



# Gifts amidst tears

**A journey to Easter with those who are recovering from the breakdown of their marriage.**

*“I knew my wife was unhappy but she was nearly always unhappy with one thing or another. I was shocked when we separated. There was no bitterness, just overwhelming sadness at the break-up of our family. It took me until a few months ago to realise that it was definitely over and that I had a lot of growing to do. As a long-distance father, my continued relationship with my children has been most important to me. I have been greatly helped by the support of other solo parents. Perhaps the most important resource is my Catholic faith and how I integrate it with my life experiences.”* (a single Dad)

*“I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptised persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life.”* (John Paul II, FC 84)

## Resources

**When Dreams Die:** a statement of the Australian Catholic Bishops concerning the Pastoral Care of Separated and Divorced Catholics, 1985.

Pope John Paul II, **Familiaris**

**Consortio**, #65-85.

## Naming the pain

*Marriage breakdown is a tragedy.*

Let us state this up front and avoid any attempt to sugarcoat what is arguably the most devastating event a human being can endure.

The prevalence of divorce in today's society and the lessening of social stigmas associated with it do not make the grief of marriage breakdown any easier to bear.

Marriage breakdown is tragic for spouses - it is the death of a dream at the intimate core of a person's life. No one gets married with the intention of getting divorced. Marriage holds out extraordinary promise, and it is heartbreaking when those promises are not delivered, especially when we have done everything possible to try to make the relationship work.

Marriage breakdown is tragic for the children involved. The relationship of love that promised them stability and assured them of their loveability become a source of anxiety and confusion.

Marriage breakdown is also a tragedy for the Church. Marital love 'speaks' to us all about the promise of Christ's love. When a marriage dies, our community of faith feels keenly the loss of that sacred 'voice' in its midst.

## ...and the hope

*‘The Lord is close to the broken-hearted’* (Psalm 34:19)

The Gospel is 'good news', not because it glosses over life's tragedies but because it offers a path *through* and *out of* deathly circumstances to healing and new life. Christians proclaim Christ crucified and risen. Those who have experienced marriage breakdown are not 'removed' from the sacred scenes of Holy Week. Rather they are at the centre of these scenes. They are walking the way of the Cross; the promise of resurrection is theirs in a special way.

As a Catholic community we should have great reverence for our divorced people for they are (or have been) deeply immersed in the passion of Christ. If there was ever a time that the gospel speaks to us it is here and now in the lives of those whose central experience of God's love has turned into betrayal, abandonment and failure. Is this not what happened to Jesus? Is this not the path of the Saviour in whom we place our trust?

Those who have been stripped of their dreams, supports and self-esteem in a marriage breakdown face a terrifying yet sacred journey: from Good Friday through Holy Saturday to Easter Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection.

In what ways can we be with them on this journey? What can we learn from them as we travel together? How can we be the face of Christ to them, just as they are the face of Christ to us?





# Good Friday

## At the foot of the cross

There was nothing Mary could 'do' as she stood at the foot of her cross and witnessed the crucifixion of her Son. Yet she was 'there', the ache of her heart at one with his broken body.

Being with a person who is grieving a marital loss can be a bit like this. It hurts not to be able to 'fix' things; it is humbling to be lost for words and to feel so helpless. At such times never underestimate the value of your loving presence. Just 'being there' is all part of the mysterious journey from death to resurrection. Remember that most grieving people are surrounded by people who ignore their grief.

Give the person time and space to tell their story. The hunger of the human heart 'to be heard' is especially true of those who have lost the person dearest to them. Neither advice nor quick solutions but a listening ear is often the first ointment for a wound of the heart. *'Have you heard me? Can you understand even a little bit? Because if you do then I won't be so alone.'* The heart cries out for a sign of acknowledgement: a well chosen word, a look of compassion, a gesture of empathy.

