

Word on Worship

Words at Funerals

Newsletter of the Worship Office, Archdiocese of Newark, NJ

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Barbara's Funeral Homily. Wednesday 10 am.

Today this church is filled with people who have gathered to say farewell to Barbara. People whose hearts are filled with pain and sorrow at the loss of such a good and holy woman.

There are her three children here in the front pews. There is Barbara's oldest son, John, and his family from Buffalo. Then Peter and his wife from San Diego. And of course, Louise and her dear husband, Mark, who along with their little ones, Robbie and Connie, helped to care for Barbara during the last months of her battle with cancer.

There are Barbara's life long friends, Allison and Richard, who proclaimed the two scripture readings we just heard. Allison read from the Book of Wisdom, and Richard from Paul's Letter to the Romans. I must say, you both did a wonderful job. Barbara, who I know always remarked when someone read the scriptures well at Mass, would have said "Good job!"

There are the members of the Home School Association, to which Barbara belonged while her own three children were attending our parish school. That association does a wonderful job in supporting Catholic education. In fact, Barbara was so involved and impressed with the group that she continued to be a member even after John, Peter, and Louise graduated from Our Lady of Visitation School. And there are all you others - neighbors, relatives, and fellow parishioners - filling up almost half the church. All of you mourning the death of Barbara.

But the person here most in pain and grief, and most in need of our prayers, is Barbara's husband of 38 years, Ron. What a devoted husband! I don't think I ever saw the two of them apart. When Barbara was at Mass or at a parish meeting, I would see Ron next to her, sometimes a little sleepy from his late night shift at the Post Office, but there with his beloved wife.

We are all here because we have been touched and made better by the dear woman whose body we honor with Christian burial. A woman who came to Mass. A woman who prayed. A woman who gave her life to her family. A woman who never lost hope, even when she was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer some 18 months ago. As she told me "I'll never give up. I'll fight this thing to end." And fight it, she did! Her doctors told her she would die within three months. I guess she had God fighting on her side to keep her with us so much longer than that three months.

I know that the God who was with her then, is with her now, bringing her into new life, saying "Barbara come and join my angels and saints. Be part of my family in heaven." That's a vision which gives hope and consolation to Ron, and to his children, Peter, John and Louise, and to Richard and Allison, and to all of us, even on such a sad day. Thank God, we have our faith!

While admittedly fictional, what you just read is an example of what often passes for a funeral homily. But are those words of a funeral homily or are they something else? Are such words appropriate during any part of a funeral Mass? In this article I would like to consider the funeral homily. What is its purpose? How does it fit into the liturgy? What should it contain? How does one balance the requirements of the liturgy with the emotional needs of the bereaved?

THE FUNERAL MASS

While we might begin this consideration by looking at what is said about the homily in the *Order of Christian Funerals* published in 1989 and mandated for use at all funeral celebrations in the United States, perhaps the better place to begin is with the funeral liturgy. The funeral homily does not exist in isolation, it is part of the funeral Mass.

The funeral Mass, like any Mass, "gathers together the

people of God, with a priest presiding in the person of Christ, to celebrate the memorial of the Lord or eucharistic sacrifice. For this reason the promise of Christ is particularly true of such a local congregation of the Church: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." (Matthew 18:20). In the celebration of Mass, which perpetuates the sacrifice of the cross, Christ is really present in the assembly itself, which is gathered in his name, in the person of the minister, in his word, and indeed substantially and unceasingly under the eucharistic species." (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 7)

The funeral Mass celebrates the paschal mystery and the presence of Christ. This is evident in both the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the eucharist. Both are centered on the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord by which we are saved and set free.

