

DR. DANIEL AND BETHANY MEOLA



LIFE-GIVING
Wounds

A Catholic Guide to Healing for
Adult Children of Divorce or Separation

IGNATIUS

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DR. DANIEL MEOLA and BETHANY MEOLA

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*A Catholic Guide to Healing for Adult
Children of Divorce or Separation*

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To all of the amazing adult children of divorce or separation whose lives we have been blessed to be a part of in various ways; you are extraordinary miracles of God's redeeming grace.

To one heroic "stander" whose witness to the fidelity of marriage and the joy of faith, despite great personal suffering, has greatly moved and inspired us.

And to our beautiful daughters, Zelig-Louise and Grace. You are the most precious gifts we could ever receive and our enduring motivation for all we do.

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FOREWORD

by Edward and Beth Sri

Wait, that's a thing? I (Beth) thought to myself in 2017 upon seeing a retreat flyer online. *There's a retreat now just for adult children of divorce?!*

Those of us with divorced or separated parents were often told “you’re fine” and “you can be happy now because your parents are happy.” We were expected to be resilient and strong, supportive and accepting of the new arrangement. And should we have felt anything to the contrary—fear, sorrow, anger, anxiety—we needed to “stuff” that down, keeping it hidden from those closest to us: our parents, who were now tasked with rebuilding their separate lives. Our family had split apart, and we had to just keep on keeping on. Truly, the anguish of the children of divorce was often a “suffering that was not allowed to be called suffering.”¹

I had recently committed to taking a deep dive into my own story as a child of divorce by reading all I could on the topic, seeking therapy and bringing it all to Jesus in prayer, the sacraments, and spiritual direction. It was heavy, arduous, soul-searching work, and while I read that there were millions out there who had similar childhood stories and experiences, there were few in my world who were willing even to discuss it.

¹Leila Miller, ed., *Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak* (Phoenix, Ariz.: LCB Publishing, 2017), back cover.

So, learning that there existed a Catholic retreat for adults who grew up in broken families was welcome news. I attended my first retreat run by Life-Giving Wounds in 2018 in Virginia, and my randomly (or providentially) assigned small-group leader was none other than founder Daniel Meola. All eight of us in the group struggled to find words for our pain, often attempting to share through sniffles and tears. But as that weekend went on, we also discovered the flipside: connecting with one another led to laughter and even joy. We were not alone in discovering the humor in our shared plight. Dan artfully led us to that place, holding space for the myriad emotions that arose in each of us, pressing in when he sensed there was more to our stories, and rejoicing at the unexpected goodness we found.

In this book you'll get to know Dan and his beautiful bride, Bethany—their own stories, trials, and triumphs as they've walked the road of life-giving wounds individually, together in their marriage, and alongside the hundreds they have helped in the ministry they founded.

In my (Edward's) experience teaching students in the college classroom and working with young adult missionaries in the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), I've seen the impact divorce has on young people. I had known from my studies that the deeper wounds of growing up in a broken home often rise to the surface for the first time when students emerge into adulthood, and especially when they enter into serious relationships of their own. I saw this firsthand. In their essays and in conversations, some college students made connections between their parents' divorce and their own fears and anxieties in life, their insecurities they experienced in their dating relationships, and their general doubts about whether they would ever find a lasting

love. Some young professionals with divorced parents became aware of how averse they were to conflict, how afraid of commitment, and how eager to please others. Missionaries have shared how their parents' divorces even affected their view of God: *Is he trustworthy?*

Growing up without the committed love of their parents, many children of divorce had thought they just needed to be resilient, having never been given the chance to grieve and to seek the deeper healing God wanted for them. Thankfully, many are now finding support through counseling, spiritual direction, and the community of countless others who have experienced the wound of being a child of divorce—a community that Dan and Bethany Meola have fostered through the Life-Giving Wounds ministry and, no doubt, will continue to cultivate through their book of the same name. We pray that this book and this ministry will touch many more souls to help them know they are not alone and offer them a way forward through the healing power of Christ.

PREFACE

Disclaimer

We include throughout this book personal stories and quotes from adult children of divorce or separation. Where particular persons are mentioned by name, either their own or a pseudonym that they chose, they gave permission to use their words and stories as included here. We share other more general stories or representative examples of the experiences of adult children of divorce without identifying details to protect their anonymity. We are also grateful to the anonymous contributors to Leila Miller's edited collection of testimonies, *Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak*,¹ several of whom we quote here.

Inclusion of quotes from, or references to, books and media sources throughout this book do not constitute approval of, or agreement with, the entirety of that particular source or everything produced by the parent company of the source.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a labor of love for several years, written in between the daily demands of running a young and

¹Leila Miller, ed., *Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak* (Phoenix, Ariz.: LCB Publishing, 2017).

growing national nonprofit apostolate and raising two young children: in early morning hours at Panera (Bethany) and late at night after the kids were asleep (Dan). There's no way these words would have seen the light of day without the help of many, some of whom we would like to thank here.

Several trusted advisors generously reviewed early drafts of this book, in whole (Dr. Andrew Lichtenwalner, Dr. Jill Verschaetse, Art Bennett, Father Dan Leary, Beth Sri, and Jessica Root) or in part (Father John Baptist Hoang, O.P., Father Christopher Singer, and Mary Rose Verret). We're also grateful to Michael Herson, Dr. Mario Sacasa, Father Paul Sullins, Ph.D., and Dr. Andrew Sodergren for allowing us to include their insights and research on several topics and reviewing those sections for accuracy.

We are grateful to all of the Life-Giving Wounds volunteers around the country (over 150 at last count) who generously dedicate their time and efforts to helping the ministry grow and improve: especially our dedicated and hard-working board of directors (currently Art Bennett, Michael Herson, Father John Baptist Hoang, O.P., Father Dan Leary, Dr. Andrew Lichtenwalner, Michael Mannocho, Jessica Root, Beth Sri, and Mary Rose Verret), our traveling retreat team (currently Father John Baptist Hoang, O.P., Matt Bigelow, Emily Carey, Michael Corsini, Jen Cox, Mary DePuglio, Hannah Dragonas, Sarah Hart, Father Jim McCormack, M.I.C., Lacy Prebula, Craig Soto, Teresa Swick, Dr. Jill Verschaetse, and Alex Wolfe), our national chaplain (Father Mario Majano), our blog editor (Sam Russell), our media and communications specialist (Katey Mooney), and all those who have served as speakers and small group leaders at Life-Giving Wounds retreats or support groups. A special thanks to Jen Cox

and Alex Wolfe, who have dedicated hours upon hours to crafting and sharing the vision of Life-Giving Wounds and developing various new projects.

