

## MOVING FROM GRIEF TO HOPE

By Mary A. (EnCourage mom)

We EnCourage members can face a lot of grief. We may grieve that our sons and daughters have lost their faith. Each step towards this behavior most often involves a step away from our Catholic faith. We may have once held a holy pride about being a solid Catholic family. Being a Catholic family conjures up so many beautiful and heart-warming images in our hearts and minds: Baptisms, First Penances, First Holy Communion and Confirmations. All this joy may have been multiplied by glorious celebrations at Christmas and Easter. As we journeyed through life, we may have envisioned our family being there united and supporting a series of Catholic celebrations for new generations. What do we celebrate now that our sons and daughters leave the faith—not just those practicing this SSA behavior but also other sons and daughters who may have left? What ceremonies bind family life together now? This absence of celebrating united family sacramental life, united Catholic customs and a united celebration of feast days is yet another cause for grief, yet another sword in the heart.

The Sacraments unite us to Christ, but they also unite us to one another as one body in Him. Rather than uniting in Christ, and in the Sacraments, we can find ourselves at odds with our sons and daughters over a host of new issues: from abortion, “feminism,” “population control,” to whether prayer should be allowed at graduations, to whether God exists. We may be called prideful because we think our religion is the one true religion. We may be called bigoted or homophobic for not supporting SSA behavior. Our sons and daughters may have once loved God, the Church and the faith as children. Now they may hold every aspect of it in contempt. Some of us may have sent our then faithful children away to college only to have them return four years later seeming almost brainwashed to believe Catholicism is a lie and absolutely convinced with complete certitude that we as parents are “racist.”

Perhaps as we nurtured our children through the years of their young lives, we thought of the day they would one day walk down the aisle of a Catholic church, happily married. Perhaps we thought our children might be called by God to a religious or priestly vocation. Perhaps these thoughts helped us persevere through difficult times. It can be a shock and source of sorrow to learn that what had kept us going through difficult times is something that will never reach fruition. It may seem somehow like a cruel joke. *You duped me O Lord, and I let myself be duped.* (Jer. 20:7)

All these things and more need to be grieved. They are true losses in our lives. We can literally go through steps of grieving (denial and shock, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.) Of course, we never “accept” this behavior.

The grieving process can at times feel like we are standing near the ocean, being toppled by one mighty wave after another. No sooner do we resolve one grief with our sons and daughters, but another wave can come upon us to knock us off our feet. We may see our adult children move on from one disordered behavior to another. With each new behavior, we can find ourselves grieving all over again.

It's important to acknowledge the pain and grieve. As parents, we weep. But we weep with the strength and in the company of angels who comfort us, in the company of a God who loves us deeply—a God who is our refuge, our strength and our help. *God is our refuge and our strength, and ever-present help in time of distress.* (Psalm 46.2). We parents persevere with and through God's grace alone. Yet we persevere and in a mysterious way find ourselves blessed and comforted by God. Our Lord has promised: *Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.* (Matt 5:3-10)

And we learn so much. We learn the ironic lesson that we can willingly offer every bit of our suffering to God, and that God will use the offering of our suffering to sanctify the souls of our sons and daughters, and perhaps to sanctify other souls as yet unknown to us. As we lift, (not drag or carry) our crosses, our crosses can become the very vehicle of salvation not just for our loved ones, but for ourselves as well.

Ultimately it helps to remember that our children are not our children. They belong to God. And only God can bring them back to Him.

And knowing that only God can bring our sons and daughters back to Him, we surrender them to Him. The race is not over, the story not finished. We have yet to reach the summit which represents healing of our lives and that of our children. The end of the race, the end of the story, the summit are still ahead of us. And for that reason, despite the grief, we persevere in hope.