

## **How to Handle Anger With God**

by Pat McCloskey, O.F.M.

When Kevin's four-month-old daughter suddenly stopped breathing one night and died in her crib, a victim of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), he was devastated. He felt, however, that expressing any anger at God would show a lack of faith because he "shouldn't feel that way." Having always considered himself a religious person, Kevin did not want to add lack of faith to his other problems. Therefore he clung tightly to a faith which forbids any expression of anger at God, a faith which risks becoming increasingly hollow. Unfortunately, his prayers run that same risk.

Brenda's college-age son fell asleep at the wheel and was killed in a one-car crash. Brenda had no trouble admitting her anger at God, but some of her friends, family and co-workers were very uncomfortable with that anger. They began to dread any conversation which might trigger a reference to Brenda's dead son. In her own words, she "raised hell," asking God "a lot of hard questions." Brenda expected some answers. Eventually she found a few people who could handle her anger and decided to keep going to church until she got the answers she sought. Brenda did not consider being angry with God a good reason to quit praying.

What would you do if you were in Kevin's or Brenda's place? What do you do when a family member, friend or co-worker faces a similar tragedy? Do you automatically say that these deaths were "God's will," that the grieving parent shouldn't be angry, and should "get over it" and get on with life? Do you send out the message that prayer is only for people who have "calmed down" and "gotten their act together?"

Deaths such as Kevin and Brenda experienced—or major losses such as an amputated limb, blindness or a mastectomy—force religious people to one of

three reactions: (1) denying their faith, (2) going through the motions or (3) reaffirming their faith in a new way.

This *Update* will try to help readers see that what we call "anger with God"—their own or someone else's—might not mean the death of faith but could actually represent the awkward start of a deeper, more honest faith. Only if we can admit that we might be—or have been—angry with God, can we truly share the faith journey of a friend, relative or co-worker who finds himself or herself in that uncomfortable, stressful and lonely situation.

As we begin, some clarifications are in order. It's important to make a clear distinction between the human *feeling* of anger and the human *decision* to act hatefully toward another person or God. Also, when the word anger is used here, it does not necessarily imply hatred. It can be simply a feeling of frustration, anguish or annoyance, however deep, in face of the evil confronting us. In the Christian code, of course, it is never moral or Christlike deliberately to act hatefully toward another human person, much less toward an all-good God.

We recognize, too, that our "anger with God" is sometimes a bit of a misstatement. For often our anger is really not directed at God, but at the *cancer* or *lightning* or *human behavior* that strikes us, or a loved one, down. The temptation to blame God for these tragedies—or for not averting them—is often based on our incomplete understanding of God and of "God's will" (which we will discuss later) and of how God operates in nature and in human affairs. Although we don't always think too clearly at the time of tragedy, we may need to realize that the anger we first feel toward God should not, in fairness, really be aimed at God but rather at the evil thing or event afflicting us.

Keeping these things in mind, we offer the following suggestions on how to bring our anger and other honest feelings before God.

### **1. Admit your anger if that's what you feel.**

Brenda's friends and Kevin assumed that feeling angry with God is bad. Therefore, they told Brenda so; Kevin chose to keep those emotions bottled up. "No telling what might happen otherwise," he reasoned. Many people wrongly believe that anger must always be destructive—that it is clearly a "bad" feeling or emotion.

As such, every emotion has an important function for us. It gives us important feedback about what is going on inside us. As suggested earlier, we need to see that *our feelings* are one thing, and our *behavior* in response to them quite another thing. Feeling anger at someone, for example, does not inevitably mean we will murder or harm that person. Anger can be expressed constructively and could lead someone to stop treating us unfairly. My expression of anger could even help bring about a reconciliation.

We can decide not to face an emotion, but we cannot stop that emotion. Even if we do not freely choose which emotion to feel at any given moment, we still have many choices about how to deal with that emotion.

Feeling angry with God, then, is not bad in itself. In fact, our faith can never grow unless we are honest about our feelings. Once we admit we can be angry with God, we become free to see the many ways in which we can express that anger. A person who feels angry with God has, in fact, many options for expressing that anger: for example, turning one's back on God, cursing the next person who says, "Don't be angry with God," or expressing that anger honestly in prayer and coming to terms with it and with God. Because some ways of expressing anger are admittedly very destructive, we need to choose ways which truly represent our deepest Christian values.

## **2. Don't restrict yourself to "nice" feelings.**

Dividing our feelings into "nice" and "not nice" categories encourages us to deny those feelings we label as "not nice." Such a denial, however, severely limits our possibilities of dealing with them.

"Nice people," Brenda's and Kevin's friends may say, "don't get angry with God." But what price do they pay for being "nice?" "Nice" five-year-olds, parents often say, shouldn't become angry with younger brothers or sisters. The truth is: five-year-olds sometimes become angry with their siblings. This is an honest, healthy feeling, but now they feel guilty and confused about it because it clashes with their self-image—or their parents' expectations that nice children shouldn't get angry. This also reinforces the idea that "not nice" feelings automatically lead to "not nice" behavior.