Thanks also to all who have spiritually guided us throughout the years, who have no doubt contributed to this book through forming us spiritually and intellectually, and through friendship—this includes the many holy priests and lay people from Erie, Pennsylvania, who shaped Dan’s faith, especially Father Larry Richards, Father Steve Schreiber, Father Christopher Singer, Father Rich Toohey, and Greg and Stephanie Schlueter; all of the professors of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, especially David S. Crawford, Nicholas Healy, Margaret Harper McCarthy, and David L. Schindler; holy priest friends in the Archdiocese of Washington, especially Father Scott Holmer, Father Dan Leary, Father Mario Majano, Father Jim McCormack, M.I.C., Father Ben Petty, and Monsignor K. Bartholomew Smith; and several other dear friends, especially Michael and Jessica Corsini, Sister Donata, O.L.M., Sister Gaudia, O.L.M., Sister Inga, O.L.M., Father Ambrose Little, O.P., George and Elizabeth Logusch, Father John Paul Mary Zeller, M.F.V.A., Steve and Caitlin Mariconti, Shaina Pia, Justin and Bernadette McClain, Mark and Becky Scheckelhoff, and many more we could not name individually here.

Bethany’s parents and Dan’s mom spent hours watching our children while we wrote, even over a writing getaway weekend that made a huge difference in the book’s progress. We know that grandparent time was rewarding for everyone but also a great expenditure of energy for the grandparents, and we are grateful!

Thank you to our children, six-year-old Zelig-Louise and four-year-old Grace, for being yourselves, always bringing smiles to our faces, lifting our spirits, praying with

us, and inspiring us to try to be the parents you deserve. We love you more.

Lastly, we are deeply grateful to the hundreds of adult children of divorce or separation we have had the privilege of meeting and accompanying through our Life-Giving Wounds ministry. That is the greatest joy of this work. To all of these men and women: your courage to face your wounds boldly with Christ and seek healing for them inspires us daily. We cherish your stories and honor your bravery. This book is something of a “love letter” to all adult children of divorce or separation who are seeking to overcome generational brokenness. The Lord sees you, meets you in your wounds, and loves you with an everlasting love. We hope this book continues to aid you in deepening that divine relationship.

INTRODUCTION

*Five different houses
Four different spouses
Three different schools . . .
Imagine what it's like growing up loving life when you are six
But hating it when you are eight
Because of my parents.
My parents.
Parents . . .
To whom I should belong for that week
Monday Tuesday Dad
Wednesday Thursday Mom
Fridays Weekends we switch
Like the holidays we switch
As if our lives were a fair-trade in Monopoly
They've put me in jail, I want to be free
Only way to get out is if I pay the fee . . .*

—Sofia Fernandez*

This poem, written by an adult child of divorce, begins to capture the rupture divorce or separation causes in the hearts of children. Through accompanying hundreds of adult children of divorce or separation in the Catholic apostolate we founded, Life-Giving Wounds, we have heard gut-wrenching stories of suffering, abandonment, and loss. We have also been inspired by the courage and

*Sofia Fernandez, "Family Tree," *Life-Giving Wounds* (blog), May 14, 2023, <https://www.lifegivingwounds.org/blog/poem-family-tree>.

insight of the men and women who recognize their brokenness and their need for recovery—people who commit to breaking the cycle of divorce and family dysfunction in their own lives with the help of Christ.

This book contains the collective wisdom that adult children of divorce or separation (“ACOD” for short) have imparted to us. So while we are the authors, this is a shared journey under the loving gaze of Christ, undertaken in community with these friends and fellow disciples, some of whom you will “meet” in these pages.

There is an urgent need today for healing family wounds because we are living in an unprecedented time of familial brokenness. Every single

There is an urgent need today for healing family wounds because we are living in an unprecedented time of familial brokenness.

year, over a million children in the United States experience the divorce of their parents,¹ and one-quarter of all young adults in the U.S. are children of divorce.² Add to that the growing number of people

whose parents never married but later separated,³ and we reach a startling statistic: “less than half [of] the children in the United States today will grow up in a household with

¹ Paul Sullins, “The Tragedy of Divorce for Children,” in *Torn Asunder: Children, the Myth of the Good Divorce, and the Recovery of Origins*, ed. Margaret Harper McCarthy (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2017), 19.

² Elizabeth Marquardt et al., “Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith? Challenging the Churches to Confront the Impact of Family Change,” in *Torn Asunder*, 66.

³ Juliana Menasche Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, November 6, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/the-landscape-of-marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>; Gretchen Livingston, “About One-Third of U.S. Children Are Living with an Unmarried Parent,” Pew Research Center, April 27, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/04/27/about-one-third-of-u-s-children-are-living-with-an-unmarried-parent/>.

continuously married parents.”⁴ And that doesn’t account for the burgeoning phenomenon of “gray divorce,” when parents call it quits after their children are grown.⁵

In view of this bleak landscape, this book seeks to meet a real need: the need for Christ-centered encouragement, advice, healing, evangelization, and accompaniment for the millions of men and women who come from broken homes. We focus on *adult* children of divorce, especially young adults, because research has shown that often it is not until adulthood that people realize how deeply their parents’ divorce or separation has affected them with doubts, questions, and challenges.⁶

Even though millions of American adults are ACODs, their particular needs and concerns have been generally overlooked or even denied, with a few notable exceptions.⁷ Very few nonprofits, ministries, or outreaches, let alone Catholic apostolates, dare to tend to these wounds. The men and women who experience the pain of their

⁴Melanie Wasserman, “The Disparate Effects of Family Structure,” *Future of Children* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 56. See also “Parenting in America,” Pew Research Center, December 17, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america>. While our focus here is on those now-grown children who lost the unity of their parents through intentional parental separation, we are aware that other children, sadly, lose a parent to death, which of course entails deep sorrow and a pressing need for support.

⁵Renee Stepler, “Led by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America’s 50+ Population,” Pew Research Center, March 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population>. See also Bruce R. Fredenburg and Carol R. Hughes, *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

⁶See Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2000); Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

⁷For our curated, updated list of books, articles, and other resources directly addressing the needs of adult children of divorce, see “Adult Children of Divorce Resources,” Life-Giving Wounds, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://www.lifegivingwounds.org/adult-children-of-divorce-resources>.

parents' split deserve compassionate attention and, better yet, the restorative balm of Christ the Healer. We hope this book awakens the hearts and consciences of Christian leaders and all people of good will to a richer understanding of the long-lasting impact of divorce and parental break-up on children. And we hope it contributes to a greater determination to dedicate new efforts, attention, and resources to the healing of adult children of divorce.

