

THE  
PARISH  
**EMERGENCY  
KIT**

**RESPONDING WITH COMPASSION  
WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES**

KATHY HENDRICKS



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## *Introduction*

“No one prepared me for this.” I remember thinking this when faced with the aftermath of a suicide of one of our parishioners as well as the tragic shooting at nearby Columbine High School. Like others who have faced the unexpected calamities that affect parish life, I understood how ministry can quickly morph into a spiritual triage of sorts. Without warning, ministers are placed at the forefront as providers of consolation and comfort during times of shock, grief, fear, tragedy, and trauma. The instruction manual for how to deal with such situations has never been written.

This booklet, while not exactly an instruction manual, does attempt to offer parish ministers ideas, inspiration, encouragement, and resources for dealing with tragedies and trauma. Each chapter offers a brief overview of the topic and stresses the importance of a pastoral response. Ideas for taking action and for liturgy, prayer, and reflection follow. The psalms offer a particularly rich way to give voice to the grief, anguish, confusion, and dismay that tragedies trigger. Suggested psalms are listed in each chapter, some of which include a single verse. These might be incorporated into prayer services, used for *lectio divina*, or sent to parishioners for their own reflection. Each idea will hopefully trigger others that better suit the needs of your parish or the particular situation at hand.

I begin the booklet with those events happening at the local level—tragedies that befall a parish or diocese—and then move to national and global concerns. While the latter might not be considered “emergencies,” they do have an impact on the life of the community. The distressing news that permeates our lives cannot be laid aside when we come together each week to celebrate the Eucharist, take on the tasks of evangelization and catechesis, or live out our call to discipleship. The image of the church as the body of Christ takes on even greater significance when our brothers and sisters are suffering. It matters little whether they are in the next pew or halfway around the world. The response we offer as parishes demonstrates our commitment to living as that one body.

Taken together, the local, national, and global tragedies that beset us at any given moment can be overwhelming. Compassion fatigue—the state of tremendous tension and preoccupation with the suffering of others to the detriment of one’s own well-being—is a very real and potential danger for each one of these situations. Thus it is vital to remain attuned to what parishioners can handle given their own personal and communal struggles. In some of the chapters this issue is flagged in a particular way. In others, it will be a judgment call on the part of leadership so that the parish isn’t overloaded with information, second collections, pleas for help, and a pile of depressing news.

Lastly, it is important for leaders themselves to be mindful of the fatigue that leads, in the worst case scenarios, to cynicism and burnout. The final chapter is therefore devoted to the practice of self-care. By remaining attuned to their own spiritual, physical, and emotional needs, parish leaders are able to guide the community toward compassionate responses and an openhearted recognition of God’s presence in our wounded world.



## *Chapter 1*

# WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES A PARISH

Our parish celebration was in full swing when the secretary came to tell me that one of our parishioners had committed suicide. The news was devastating. The victim was a pillar of the community—deeply involved in the Knights of Columbus and one of those go-to volunteers who gave generously of his time and energy. The knowledge that his private struggles drove him to take his own life was heartbreaking. It hit the parish hard.

Suicide is only one form of tragedy that can leave a community reeling with shock and grief. Sudden deaths, debilitating accidents, or the destruction of a parishioner's home are other instances when pastoral ministers are called into immediate action. Such events realign priorities as ministers provide support for grief-stricken families, plan funerals, rearrange schedules, mobilize volunteers, set up assistance, and respond to questions from confused and shocked parishioners. In the case of teen suicide, for example, there is need for immediate and ongoing ministry that curtails copycat behavior—a deeply disturbing and yet very real trend.

The complex recovery for someone involved in a terrible accident requires long-range assistance for basic needs, such as meals, as well as respite for caregivers.

Because such events occur without warning, there is little time to plan. Pastoral ministry involves flexibility in order to be responsive, as well as the stability of service that parishioners find both comforting and reliable. It also requires great sensitivity, particularly when dealing with something as tender as suicide or other tragic deaths. The need to protect a family's privacy is paramount. While some want to be up-front about the circumstances of a death, others prefer to withhold information from the rest of the parish. Balancing all of these needs and concerns is no easy task.

### **PASTORAL NEEDS, CHALLENGES, AND RESPONSES**

No sooner had the call about the parishioner's suicide come into the parish office than our ministerial efforts were in play. As Parish Life Director, I contacted the family and met with them to offer condolences and arrange for the funeral. At the same time, calls were coming into the parish office. Some offered assistance with a funeral reception and the provision of meals and housing for out-of-town relatives. Others inquired about the teachings of the church around suicide. Would this mean eternal condemnation? Could the victim be buried in a Catholic cemetery? The priest officiating at the funeral, after conferring with the family, addressed these questions in his homily so as to assure mourners of God's infinite mercy and the church's revised teachings on the matter. It was an example of the ripple effect of parish emergencies and the underlying issues set into play by an experience of trauma.

