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Fr. Randy Roche

Loyola Marymount University

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Good Grief

The words, "Good grief, Charlie Brown," frequently appeared in the Charles Schulz comic strip, and the same words have often been used by people as an exclamation at something surprising or even a bit shocking. The following is a reflection on the experience of grief as good.

Grief is not a cheerful word by itself, because it names a kind of suffering that occurs in us, usually after we experience a personal loss, especially the death of someone we love. Grief describes a painful feeling that no one desires or seeks, which is probably why we might not think of grief as good.

Loss is not good in itself, but we are good, especially to the degree that we love. And the pain of grief is related directly to love. When someone we love is separated from us or leaves us, we might experience grief, as a good and humanly appropriate means of dealing with the deep hurt in our hearts. When we grieve, it is a movement that arises from love. Grief is spontaneous when it occurs, and it enables us to cope with a painful reality by going through it with courage and love rather than denying the magnitude of our loss, or trying to explain it away.

We do not all experience grief in the same way, and each of us might find that our sadness varies greatly according to many different factors in those significant relationships that have greatly changed with or without our consent. While feelings of grief are not enjoyable, the process of mourning allows us to do something very good for ourselves: we adjust to the many small or great changes to our lives that enter our awareness whenever we are reminded of our loss.

We do not know how many of our heart-strings are attached to someone or how many consequences for us the loss of someone might be for us. Sometimes grief might involve intense feelings of pain, accompanied with tears. At other times our experience might be peaceful and nearly painless, not because we have little love in our hearts, but for any number of reasons that we do not really need to understand. Life is about loving, not primarily about understanding. Besides, feelings of grief are not a measure of our love, for love is not primarily a feeling.

The grieving process works in all of us towards the same good end, whether it occurs over a brief period or through a long series of occurrences. Even when we think that we have finished with grieving, or hardly noticed a loss at the time it happened, we can be surprised by a memory that is suddenly elicited by someone's comment, seeing a picture or spontaneously recognizing a connection between a present circumstance and the person

whose absence or changed relationship with us is still connected with our hearts in some significant manner. Whether painful or not, every experience that is connected with love is good. Even in grieving, we grow in love.

Because grief and love are so intertwined, God is present with us even during moments of intense pain. Rather than resisting grief as "something wrong," we can accept it as a consequence of love, and that is good. "Love does not come to an end." (I Cor. 13:8)