We also pray that this honest and open discussion of the wounds of adult children of divorce helps to transform the hearts of parents who have divorced or are contemplating divorce. We want to inspire them, where possible and safe to do so, to work toward mutual forgiveness and reconciliation.⁸ We hope this book can help all divorced or separated parents better understand their children's possible hurts and needs, and can contribute to enriched and more honest conversations, opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation, and deeper relationships. Our goal is not to point fingers at divorced or separated parents and declaim their faults, but to offer a pathway forward in healing for their children that culminates in a rich, joyful way of life with Christ. We pray that all divorced and separated parents, too, receive the graces and renewal that they need.

Our Backgrounds

Dan's parents separated when he was eleven and divorced when he was twenty-six, the year we got married. Bethany's parents separated twice during her childhood and young adult years, though they fortunately reconciled—a

⁸For an inspiring compilation of testimonies by couples who were at the brink of divorce, or had divorced, and later reconciled, see Leila Miller, ed., *"Impossible" Marriages Redeemed* (Phoenix: LCB Publishing, 2020).

great witness to perseverance in marriage. We have both been impacted by the fluctuations of our families.

We met at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, in Washington, D.C., where we studied the Church's rich magisterium on love and the human person. We were both captivated by the beauty and power of the Church's teaching on marriage, especially its indissolubility and the security this brings to children raised within that union. By contrast, we also became more aware of what serious damage is inflicted—even on the *ontological* level, the core of a person's being—when the communion of spouses, meant to image God's faithful love to their children, is broken.⁹

After all the blessings we received at the JPPI Institute, we felt called by the Holy Spirit to found Life-Giving Wounds, a Catholic apostolate dedicated to giving voice to the pain of adult children of divorce or separation and helping them find lasting healing in Christ. This book is one fruit of that work, drawing from our personal experiences and extensive research into the topic. It also communicates something of even greater value: what we have learned from years of accompanying hundreds of men and women from broken homes in the painful but necessary process of recognizing the depths of their wounds and advancing toward greater hope, peace, and healing.

Whom This Book Is For

This book is first and foremost for adult children of divorce or separation, those millions of men and women who

⁹For a robust but accessible treatment of the ontological impact of divorce on children, see Andrew Root, *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010).

experience the pain and difficulties that follow when their parents split. This includes all those, of any age, who have lost—or never had—the love of their parents *together in the same home*, whether through prolonged marital separation, civil divorce (with or without also receiving a declaration of nullity), cohabitation dissolution, a breakup, and so on.¹⁰ While in the book we often use the shorthand term “adult children of divorce” (or ACOD), we always have this broader audience in mind.

This book is also for all those who have a beloved ACOD in their lives—spouses, relatives, friends, children, and parents. Adult children of divorce need people who can “receive” their pain in a gentle and loving way, to help them heal. At the end of every other chapter, Bethany reflects on the way that spouses are impacted by an ACOD’s broken family, and how they can facilitate healing.

We hope this book will reach Christian leaders who want to understand and better help men and women from broken homes. This includes priests and deacons, religious brothers and sisters, counselors, professional clinicians, youth ministers, young adult leaders, campus ministers, missionaries, marriage preparation and marriage ministry leaders, and more. Without a doubt, there are adult children of divorce among those whom these Christian leaders serve, and the first step in accompanying them is learning about their pain.

What This Book Is—and Isn’t

This is not a typical “self-help” book, if what that means is relying *only* on one’s self. Many of our community—

¹⁰Two related situations we do not address are (1) losing a parent, or both parents, to death and (2) being placed for adoption or into foster care. These challenging scenarios, while connected to the experiences of ACODs, are dissimilar enough to merit special attention.

including the authors—have already tried that and failed. We're made for communion and relationships with others, particularly with God. We cannot simply "do" healing on our own; we must receive it. We need face-to-face community and friendship, witnesses and mentors, and above all, life in Christ through the sacraments. Thus, this book points people to sources of healing *beyond* the confines of these pages.

We do not give a primarily psychological or sociological treatment of the trauma caused by parental divorce. Although we consider psychology very important, and we integrate psychological research into our writing, we approach everything from the perspective of the Catholic faith and from the lived experience of the hundreds of ACODs we have known.

We do not claim to give an exhaustive account of the wounds caused by parental divorce and how to heal from them. Our ministry is constantly growing and adapting to new or newly recognized needs and areas. It must be said, too, that there are many other grave harms that people experience in families beyond divorce or separation: the death of a parent or a sibling, psychological or physical abuse, addictions, mental illness, incarcerated parents, illness or injury, displacement, and homelessness. We touch on some of these topics throughout the book, but not extensively, since they are not in our area of expertise. Every one of us must bear some pain and suffering in this life, and we are all in need of Christ's healing, mercy, and love.

This book honors the pain of men and women from broken homes and offers a path of spiritual healing for them. In these pages, we focus on Christian redemptive suffering in the particular circumstances of parental divorce or separation. There are two different kinds of chapters: one kind illuminates a layer of the experience of ACODs ("The wound of ..."), while another discloses a new contour of

the redemptive joy that can flow from these difficulties. For those who wish to go deeper either individually or with a group, the Life-Giving Wounds website offers suggested prayer practices, journal and discussion questions, and more to assist personal reflection and discussion with each chapter.

Advice to ACOD Readers

For those who have experienced the divorce or separation of their parents, this book may be difficult to read at certain points. The heavy topics and true stories of suffering may trigger strong emotional reactions. Anyone who experiences this should set the chapter down and come back to it at another time—or just skip it completely. The Lord is good and gentle and never wants to re-traumatize us as we seek healing. Go at your own pace in peace, knowing that the Lord can use many different means to give his grace. You need not immediately tackle everything to find profound healing.

We encourage you to go through this book slowly and prayerfully. It is not meant as a checklist. Healing is more

Healing is more than a pursuit of a goal; it's a walk of ever deeper intimacy with our Lord in response to our pain.

than a pursuit of a goal; it's a walk of ever deeper intimacy with our Lord in response to our pain. While we describe *Life-Giving Wounds* as a *guide* for adult children of divorce, we don't intend it as a one-size-fits-all method.

You might prefer to address themes in a different order, or perhaps skip over topics that seem less relevant. Discern with the Holy Spirit what is helpful to you and leave the rest aside.

As the adage goes, Jesus loves us just the way we are, but he loves us too much to let us stay that way. We hope that all who seek healing from broken homes will discover the abundant life our Lord promises, and know that even pain and wounds can—eventually—give *life*. The bedrock of this new life is God's Divine Mercy, especially through forgiveness, both received and offered. ACODs must resist the impulse—at times overwhelming—to pretend either that nothing is wrong or to dwell in bitterness. Instead, they must strive to let themselves be open to *love*, for God is love. At times, this process can be slow and difficult; all recovery takes work. But just as someone healing from a back injury needs to stretch his tendons and muscles, so adult children of divorce must allow their souls, in all their complexity, to be stretched by Christ's mercy.