Tragedy draws out difficult questions. One of the most challenging is about where God figures into the picture. While platitudes

are scarcely helpful during times of grief and loss, they are especially inappropriate during times of trauma. Attempts to console with assurances of “God’s plan” or “God’s will” dismiss the very real pain and anguish of those devastated by a loss. They also paint a very poor picture of God, one that is particularly out of place with a Christian view of compassion and mercy. Nowhere in the gospels do we read of Jesus shrugging off the suffering of others with a glib response. Instead we see his willingness to suffer with and for us. In so doing, he shows us what it means to stand alongside those who suffer, willing to listen to them and to hold their pain in our own hearts.

### **TAKING ACTION**

*Approach funerals and wakes with sensitivity*—Most parishes are equipped to handle the original aftermath of a tragic death by assisting family members with funeral arrangements. How well this is done, however, can vary widely. An excessive adherence to rules and norms leaves loved ones already devastated by the loss even more distressed and alienated from the institution that should be serving them with compassion and understanding. Sensitivity on the part of priests and lay ecclesial ministers goes a long way toward assuring families of a genuine attentiveness to their suffering. Some families are left too stunned by events to know what to do in terms of funeral arrangements. Others have specific requests for music, slide presentations or videos, storytelling, and other tributes. The inclusion in the liturgical rituals of individuals or groups, such as the Knights of Columbus or youth group, might be appropriate as a way to show community support and allow for a way to acknowledge the loss felt on the part of the entire parish. Gentle guidance with a sensitivity to these requests, and yet remaining within parish or diocesan norms, ensures that wakes and funeral

services provide comfort and consolation without becoming either impersonal or emotionally exhaustive.

*Recognize the importance of presence*—The first wave, in which shock and pain surface, requires an urgent response on the part of parish ministers. Timing matters. The immediate aftermath of a tragic occurrence, therefore, doesn't call for theological explanations or a rush to "closure." Rather, it is a time to acknowledge the searing pain that besets those most deeply affected by the tragedy as well as the community. As pastor and author Gerritt Dawson notes, "There are stages in prayer through which many of us pass in settling the weight of life's afflictions. Spiritual union with Jesus is the goal, but is rarely accomplished in the beginning" ("Through a Glass Darkly," *Weavings*, Volume XIII, no. 2). The importance of quiet presence cannot be overstated. Our willingness to simply listen as loved ones and parishioners pour out their pain is one of the most effective forms of ministry.

*Provide long-term support*—As the immediate aftermath of a parish tragedy begins to wane other needs arise that require a compassionate approach to ministry. Parishes with some type of grief ministry already have a structure to make long-range plans for outreach and support. Stages of grief not only affect individuals but also communities. It is especially helpful to call upon those who have suffered trauma and who understand the various needs that arise as time wears on. Volunteers with Stephen Ministry and other forms of pastoral care are especially knowledgeable about providing comfort and assistance. Not only do they have direct experience with trauma and tragedy, but having worked enough with their own suffering, they are able to minister to others without excessive self-reference. In addition to this direct ministry, pastoral

leaders can remind parishioners of the importance of reaching out to families and friends after the funeral is over and the shock of the tragedy starts to recede. This is often when loved ones are most vulnerable and in need of ongoing consolation.

### **PRAYERS, REFLECTIONS AND LITURGICAL IDEAS**

- The most basic stage of prayer for those experiencing a tragedy or trauma is one that articulates the grief and anguish. Psalms of sorrow are especially meaningful in providing an outlet for one's pain. One or more of these psalms might be shared with family members or parish groups as part of pastoral visits or in email announcements or other forms of communication with the parish at large. Examples\* include: Psalm 4:2, 7–9; Psalm 6:2–9; Psalm 41:2; Psalm 42:2–7; Psalm 43:5; Psalm 77:2–11.
- The next stage of prayer includes a plea for God to bring some good out of the suffering. Prayers for healing and an openness of heart to the workings of a merciful God express the hope in consolation that comes with time and mutual support.
- When tragedy strikes near the holidays, it poses an additional pastoral challenge. Cultural emphasis on merriment and cheer runs counter to the ongoing feeling of sadness and sorrow that envelop a community traumatized by grief and loss. Alternative worship, such as a “Blue Christmas” prayer service, provides opportunities to draw themes of Advent longing and

\* The psalm citations in this booklet are based on the verse numbering system used in the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (NABRE), which is the translation used in the Lectionary. Because the NABRE begins numbering psalm verses with the superscription at the top of the psalm (e.g., “A psalm of David”), for psalms with superscriptions, the verses cited here will be one verse different from Bibles that do not count the superscription (e.g., the NRSV). The NABRE can be found online at [usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm](http://usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm).

Christmas hope into the experience of mourning. Examples of Blue Christmas services are available online and can be used as a model for other holiday seasons.

