

Reflections from Fr. Tony Palazzolo 2008 Winner of CDM's Rev. James Young Ministry Award

It was 1971 and an academically perfect Catholic, having experienced eight years of nuns and eight years of Jesuits, I found myself divorced. This could never happen; it was not a possibility. However, after five years of intense marriage counseling it occurred. I was devastated beyond words; I went down to 145 pounds (my right leg weighs 145 pounds now). I was asked to resign as president of the men's club at the Catholic Church. I was told I should no longer teach CCD because I was now one of the less than perfect Catholics. "Keep coming to church, sit in the back, and for goodness sakes please continue to give in your envelope, yet don't infect anyone. Be sure the D is stamped on your forehead." This was the message I perceived from the Church. For five years I went to Protestant churches. I kept going to the Catholic Church so I wouldn't go to Hell because we know God only counts the Catholic services in Heaven. With intense study of Scripture and exposure to other denominations, I changed. I described myself as a Christian first and foremost who chooses to practice as a Catholic. In my opinion, there is no other denomination that has the history, spirituality, sacraments and the liturgy the Catholic Church enjoys. However, since the mid to late 70's Jesus has been my model. The Church sometimes complicates the simple message of Jesus Christ, "I will be with you always until the end of time"... "My peace I bring you, My peace I leave with you"... "I have come so my joy can be your joy and your joy may be complete"... "Come, follow me. Do not be afraid." These are the messages of Jesus — the messages by which I now live.

In 1974 I heard of a conference being held in Boston. Fr. Jim Young, a Paulist priest, initiated ministry to divorced and separated in the late 60's and early 70's. This took

great courage because the divorced Catholics were considered outsiders. I attended the conference. I was not prepared for the warmth, generosity, kindness, compassion, non-judgmental attitude or the love of Fr. Jim Young. He was the most Jesus-like priest I had met. During the weekend he literally saved my spiritual life. Inspired by Fr. Jim I returned to Knoxville and contacted the campus ministry pastor at the University. He said, "Oh, Fr. Jim Young. We went to school together." I told him we were beginning a ministry for the divorced and separated in this parish because people who are going through divorce need the help, consolation and support of the Catholic Church.



Fr. Tony celebrates Mass at the University of Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

I had no idea what ministry to divorced and separated Catholics meant yet I knew we had to do it. At the same time my children decided to move in with me. The next 25 years I raised three children, ministered to the divorced and separated in the Catholic Church in Tennessee and Georgia, and ran major corporations. To enhance my ministry I started taking courses at the University of Tennessee. In December 1989 I finished the Master's degree in Counseling and Psychology, went to work for Levi Strauss as an advisor and consultant, and tried to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up.

From the experience with Levi Strauss I was offered a major business opportunity. At the same time I heard a booming voice from Heaven say, "You will really look good

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Balanced Wholeness: Feeling

David Mora



Our previous issue introduced David Mora's series of articles on Balanced Wholeness. We continue here with the second installment of the series.

Hello to all and happy Fall! Our year of 2008 is coming to a fast close. This year has not only gone by rapidly but this decade is soon coming to a close as well! It's true what they say that the older you get the faster time flies by.

We are upon one of my favorite months which includes one of my favorite holidays, Thanksgiving. We have so many things to be thankful for even when life is a struggle. In these days, economic uncertainty abounds yet we must never lose hope that God is by our side. Stressful times can overwhelm our feelings. Stressful situations and experiences can send us into grief mode where our feelings and how we deal with them become very important. As a matter of fact, let us talk about feelings in this issue as it is the next realm of wholeness in our being.

Feelin' Alright?

None of us will go through life untouched by some sort of hardship, maybe even a tragedy. For those who are going through a separation or divorce, there can be a number of emotionally overwhelming situations that make life seemingly a rollercoaster. It is said that divorce is second only to death on the level of major grief in life. I do some contract

work with divorcing parents to help them manage the effects of the divorce and mitigate harm to their children. In our workbook, divorce is described as a type of death; a death of hopes and dreams. It is therefore natural to be grieved. Yet we remind our participants that not everyone is willing to mourn and grieve as is necessary to get through this issue. Not to stereotype, but many a man is

willing to deny tender feelings and suppress rather than appear weak. Some guys get lost in quickly finding another partner (statistically, males remarry quicker than females), others focus heavily on work, sports, or exhibit outburst of fury. Some guys may connect with

male buddies (Jack Daniels, even?) laughing and having a good ol' time and ignore what's going on. Meanwhile they're hurting inside but fear vulnerability.

Women can also have issues with grief and not feeling all emotions properly in a separation and divorce. Many women do not want to burden others because of guilt or other unworthy feelings. A large issue with women is the emotion of anger. Females are socialized for the most part to be sugar, spice and everything nice. Unlike guys, tender feelings are okay but anger is not. Anger turned inward we know becomes depression. Many women could go a long way towards dealing with sadness or depression by letting anger be, feeling it, and expressing it

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Jacob's Well

Vol. XXIII No. 3

2008 / Issue 3



Catholic Divorce Ministry

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in black." This call to ministry, specifically to the priesthood, was beyond anything I expected. I have had two role models over the course of my life, Jesus and Frank Sinatra. For the first ¾ of my life I lived a lot more like Frank Sinatra than I did Jesus Christ. I just did not fit the standard Catholic idea of priest. I went to seminary, not with the idea in mind I had to be a priest, but to see if this was a Tony thing or a God thing.

