

 **Grief as a Place of Spiritual Transformation:
Christian Spirituality and the Journey
Toward Deeper Communion¹**

Abstract: Grief raises profound existential and spiritual questions that cannot be fully addressed by psychological perspectives alone. Although contemporary grief studies have significantly advanced our understanding of meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, and spiritual coping, the distinctive contribution of Christian spirituality remains underexplored. Using a theological-hermeneutical method in dialogue with contemporary grief research, this article argues that Christian spirituality understands grief not merely as adaptation to the death of a loved one but as a lifelong journey toward ever deeper communion with God, with oneself, with the Church, with others, and with the loved one whose communion of love is transformed—not destroyed—in the risen Christ. It further shows how Scripture, the paschal mystery, the Eucharist, and compassionate accompaniment enable grief gradually to become a place of hope, renewed meaning, and spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Grief; Christian Spirituality; Communion; Hope; Accompaniment; Eucharist

**Żałoba jako miejsce duchowej przemiany:
duchowość chrześcijańska i droga
ku głębszej komunii**

Abstrakt: Żałoba rodzi głębokie pytania egzystencjalne i duchowe, których nie można w pełni wyjaśnić wyłącznie z perspektywy psychologicznej. Chociaż współczesne badania nad żałobą znacząco poszerzyły rozumienie rekonstrukcji sensu, trwałych więzi (*continuing bonds*) oraz duchowego radzenia sobie ze stratą, specyficzny wkład duchowości chrześcijańskiej pozostaje wciąż niewystarczająco opracowany. Wykorzystując metodę teologiczno-hermeneutyczną w dialogu ze współczesnymi badaniami nad żałobą, artykuł ukazuje, że duchowość chrześcijańska rozumie żałobę nie jedynie jako proces przystosowania się do śmierci ukochanej osoby, lecz jako trwającą całe życie drogę ku coraz głębszej komunii z Bogiem, z samym sobą, z Kościołem, z innymi oraz z ukochaną osobą, której komunია miłości zostaje w Chrystusie

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Zmartwychwstałym przemieniona, a nie zniszczona. Artykuł pokazuje ponadto, w jaki sposób Pismo Święte, misterium paschalne, Eucharystia oraz pełne współczucia towarzyszenie sprawiają, że żałoba stopniowo staje się miejscem nadziei, odnowionego sensu i duchowej przemiany.

Słowa kluczowe: żałoba; duchowość chrześcijańska; komunია; nadzieja; towarzyszenie; Eucharystia

1. Introduction

The death of a loved one is among the most profound experiences of human life. It touches not only the emotions but also personal identity, relationships, one's understanding of life, and one's relationship with God. Consequently, grief raises fundamental questions concerning love, suffering, meaning, hope, and the destiny of the human person. Over recent decades, these questions have increasingly become the subject of interdisciplinary research, bringing together psychology, medicine, sociology, theology, and spirituality.

Contemporary grief studies have made substantial contributions to understanding grief as a multidimensional and deeply personal experience. Research on meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, and spiritual coping has demonstrated that grief is far more than an emotional response to loss. Yet these valuable insights also reveal the need for further dialogue with theological perspectives that address questions of transcendence, communion, and the ultimate meaning of love and death.

In this article, Christian spirituality is understood as the personal and communal way of living the Christian faith under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Rooted in the paschal mystery of Christ and nourished by Scripture, prayer, the sacraments, and the life of the Church, it seeks the gradual transformation of the whole person by deepening communion with God, with oneself, with others, and with creation. Within this perspective, grief is not viewed merely as a painful consequence of death but as a privileged place where God's saving presence gradually transforms human life.

The central question guiding this study is: What distinctive contribution does Christian spirituality offer to the contemporary understanding of grief? This article argues that its distinctive contribution lies in understanding grief as a lifelong journey toward ever deeper communion. Because authentic human love participates in the love of the risen Christ, death does not destroy communion but transforms its mode of presence. Consequently, grief is not primarily a journey of letting go but of learning to live this transformed communion in faith, hope, and love.