Adults often deny the existence of conflict so that they can be "nice." But is a relationship between two people which is so weak that it cannot withstand any quarrel worth maintaining? What kind of God is so fragile that we cannot admit, as Brenda did, honest feelings of anger before this God? Who really fears such anger? God? Or the "nice" person trying to "save" his or her faith? Such a "nice" person will probably deny the existence of many emotions which continue to work quietly but relentlessly.

If someone is angry at God because of a personal or family tragedy, denying that anger as Kevin did may encourage a faith which "goes through the motions" without any deep, inner conviction. Such a person may not "lose" his or her faith in the sense of becoming an atheist but may settle for a faith which refuses to face life with any real depth or honesty. That is the risk Kevin took in the way he dealt with his daughter's death.

In the late 1960's, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross discovered that "nice" people who do not want to admit that a friend or relative is dying actually hinder that person from going through the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). Her book *On Death and Dying* showed that often dying persons

have fewer problems in admitting their condition than friends or relatives who cling to denial in order to protect their own feelings. In the final stages of a terminal illness, in fact, a dying person who has come to acceptance will avoid people whose own need to deny the situation is stronger than the dying person's need to live honestly with it.

### **3. Be wary of a faith which is always "nice."**

The following story may explain why I fear a faith which is forever "nice," a faith which prides itself on avoiding any expression of anger with God. This story may help some readers get in touch with any unresolved anger with God and to see their faith in a new way.

By the time I was a junior in high school, I had done my share of complaining that "life isn't fair," but nothing really shook my faith in God until two nephews were born several months prematurely and died a few days later. What did I believe about God now? What could I say to my grieving brother and sister-in-law?

I was away at school, and I remember my father's letter saying that my nephews had been born, named, and baptized immediately, and that I should pray for their survival. Up to that time I had prayed for various people but never for someone literally in a life-or-death situation. Earlier petitions might have concerned more trivial matters, but this was big-league praying.

Here was the clearest and most painful case of innocent suffering I had ever encountered. How could God not hear my prayers and those of our whole family for those tiny infants? For some reason I felt confident that they would make it, and therefore I was devastated when I learned that my nephews had died.

How could a good God let this happen? I asked with hurt and anger. To say that my nephews died of "natural causes" seemed heartless and dishonest. Furthermore, I could not believe that their deaths were "God's will," at least in the

sense that that's what God really wanted. Nevertheless, at that time I thought that "nice" people never get angry at God. Though puzzled and hurt, they somehow "get over it" and "life goes on."

Besides, the Catholic Church teaches that baptized infants who die go straight to heaven. Who was I to complain? Slowly my confusion and anger subsided and life returned to a new kind of normalcy. Two years later my brother and sister-in-law had a healthy baby girl, and I was ready to let God off the hook—so to speak. Years later when I read Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's book and reflected on other experiences of loss, I began to see the danger of a faith which is more "nice" than honest.

Admitting our anger with God does not destroy faith but rather forces us to clarify what we believe and why, to move from a child's faith to an adult's faith. Though refusing to admit anger with God may seem to protect one's faith, I am convinced that in the long run it does more harm than good.

#### **4. Let your honesty lead to growth in faith.**

In 1986, Sister Suzanne Schrautemyer went to a doctor because of a lump under her left arm. Tests showed that cancer had spread to her bone marrow. Earlier, she had undergone a partial mastectomy, a bilateral mastectomy, radiation treatment and chemotherapy. At this point, Sister Suzanne (age 39) decided to accept her coming death and discontinue chemotherapy.

She had gone through several months of low-grade anger and depression, having difficulty talking about this with anyone. "I had to be assured it's okay to be angry, to doubt, to be broken and down," she said. "I don't believe now that my faith is insulted by my anger and doubt. I had to move through it—those real human experiences—before I could let go of it."

When she told the sisters in her community about her decision to discontinue chemotherapy, they felt angry and depressed. "I told them I needed them to be real. If they were angry at me for being sick again, that's okay, I said. If they're angry at God because I might be dying, that's okay. And it's okay to show that to me. I told them I wanted them—and needed them—to be real."

Had her faith changed during that two-year ordeal? "Yes, it's simpler," she told a newspaper reporter. "I used to think some places, people, times were more sacred than others. My experience of faith now tells me that everything, every moment is sacred. Everything that happens is a sacrament, a moment when God becomes tangible and life is real. That's what's different."

Admitting her anger did not cure Sister Suzanne of her cancer, but it allowed her to live honestly, to choose how she would deal with her feelings rather than try to pretend they didn't exist. Such honesty led her to a more adult faith, to a fuller appreciation of the present moment and of God's providence. Thus, her initial anger with God led not to denying her faith or "going through the motions" but to a deeper, richer faith able to put its arms around all of life—even her coming death.