Three years later after a completed annulment I was ordained in Jamaica where I served as a missionary. When it became clear I could do more for the poorest of the poor from the U.S., the Bishop and I agreed I would come back to Jacksonville to serve at San Jose parish for five years with the agreement I would spend 20 weekends per year traveling across the country raising funds for Food for the Poor. While at San Jose parish I began again to serve the ministry to the divorced and separated. I created a Divorced and Separated Advisory Committee in the diocese under the auspices of the Family Life Office to initiate support groups in parishes and expanded the ministry throughout the diocese.

I received a phone call from Executive Director Irene Varley of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics, the ministry begun by Fr. Jim Young. She had met me at a conference in Boca Raton and thought I would be a good choice for chaplain. Irene had no idea the impact Fr. Jim Young had on my life years ago. While she was inviting me to serve as chaplain tears were streaming down my cheeks and I literally could not talk. How ironic! Here I was, many years later, being asked to be chaplain of the organization started by the man who saved my spiritual life. Tell me that God does not work in strange and mysterious ways and, my dears, I am the strangest.

I served as chaplain of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics for six years and it was my deep honor and joy to have that opportunity. There is no ministry I am aware of that is more rewarding than ministry to those who are broken and wounded through the tragedy of divorce. I hate divorce. God hates divorce, yet He loves divorcees. I continue to serve CDM as I am called upon. It has been the ministry of my heart, along with family ministry. I spend my weeks working in the Family Life Office doing counseling, spiritual direction and continuing to lead the Ministry to the Divorced and Separated in the Diocese of St. Augustine.

On August 18th I received a letter from the Catholic Divorced Ministry advising me I had been chosen as

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Give the Gift of Ministry

You may earmark your tax-deductible donations to this nonprofit organization (U.S. IRS §501 (c)(3)) for a specific purpose. Please return this form with your check or credit card information, or donate via our online store at www.nacsd.org/estore/donate.

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recipient of the 2008 Rev. James J. Young Ministry Award. Again tears were running down my cheeks. God has an incredible sense of humor. I was honored and humbled to receive the award on October 11th at Notre Dame at Mt. Carmel Church in Cedar Knolls, New Jersey. I encourage each of you to renew your commitment to this ministry. It is the fire in your belly that will keep this ministry going. I am blessed to be able to serve the two ministries of my heart, Family Ministry, including ministry to the divorced and separated, and the ministry to the poorest of the poor through Food for the Poor, which is now the largest international charitable organization in the U.S.

God has blessed me richly beyond anything I could

imagine. I am the evidence of God's grace and mercy. Grace says *you get what you don't deserve* and mercy says *you don't get what you do deserve*. There is nothing in my life I have done to deserve the joy and pleasure of serving these two ministries. At 76 years old I am in excellent health and serve both ministries enthusiastically.

Again, I encourage you to take control of this ministry to the divorced and separated Catholics. The bishops are not going to do it. You will have to do it. Be creative to raise funds and to grow the ministry. It is sorely needed and I encourage you to continue out of love to serve others in Jesus' name to the glory of God. May God bless all of you, your families, and your ministries.

With love and prayers,

Fr. Tony Palazzolo

Mora: Balanced Wholeness

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in a healthy way.

In your anger, do not sin.

—Ephesians 4:26

Jesus felt much anger in his day at injustice and oppression. Ladies, it is okay to be angry. You must express it and grieve it, so there can be closure. Guys, we must feel the tender feelings and not be afraid to mourn or else the feelings manifest themselves in other unhealthy ways.

I recently attended a lecture by Dr. Kathleen Sullivan, Senior Director of Service and Programs at the University of Notre Dame. Her talk about the Beatitudes of Jesus' time and the beatitudes of today makes for an interesting contrast — especially the beatitude about mourning:

Jesus: *"Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted."*

Society today: *"Blessed are those who curse their suffering, they shall be entitled to self-pity and attention."*

Dr. Sullivan went on to note, "those that loved Jesus the most, grieved the most and ultimately received profound comfort."

So, do you want some healthy and unhealthy examples of how to cope with grief? I'm glad you asked!

Healthy:

- Prayer
- Talking with family or friends who are unconditionally loving and won't condemn you
- Support groups
- Counseling

- Church community
- Journaling
- Nature
- Exercise

Unhealthy

- Alcohol or drugs
- Over/under eating
- Being a workaholic
- Escaping into another relationship
- Perfectionism
- Resentment
- Perpetual victim
- Self-pity

So, let us be thankful and accepting even of the not so fun feelings that arise within us during life's challenges. The old saying, "What you resist, persists" applies wholeheartedly when it comes to the emotional life and acceptance of our God-given feelings. The word crisis has two meanings in Chinese: danger and opportunity. As I encourage parents in my seminar, take this life crisis, make it an opportunity for growth and wisdom, and let go of resentment and guilt. Unresolved issues related to separation and divorce invariably get brought into future relationships and marriages. This is a major reason for the higher divorce rate for second marriages. Look within yourself and to God for closure and healing. Christ does not promise a pain-free life as the cross attests, yet he experienced resurrection and assures us the same through his grace and love. God bless. ■

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