

## Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

*Fr. Michael Shortall describes how his family dealt with the loss of a loved one during these strange times.*

### Grieving and remembering during the lockdown

My father died during the lockdown. He didn't contract the COVID-19 virus; but his final weeks of care and dying, as well as our period of mourning, were all shaped by it. Some rituals had to be abandoned; others, because of technology, took on new forms.

In life, Dad took seriously the responsibility of going to funerals. Of course, there was the social aspect, the obligatory raising of a glass in honour of someone. But it was also to use an old phrase, a corporeal work of mercy: "to pray for the dead". This obligation can be especially strong in rural areas, like my home in northern Kilkenny. Because when someone dies, it's a community as much as a family that loses someone.

Now, our community couldn't do the same for him – or at least not in the same way. I can still see the big wooden doors of the church shutting behind us, allowing no-one in. To say we felt robbed or cheated can imply that there is someone to blame. There isn't. The restrictions were the right thing to do. Yet, we really felt the lack of it. The peculiarly Irish rituals surrounding the death of a loved one weren't available to us, or our neighbours and friends, and most of all to Dad.

"We had a small funeral. Half the world was there," my mother said afterwards. People adapted as best they could, and technology helped hugely. It was striking how many people tuned to the live stream on the parish website. It especially helped my sister, who lives abroad and couldn't make it home. She was even able to participate, as she led a decade of the family rosary on her smart-phone, from three thousand miles away.

Many people have heard of the five phases in the process of grieving. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross famously named the stages as: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. But this can give impression that there is a right way to grieve. Experience tells that everyone has their own way of grieving and sometimes someone can get stuck. Getting through grief is a matter of managing or muddling through.

Instead of stages, recent research names four tasks to grieving. They are: recognising the reality of the loss; dealing with expressed and latent feelings; living in a world without the deceased and finally; the relocation of the deceased in one's life.

It would be a great social cost indeed, if these often-called 'strange times' changed our habits about how we support the grieving. It would, I believe, make it all the harder for those enduring loss.

Rituals, traditions and customs are vital. They may be the kind acts of a neighbour that leaves in a casserole or an apple tart left at the door; or they may be the religious rites of a faith-community. They provide a way to recognise the reality of grieving, in all its emotions and

confusion. They give comfort to those who mourn. And in the end, they give hope for a new future.

Remembering is a key part of our Catholic rituals. When we gather to celebrate Mass, we are heeding the invitation of Jesus to: “do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19). When we gather and remember his name, a promise was made that he would be with us (M 18:20).

So, by remembering in Jesus, we are bound to the one giving hope, for he has conquered even death itself (Rom 8: 31-39).

Nowadays death notices on local radio - which are very much part of rural life - generally end with a line saying that a memorial service will be held at a later date. As a family I know we are looking forward to when we can remember Dad, together with his community, in a spirit of hope.

Let us pray for all who have lost loved ones in this time, particularly due to the COVID-19. May they rest in peace.

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