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Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4, King James Bible)

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”.

Are all mourners comforted: Does the work role of Catholic clergy in Ireland contribute to the disenfranchisement of their grief?

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Abstract

While bereavement-related compassion fatigue and burnout have been studied in many helping professions, this researcher has found no peer-reviewed articles based specifically on bereavement experiences of Roman Catholic (RC) clergy in Ireland and only a handful on experiences of other religious ministers worldwide. There is a clear gap in research with regard to clergy experiences of personal or professional grief, the possible effects this may have on them, or the supports they use to help them cope.

Peer support, some form of mentoring/supervision, and debriefing, may help clergy to recognise their own grief, have it acknowledged by others, and recognise their personal strengths and limitations. While prevention of burnout is important to individual clergy, it is also vital for the health of the wider Church and formal support structures may be necessary as part of the Church's duty of care towards its clergy.

Key Words: Disenfranchised Grief, Bereavement, Roman Catholic Clergy, Chaplain, Burnout

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**“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”.
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Ireland contribute to the disenfranchisement of their grief?**

The purpose of this review is to examine the literature surrounding the contribution of work-role and perceived social position of clergy in Ireland to the disenfranchisement of their grief, possible effects on their health and ability to perform their role, and the supports which may be useful in helping them to take back their right to grieve.

The likelihood is that all of us will know grief in our lives, whether through the loss of a loved one, our health, employment, social standing, hopes or dreams. Our experience of grief is affected by our personality, gender, age and developmental stage, the culture and society in which we live, our attachment to the deceased/lost object, and our spirituality. These factors may also influence our experience of grief support.

According to the 2011 census there were 3,831,187 Roman Catholics in Ireland, 84.66% of the Irish population who declared a religion (CSO, 2011). This population is served by approximately 3000 active secular clergy, many of whom are now nearing retirement.

In 2013, only 70 men were training for Catholic priesthood (Hoban, 2013). This means Ireland is relying on an ageing and diminishing group of men to provide religious and pastoral support at times of bereavement, as well as to carry out the other duties of their role. As a result, clergy may find themselves with little time to reflect on their own losses.

The work-role of clergy is unique in that they are on call 24/7, face call-outs to death-beds, accidents and tragedy, and yet care of the dying is not their main role. Funerals are unrepeatable events, likely to be remembered by the bereaved for a long time. There can be great pressure on clergy to provide theological, liturgical and pastoral support. Ministry may begin in the early stages of an illness or as death approaches, and continue with visiting bereaved families after the death, and celebrating anniversary masses.

But what of the grief and losses experienced by clergy themselves? Because of their vow of celibacy, all Catholic clergy face the loss of the prospect of a partner and children. They also face loss of identity and social standing in a world of increasing secularization and clerical abuse scandals, loss of a permanent home due to regular transfers, loss of church property, loss of colleagues when fellow priests leave the priesthood, and the

deaths of family, friends and parishioners. Much of their grief could be termed “professional grief”, a sort of hidden grief that can often be internalised.

Disenfranchised grief describes grief which is not, or cannot be, “openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, and/or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p.4). It therefore usually remains hidden and unrecognised (Papadatou, 2009). Doka (2002) states that grief can be disenfranchised if the loss is not acknowledged; the relationship is not recognised; the griever is excluded; or the circumstances of the death are stigmatised. Even acknowledged and recognised grief can become disenfranchised if the person’s mourning is not socially acceptable and validated, or when society sets a time limit on the bereaved’s grief (Corr, 2002). With no natural outlet, and with demands of work continuing, this kind of grief can accumulate and lead to burnout. As Clark (2013) states, familiarity with death does not make it easier to accept loss or effectively manage professional grief.

Helsel (2008, p.338) asks if “those in situations of frequent loss often forget to grieve and respond to the loss without even knowing the signs of their own grief”.

Method

In searching for relevant literature, a number of databases were consulted and internet searches completed. Searches were done via ADEC, MedlineOvid, CINAHL, and PubMed, using the keywords “clergy”, “disenfranchised grief”, and “burnout”.