It is scary to be confronted with such agony. It may be foreign to us. On the other hand, it may be uncomfortably familiar. The temptation is to run away. We need courage - and faith - to be present to the person who is grieving, especially on those occasions when their pain may lead them to turn on you in misplaced anger. Place both of you in the hands of God. Trust that even the smallest gesture of care can have impact. And know that you are not alone. You are part of a Catholic community which is blessed with resources to assist

people in pain. Appropriate to the person and their situation look for opportunities to 'throw out a lifeline': e.g. the name of a grief counsellor, a support group, an invitation to the sacraments, a prayer, a person, program or book which may be helpful (if not now, then later). Make contact with your parish or diocese and find out what resources are available in your locality.

## What we can learn from those who grieve and heal

### It takes courage to live!

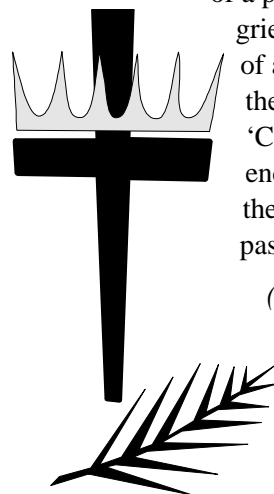
How courageous are those who continue to live although they feel as if they have nothing to live for. People recovering from divorce remind us of the importance of small steps that keep us alive: Like breathing! Like getting out of bed each morning. Like allowing others to help us. Like trusting in God who seems to have abandoned us. No matter how insurmountable our problems may seem, there is always a tiny step we can take in a life-giving direction.

## On the journey to Easter

*Pastoral suggestion:* In preparing Good Friday reflections such as Stations of the Cross, invite the input

of a person who is grieving the loss of a spouse. Let the story of their 'Calvary' experience proclaim to the parish Christ's passion.

*(Alternatively: incorporate parts of this leaflet into a Good Friday reflection.)*



*"All the familiar structures of my life had been blown away. I knew I wanted to get better but I didn't know how to do it, so I hoped that these people at the Recovery workshop could get me to a better place. The videos, the people and the talking nudged me out of the hole and pointed me in the right direction of healing."*

(a divorced man)

*"At the Recovery workshop, if you want to, you can 'share your story' and have people listen and grieve with you. In six years, it was the only place where anyone was willing to listen to what had happened to me."*

(a divorced woman)

## Resources

Grief programs can offer important help to the newly separated in surviving what could be the worst crisis of their lives. An example is the **Recovery Workshop** offered by the Diocese of Parramatta.

Where financial hardship is one of the outcomes of separation, the **St Vincent de Paul Society** can provide assistance.

# Holy Saturday

## At the tomb

The divorce is well and truly over. Time marches on and life appears to be back to some kind of normality and routine.

Yet the pain is far from over for the person who has lost their spouse, a large part of their life and a sense of self worth. The immediate trauma of those earlier 'crucifying' events may have subsided, but the ache and the emptiness remain. The tomb of Holy Saturday is still closed and deathly, the journey to Easter incomplete.

This is the time to continue your presence to the person who is grieving.

Again, offer a space to talk. A gentle enquiry like 'What is life like for you now?' can acknowledge that life has changed and the challenges are ongoing.



Including the separated/divorced person socially is important. The experience of divorce can include the loss of friends and in-laws. Healthy affection and supportive friendships can also help to protect the grieving person from turning to inappropriate relationships for solace.

There may also be times to challenge the grieving person into taking a lifegiving action that will further the recovery process, or to work on areas of their life which may in some sense have contributed to the marriage breakdown. Perhaps offer some of those resources mentioned earlier.

Keep praying for the grieving person.

## What we can learn from those who grieve and heal

### Marriage does matter

People who have suffered the loss of a marriage partner have an acute appreciation of the value of marriage. The depth of their loss reflects the preciousness of the gift (which is why downplaying the value of marriage is no help to divorced people). They call married couples not to take their relationship for granted. They remind us of the centrality of marital commitment and its impact on the whole community. Marriage is not a commitment to be entered into lightly. Proper marriage preparation is essential, as is ongoing marriage enrichment.

### The value of small kindnesses

People who have separated or divorced sometimes speak of the healing power of small kindnesses, such as the offer of a lift to the school speech night so that the solo parent doesn't have to front up alone, or receiving a card on an important anniversary.

Another source of help and insight is the lived witness of older single people who have never married but who have forged a healthy, loving life on their own. Their example can offer hope to divorced people terrified at the prospect of being alone again.