The Scripture readings of the funeral Mass "proclaim the paschal mystery, teach remembrance of the dead, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, and encourage the witness of Christian life. Above all, the readings tell of God's design for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called his own." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 137)

Then "the community, having been spiritually renewed at the table of God's word, turns for spiritual nourishment to the table of the eucharist. The community with the priest offers to the Father the sacrifice of the new covenant and shares in the one bread and the one cup. In partaking of the body of Christ, all are

given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 143)

The funeral Mass centers on the paschal mystery, not on the deceased. It is a celebration of the faith of the Church. Since this is the case, anything which directs attention from the paschal mystery, anything not associated with the paschal mystery, has no place in the liturgy, including the homily. "Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 5)

THE FUNERAL HOMILY

The homily at a funeral Mass is to do what a homily always should do, namely, help people look at life through the lens of the scriptures and see there the presence and action of God. Seeing that, people are led to respond to God by praise and worship in the liturgy and by lives lived in conformity with the gospel. (see *Fulfilled in Your Hearing, The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, NCCB, 1982, Part IV)

The *Order of Christian Funerals* puts it this way: "A brief homily based on the readings is always to be given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should also help the members of the



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assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well. Through the homily members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 37)

NOT EULOGIES

Homilies are not to be replaced by eulogies which praise the good qualities of the deceased or recall happy memories and past events. Such "homilies" deprive people of the good news of the gospel which proclaims that in Christ life is changed, not ended. Such eulogies also convey that Christianity has nothing distinctive to say about life or death. In fact, in the example given at the start of this article, the name of Jesus Christ is not mentioned once.

Many times those attending a funeral are Catholics who rarely come to Mass, or they are people without any

connection to Christ or his Church. The funeral homily presents a special opportunity to proclaim the gospel to those who rarely hear it. It also presents an opportunity to show how the gospel can make sense out of life and death, and can give hope and consolation even in the midst of sorrow and grief. If we offer our hearers eulogies filled with platitudes, pleasant memories, and emotional tugs at the heart, we deprive them of God's life-giving word and the life-changing Word.

Eulogies at funerals also do something else. They tend to make the funeral liturgy a private, family affair, rather than the celebration of the wider Church. In the scripture readings and the homily, the Church tells stories of the family of faith. These stories proclaim how God has acted in the lives of his holy people of old and they help us to see how God is continuing to act in the lives of his people today. If we replace these stories of faith with stories about the deceased and his or her interactions with others, we focus attention on the pain, the loss, the memories of an individual family. We ignore the communal, ecclesial dimension of our liturgy. Like the entire liturgy, the homily is to proclaim the faith of the

Church. It is not to be a eulogy proclaiming the memories of the bereaved.

WORDS OF REMEMBRANCE

As we see, the homily has a particular role and place in the funeral liturgy. However, the *Order of Christian Funerals* does provide a place where memories of the deceased might be shared. This can take place after the liturgy of the eucharist concludes with the prayer after communion, and before the beginning of the final commendation. The rite states, "A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 170)

This option, however, needs to be carefully understood. Too often at this point in the funeral liturgy one individual after another makes his or her way to the pulpit. There the person tells personal stories or anecdotes about the deceased which bring the congregation to tears or to laughter. Each speaker seems to try to outdo the one before. Sometimes such remarks are even addressed directly to the deceased. Speakers thank the deceased for all he or she has done for them or the family, or at times speakers seek forgiveness for past mistakes, or even tell the deceased that he or she is forgiven for his or her past sins and failings. While individuals may have a need to express such sentiments, memories, and emotions, the liturgy is not the place to do so. Such talks might be given while the family is gathered at the funeral home, at the graveside following the committal service, or during the repast

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In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says: "We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, otherwise you might yield to grief, like those who have no hope." What the Thessalonians are to be clear about, of course, is that the resurrection of Jesus promises eternal life and happiness to all who die in him. Thus, grief continues to be a reality in the human experience of the death of a loved one, but without the hopelessness that accompanies the bereavement of those who do not believe.

Paul might well be giving a directive to those responsible for preparing funeral liturgies. Indeed, our liturgical celebrations of Christian death must minister to both aspects of the experience: the loss of a loved one in the mystery of death, and the hope that is ours because we believe that "life is changed, not ended."