This perspective does not diminish the value of contemporary psychological approaches. On the contrary, Christian spirituality enters into dialogue with them, appreciating their insights while situating them within the broader horizon of God's saving action

in Christ. Theories of meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, and spiritual coping illuminate important dimensions of bereavement. Christian spirituality complements these perspectives by asking how God's grace accompanies grieving persons, how love is transformed rather than extinguished by death, and how communion continues to mature through participation in the life of the risen Christ.

Methodologically, the article employs a theological-hermeneutical approach in dialogue with selected contributions from contemporary grief studies. It first presents major developments within grief research before exploring the distinctive contribution of Christian spirituality through biblical reflection, theological tradition, and pastoral theology. Particular attention is given to the paschal mystery, the communion of saints, the Eucharist, and compassionate accompaniment as expressions of a spirituality that understands grief not simply as adaptation to loss but as a journey toward ever deeper communion.

2. Contemporary Grief Studies

Contemporary grief studies increasingly understand grief as a multidimensional human experience rather than a predictable sequence of emotional stages. Although grief is occasioned by the death of a loved one, it affects the whole person, including emotional, physical, cognitive, relational, existential, and spiritual dimensions. Consequently, grief is now widely recognised as a dynamic and deeply personal process shaped by individual history, relationships, culture, and faith.

One of the most influential developments in contemporary grief research is Robert A. Neimeyer's theory of meaning reconstruction. Neimeyer argues that the death of a loved one often challenges fundamental assumptions about identity, purpose, justice, and the future. Bereaved persons therefore face not only the pain of loss but also the task of reconstructing meaning within a world that has been profoundly changed. Grief thus becomes an active process of integrating the loss into a renewed life narrative rather than simply recovering from emotional suffering (Neimeyer 2001; 2016).

Thomas Attig complements this perspective by describing grief as a process of relearning the world. The death of a loved one changes everyday life in ways that cannot simply be reversed. Rather than returning to the life that existed before the loss, grieving persons gradually learn to inhabit a world permanently marked by absence while discovering new possibilities for living with meaning and hope (Attig 2011).

Another major contribution has been the theory of continuing bonds developed by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman. Contrary to earlier assumptions that healthy grieving requires emotional detachment, they argue that maintaining an enduring relationship with the loved one may represent an important dimension of healthy adaptation. Such continuing bonds are expressed through memory, gratitude, shared values, and the lasting influence of love upon everyday life (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 2014).

Alongside these developments, increasing attention has been given to the spiritual dimension of grief. Kenneth I. Pargament demonstrates that spirituality is not merely an additional coping resource but one of the principal ways in which people interpret suffering, seek meaning, and respond to life's deepest crises (Pargament 2001). Contemporary grief research therefore increasingly recognises that questions concerning transcendence, hope, forgiveness, and spiritual identity belong to the experience of grief itself rather than existing alongside it.

Together, these perspectives have significantly enriched the contemporary understanding of grief. They demonstrate that grieving is not simply a matter of emotional adjustment but involves the whole person and extends far beyond the immediate experience of loss. At the same time, they leave open important theological questions concerning the ultimate destiny of love, the meaning of communion beyond death, and the possibility that grief may become not only a process of adaptation but also a place of spiritual growth.

It is precisely within this dialogue that Christian spirituality offers its distinctive contribution. Rather than replacing contemporary psychological insights, it receives them with appreciation while interpreting grief within the broader horizon of God's saving action revealed in Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality asks not only how people adapt to the death of a loved one, but also how God's presence accompanies them, how love is transformed rather than extinguished by death, and how communion continues to mature through participation in the risen life of Christ. These questions form the starting point for the theological reflection developed in the following chapter.

