

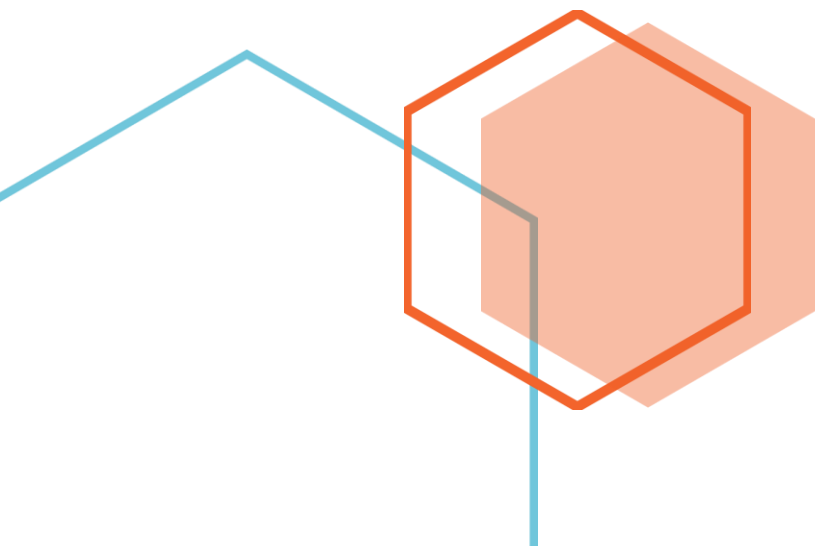


# ***Impact of Dealing with constant sorrow on mental wellbeing.***

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Fall in love with the shepherd.

The many challenges that face our Priesthood and Religious Life today can over burden us. We can feel powerless and depressed. In the midst of all of this, our God is calling us home to fall in love with the shepherd, for with Him, His yoke is easy, and burden light!



# Impact of Dealing with constant sorrow on mental wellbeing.

**Fall in love with the shepherd.**

## Context

When I was a young Christian Brother I never envisaged the world and the Church would be the way it is now. In Year 12 I studied George Orwell's '1984' and this novel was filed away in the fiction section of the library. Now I wake up each day into a COVID world, often in lock down, often separate from real people and their real lives. My wonderful mother and father were married at St Michael's College at the University of Toronto. Dad's best man was the extraordinary Catholic layman, Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan coined the phrase, 'the global village'. He foresaw the village we now live in whereby global financial crises, pandemics, wars and revolutions in one part of the world can directly impact us all.

## Grief and grieving

Some thirty years ago I reflected to a group of friends that "in my Religious Life I had never known certainty!" I joined Religious Life just as the floodgates opened and thousands of priests and religious left ministry. I feel that my whole Religious Life has been a letting go, a grieving characterised by loss, powerlessness and vulnerability. My experience of Christian Brotherhood has been mirrored in our experience of the Church at large. When I joined the Brothers there were about 250 Brothers in Queensland alone with an average age of about 30. Today, nudging retirement I am still 'the young Brother!'

And in those intervening years we have grown old, we have lost our power and prestige, we have lost our identity and most of all – we have been shamed, and shamed over and over again.

For many of our men it has been like a wound, a cut on the leg and it begins to heal and form a scab under-which healing is taking place. Then, without warning, someone else rips the scab off, it bleeds again, and the whole healing process has to begin again. This has been our Christian Brother experience every time the TV news mentions us or another allegation surfaces.

Fr Pedro Arrupe sj

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It will decide  
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how you spend your  
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and what amazes you  
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## Grieving

As men within the Church we have grieved our loss of identity. We have grieved the loss of the trust of the flock. We have grieved the unfair treatment of the media. We have grieved been unwitting victims of past abusive cultures. We have grieved the empty pews and watched people vote with their feet to secular marriage celebrants and the funeral parlours of canned music. We have grieved an increasingly materialistic and secular world that appears to be finding meaning apart from us. We have grieved the loss of a strong cultural and tribal Catholicism, which, despite having its faults – did wrap life's journey in rich symbol, ritual and narrative.