In this article, we shall take a look at the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF), actually a complexus of liturgies - from three perspectives: first, as **Liturgy**, second, as **Paschal**, and third, as **Pastoral**, and see what the musical implications of Paul's words might be.

taken seriously. In other words, the funeral is liturgy, and the music should be so prepared as to reflect this. An effective song leader at the funeral Mass, with or without a choir, is necessary in order to encourage the active musical participation of all. It should be quite clear to the congregation that its participation is invited. The same principles that govern good Sunday liturgy also apply at funeral liturgies: Eucharistic acclamations should be strong, familiar melodies so that people can sing them readily and even automatically. This is especially important when one considers that a funeral congregation often comes from a variety of parishes with different repertoires. Hymns with familiar, easily sung refrains also make for increased participation at the vigil, the Mass, and even the committal, although this last is probably the most difficult challenge musically. Although liturgy is never to be seen as a catechetical tool, the fact is that good liturgy teaches subliminally; if our people experience the various rites of the OCF as intimately related to their Sunday experience, we have helped them to see a bit more clearly what it is that we are about in both the Sunday

in the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of the dying and rising of Christ into which we have been baptized. The experience hits home in a very real way. Neither aspect of the mystery, dying or rising, can be neglected without shortchanging the people who have come to bid farewell, in Christian hope, to a beloved relative or friend. Music that echoes the Easter mystery and the baptismal rituals of the parish community can be particularly helpful in this regard. The death aspect of the mystery is most acutely felt, of course, by those closest to the deceased, and their feelings must be taken into account with great sensitivity when the music is chosen. The music should honestly echo the sense of loss that is always part of someone's death, even at an old age and after a long illness. More and more liturgists are seeing the need for reviving songs and psalms of lament, so that even as we express our faith in resurrection, we are not trivializing that faith by pretending that the darkness isn't really there. It is, and we can be of immense service both theologically and emotionally to our congregations by finding music that expresses, in a Christian way, the "dark side" of death, even as we "wait in patient hope for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" and the renewal of all creation. In a culture that shies away from naming the darkness of sin and death as being somehow "negative," we can be of immense, counter-cultural help in fashioning a style of funeral ritual that heals precisely because of its honesty. And we don't need to fear that honesty, because in our sinfulness and darkness we still dare to hope in the God who is forgiveness, light, and peace.

At the same time, the music at

SINGING THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

THE FUNERAL AS LITURGY

The *Order of Christian Funerals* organizes the liturgical celebration of the funeral into three major segments: the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Mass, and the Rite of Committal. In each of these, Vatican II's desire for "full, conscious, and active" participation must be

celebration of the Paschal Mystery, and the strikingly personal appropriation of that Mystery in the rites for a departed loved one.

THE FUNERAL AS PASCHAL

It is at the funeral, as at no other liturgy, that we are challenged to express our faith

THE FUNERAL AS PASTORAL

Musicians and artists are accustomed to speak of the "pastoral judgment," which always addresses the question of how a particular piece of music, or a particular work of art, enables the prayer of **this** particular congregation in the here and now.

When preparing for a funeral, the pastoral judgment is clearly of paramount importance, given the sensitivity of the occasion. Special circumstances must always be taken into account: planning the music for the funeral of an elderly and beloved grandparent of a large and cohesive family is quite different from dealing with the loss of a small child in a car accident. Acclaiming the triumph of Christ must always be there, but it will sound differently in celebrating the passing of one who has attained the fullness of years and in expressing the poignant (although hope-filled) grief of parents who are burying a little one. Songs such as *Holy Darkness* by Dan Schutte or *I Know That My Redeemer Lives* by Scott Soper (both published by Oregon Catholic Press) can be of immense help in expressing the Christian attitude towards the mystery of death, especially when it occurs in an untimely or unexpected way. Psalms of lament are also finding their way back into the repertoire, as we acknowledge that before we can rejoice in the light we must name the darkness. The mystery never stops there, of course, but it is trivialized if the loss and grief are not claimed for what they are.

What about the "special requests" that are made by family and friends? Some musical selections, if they are liturgical in nature, can easily



a funeral needs to articulate the "upside," so to speak, of the paschal mystery, the fact that death leads to new life, to resurrection, already prefigured in the baptism of the departed. Thus, songs that affirm the resurrection, the triumph of Christ over sin and

death and darkness, the meaning of baptism, should be part of the parish funeral repertoire. Particularly for parishioners who attend the funeral, there can be a striking connection between what they sing at baptisms, and what they sing at funerals.

