

Widowhood

A woman who has lost her spouse to death, is a widow. A man who loses his spouse to death is a widower. They both belong to a group called Widowhood.

St Lawrence the Deacon, of Rome, who was martyred, called Widows the treasure of the Church. Maybe that is why certain international rights groups are looking at discrimination of widowers, but I digress.

Widowhood can be one of the most traumatizing events in a person's life. It can come on unexpectedly, allowing neither time nor means for preparation. Or it can occur after years of caregiving, allowing both time and means for preparation, yet the surviving person always finds it unexpected. It can come alone or surrounded by family who shows loving support and then leaves.

Interestingly, both the Quran and the Bible put widows and orphans together. It is because it became a family obligation to take care of the widow. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is the protector of widows (Ps 146); and a curse is put on those who do widows an injustice (Dt 27).

In James in the Christian Scriptures, is written "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (1:27). In Christianity, it is still an obligation of the family, but it is extended to the Church, as a family, as well.

It is God's concern that miracles are recorded in the Scriptures as well for widows. When a woman's husband died, the obligation of care fell to her son. If the son died, the woman had no legal status in society and no means of support. The most famous biblical mention is of the funeral of the only son of a widowed mother, the Widow of Naim. The funeral cortege is coming out of the city, toward the cemetery. At the same time, coming into the city was Jesus and His followers. They did not step aside to let the funeral pass. The widow figured that this group was expecting the funeral to move to the side. Instead, Jesus walked up to her and told her not to cry. She probably thought that this was not only a strange request or inappropriate. She was expected to be grieving. She had lost everything, and this crowd that was following would shortly abandon her. She was crying for her son and herself. Jesus raised her son and restored him to her. This is probably the prayer of every widow or even every mother that loses a child. But, it does show us an example of God's concern for a widow.

The widow Naomi was cared for not by her sons but by her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Other widows such as Abigail and Judith use other qualities to take care of themselves. While it appears these women seem to have taken care of the situation, it not by a miracle but through regular human interaction. Scripture, though, does not see it that way, it sees God's Hand at work.

Our churches are filled with widows, and we are dependent upon their activity in supporting and building up the Church.

Many a pastor has said that the Church was built by the pyrohy-making women. While the Church takes advantage of their labors, does it also take care of their spiritual needs?

They can have anger with God, not only from the loss of a spouse, as in the story of the widow's mite. The fact that she gave all that she had was also a sign she had forgiven God for the loss of her husband. Her financial status had changed and this caused problems not only practical, but also spiritual. Being in Widowhood means that the person's heart was removed, stomped on, cut to pieces, and only a portion of it was returned. There may be a smile on the face, but there is probably some depression behind that smile. The Church must provide meaning for life to continue in this new form and hope that makes that life worth living.

Widowhood also means a change in identity. A husband and wife were, for many years, part of a couple. Now there is only one. Married friends no longer see them as members of their group. Widows so often find their social life with other widows. This is why so many are involved in Church activities. They make the Church their life. The Church needs to help make their lives fuller. They need to share their stories and their grief with others. This is where our religious women can be especially helpful in leading groups of women where they can talk about their issues without the presence of a man.

The Church reaches out to the marginalized; and widows and widowers should be reached out to as well. After the funeral is over is not the time to end the pastoral care but a time to begin it. Visits from their priests and deacons to make sure everything is all right can help. One widow remarked when her pastor stopped by a week after the funeral that her husband had always handled the cutting of the grass, and she didn't even know how to start the lawnmower. No, the priest didn't start the lawnmower and leave, nor did he cut the grass himself. These would have been short-term solutions. He got a man who liked to tinker, to, as a Christian, mow her lawn, and take care of those little things around the house. At the same time, his wife and the widow would go together and have their hair done. These little things allowed the widow to find hope in her future.

Pastoral care also means forming bereavement groups. The loss of a spouse is not something that is dealt within 40 days but sometimes can take years. People need an avenue to share their anger, regrets, and guilt. Bereavement groups are not just for Widowhood, others grieve as well. The story of King David and his grief over the loss of his son is one that he brought to God.

A widow or a widower does not advertise their status in life as married couples do. They sit alone, or with their children. They are members who should expect their Church, not just its ministers, to provide spiritual concern.

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