And in much of this grieving what was taken from us was done so with our having little to no say in it. We were powerless. We were victims too. We were voiceless and when we dared to claim our voice it could not be heard in the cacophony of noise generated by a materialistic, secular and hedonistic world.

## The Spiritual Life

In my work, mainly with the staff of Catholic Secondary Schools I break open four simple steps that I believe, provide the teacher with a spiritual framework for who they are and what they are missioned to do. The Holy Father often references a 'culture of encounter' as being central to our spiritual lives at this time in history. Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (24) reminds us,

*An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelising community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.*

## Come as guest

So the first step in any true 'encounter' is to come as a guest to that sacred space. The guest comes slowly, gently, respectfully with an open mind and heart. The guest comes sensing the 'holy ground' of encounter – the true burning bush nature of the meeting of hearts. The guest 'takes off their shoes' for the ground upon which they walk is holy. The guest comes humbly and hospitably with respect for the host they will meet on life's journey. The guest enters the sacred ground of encounter knowing that it is truly a reciprocal giving and receiving. Guest-ness is HOW we come.

The guest heart and mindset is formed in the deep and quiet solitude of prayer. In that space our God beyond all names holds us, wraps arms around us, whispers to our



heart and comes as guest to our spirit. All our God asks of us is the humility to 'let go' to 'allow' to be vulnerable and to bring our true selves before the love energy that pervades our Universe. In the quiet solitude of prayer we experience and we KNOW beyond all head knowing the total and unconditional love of our God. From this experience of knowing we can step out in ministry with the inner freedom to 'come as guest' to the encounters that fill our everyday – for we no longer need to 'win' or 'have power over' or 'persuade' – we can now just 'be there' and 'be with'.

### **Choose to be Present**

So having 'come as guest' – we now make the choice to be deeply present. Like St Teresa of Avila we, despite our brokenness and our feet of clay, we become Christ's hands and feet, eyes and ears – Christ's heart for and in that encounter. Our choice to be present puts our needs and our concerns, our ego – to the side. Because of our invitation to Christ to 'be so in me that others may look up and see no longer me but only Thee' – we are able to be deeply present. Our presence will say in a knowing beyond words, "You are beautiful! You are lovable! You are unique and gift!" The other, because of our presence, will hear this with the eyes and ears of the heart much more than the ears of hearing.

### **Crap Detector**

And we will be authentic. I have never in over 40 years of teaching taught a student who needed me to be perfect. What they needed so desperately was for me to be authentic. In fact, my brokenness, my feet of clay, made me relatable to thus creating a space where the Christ in me could touch the Christ presence within them and work its healing and magic. "Despite of me ....." When we come as guest to sacred encounter, when we choose to be deeply present – the crap detector of the other does NOT go off. That crap detector that senses immediately a lack of authenticity does not go off. The other is therefore 'disarmed' and with the Spirit at work in self and the other, they will often invite you 'in'. This is truly sacred ground. This is true encounter.

### **Open in Compassion**

When we come as guest and choose to be present our hearts will open in compassion. We will grow more accepting of our own wounded-ness and brokenness. Like Graham Greene's 'Whisky Priest' in 'The power and the glory' we will sense that it is our love wrapped round human brokenness that in the end will be our principal way of evangelization and encounter. If we encounter with guest-ness and presence we will naturally let go of 'ego' and power and be able to be deeply in that space that needs healing, acceptance and love. It is no accident that thousands of people walked many miles to sit in the confessional with the Cure of Ars. His presence was that of the ultimate compassionate shepherd. In his presence, in his eyes and voice, they



sensed the wounded healer, the shepherd who knows and calls each by name and goes in search of the lost one.