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be worked into the funeral; often these pieces require a solo cantor and can nicely work as music for the preparation of gifts. We hit a "slippery slope," however, when we receive requests for personal favorites that are popular or theatrical in nature, with no real connection to the liturgy. Funerals, like baptisms and weddings, are not primarily family or private events, but ecclesial events; we come to the Church and ask that Church to bury our loved one. Therefore, we are implicitly asking that Church to bury the departed in its own particular way, because we value that way.

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Pastoral challenges abound in enhancing the vigil and/or committal with music. More often than not, these services will be led by a priest or deacon, with only a reader to assist – if that! One might consider providing participation aids for the vigil and the committal. The participation aid for the vigil might include simple, familiar options for opening and closing songs (perhaps even using different songs for different liturgical seasons, all in one booklet), and several possibilities for psalm responses (perhaps Psalm 23 and 27, which have been set to music by various contemporary composers). Be

sure to secure copyright permissions. A simple psalm refrain could be sung while the psalm verses are read, if no one is available to do solo singing on the verses. This means, of course, that the priest, deacon or other minister who leads the vigil must be willing to intone the psalm refrain if no cantor is available. Chanting prayers that require an "Amen" response from the assembled group will also add a note of solemnity.

A parish's bereavement ministry might include providing song leaders at wakes and committals. A participation aid could be provided for the committal rite. This participation aid could include a sung *Blessed Be the Lord our God* for the prayer over the place of committal, and a short and familiar closing song. Simply chanted prayers also invite a chanted "Amen." If the parish cannot supply a cantor, the presiding minister could intone the response on one note and begin the closing song.

A good pastoral practice that has found success in many parishes is the establishment of a funeral choir. Consisting of retired persons, those who work at home, and other available folks, such a group can add a fine touch of melody and carry the congregation through hymns and acclamations. A family that arrives at the church and sees a choir ready to sing the departed into the embrace of the Trinity, knows that the Church cares, that the Church sees the importance of the departed as a baptized member of the Body of Christ.

An interesting way of integrating the funeral experience into the Church's liturgical life is to make a judicious and sensitive use of

seasonal music. An Advent funeral, for example, might be enhanced by the sentiments of longing and waiting for the Lord expressed in *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* or *Wake, O Wake, for Night is Flying*. Similarly, some of the verses of *Good Christians All Rejoice, Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, or *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear* make obvious references to the paschal mystery and to our longing for light and peace, and, therefore, might be appropriate at a Christian funeral. The Lent and Easter repertoires, of course, abound with examples of texts that express the Christian mystery of death and resurrection. Thus, with proper sensitivity to the bereaved, the Christian can take its place in the Church's overall seasonal worship and be seen as a real expression of what that seasonal worship is all about. This, in turn, will bring new depth and meaning to the hymns sung Sunday after Sunday, season after season.

These simple suggestions can help to make the major rituals of the OCF more graceful, and clearly more related to the mystery that is celebrated every Sunday, and indeed every day, by the Church. Music can soothe, console and create a sense of ease and familiarity at a time when the all-too-uncomfortable sense of death pervades our lives. At the same time, it can both allow for the honest expression of grief, loss, and the unfathomable mystery of God, and move us beyond to the radiant hope that is ours in the Risen Lord Jesus.+

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“The family would prefer to go with a chapel service instead of a Mass in church. Can you help us, Father?” More and more parishes are getting requests from funeral directors for a chapel service in the funeral home instead of a funeral Mass at church. In some cases, the deceased may not have been an active practicing Catholic. In other instances, there may be few survivors or distant relatives or people from out-of-town. I know of one situation where the survivors who made the request were totally unaware that their uncle was quite closely affiliated with the parish. Perhaps the family wants to have it over and done with as soon as possible. Financial considerations may also enter into the decision.