3. Christian Spirituality and the Journey toward Deeper Communion

Christian spirituality understands grief as a lifelong journey toward deeper communion. Rooted in Christ's paschal mystery, it invites believers to live their grief in communion with God, with themselves, with others, with the Church, and with the loved one entrusted to God's merciful love.

From this perspective, grief is not interpreted merely as a consequence of death but as a privileged place where God's saving presence accompanies those who grieve. Christian spirituality therefore asks questions that extend beyond psychological adaptation: What becomes of love after death? How does communion continue when physical presence has ceased? How does the risen Christ transform the experience of grief? These questions do not replace psychological inquiry but open a theological horizon grounded in Christ's death and resurrection.

The distinctive contribution of Christian spirituality proposed is that grief is neither primarily a journey of detachment nor simply a process of maintaining continuing bonds.

Rather, it is a lifelong journey of learning to live within transformed communion. Because authentic love participates in the love of God revealed in the risen Christ, death does not destroy communion but transforms its mode of presence. Spiritual transformation is therefore not the starting point of Christian grief but the fruit of growing communion with God, with oneself, with the Church, with others, and with the loved one continually entrusted to God's merciful love.

The following sections develop this vision through its biblical foundations, the hope rooted in the paschal mystery, and the Christian understanding of love transformed in the risen Christ.

3.1. Biblical Foundations of Living with Grief

Christian spirituality begins not with explanations of suffering but with God's faithful presence within it. Throughout Scripture, grief is presented as an authentic expression of love rather than a sign of weak faith. The Bible neither suppresses lament nor treats it as incompatible with trust in God. Instead, it reveals that grief can become a privileged place of encounter with the God who remains present even in human suffering.

The Old Testament repeatedly portrays grieving persons bringing their sorrow honestly before God. Abraham mourns Sarah (Gen 23:2), David laments Saul, Jonathan, and Absalom (2 Sam 1:17-27; 18:33), and Job courageously questions God without abandoning his relationship with him. Likewise, the Psalms demonstrate that lament belongs to the language of faith itself. Even when God's presence seems hidden, the one who grieves continues to address God, entrusting pain, confusion, and hope to him.

This biblical understanding reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus weeps (Jn 11:33-35), revealing that divine compassion does not abolish human sorrow but enters fully into it. In Gethsemane he experiences profound anguish (Mt 26:36-46), and on the cross he prays the opening words of Psalm 22 (Mt 27:46). His suffering shows that lament and trust are not opposites. Rather, faith enables those who grieve to remain in relationship with God even when they do not yet understand the mystery they are living.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that, through Christ's death and resurrection, death has been transformed from its definitive power into a passage toward eternal life (CCC 1005-1014). Consequently, Christian spirituality does not invite grieving persons to suppress their sorrow or hasten its resolution. It encourages them to bring every dimension of their grief before God, trusting that the crucified and risen Christ continues to accompany them.

Within this biblical horizon, grief itself becomes a place where communion with God may deepen. The one who grieves gradually discovers that God's response to suffering is not

first an explanation but a presence—a presence that opens the way to hope and prepares the heart to recognise the transforming power of Christ's paschal mystery.

3.2. Hope Rooted in the Paschal Mystery

The distinctive contribution of Christian spirituality begins with the conviction that hope does not stand opposite to grief but grows from within it. Christian hope does not deny the pain of separation, nor does it seek to hasten the grieving process. Rather, it enables those who grieve to live their loss in the light of Christ's death and resurrection.

Saint Paul expresses this perspective when he encourages Christians not to grieve as others do "who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). Significantly, he does not tell believers not to grieve. Instead, he distinguishes between grief lived without hope and grief illuminated by faith in the risen Christ. Christian hope therefore changes neither the reality of death nor the experience of grief; it gradually transforms the horizon within which grief is lived.

The foundation of this hope is the paschal mystery itself. Through his death and resurrection, Christ entered the fullness of human suffering and transformed death from an ultimate end into the passage toward new life. Consequently, Christian spirituality understands grief not as a journey away from love but as a journey with the risen Christ, who continues to unite those who belong to him.