### On the journey to Easter

On Holy Saturday, bring to mind those who are on the road to recovery after separation/divorce. With the passing of time and the busy routine of life, their situation may have receded from your consciousness. Holy Saturday is a good time to remember their sacred journey to Easter and to stand with them in prayerful solidarity.



*"I attended a seven week Recovery Workshop which was a real turning point for me. The program allowed me to deal with the various stages of grief - acknowledge them, work through them and come out the other end feeling more confident about my life and what was ahead of me.*

*I started to read a lot...books on relationships, love, spirituality, life itself. I found that a good book was my best friend. Gradually I began to learn a lot about myself, about the real me, about the mistakes I had made, about my real desires in life.*

*Underpinning all of this was the rediscovery of God in my life. I was fortunate enough to start receiving spiritual direction from a priest who helped me enormously in my developing relationship with God."*

(a divorced woman)

## Resources

There are programs available to help children from single-parent families in their grief. One excellent example is the **Seasons for Growth** program published by the MacKillop Foundation.

**Solo Parent groups** offer a caring environment for single parents to support each other through complex and painful life experiences.



# Easter Sunday

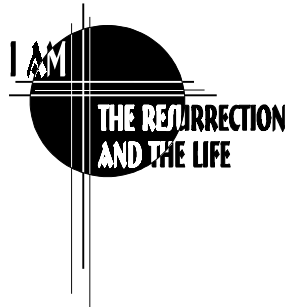
## The Crucified One is risen

There *is* an Easter Sunday! Through faith we know that Jesus has risen; his resurrection can be experienced as a tangible reality in our own lives. However 'deathly' the night can seem, God will bring us through to a new dawn.

As the path of recovery continues in the lives of those who have been divorced, signs of hope and healing emerge: the ability to laugh again; enjoying things of beauty; new friendships; new skills and opportunities for growth and discovery.

Of course the grief process is not a 'straight line' journey from A to B. It is a journey 'up hill and down dale', great leaps of progress and painful setbacks. Yet through perseverance, prayer, a lifegiving community and a positive focus not only does deep healing occur, we find ourselves enjoying wonders and gifts we never thought possible.

The Church is blessed with many beautiful and gifted people who have made this journey from death to life. As the body of Christ, let us draw upon their Spirit-led witness and celebrate the Easter proclamation of their lives.



## What we can learn from those who grieve and heal

### Hope in the resurrection

By their faithful perseverance in dark times, people affected by divorce attest to the Easter promise in a special way.

### Humility

We can be rather 'full' of ourselves at times, convinced that we are totally in control of our destiny. But people who have been through a divorce know otherwise. Having been brought 'low' through tragedy they have a deep humility before God and know in a special way that life is gift.

### Mission

A gift of healing is never for one's private benefit alone, it is for the building up of the body of Christ. Those who have grieved and healed are called to share the fruits of their sacred journey with others. Let's affirm and call forth the gifts of those who have recovered from the wounds of separation/divorce.

## Easter proclamation

During the Easter season, invite a number of people to give a brief (5 minute) testimony to a personal experience of resurrection and new life. This could be done in a formal liturgical setting, in a small parish discussion group, or simply around the dinner table at home. Include among the witnesses a divorced person who has experienced healing and growth.

*"It was about two years after the separation from my husband that I woke up one morning, went to the bathroom mirror, looked at myself, smiled and said out loud: 'I feel happy!' Words that a few months prior I thought I would never be able to say.*

*I don't know why God allows us to walk the paths we do - especially the paths that are covered with much pain. However, I do know that what we learn from travelling those paths is never wasted. Somewhere along life's journey we will look back and understand why we had to experience what we did."* (a solo Mum)

## Resources

The **Beginning Experience** is a weekend program to assist people who find themselves 'alone again' to make a new beginning.

For a simple introduction to the annulment process, read '**Can I get an Annulment?**' by Robert McGuckin (EJ Dwyer, 1992).



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For enquiries about programs and resources for those affected by separation and divorce, contact Ph/Fax 02 9890 2968 or your local parish or diocese. This leaflet may be photocopied for non-commercial church use.