How are we to respond to these requests in a pastoral manner, one faithful to our tradition yet sensitive to the mourners? At least one parish has put together a helpful brochure entitled “Why Catholics Are Buried with a Mass” (St. Valentine Parish, Bloomfield. See side bar) drawing upon material from the revised *Order of Christian Funerals*. (OCF 1989) To be sure, the OCF presumes the Mass will be the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. (5, see also 154) Moreover, even in the case where for liturgical or pastoral reasons there is no Mass, the rite for “Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass” assumes the service takes place in the church building and not in a funeral home. And in these instances the mourners are urged to schedule a Mass for the deceased at a convenient time after the funeral. (128)

The OCF is an authentic witness to the tradition of the Church. It represents a rich theological source, for worship

shapes belief (*Lex orandi - lex credendi*). The introductory paragraphs of the pastoral introduction describe the mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection as giving power to all of the Church’s activity. The Church is born from the pierced side of Jesus as he hung upon the cross (Jn 19:31-37). From his side flowed water and blood: an

accompanying the sprinkling with holy water underscore the great day when the new Christian was plunged into the mystery of Christ crucified and risen. The white pall is emblematic of the baptismal garment with which a Christian is clothed at baptism. The Easter candle is a symbol of the presence of the risen Christ as the body of the

Why Not a Chapel Service?

allusion to the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, the font and the table, the twin pillars of the Church’s sacramental life. “At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the eucharist.” (4)

Great significance is attached to the opening rites of reception of the body at the doors of the church, since the church building is the house of the church, the place where the community of faith assembles for worship. “The church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in baptism, nourished in the eucharist, and where the community gathers to commend one of its deceased members to the Father.” (131) The baptismal symbols which make up the reception rite recall the day when the departed Christian was washed in the waters of baptism and marked with the sign of faith. The words

deceased is brought to the church for the last time.

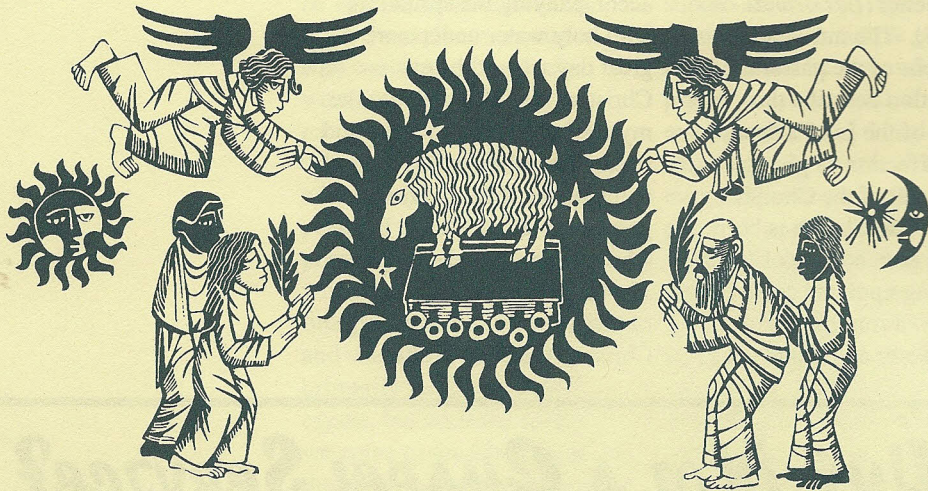
So much for the baptismal symbols at the reception of the body which can only be done properly in a church. But why the eucharistic sacrifice? The sacrifice of the Mass is **for God**: an act of worship, an oblation of praise and thanksgiving for the **gift of life** now entrusted to the Author of Life. The funeral Mass is **for the deceased**. Maybe we need to re-assess the whole practice of Mass stipends or offerings. We certainly need to re-assert the value of praying for the dead. The Church on earth is joined to the Church in heaven, the communion of saints, commending the deceased to God’s mercy and interceding for the forgiveness of sins. Finally, the funeral Mass is **for the living**. The funeral Mass can be a kerygmatic moment inasmuch as the words and actions of liturgy proclaim the hope and consolation of the risen Christ to all who await the final passage and homecoming to God.