Good Friday is followed by Easter Sunday. This book is about going into your own Good Friday and finding your Easter Sunday—your own *life-giving wounds*.

The Wound of Silence

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

—Psalm 42:5

Have you seen the sci-fi film *A Quiet Place*? The plot is simple: A family lives in a post-apocalyptic world ruled by murderous aliens with an extraordinary sense of hearing. If the humans make too loud a sound, the aliens will instantly learn their location and come to kill them. To survive, the family enters into an oppressive silence, one that engulfs the viewer. Watching it, you may find yourself wanting to shout just to find relief from the terrible quiet.

Has your life ever felt like *A Quiet Place*? Have you sensed that if you spoke up about something, bad things would happen? Dan's experience as an adult child of divorce has sometimes felt this way—a *wound of silence*. He felt that if he spoke about his pain, he would be rejected by his family, friends, significant other, society, and even his Church and God. So many ACODs have grown accustomed to silence regarding their suffering. Why? We will name some of the most common reasons.

Causes of the Wound of Silence

The Freeze

From the child's perspective, divorce can be traumatic.¹ In order to cope, children of divorce may shut out painful memories or deny that the difficult experiences affected them. They "freeze" the past, and it can take a long time to "thaw out" enough to feel ready to talk about it. Parents can likewise be traumatized by things that happened in the marriage or in the divorce, and may not be willing or able to discuss the situation with their children. In our ministry, it is not uncommon to meet older adults who, even decades later, feel like they are *only now* able to examine deeply their parents' divorce and the effects it had on them.

Survival Mode

The chaos of divorce and separation can put a family into survival mode. As parents rebuild their lives, often with little support, children, too, try to retain some semblance of sanity and calm. To do so, they often take on more responsibilities: more chores around the house, caring for their siblings, and even providing emotional or financial support for their parents. At a very early age, an ACOD

¹ The classic "adverse childhood experiences" (ACE) study done in 1998 by Vincent Felitti, M.D., and Kaiser Permanente includes parental divorce and separation in the trauma category for children and recognizes its deep, adverse impact on the people into adulthood. It is noteworthy that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) uses the language of "trauma," too: "Divorce is immoral also because it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children *traumatized* by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society" (no. 2385 [emphasis added]).

can end up, in one form or another, being a “parent” to his siblings or even to his parents. He may become his parent’s go-to emotional confidant, replacing the missing spouse—an impossible task. This is called inversion parenting or “parentification,”² and in these situations, a child loses the opportunity simply to be a child around his parents. Operating in survival mode, there is little time or energy for the child’s emotions and needs to be heard or responded to.

Fear of Disloyalty

Adult children of divorce may keep silent for fear of offending their parents. Children love their parents and fervently want to be loved by them. They may feel they are being disloyal by expressing their pain. Certain family cultures—as well as ethnic cultures—can compound this problem by considering it taboo to bring up “family issues,” valuing “peace” above all else. Children of divorce may worry that if they share too much, one or both parents will become distant or even leave them. They might also have anxiety about alienating a sibling. They cannot bear any other losses, so they silence their feelings to preserve whatever love they can receive.

Further, children likely recognize the good that their parents *have* done, so they feel unjustified in questioning the divorce. They may think, “They did the best they could,” caught between conflicting emotions of anger and love. Although compassion and respect for our parents are crucial, the common platitude about doing “the best they could” can be—as one clinical psychologist put it—a “thought-stopping cliché” that blocks the healing

²See, for example, Louise Early and Delia Cushway, “The Parentified Child,” *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 7, no. 2 (April 2002): 163–78.

process.³ Besides, it simply cannot be true since we are all imperfect sinners. And sadly, we know that sometimes parents *do* intentionally inflict harm—in words and actions—upon children.

“Divorce Happy Talk”

ACODs commonly hear, in the aftermath of their parents’ split, that it was “for the best.” Sociologist Elizabeth Marquardt aptly calls phrases like this “divorce happy talk.”⁴ Here are some common refrains that we have heard:

- “Kids are happy when their parents are happy.”
- “It’s good for your parents to live their true, authentic lives instead of faking their happiness in a broken marriage.”
- “Your second family is like a bonus family!”
- “A good divorce is better than an unhappy marriage.”
- “Their love will grow for you now that they are apart and not fighting.”

Consider the high-profile divorce between Jeff and MacKenzie Bezos, founders of Amazon and one of the richest couples in the world. After twenty-five years of marriage, the couple wrote about their split on Twitter. Their words were trumpeted around the Internet as a great example of a successful, happy divorce:

As our family and close friends know, after a long period of loving exploration and trial separation, we have decided to divorce and continue our shared lives as friends. We

³Peter Malinoski, “The Sins of the Parents—Conveniently Denied,” *Souls & Hearts* (blog), July 13, 2022, <https://www.soulsandhearts.com/blog/the-sins-of-the-parents-conveniently-denied>.

⁴Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 170–71.

feel incredibly lucky to have found each other and deeply grateful for every one of the years we have been married to each other. If we had known we would separate after 25 years, we would do it all again. We've had such a great life together as a married couple, and we also see wonderful futures ahead, as parents, friends, partners in ventures and projects, and as individuals pursuing ventures and adventures. Though the labels might be different, we remain a family, and we remain cherished friends.⁵

From this statement, it seems like very little is lost—only “labels”—since they “remain a family” and are still “cherished friends.” Indeed, according to them, much is *gained* by the divorce, with an expectation of “wonderful futures ahead.” One wonders how their children feel about this wonderful future. (We have never met a child of divorce—forever forced to travel between two homes and the two worlds of his parents—who described his parents' breakup as just “changing labels.”) More tragically, public statements like this are used by others to justify more “happy” divorces.

Some families, too, talk about the divorce as only a positive, or at least neutral, reality for the children. This can make the children feel out of place within their own family if they don't agree or feel differently. This may lead them to stuff their suffering down. Worse, they may force themselves to believe what many have told them: “It was for the best.”

The Trickle-Down Theory

Society often shows a preference for the needs and concerns of divorcees over those of their children. An entire

⁵Jeff Bezos (@JeffBezos), “We want to make people aware of a development in our lives,” Twitter, January 9, 2019, <https://twitter.com/JeffBezos/status/1083004911380393985>.

industry of websites and apps, media, divorce coaches, lawyers, social workers, and psychologists gives support to divorcees, but far fewer societal resources exist for the children. Within the Church, too, many Catholic dioceses and parishes have programs and retreats for divorcees, but little for the unique needs of the children of divorce—although we happily note that is beginning to change. We founded Life-Giving Wounds to address this need, and stress that the path of healing is *not the same* for children of divorce as it is for divorcees.