**PRAYER FOR A PARISH IN MOURNING**

*Merciful God,*

*Our hearts are laden with sorrow over this tragic event.*

*Confusion and distress weigh us down with questions  
and doubt.*

*Where do we turn as we wrestle with the aftermath  
of this tragedy?*

*May we find strength in our suffering and in our willingness  
to console one another.*

*Deepen our trust in your compassionate  
and yet silent presence.*

*Our hope rests in you.*

*Amen.*



## *Chapter 2*

# WHEN VIOLENCE STRIKES A PARISH

On a peaceful Sunday morning Mass was taking place as usual at St. Mary's Cathedral in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Just before the Eucharistic Prayer, a mentally disturbed man entered the vestibule, pulled out a hunting knife, and attempted to steal the offertory collection. Ushers managed to wrestle him into a restroom and then called 911. Police arrived as the parishioners, unaware of the chaos, were making their way up the aisles for Communion. While struggling to bring the situation under control, one of the deputies shot and killed the man. The next day I was scheduled to offer a professional development session to the parish staff. Assuming that the meeting would be canceled, I was surprised when the DRE asked me to keep the appointment. Instead of speaking to the group about parish planning, however, I was to facilitate a discussion about the shooting.

Violent acts occurring on parish grounds can range from something as deadly as the St. Mary's shooting to assaults, thefts, and vandalism. Each one sets off a range of reactions, starting with

shock and rippling out into anger, fear, hurt, and grief. What I heard during my time with the St. Mary's staff was a combination of these reactions as the realization of what could have been sank in. Some expressed fear over being in the church by themselves at night when there were so many ways for intruders to enter the building. Others noted the frequent encounters with mentally ill people populating the area around the cathedral and expressed anger and frustration at the way their needs were being overlooked by city and state social service agencies. There were also expressions of guilt over not being able to prevent the incident, irrational as that was, and relief that the man didn't enter the worship space and harm the parishioners. And there was overall grief over the tragic death of a human being within their parish church.

The reactions of the St. Mary's staff might be applied to any instance in which a violent act happens on church property. Pastoral leaders and parishioners are left shocked and vulnerable as they seek sensible and realistic ways to respond. A disturbing increase in mass shootings across the nation makes violence a terrible possibility in places once considered off-limits for such atrocities.

### **PASTORAL NEEDS, CHALLENGES, AND RESPONSES**

Places of worship, of course, have never been immune to acts of violence. Consider the twelfth-century murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, the torching of Jewish synagogues during pogroms, or the recent bombing of mosques in the Middle East as well as in the U.S. and Canada. The most immediate and understandable reaction is fear. This quickly gives way to restrictive measures aimed at barring entry to anyone who might threaten the safety and security of the religious community. There is no question that these are topmost concerns in any place of worship,

particularly when it comes to children and youth. Thus, parishes need to remain vigilant about security risks through an assessment of parish facilities and the installation of measures that ensure, as much as possible, the safety of the community.

It's also vital to face the reality of not only being a public place that is as vulnerable as any other when it comes to violence, but also one in which the primary values center around welcome and inclusivity. Parish leadership must exercise good judgment when responding to such violence, both in providing assurance around the safety of the community and in urging responses that are merciful and loving. Consider the witness of the Amish community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in October 2006, in extending forgiveness toward the man who murdered five of their little girls before killing himself. Not only did they resist the temptation toward vengeance, but they invited the wife of the shooter to grieve her loss along with their own. The same was true after the tragic shooting of members of the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015. In a statement posted on the website of the South Carolina Conference of the Methodist Church, Bishop L. Jonathan Holston encouraged prayer for peace and understanding as a pathway to healing. "My hope is that we will band together as people of faith at this time so that the world may see through us the love of Jesus Christ."

### **TAKING ACTION**

*Provide support and counsel*—The aftereffects of a violent act on parish grounds require care for those most directly impacted by the violence, for those who are responsible for the welfare of groups and individuals, and for the community at large. Depending on the seriousness of the situation, professional counselors and others who can provide psychological support and advice might be needed.

Police officials and other safety experts are usually willing to offer assessments and advice about securing parish property as well as training for staff, ministerial leaders, and volunteers in the case of emergencies. Reaching out to the wider community for assistance and resources is a vital way to respond to the reality of violence without letting it overtake the primary mission of the parish.

*Communicate*—There is no going back to normal after a violent act happens in a parish. Even so, the instinct to reassure parishioners might cause some leaders to paper over the incident by closing down any talk about it. Parish leaders should stay attuned to the need for follow-up by holding parish forums around safety concerns as well as through written updates on the measures taken to follow through on these issues. Parents will be especially concerned about the security measures affecting their children, making this kind of communication essential for those involved in catechetics, sacramental preparation, nursery care, and youth ministry.

*Emphasize hope*—While fear may be the most immediate reaction to violence, hope provides a crucial counterpoint. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). This beautiful passage reminds us that the key to overcoming fear is through trust, faith, and unwavering confidence in the love of God. Draw upon this and other hopeful Scripture passages in the aftermath of violence and throughout the months that follow as a way to anchor the parish in hope. Share accounts of other faith communities that have not only weathered acts of violence but