Initial searches yielded little material so the search was widened to include “ministers”, “chaplains” (as many chaplains are also clergy), “pastoral care”, and “bereavement”, and to cover the period 1980-2013. Since the search yielded no peer-reviewed articles based specifically on the experience of Catholic clergy in Ireland, the search was expanded to clergy of Christian denominations worldwide. Most searches returned literature on how clergy help others through grief, with few focusing on the experiences and needs of clergy themselves. This suggests that their grief may even be disenfranchised by those studying the topic.

The libraries at the Irish Hospice Foundation, The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and the James Hardiman Library at NUI, Galway were consulted, and a search was completed on Google Scholar.

Articles which focused on the personal and professional experiences of clergy were included. These were mostly qualitative surveys. Articles on the assistance clergy offer to others were excluded. Articles written by clergy for clergy were of particular interest.

Results

Thirty-eight articles were collected and eleven reviewed. The literature was divided in to three main themes for the purposes of this review: (i) disenfranchised grief in clergy and chaplains, (ii) review of burnout in clergy, (iii) suggestions for supports.

(i) Disenfranchised grief in clergy and chaplains

“When my brother passed away, I soon discovered that my parishioners, and myself, held strong expectations about how much – actually, how little – I should grieve for him. After all, didn’t I believe in heaven and in the eternal soul? Why should I be so upset about him being in a better place? (A Catholic priest)” (Bento, 1994, p.40).

Each society has grieving norms that define and in some ways limit the role of the griever. In effect, society gives a licence (enfranchisement) for certain griefs and not for others. Helsel (2008, p.337) suggests that “the grief of chaplains often goes unacknowledged”. The closeness of relationships with parishioners is not always recognised. Chaplains/Priests may feel they are not entitled to grieve, thus disenfranchising themselves. Bento (1994, p.35) argues that “the inhibited expression of grief may be self-imposed (out of shame) or may result from societal or organizational norms of appropriateness”. This disenfranchisement can be reinforced by a wider community which feels grief is unnecessary for the chaplain. A faith community’s ‘grieving norms’ may find a religious leader feeling responsible for the community, and leave them in a position where they are the last to grieve. This is echoed in Bento (1994) who stated that leaders can be expected to ignore the events of their private lives and carry on with work as normal. Helsel (2008) points out that repressing grief in order to continue with work may lead to burnout.

Helsel (2009, p.1) went on to suggest that proximity with death and dying can be troubling for ministers, yet they are “seen by various disciplines within their setting as the

ones uniquely prepared, indeed ‘set apart’ for this service of care”. Their work calls them to repeatedly encounter loss (often in tragic circumstances) and yet their grief may at times be denied by the communities they serve. They are called to be a stable, comforting, healing presence. They may feel the need to grieve privately, feeling socially marginalized by their position while also experiencing personal loss. However, although the liminal position may be difficult for the pastor, it can also bring some of the deepest satisfaction in ministry, provided it matches their talents, abilities, and personality type.

The Spidell et al (2011) survey sought information on how chaplains responded emotionally, their coping strategies, how they felt about accumulated grief and how they revitalised themselves from these experiences. Did they feel appreciated in ministry? Was their grief affirmed? Did they realise the ways grief was affecting them? Some 44% felt they had no time for themselves, 41% were ‘going through the motions’ and 21% felt their loss was not recognised by their workplace and they did not feel supported in the work environment. Chaplains felt under pressure to be able to handle any situation and to support colleagues. One person responded that “my colleagues assume I am immune to grief” (Spidell et al, 2011, p81). Chaplains expressed particular concerns about the

accumulation of grief, their coping strategies, and the possibility that their grief may lead to compassion fatigue and burnout.

(ii) Burnout in clergy

Several studies have been done on burnout and compassion fatigue in clergy. Although these studies are not directly connected to clergy experience of bereavement it is likely that their disenfranchised grief would contribute to exhaustion and an intensity of emotions (Doka, 2002).