The widespread idea that happy parents make for happy children has contributed to this one-sided focus on support for parents. The argument goes something like this, as Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee put it: “As a parent puts his or her life together in the post-divorce years, they say, the children will inevitably improve. Because an unhappy woman often has a hard time being a good mother, they argue, it follows that a happy woman will be a good mother.”⁶ However, as Wallerstein and Blakeslee point out:

It is often true that an unhappy adult finds it hard to be a nurturing parent for unhappiness can deplete the adult’s capacity to provide the care and understanding that children need. But it does not follow that a happy or happier adult will necessarily become a better parent. The “trickle down” theory is not relevant to parent-child relationships There is no reason to expect that the adult’s greater happiness will lead to a greater sensitivity or greater concern for his or her children. To the contrary, circumstances that enrich an adult’s life can easily make that adult less available to children.⁷

⁶Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade after Divorce: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 10.

⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

Even in Christian circles, it's not uncommon to find a hesitance to upset divorcees, and therefore a reluctance to give full voice to the children's perspective. Dan had this experience the very first time he shared publicly about the difficulties he was experiencing from his parents' separation. During a talk rehearsal in preparation for a high school retreat, Dan mentioned the suffering caused by his parents' split and how his faith helped him through it. One team member objected, "He shouldn't discuss his suffering about his parents' divorce. It will alienate the divorcees on the retreat." Others agreed, and Dan felt crushed. Providentially, a priest in charge spoke up and encouraged Dan to share. But the initial reaction betrays a common belief: the parent is more important.

Sadly, many ACODs do not experience the support of their church or religious community. According to Marquardt, two-thirds of young adult children of divorce in the United States report that *no one* from their church or synagogue reached out to them during their parents' divorce.⁸ On our Life-Giving Wounds retreats, we ask participants about this, and most report the same thing: no one reached out. Some of these children eventually leave the pews of our churches, in part because of this neglect, an aspect of the wound that we'll examine further in a later chapter.

The Resiliency Theory

It is often said that children of divorce are "resilient." In other words, they may feel pain, but it's limited to a short period of time, after which they will be fine and go on to live successful lives. This may be partly true on some level; many *do* show a remarkable strength. However, this idea is used by some as justification for divorce, and it can

⁸ Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, 155.

cause ACODs to minimize their struggles, thereby impeding real growth.

Divorce is a long, enduring grief and challenge for the children. One adult child of divorce put it this way:

To say that kids are resilient is to dismiss what they are actually experiencing, which is the loss of all that is good, holy, true, and stable in their world While the parents may go on to find happiness, it is the children who cannot escape the situation and must relive it each and every holiday, each and every drop-off and pick-up, and even on their wedding day and the birth of their own children.⁹

In many ways, Dan is a poster child for resiliency: he earned a Ph.D., has a stable job, has been happily married for over a decade, is a loving father, and still has a relationship with both of his parents. What more proof could you need?

Divorce is a long, enduring grief and challenge for the children.

But these outward indicators of success, while good in themselves, miss the inner struggles that, like so many children of divorce, Dan has had to face

and continues to face. ACODs are never doomed to misery, but the doctrine of resiliency should not be utilized to silence the pain.

The Sleeper Effect

Some minimize the pain of ACODs if the divorce happened long ago: “You’re still mad about that? You’re not

⁹Leila Miller, ed., *Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak* (Phoenix: LCB Publishing, 2017), 162.

over it yet?” However, there is often a time lapse between when the divorce occurred and when a person feels ready to start processing it. This “sleeper effect” is well documented in the work of Wallerstein and Marquardt.¹⁰ It is often not until young adulthood that a person feels able to dive into the impact of his parents’ divorce, facilitated perhaps by greater space and independence from his parents, or triggered by the onset of a serious relationship or a failed one. In young adulthood, self-knowledge generally deepens, and a person will likely know more about his wounds as an adult than as a child, making the young adult years crucial for addressing them.

Gray Divorce

A growing phenomenon is “gray divorce,” when parents break up after the children are adults.¹¹ Some think that the fact of adulthood—being “grown up”—means that the divorce will not hurt. However, as many children of gray divorce attest, the breaking of your family still causes serious damage in adulthood, and also brings new challenges in terms of caring for aging parents, dealing with newly complicated family dynamics, and so on.¹² Simply being grown doesn’t mean that you don’t desire to see the love of your parents together.

¹⁰ See Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds*, 9–10; and Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

¹¹ Renee Stepler, “Led by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America’s 50+ Population,” Pew Research Center, March 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>.

¹² For more on gray divorce, see Carol Hughes and Bruce Fredenburg, *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

The Ubiquity of Relational Brokenness

The sheer pervasiveness of divorce and family breakdown also contributes to the wound of silence. As we said in the introduction, fewer than half of all American children today will live with their continuously married parents throughout their entire childhood.¹³ Given the ubiquity of relational brokenness in our society today, it can begin to seem normal. The children in these situations can get the impression, or be directly told, that their suffering is insignificant because *so many* people go through it and seem fine: “If they can get over it, then so can you.” Society finds it hard to accept that many, many people may be suffering without the help they need. In this environment, some adult children of divorce internalize the message that their suffering does not count as suffering and therefore stay silent.

False Guilt and Shame

A phenomenon related to the wound of silence deserves special attention: the fact that it is common for ACODs—including Dan at times—to have a nagging feeling that their parents’ divorce was somehow their fault. We need to label clearly this feeling as *false* guilt and *false* shame. To all ACODs, we state wholeheartedly: “Your parents’ break-up *is not* your fault, but we know that feelings of shame or guilt about the divorce can contribute to not sharing about it with others.”

In the most extreme case, some parents have literally told their children that they were a direct or indirect cause of the divorce. They may have said, for instance, “If you weren’t such a difficult child, I would not have

¹³ Melanie Wasserman, “The Disparate Effects of Family Structure,” *Future of Children* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 55–82.

fought so much with your mother.” This is a form of scapegoating, instead of parents owning up to their own choices and behaviors.

Other ACODs may feel guilty because they think they could have or should have done more to prevent the split. This is especially true for those who were older when it happened. They may feel like they could have said more, counseled more, shared more resources, and so on. Some may regret that their silence of shock may have been interpreted as condoning the split. But many ACODs have gone to great lengths to help their parents, pleading with them to work it out and giving them resources, and yet their parents still divorced. Splitting up is *always* the parents’ decision (or at least the decision of one of them), regardless of a child’s action or inaction.

At times, one or both parents *involve* the child in the decision-making process of the divorce, asking the children whether they should divorce or stay married. Children who encourage the divorce may later feel complicit, ashamed, and at fault for the split. Parents might bring up these conversations later and argue that they were simply doing what the children wanted. But it is impossible for children to understand fully all the negative effects that will follow from a divorce or separation when they give their own perspective.