Why a chapel service instead of a funeral Mass? Other issues are also at work here.

1. Beware of an attempt to **short-circuit the grieving process** by paring down the funeral liturgy to a bare

A photo ready reprint “Why Catholics are Buried with a Mass” appears on page 77 of this issue. A cover with the title, appropriate graphic and parish name needs to be added on the reverse side to complete a booklet form.

Copies of the brochures can be given to funeral directors who most frequently handle parishioners’ funerals. They can display them with the other pamphlets they provide for visitors. Also the directors should be asked to give copies to those who are making arrangements before any decisions are made regarding the burial of their loved ones.



minimum. One symptom of this in our death-denying culture could be the increasing number of funerals without any wake or viewing time. Funerals are a classic rite of passage – for the deceased to be sure! – but also for the mourners who need to articulate their loss, express sorrow, and find support from others. The format of the OCF captures the traditional way funerals are celebrated in this country: three stations of home, church, and cemetery hinged together by two processions. The church on earth accompanies our beloved brother/sister as far as we can go before entrusting his/her soul to the saints and angels, to Mary our Mother, and to the Lord Jesus.

2. The increasing number of requests for a funeral service outside of church, and indeed, often without a formal religious service for baptized Catholics, points to the growing need for **evangelization**, or better, re-evangelization. Much insight can be gained from the U.S. Bishops' national plan and strategy for Catholic evangelization entitled *Go and Make Disciples* (1992). Pastoral ministers need to see the occasion of the loss of a loved one as an evangelizing moment. The most important

message to be conveyed would be something like this: the funeral Mass is not a reward for good living, but the acknowledgment that one of our own has passed on to a God whose mercy and compassion far outstrip our notions of human justice and vindication. Wherever one has been on his/her faith journey, the baptized Christian has been sealed (sacramental character) with the sign of the cross of the Good Shepherd who will never desert his own.

3. A funeral liturgy without Mass could be one more sad indication of the **loss of the centrality of the eucharist** in the lives of many Catholic faithful. The eucharist is the sacrament of the unity of the Church, uniting us to the risen Lord and to one another. To be a Catholic and to be a eucharistic Christian are two sides of the same coin. The declining number of priestly ministers and the proliferation of Sunday communion services in the absence of a priest are worrisome signs that we may be losing our eucharistic consciousness. In this regard Fr. Tom Iwanowski's challenging article on "Communal Funeral Masses" deserves re-reading.

4. A final consideration is the need to develop further the

ministry of consolation in parish life which can project an image of a Church which has something to offer grieving family members in a time of crisis. "The Church calls each member of Christ's Body – priest, deacon, layperson – to participate in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn." (8) Many parishes have introduced a Bereavement Team or Lazarus Ministry. This ministry consists of parishioners who are present to the family offering support and volunteering their services, e.g., cooking meals, baby sitting, transportation to airports. Members of the team can provide the reader and servers at the funeral Mass. They can also form the nucleus of a worshipping community, especially when the mourners are few in number or unfamiliar with Catholic liturgy. Presence and sensitivity are the two qualities called for by the bereavement ministry.

Monsignor John F. O'Brien, a respected professor, spent his entire priestly ministry at Immaculate Conception Seminary. In the days before Vatican II, he would jokingly list as the one secure right of the lowly seminarian the right to Christian burial! Actually, this is a basic right of all baptized Christians, as Archbishop Gerety strongly asserted in one of his first pastoral instructions in 1976: "Christian burial is a RIGHT and not a privilege." Would it not be a shame if Catholics were to forego the full implications of this right by being buried at a rite without Mass?+

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One Thursday afternoon I returned to the rectory, after being away for a day and a half, to discover that three funerals had been scheduled for Saturday morning. We had one at 9:30, another at 10:30, and a third at 11:30. In addition we had our usual Saturday morning Mass at 8:30 AM, a special monthly Mass for one of our parish organizations which had to be moved to 12:30 PM because of the funerals, a nuptial Mass at 4 PM and our regular Saturday evening Mass at 6 PM. Seven Masses in total.