Bricker & Fleischer's (1993) limited review of the social support felt by Roman Catholic priests gives an indication of society's role-expectations of priesthood, their role-related stressors and network limitations. It reports the lived experience of four RC clergy, in their own words. The men who volunteered for this survey may be in the minority in their experience, but with numbers of Roman Catholic clergy declining, any minority is of greater significance than ever. The priests spoke of the positive and protective influence of interpersonal relationships, particularly with fellow priests, and their

emotional pain when friends pass away, fellow priests leave the priesthood, or they themselves are transferred to a new parish. They spoke of the particular stress of their role, frequently moving from bereavement to celebration and back in a short time frame:

“....I remember burying him and then coming over here and doing a first communion...I just felt wiped out and spent...sometimes I feel numb”
(Bricker & Fleischer, 1993, p.226)

....an emotional roller coaster...you have a funeral in the morning, a wedding in the afternoon, and then an emergency type event...if you're not in touch with yourself, you could literally die from the stress....it's part of survival...the job can kill you. (Bricker & Fleischer, 1993 p.227)

Priests perceived themselves as being constantly appraised by their communities, feeling obliged to keep difficulties/needs 'hidden behind the collar', while mandatory transfers made it difficult to maintain stability in support networks. The priests interviewed felt a lack of socio-cultural support for the priesthood and a sense of abandonment by the

official church. The demanding schedules of priests minimised the time they had available to spend with support networks, particularly with fellow priests.

Francis et al (2004) conducted a survey of 1468 Roman Catholic, British parochial clergy using an adapted version of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* and the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire*. The data revealed that many priests, particularly those in their 40s, experience high rates of emotional depletion and desensitization. This is perhaps not unexpected given that “the sharp drop in the numbers of Roman Catholic priests is now putting more serious strain on the ministry-related demands placed on the remaining and diminished workforce” (Francis et al, 2004, p.13). They found that 36% of the Catholic priests surveyed felt used up at day’s end, with 19% feeling emotionally drained by ministry. Yet, 81% would still go in to parish ministry if they had their time over. Barnard & Curry (2012) found that clergy who reported being more eager to please found it more difficult to differentiate self from work-role. They often felt a need to maintain a positive public persona. However, personality traits which affect burnout can be changed through education and intervention and “...efforts to enhance self-compassion among seminarians and active clergy may have a preventative effect on clergy burnout” (Barnard & Curry, 2012, p.159).

In a study on support systems for Japanese palliative care professionals, Shimoinaba et al (2009) found that deaths of patients called up memories of the professionals' own losses and unresolved grief. If this grief was not recognised and addressed, it could lead to burnout. As there is not always time to process grief, the reactions of the professionals varied between suppression and open expression. When these losses accumulate professionals may feel irritable, angry, guilty, and frustrated and experience sleeping difficulty. They found that "there appears to be the need for support at three levels: organizational level support, ward level support, and self-care" (Shimoinaba et al, 2009, p.249). This could also be applied to clergy: a need for support from the church hierarchy, support from fellow priests and congregation members, and a degree of self-care.

(iii) Suggestions for supports

So how can clergy be helped to enfranchise their own grief reactions and avoid burnout? Helsel (2008) suggests priests may find comfort in the religious concept of the Communion of Saints. The belief that the dead are still present in a mystical sense may help them with meaning-making. Priests may also find comfort in daily petition to the saints and by remembering the part the deceased person played in their life. This remembrance can connect the minister with his own repressed grief. Rituals are particularly useful for those experiencing disenfranchised grief. Although the priest is generally less a participant in the funeral ritual than the celebrant, ongoing ministry to the family of the deceased may provide some closure, as may anniversary masses. Rodgeron & Piedmont (1998) suggest that the religious coping of ministers – collaborating with and deferring to God- may lessen emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation.

The respondents to Spidell et al (2011, p.84) felt that

chaplains are trained to be open and empathic to the situations, crises, and feelings of others..... the chaplain's own grief is often avoided or

diminished, seldom to be processed. Chaplains may become at risk for burnout, or, at worst, vicarious traumatization.

They expressed a need for balance between detachment and engagement and pointed out that “By training, temperament, and unrealistic self-expectations, some chaplains may be especially vulnerable to the stressors caused by disenfranchised grief” (Spidell et al, 2011, p.84).

Although burnout has been researched in many helping professionals (eg doctors, nurses, counsellors, social workers), Doolittle (2010) argued that “...the clergy represent a unique vocation with a unique set of required emotional demands and job skills” (Doolittle, 2010, p.89) and that “identifying protective behaviors that may prevent against burnout is important for the long-term emotional health of individual clergy as well as the wider church” (Doolittle, 2010, p.88). He found that clergy meeting the criteria for burnout were generally younger, dissatisfied with their spiritual life, and had had at least one traumatic church placement. Clergy can sometimes feel scrutinised by their congregations and pressured to maintain a position of Christian leadership at all times.