Joseph Ratzinger explains that eternal life is not simply endless existence after death but the fulfilment of personal communion with God in Christ. Because Christ has conquered death, authentic love is not extinguished but drawn into the eternal communion of God's life (Ratzinger 1988). This theological vision later receives a pastoral expression in Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* (1-2), where hope is presented not primarily as knowledge about the future but as a transforming encounter with Christ that gives meaning to the present, even amid suffering and death.

From this perspective, Christian hope is neither optimism nor certainty about the destiny of another person. Rather, it is trusting surrender to God's justice and mercy. Christian spirituality therefore continually entrusts the loved one to God, praying that he or she may attain the fullness of communion with him. As Benedict XVI reminds us, love reaches beyond death, and prayer for those who have died remains an authentic expression of the communion that unites the whole Church (Benedict XVI 2007, 48).

The paschal mystery also sheds new light on the experience of love itself. Death certainly changes the way love is lived, but it cannot destroy the communion that has its deepest source in God. Just as the risen Christ remained truly present to his disciples in a new and transformed way after the Resurrection, so too the communion of love with the loved one is not abolished but transformed in him. Grief gradually becomes the lifelong journey of learning to recognise and live this transformed communion in faith, hope, and love.

Christian spirituality therefore understands hope not as an escape from grief but as the grace to remain faithful to love while allowing Christ to transform its mode of presence. It is this paschal transformation that opens the way to a deeper understanding of communion beyond death.

3.3. Love Transformed in the Risen Christ

One of the most significant developments in contemporary grief research has been the recognition that healthy grieving does not necessarily require relinquishing one's relationship with the loved one. The theory of continuing bonds has shown that love, memory, gratitude, and personal identity continue to be shaped by the enduring significance of the one who has died (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 2014). Christian spirituality welcomes this insight while offering a deeper theological understanding of why love endures and how it is transformed in Christ.

From a Christian perspective, authentic love originates in God, who is love (1 Jn 4:8), and participates in the communion of the triune life. Roszak's (2022) interpretation of Thomas Aquinas likewise emphasises that perfection is fundamentally relational, finding its fulfilment in participation in God's creative and sustaining order rather than in isolated self-sufficiency. This insight offers a valuable theological horizon for understanding love as communion rather than possession. For this reason, death cannot destroy love. It transforms the way communion is lived, but not the communion itself. The deepest bond between persons is sustained not only by memory but by God's faithful love, from which nothing can separate us (Rom 8:38–39). The Second Vatican Council teaches that the communion between the pilgrim Church and those who have died in Christ is not interrupted by death but continues within the one Body of Christ (*Lumen Gentium* 49-51). Christian hope therefore rests not upon an imagined continuation of earthly relationships but upon participation in the risen life of Christ, who unites all the members of his Body.

This conviction also transforms remembrance and prayer. Remembering the loved one becomes more than preserving memories of the past; it is an act of gratitude, hope, and continuing love. Likewise, prayer for those who have died expresses the enduring communion of the Church as it entrusts them to God's mercy (CCC 958). At the same time, those who grieve may confidently hope that their loved ones, if they already share in Christ's glory, continue to accompany them through their loving intercession, just as the Church seeks the prayers of the saints. Thus, love remains active within the communion that Christ has established and that death cannot destroy.

The deepest expression of this communion is found in the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's life. Every Eucharistic celebration manifests and deepens the communion established through Christ's one sacrifice (John Paul II. 2003, 21-24). The Church celebrates the Eucharist in communion with the saints in heaven and prays for

those who have died, entrusting them to God's merciful love (CCC 1370-1371). In this way, the Eucharist makes visible the communion embracing the Church on earth, those being purified, and those already sharing fully in God's glory.