## **5. Be careful how you speak of "God's will."**

In dealing with tragedies such as Kevin, Brenda and Sister Suzanne faced—or the ones we have suffered or observed very closely—religious men and women often describe them as "God's will." Unfortunately, people who readily speak of "God's will" in such circumstances are frequently the same people who acknowledge only their "nice" feelings. Thus, because "nice" people never get angry with God, the suffering person may feel that he or she can "keep" the faith only by denying that anger, as Kevin did when his daughter died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Or the person may express that anger and thereby "lose" his or her faith.

People who refuse to admit any anger with God and who immediately describe a tragedy as "God's will" may have the best of intentions. Experience, however, shows us that people most often speak about suffering as "God's will" when they are talking about someone *else's* suffering.

In a three-panel cartoon, an old and bearded God is shown as sitting on a cloud, thinking. Then he picks a number from a rotating device similar to the kind used by people calling bingo numbers. The final panel shows part of a balcony falling on a man walking on the sidewalk. When many people use the term "God's will," they are not saying that God sends suffering to people whose number comes up. But that is often the message which the suffering person hears: "My number has come up. 'Nice' people, however, never get angry."

We can describe any suffering as "God's will" in the sense that God has not intervened to prevent that suffering from striking some individual. Or God "allows" the laws of nature to follow their normal course. But that is very different from "God's will" as described in the cartoon above in such a misleading way.

Doesn't it make more sense to describe "God's will" as "what we know God wants"—that each person share in the divine life and reflect the image of God in which he or she was created? God wants people to be healthy and fully alive. The famous parable of the Good Samaritan certainly expresses "God's will" for our suffering brothers and sisters—that we be ready to inconvenience ourselves as we try to relieve human suffering. Glib talk about "God's will" for other people can easily excuse us from the works of compassion and mercy which Jesus praised.

God has made a world where men and women can use their freedom constructively or in destructive ways. But tragedies such as Kevin, Brenda and Sister Suzanne faced are not anyone's "fault" in the sense that they result from the abuse of human freedom. Their tragedies, plus others resulting from floods, earthquakes and cancer, strike saints and sinners alike. Sweetly telling bereaved

people that they will be united with their loved ones in the next life may only end up shaming grieving brothers and sisters into denying the deep pain they feel right now. "You shouldn't feel that way" could be the worst thing we can say under such circumstances. Standing by them in their grief and helping them see their options for expressing their sorrow is probably the most faith-filled response we can make.

## **6. Express your feelings honestly when you pray.**

Because most people think that prayer should always be a peaceful, serene experience, they have trouble imagining that an angry person could really pray. Better to wait until he or she has "cooled down" before praying. Unfortunately, grieving people who accept that message frequently try to pray (communicate with God) without ever mentioning the most important things or feelings which need to be communicated. Such an attitude leads either to superficial prayers ("being nice" at all costs) or abandoning prayer as dishonest. People who pray honestly in anger can grow into a faith which is perhaps not as "nice" as before but is obviously more honest. Moreover, these are the people who are most ready to understand and assist others who are bandaging up life's physical or emotional wounds.

If I can face an emotion like anger with God, see my own freedom in responding to that emotion, pray honestly if not elegantly, then I might be able to help a suffering person put his or her life back together. But if I refuse to recognize "bad" feelings in myself, or believe that genuine prayer is always serene, I will certainly become an obstacle to someone else's faith. Moreover, I may unintentionally indicate a path which leads not to deeper faith in God but to rejection of God or "going through the motions" of belief because that seems easier.

Praying amid my own anger or encouraging someone else to pray honestly in his or her anger may feel awkward and not much like any prayer I've ever known.

From such soil, however, God may nurture a faith unlike the one I had—or the other person had—when everything went very smoothly and there was no reason to pray in anger.

## **7. Recognize when it's time to move beyond anger.**

We become angry when we suffer a loss such as Brenda or Kevin experienced—or a smaller loss. If we try to deny the anger, we choose, in effect, to be forever manipulated by it. Admitting the anger, on the other hand, does not entitle us to "special handling" for the rest of our lives. People frozen in anger can become as callous as people who prefer "being nice" at all costs. Dealing with anger—our own or someone else's—can lead to growth, to deeper compassion, to a deeper faith in God. Dealing with anger will not erase Kevin's or Brenda's sorrow, but it will enable them to live honestly and to help others who have experienced great loss. If anger becomes a permanent condition, however, the person stops long before the journey is complete.

Our goal is an adult faith in God—however much that may resemble or differ from the faith in God we had as children. Adults ready to grow in faith can face their anger, recognize their God-given freedom in the face of it and encourage others to do the same. Kevin could deal with his anger and thus discover a more adult faith; Brenda may yet discover that God wants to help her transform her anger into compassion.

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# Summary of “How to Handle Anger With God”

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