Other children may feel guilty because they expressed to their parents how much they hated to see them fight, maybe even asking them to divorce. But what is being expressed in this is a child’s desire for peace, safety, and love, which is something holy and good. The Church teaches that the breakdown of conjugal living should always be considered a “last resort.”¹⁴ But it can be morally

¹⁴John Paul II, encyclical letter *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 83; Francis, apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016, no. 241.

legitimate for spouses to separate or even civilly divorce in certain cases, such as when one spouse is causing “grave mental or physical danger” to the other spouse or the children, or when civil divorce “remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance.”¹⁵ A child in a highly unstable family situation should therefore not feel ashamed or guilty about asking for the dysfunction to stop; this does not make him responsible for his parents’ divorce. Children in tumultuous homes have two substantial painful experiences to grieve once the separation is complete: the toxic family behaviors that led to the split *and* the breakup itself.

Put another way, an ACOD can recognize (and even be grateful for) some legitimately good effects of his parents’ separation or civil divorce—such as freedom from abuse or turmoil—while *at the same time* grieving the loss of an intact family. Any positive consequence that comes from parents separating doesn’t change the fact that, deep down, what the child most fervently desires is for his parents to be healthy and virtu-

An ACOD can recognize some good effects of his parents’ separation or civil divorce, while at the same time grieving the loss of an intact family.

ous enough to have a peaceful, safe, loving, and happy life together. So, to the question we’re often asked, “Is the ‘real’ injury what happened before the divorce or the divorce itself?” we respond emphatically, “both.”

Children of divorce may also feel guilt and shame about their response to the divorce “announcement,” which

¹⁵ CCC, no. 2383; see also Code of Canon Law, can. 1153; Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 241.

could have included silence, laughter, or angry outbursts. Or maybe they just kept on playing and ignored it. In retrospect, we ACODs may feel that we should have done something different at this critical moment, and if we had, maybe we could have prevented the divorce somehow. Here's an example: a young girl, upon hearing the news of the divorce from her father, yelled, "Fine, I hope you leave!" He walked out without saying a word. She ran to her bedroom sobbing, and for many years felt ashamed and guilty, thinking that her response somehow led to her parents' final decision to divorce or gave approval to it. However, she later realized that what the young "her" was doing was perfectly fine for a child, and even something positive. What she was really saying in that angry outburst was, "I don't like this at all, and I want you to fight for me and the family and not abandon us!"

Dan, too, carried guilt about his parents' divorce. His father often told him, "I did this *for you*." So Dan thought that somehow he had given his father the impression that he wanted the divorce. He racked his brain for years trying to figure out why his father would have thought this. But he realized eventually that this was his father's own justification for his actions and not anything Dan actually said, wanted, or did.

Finally, ACODs often feel ashamed of the scandalous circumstances surrounding their parents' divorce—affairs, messy custody battles, or pre- and post-divorce fighting. This is compounded in the age of social media. The children may worry that someone will judge them or view them negatively. Others may put themselves under immense pressure to keep the scandal a secret. But children are entitled to disclose their family situation to whom they want, as long as it is done respectfully and for a good purpose, since it is part of their story and necessary for

their healing. And other people's public disclosure of the divorce is beyond their control.

Declarations of Nullity

Another situation that can contribute uniquely to the wound of silence is when divorced parents receive a declaration of nullity—commonly called an annulment. Civil divorce is the legal dissolution of a civil marriage contract. But Catholics believe that no power on earth, not even civil authority, can undo the sacrament of Marriage, which God has established and proclaimed as indissoluble (Mk 10:9; Mt 19:3–9; Lk 16:18).¹⁶ A declaration of nullity, issued by a Church tribunal, declares instead that a couple's previous relationship was not a valid marriage to begin with, due to some obstacle at the time of consent. Persons in this situation are considered by the Church to be unmarried, and thus are able to enter into a marital union.¹⁷ But if the Church determines that the marriage in question is in fact valid, neither spouse is free to marry, even after a civil divorce.

The goal of the declaration of nullity process is to discover and reveal the truth about a particular couple's presumed marriage—which by this point has undergone a civil divorce—in order for all involved to have clarity

¹⁶See CCC, nos. 1650, 2382; Code of Canon Law, can. 1141.

¹⁷See CCC, no. 1629; Code of Canon Law, cans. 1095–1107. It's important to clarify that no divorced Catholic is obligated to undergo the declaration of nullity process. Many divorced Catholics continue to honor their marriage vows even after an unwanted civil divorce, which is a beautiful witness. Others may embark on the declaration of nullity process out of a desire to uncover the truth of their marital situation, or to enter into a new union in the Church with a clean conscience. Much discernment and prayer are needed in these matters.

about the situation. The Church does not (and cannot) “break apart” any valid sacramental marriage, but looks at what happened leading up to the wedding day and on the wedding day itself in order to determine whether or not a valid marriage actually took place.

Some children whose parents receive a declaration of nullity find that the process brings some healing and comfort. But for others, it raises questions about their identity and their relationships (which we will discuss in chapters 5 and 6). Fundamentally, children whose parents receive a declaration of nullity experience hurt similar to that of *any* child who has lost the love of his parents together. But some may feel an additional pressure to be silent about their pain because the declaration of nullity seems to suggest that this difficult “season” is now over. We must be careful not to treat a declaration of nullity as if it instantly or magically erases all hurt, especially that of the children, who have still experienced the breakdown of their original family.

Lack of Awareness of the Wound

Probably all of us know some ACODs who adamantly insist that they are unaffected by their parents’ split. Maybe you are one of them. Sometimes stories like theirs are exploited as examples of how *all* ACODs should be: apparently unscathed and doing fine. Although we always rejoice to meet an adult child of divorce who has experienced deep healing, we would like to encourage each of you readers with divorced parents to ask yourself honestly: Were you given a chance to be affected? Were you given permission to grieve? Have you looked into the effects of divorce on children, and can you say that you never struggled in any of those ways? Have you seen growth in your

life, thanks to kind support, to help heal the hurt that you did experience?

We have yet to meet an adult child of divorce who was truly unaffected by his family's breakdown although he might be uncomfortable with acknowledging his woundedness. As with an injury to our body, however, ignoring our interior injuries doesn't heal them; on the contrary, they can fester and poison us. We have seen time and time again how powerful it is when an adult child of divorce faces his pain for the first time. Although it's hard—excruciating, even—it leads to new freedom, peace, and connections with others who are journeying on the same path toward healing. When Dan first tried to look at his experiences by himself, it was a mess. He felt angry, frustrated, and lonely, and made some bad decisions out of his hurt. This made it seem like *not thinking* about the pain was the better route. But eventually the healing process changed his life and was worth all the effort and discomfort it entailed.