One way to counteract these feelings may be to balance it with a variety of interests and relational, physical and professional activities outside of one's vocation (eg exercise, reading, retreats, having a mentor, spending time with friends). However, the personality type of some clergy may mean that they find it difficult to allow themselves space for these kinds of personal, re-vitalizing pursuits. All Roman Catholic clergy are men, and therefore might be expected to be instrumental grievers (Martin & Doka, 2000). However, it would be reasonable to assume that some may have a more intuitive grieving style. Those with an intuitive grieving style may be disenfranchised by their congregations and fellow priests, and asking for help may be seen as 'feminine'. It may be advantageous for church governing bodies to enhance relational activities for active clergy and to promote a varied and balanced model of personal development for seminarians in order to strengthen their emotional health.

Ryan (2006) highlighted the high rates of commitment to, and satisfaction in, ministry of Irish Roman Catholic priests, but also the complicating factor of individual personality styles. He questioned formation of his fellow priests and "how well we are equipped to cope with the human condition in all its complexity" (Ryan, 2006, p.679). Grief for the

loss of the church as it was in the mid- to late-1900s (the early days of priesthood for many of today's clergy), the decline in clergy numbers, and lower levels of religious practice were recognised as impacting on clergy morale: "One factor in low morale may be a kind of grieving for the passing of all of that, and as such may be a stage we need to go through in moving to a new situation" (Ryan, 2006, p.680). He proposes an ability to let go, self-care, cultivation of friendships, realistic expectations of oneself, and a good relationship with one's bishop as ways to continue through this new reality, and also recognises the affect that group morale can have on the individual.

Lewis et al (2006) reported the need for an overall strategy of clergy support given the decreasing number of ordinands in training in Ireland. Peer support, some form of mentoring/supervision, and debriefing after tragic incidents may help clergy to recognise their own grief and to have it acknowledged by others. Seminarians may benefit from further education in bereavement and end-of-life care (theories have changed significantly in the past fifty years) and also in self-care so that they might recognise their personal strengths and limitations and be prepared to ask for help.

Historically, clergy have been supporters of the bereaved, but some would say that their training lacked substantial teaching in the area of bereavement support and self-care.

Summary and Recommendations

The feelings and difficulties outlined in the literature are expressions of disenfranchised grief. However, there is a clear gap in research with regard to clergy experiences of personal or professional grief, the possible effects this may have on them, or the supports they use to help them cope. Their grief has been largely unseen and neglected. Perhaps many clergy do not experience disenfranchised grief, or they experience it but self-disenfranchise and are reluctant to speak about it, but researchers have disenfranchised them by ignoring them as a group.

As clergy in Ireland increase in age and decrease in number, there is a need to look at burnout and compassion fatigue in this population and what contribution, if any, their experience of grief may have on their mental, physical and spiritual health.

Literature suggests that the grief of clergy needs to be recognised, discussed, and addressed in an open and structured manner. Structured peer support and supervision, as well as improved bereavement and self-care training for seminarians and active clergy, would be of benefit. Clergy can be reluctant to engage with ‘outsiders’. However, some

of their own members are beginning to look at the issue and encouraging their colleagues by supporting their right to grieve and, as such, granting them permission to do so.

Walsh (2005, p.283) states that the very training of clergy may make them unaccustomed to showing their vulnerability and argues that “we must allow ourselves time to grieve”, while Kenneally (1997, p.36) speaks of climbing “...in to that protective shell where hurts can’t come and priests don’t cry...”.

For those interested in the topic I would recommend reading both Helsel articles (2008, 2009), Spidell et al (2011), and Ryan (2006). Helsel and Spidell et al give good insight into disenfranchised grief as experienced by chaplains. These are as close to the experience of clergy as yielded by the search. Ryan is useful because it gives an account of life in the Irish Roman Catholic priesthood in the twenty-first century and gives some insight in to the thinking of a contemporary clergyman on the physical, emotional and spiritual health of his fellow priests.

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