronged us, it is perfectly appropriate to offer forgiveness as well as to request it. The other persons are well aware that we hold against them particular wrongs, injustices, hurt feelings and anger. To say "I forgive you" is to affirm that by the grace of God we have passed beyond rancor and resentment; that we desire nothing more than reconciliation and union – even if those goals do not issue in some formal reuniting on an ecclesial level. We may well accept to live with our structural separation. We should never accept to live alienated from one another by a refusal to forgive. "Forgive us our trespasses," we pray each day, "as we have (already) forgiven those who trespass against us!" Such is the hard and narrow way of the cross that Christ bore for us, and which he calls us to bear for him and for one another.

Acknowledge our loss and its consequent grief, and surrender it into the hands of God. Then we might find the grace and the strength to live our Orthodox Christian existence as God wills. We may still harbor resentments and regrets, we may still lament the changes that have occurred in our ecclesial structures. But if at the same time we can extend forgiveness and seek reconciliation, we will bear a faithful witness to the ineffable love of God expressed in the life and work of his Son Jesus Christ. Like the Gerasene demoniac, we will faithfully fulfill the calling that is ours: to proclaim to all those around us the wonderful works the Lord has done for us, and the boundless mercy he has poured out upon us.

1. <sup>1</sup> John W. James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook – revised ed.* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998), p. 97. [↩]