In the next chapter, we'll look at *life-giving grieving* as an initial holy response to all the wounds we have experienced.

Life-Giving Grieving

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

—Matthew 5:4

“The wounds caused by our parents’ divorce can feel like a phantom limb,” says Life-Giving Wounds leader Beth Sri. What she means is, we don’t even know something serious and necessary is missing from our lives and affecting our day-to-day existence because we have grown used to the silence, minimization, and normalization of our pain. Perhaps we ignore the “missing limb” because that’s the only way we know how to function.

ACODs, you have lost something important. God wanted your parents’ marriage to be a loving, lifelong bond. He wanted you to have a home within that loving communion. You have a right to grieve your losses no matter the circumstances of your family’s breakdown. Jesus weeps with you.

The first step in healing from family wounds is to find the courage to break the silence of our suffering, face our pain, and grieve our losses. Like many children of divorce, grieving was far from Dan’s mind after his parents separated. He wanted to be self-sufficient and strong. But deep

ACODs, you have lost something important. God wanted your parents' marriage to be a loving, lifelong bond.

down, he was simply scared that if he dug too deeply, felt his pain too keenly, the past would overwhelm him.

But we have to face these fears. To do so, we must know how the past affects us. The past is never sim-

ply the past, and the same can be said of the present and future. Through the God-given gifts of intellect, will, and memory (which includes emotions), we embody a unity of time in ourselves. The past *filters* how we live and see the present, for better or for worse. The present can *transform* the past's impact on our thoughts, imagination, and life, while contributing new ideas, memories, and choices that intermix with the past. And what we think about the future *shapes* our desires and actions in the present. In the human person, the three "times" are orchestrated into a single symphony. So why not make sure the past is helping rather than hindering us? It's never too late to confront the past and change how it affects the present. To do this, we first have to grieve.

The Central Wound

All children of divorce have *lost the love of their parents together* as a unified communion. This is true no matter how brief, fragile, or even nonexistent that love was; no matter how amicable or bitter the separation was; and no matter how much love and involvement each parent individually gave after the split. God designed marriage to be a lifelong, indissoluble union of persons, within which children would be welcomed and lovingly

nurtured by their mother and father.¹ Christ made this perfectly clear to the Pharisees: “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one’? . . . What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Mt 19:4–6). Putting marriage asunder injures the soul, and this wound must be named and mourned.

A child is the living embodiment and permanent expression of the one-flesh union of his mother and father, so the fracture of that union reaches to the core of his identity and being—even if all he ever knew was one parent or a stepfamily. Enduring married love is meant to provide a strong foundation for one’s human development and give a model for all relationships to follow.² For the child, the breakdown of his parents’ relationship is like a rock thrown into still water, with the effects rippling out in every direction. These ripples touch his very origin and identity, his pursuit of love and vocation, his emotional life, and more. Divorce is not just one event but waves of events. We need to acknowledge the many ripples and allow ourselves to grieve them.

¹ See John Paul II, encyclical letter *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 19; Francis, apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016, nos. 29, 63, 71, 73.

² While neither this book nor Life-Giving Wounds’ ministry attend to the challenges caused when a child is placed for adoption or is removed from a natural parent’s custody, we acknowledge (as adoptive parents ourselves) that those wounds, of losing a home and family life with one’s first, biological parents, are real as well. While distinct in several important ways from the wounds experienced by children of divorce, they call out also for acknowledgement, understanding, and healing. In a similar vein would be the sorrow caused when a parent dies, especially when children are young, another loss not directly addressed by this book, but worthy of attention.

What Pixar and Jesus Teach Us about Grief

In some ways, the Pixar movie *Inside Out* beautifully expresses Christian grief. Eleven-year-old Riley and her parents move across the country for her father's new job. This move causes Riley great distress and disruption, but her mother asks her to be happy "for the family" because it is a stressful event for all of them. Out of love, Riley tries to be only joyful, but the internal tension she feels

Grief is an invitation to communion with God and with others who can "receive our wound."

becomes insupportable, driving her to run away to her hometown, alone. Her parents are horrified and search frantically for her. When she finally returns home, Riley discovers that her parents truly love and embrace

not only the "happy" her, but the "sad" her as well. This teaches all of them two important lessons. First, for there to be true peace, joy and sadness must coexist. In fact, in order to have profound happiness, you must at times *embrace* sadness. Second, for this sadness to lead to joy, it must be shared with others.

Now turning to the Gospels and the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt 5:4). Here Christ connects blessedness (or in some translations, happiness) with mourning. Joy and grief not only coexist but are intrinsically related. This verse can be seen as a foreshadowing of the unbreakable relationship between the Cross and the Resurrection. And here Jesus emphasizes the communal nature of grieving. He speaks in the plural: "Blessed are *those* who mourn, for *they* shall be comforted." Christ is indicating that this blessedness, this happiness, comes through a *shared* experience of mourning and comfort. Grief is an

invitation to communion with God *and* with others who can “receive our wound.”

How is this transformative and communal work of life-giving grieving accomplished? What are ways in which we can grieve well? We will outline seven points.

Seven Marks of Christian Grieving

1. Love.

In Sacred Scripture, one of the most profound scenes of sorrow is when “Jesus wept” at his friend Lazarus’ death (Jn 11:35). What is remarkable is that Jesus deeply mourned the death of Lazarus *even though* he knew he was going to raise him back to life! This shows us that we can mourn and take pain and wounds seriously even while believing core truths like the Resurrection and trusting that God can bring good out of suffering. Christ invites us in this passage not to “skip over” grieving. In fact, grief is an expression of love for who or what was lost. After Jesus wept, the people who were with Jesus immediately said, “See how he loved him!” (Jn 11:36).

By mourning the losses of our parents’ love together, the unity of our family, a peaceful childhood, and other good and holy things, we are persevering in love for our parents, our family, and ourselves, as well as for marriage the way God intended it to be experienced. As a line from the Marvel television series *WandaVision* says, “What is grief but love persevering?”

2. Reveal to heal.

To grieve well, we must do the hard work of *specifically* naming our wounds, a process we can call “reveal in order to heal.” The Scriptures—especially the book

of Lamentations and the Psalms—are full of examples of voicing clearly delineated sorrows: “My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ . . . Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? . . . I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’” (Ps 42:3, 5a, 9) Consider also the Gospel passage that relates how both Martha and Mary shared with Jesus their concrete regret that, had Jesus been there, their brother would not have died (Jn 11:21, 32).