For those who grieve, participation in the Eucharist becomes far more than an act of remembrance. United with the crucified and risen Christ, they encounter the living source of communion that transcends death. Just as the risen Christ remained truly present to his disciples in a new mode of presence after the Resurrection, so too the communion of love with the loved one is no longer sustained by physical presence but by participation in Christ's risen life. In Holy Communion, believers are drawn ever more deeply into this mystery, discovering that the love they shared has not disappeared but is being transformed in Christ.

Christian spirituality therefore proposes a path that differs both from detachment and from attempts to recreate the former relationship through emotional dependence or imagined forms of communication. It invites those who grieve to continue loving, praying, remembering, and entrusting the loved one to God's mercy while allowing Christ gradually to transform their communion. Grief thus becomes not the slow disappearance of love but the lifelong journey of learning to live this transformed communion until its fulfilment in God's Kingdom.

4. Christian Accompaniment as a Journey of Communion

Christian spirituality understands accompaniment not primarily as providing explanations but as sharing the journey of grief. If grief is a lifelong journey toward deeper communion, then authentic accompaniment helps those who grieve discover that they do not walk this path alone. Through compassionate presence, attentive listening, prayer, and the life of the Christian community, they are gradually strengthened to live their loss in hope.

4.1. Compassionate Presence and Attentive Listening

Christian accompaniment begins with presence rather than answers. Following the example of Christ, who first drew near to those who suffered before speaking to them, pastoral accompaniment offers respectful and compassionate presence. People living with grief need trustworthy companions who patiently receive their story without interrupting, judging, minimising their pain, or offering premature explanations. Being deeply listened to allows grief to be expressed honestly and repeatedly, often many times, until the experience of loss can gradually be integrated into life. Such listening reflects God's own faithful presence and becomes a privileged place where hope quietly begins to grow (Nouwen 1979; Leech 1980; O'Malley 2017).

4.2. Learning to Live with Grief

Christian spirituality does not encourage grieving persons to forget the loved one or to return to life as it was before the loss. Because love has been transformed rather than destroyed in the risen Christ, grief becomes the lifelong process of learning to live this new reality. The loved one cannot be replaced, nor does authentic healing consist in leaving the relationship behind. Rather, through prayer, participation in the Eucharist, and everyday faithfulness, those who grieve gradually learn to integrate the loss into a renewed way of living, while remaining open to the hope that communion continues to mature in Christ (Swinton 2017; Platovnjak 2025).

4.3. The Christian Community as a Community of Hope

Grief is never meant to be carried alone. The Christian community becomes a visible expression of the communion that Christ has established through his death and resurrection. Within the Church, those who grieve encounter prayer, the proclamation of God's word, the Eucharist, and the compassionate presence of others who help bear their burden. As Roszak reminds us, Christian witness becomes credible through relationships marked by presence, hope, and charity (Roszak 2013). In this way, the Church does not remove grief but accompanies those who grieve, helping them discover that love continues to grow in the communion of Christ, whose victory over death opens the way to lasting hope.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary grief studies have significantly enriched our understanding of grief by highlighting the importance of meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, and the spiritual dimension of bereavement. Christian spirituality fully appreciates these contributions while offering a distinctive theological perspective. Rather than understanding grief primarily as adaptation to loss, it interprets it as a lifelong journey toward ever deeper communion.

The central argument of this article is that authentic love does not end with death. Because it participates in the life of the risen Christ, love is transformed rather than destroyed. Consequently, grief is not simply the gradual acceptance of absence but the lifelong process of learning to live this transformed communion with God, with oneself, with the Church, with others, and with the loved one continually entrusted to God's merciful love.

This journey is sustained by Scripture, prayer, the Eucharist, compassionate accompaniment, and the life of the Christian community. Together they enable those who grieve to discover that God's response to death is not the disappearance of love but its fulfilment in Christ's paschal mystery.

Christian spirituality therefore offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary grief studies by showing that the deepest goal of grieving is neither detachment from the loved one nor merely preserving continuing bonds, but growing ever more deeply into the communion of love that the risen Christ has opened through his victory over death.

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