## **Liberation**

When we walk this spiritual journey of the heart – we will experience true, deep and lasting inner freedom, inner liberation. We will experience what Bernard Haring called, “Free and faithful in Christ!” Have you ever looked into the eyes of a truly loving person? The eyes sparkle! The eyes are soft! The eyes encounter! The eyes and the heart are those of the truly free. Sure, all of this is journey and one never fully arrives, one is never fully free nor loving – that is called life.

I am no theologian and each of you can tear my ‘theology’ to pieces. But what I have just described is the Pascal mystery. As Jesus walks Holy Thursday he engages profoundly in ultimate guest and presence. As he climbs Calvary he is the ultimate in compassion – stretching out his arms in healing and forgiveness. On Easter morn he knows intimately the freedom of love (1 John 4: 7) and gifts this to each of us if we can only find the courage and humility to be faithful to this inner journey.

The Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr Pedro Arrupe sj once said,

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## **So what?**

So where I am going to with all of this? In all the pain and grieving that you are I have and are experiencing, in all of the loss – we find ourselves on the most privileged sacred ground. For more than ever before I believe the people of God are looking for and longing for shepherds with broken hearts. They are longing for shepherds with feet



of clay. They are looking to truly encounter our God through our brokenness, our fidelity, our humility and our humanity. They want authentic and holy shepherds.

So, in the midst of all of our pain we are invited to fall in love with our God over and over and over again. We are invited to come to the sacred space of prayer 'as we are'. In that space we have no words, we have no answers – all we have is ourselves. That is all THE shepherd wants and needs of us.

## **Cana Community**

Many years ago I was volunteering at the Cana Community at Surrey Hills in Sydney. I was preparing for my Final Profession of vows. Sr Anne Jordan pbvm had lived with and among the homeless and destitute of Surrey Hills for over twenty years. One day in a moment of stupidity I said to Anne, "Aren't you afraid of burnout?" She almost bit my head off! "Burnout", she said, "only happens to people who do not minister from the heart!" In other words, burnout and depression are intimately linked to ego. They occur when it is all about US. They occur when we and our priesthood are the centre of attention. They occur when our priesthood and my Religious Life become ends in themselves – divorced from the suffering Christ present in the flock.

## **Constant Sorrow**

Yes, it is difficult to be a minister of the Gospel at this time in the history of humanity. Yes, we can feel so overburdened. But we are not alone. The mother who gets up in the wee hours to nurse a crying baby, the parent who holds the hands of the grandparent with Alzheimer's, the married one who senses that their partner is having an affair, the teenager struggling with issues of sexual orientation, the caregiver who has lost their job and cannot pay the bills .....all of these and more know constant sorrow. Some call it life.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Nelson Mandela both came out of many years of solitary confinement with no bitterness and Maximilian Kolbe could freely give his life in Auschwitz because they had a 'why', their lives had meaning, they were in love with the shepherd!

Sure we can get therapy and there is a place for that. Sure it is vital that we engage in Pastoral Supervision / Mentoring. Sure we have the brotherhood of the priesthood. But more than ever before we need to transform our lives through love and frequently fall at the feet of the shepherd. 'Fear not' – words that HE uses constantly in Sacred Scripture, he will gently wrap arms around us, he will gently pick us up and like he did on the way to Emmaus, he will walk beside us – every rocky, hilly, rough step of the way. Then our "hearts will burn within us" and then, the people of God will say, "Wow, what is it that those men have got that their eyes sparkle in the midst of pain, their



hands are healing hands and their lives speak of a joy and peace beyond anything that this world can give!"

### **Finally**

Nothing I have written about above is easy. None of us is perfect (just ask the Brothers in my community). Don't lose heart that it all seems 'a bridge too far'! Today, tomorrow, get up – and in the midst of what appears to be 'constant sorrow' reach up and put your hand in to the hand of your every present shepherd. He'll walk beside you – one step at a time. Before you know it – your life, your priesthood will be profoundly full of meaning and then, when that happens, both your body, your mind and your spirit will know true wholeness and health!

God bless

Br Damien Price cfc Ph D  
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