Being *specific* about what we grieve helps us grow in self-awareness. It helps us understand the full extent and various layers of our injuries. We start to see where healing is most needed so we can present our wounds to the Divine Physician. This process of revealing takes time, especially if we need to overcome habits of silence and self-denial. Prayerful journaling can help us begin to untangle these feelings and experiences. If we ask, God will reveal our areas of hurt to us, and then we can weep with him. Christ never ran away from the sick or the suffering. Instead, he embraced them, even when society pushed them away. We also often need others to help us with this work of revealing—people who have known similar suffering and can show us a pathway forward through their own hard-earned insights.

3. Distinguish between the person and his acts.

At some point when we grieve, anger will likely arise at injustices we have experienced. Many ACODs—including Dan—feel caught between anger and love toward their parents and are unsure how to feel and express their pain while still loving their parents. In college, Dan learned the distinction between the person and his acts, which helped

him see that when we grieve an offense done to us, our attention should be directed toward the *acts* committed, and not the *person* who committed them. We can fiercely detest and name as painful wounds conflicts, abuse, neglect, betrayals, abandonment, dysfunction, rejection, and the divorce or separation itself, but yet love our parents and respect their dignity as persons.

God says, “I hate divorce” (Mal 2:16), but Jesus shows great charity toward the Samaritan woman at the well who had multiple husbands (Jn 4:1–42). Jesus honors the woman as greater than her sinful actions, while calling out her sin and exhorting her to live differently now. It is possible to be angry that your parents are divorced while still loving your parents—no matter their faults and sins, they have inherent dignity.

4. Seek out those who can receive the wound.

To grieve well, we must find people who can receive the wound with love, understanding, and empathy. Grief is an invitation to communion, first with Jesus and then with others. Not everyone we share our suffering with will be able to receive it and honor it. Many ACODs have tried to express their suffering only to have it minimized, discounted, or flat-out rejected. This can happen because of the listener’s own trauma, or his beliefs about divorce that prevent him from fully empathizing. Even Jesus had his pain minimized. When he wept at Lazarus’ death, some questioned the authenticity of his grief: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (Jn 11:37).

Special graces come from talking with a supportive peer from a similar background, someone who is also trying to heal with the help of Christ. Burdens are always lighter when carried by two. Jesus allowed others to help bear

his suffering—Simon of Cyrene helped carry his Cross (Mt 27:32). In our lives, our own “Simons” can mediate Christ’s loving gaze and compassion to us. At last we have been heard, understood, and are no longer alone. Our “Simons” can help us find freedom from the pain’s hold on us, and we can turn to them when different manifestations of the grief surface. This could happen in something as commonplace as a text message thread with close friends sharing about ongoing issues and asking for prayers. Spouses can also play an important role in receiving grief; Dan turns to Bethany when new hurts arise.

In addition to friends and peers, Catholic or Christian counselors, spiritual directors, and mentors can receive our wounds and provide reliable guidance and ongoing support in healing.³ There should be no shame or stigma in asking for professional help.

5. Expand your heart and integrate the grief.

Some sorrows cannot be fully healed or “fixed” in this earthly life, if by “healing” we mean no longer experiencing any pain or negative effects caused by a difficult situation. The suffering caused by divorce or separation can be described as a *lifelong wound*. As Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee say, “Divorce is deceptive. Legally it is a single event, but psychologically it is a chain—sometimes

³ For advice on pursuing counseling and spiritual direction, see Cafea Fruur, “Seeking Therapy as an Adult Child of Divorce,” *Life-Giving Wounds* (blog), July 9, 2020, <https://www.lifegivingwounds.org/blog/seeking-therapy-as-an-adult-child-of-divorce>; Graciela Rodriguez, “Are You Seeking Inner Peace? Spiritual Direction Can Help,” *Life-Giving Wounds* (blog), April 20, 2021, <https://www.lifegivingwounds.org/blog/spiritualdirection>; Sister Kalin Holthaus, A.V.I., “A Religious Sister’s Advice about Spiritual Direction for ACODs,” *Life-Giving Wounds* (blog), August 12, 2021, <https://www.lifegivingwounds.org/blog/a-religious-sisters-advice-about-spiritual-direction-for-acods>.

a never-ending chain—of events, relocations, and radically shifting relationships strung through time, a process that forever changes the lives of the people involved.”⁴ Divorce (and ongoing separation) rears its head at numerous moments throughout life: at holidays and family get-togethers; during milestones like weddings, births of children, celebration of sacraments, and funerals; while raising children and taking care of aging parents; and so on. In addition, divorce introduces ongoing dysfunctional dynamics into relationships with family members. Thus, divorce or separation must be grieved not just at the moment it happens, but at *all* of the various difficult moments it causes into the future.

But this should not cause us to despair or become mired in self-pity. Alongside our grief, we can live a life of joy, peace, happiness, and love if we allow Christ to expand our hearts in response to the wounds.

Grief counselor Lois Tonkin says that people tend to think that grief naturally diminishes over time—the old adage “time heals all wounds.” But what Tonkin found when working with clients who lost a loved one is that *we learn how to grow around grief* so it is better integrated into our life overall and has a relatively less prominent place within us.⁵

Drawing on Tonkin’s insight, we can think of the goal of grieving over time as an ever-enlarging heart, becoming more and more like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The grief over our parents’ split remains part of our lives, but our hearts can expand to create ever more room for joy, peace,

⁴Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade after Divorce: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), xii.

⁵Lois Tonkin, “Growing around Grief—Another Way to Look at Grief and Recovery,” *Bereavement Care* 15, no. 1 (1996): 10.

and love. We can integrate grief into these realities and vice versa. As Pope Francis says, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, “‘joy’ refers to an expansion of the heart,” which through Christ’s grace can take place even in the midst of great sorrow.⁶ When we experience a fresh wave of grief, perhaps feeling the pain as intensely as before—the path is rarely linear—it has less of a hold on us and we can “ride the wave” of pain more serenely.

6. Cultivate hope and reject self-pity and the victim mentality.

Self-pity and a “victim mentality” are not Christian ways of grieving. What we mean by these terms is a self-indulgent, excessive focus on our own trials and a hypersensitivity to our lack that fixates on our perceived powerlessness to change the situation or improve our lives. Self-pity and a victim mentality say that “all is lost,” “these bad things can never change,” “I can never change,” or “that’s just the way I am.” People with this mentality also compare their trials with those of others, thinking they have it uniquely worse than anyone else.

But Christian grieving rejects both self-pity and a victim mentality because it believes in the Lord’s promise: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they *shall be* comforted” (Mt 5:4, emphasis added). We believe in the promise of God’s comfort, a “being with” us that strengthens us (from the Latin, “*cum*-with,” “*fortis*-strength or fortress”). Saint Paul writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort

⁶Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 126.