Four of them would be poorly attended. Our usual Saturday morning Mass would have about 35 people. Each of the funerals, if averages held, would have no more than 40 people at best. All in a church that accommodates 550. The situation immediately brought to mind a question that I had been thinking about for some time. Why do we have individual funeral Masses? Instead of having three funerals Masses in a row, why not one funeral Mass with three caskets present?

While it might seem strange to suggest such a thing, if we look at what we do in other liturgical situations it would not appear strange at all. In fact communal funeral Masses would be more in keeping with our liturgical practice in other areas.

When we baptize, for example, we do not have one private baptism after another. Instead we have a communal celebration of the sacrament. We assemble the community as we incorporate new members into the Church and into the paschal mystery.

When we confirm we bring together candidates, sponsors, and other parish members for a

communal celebration at which the bishop presides. We do not have a series of individual, family-centered celebrations of confirmation.

When we initiate children into the eucharist, we generally do so in a communal celebration. A large part of the parish is present as the children receive

the body and blood of the Lord for the first time.

If we look at the other sacraments, we see that communal celebrations are equally accepted. We have communal anointings of the sick. We have communal penance services. We have communal ordinations to the diaconate and the priesthood. And while they are not common, communal celebrations of marriage do occur and are envisioned by the rite. (See 38 of the *Rite of Marriage*)

As a Church we pray together as a community. When more than one member of the community is to receive a sacrament on a given day, we have a communal celebration. We do not schedule separate ceremonies. We do not privatize; we make our celebrations communal. "It must be emphasized that rites which are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating, should be celebrated in that way rather than by individuals and quasi-privately. This applies with special force to the celebration of Mass... and to the administration of the sacraments." (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 27) Our

liturgical prayer is communal.

Why then, when two Catholics are to be buried on the same day, from the same church, do we separate them from one another? Why do we make their funeral Masses individual affairs? Why do we separate the deceased instead of gathering them, their relatives,

COMMUNAL FUNERAL MASSES

friends and fellow parishioners around one altar for one funeral Mass? In life the deceased were part of one worshipping community; why should things be different in death?

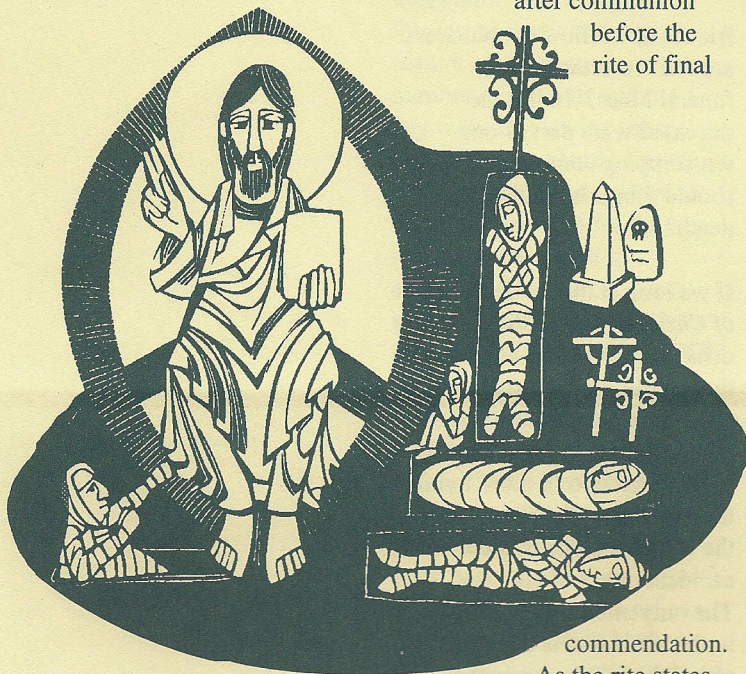
If we look at the revised *Order of Christian Funerals*, there does not seem to be anything that would prohibit such communal funeral Masses. In fact such liturgies already take place when two or more family members or parishioners die as the result of some tragic accident or act of violence. The only alteration necessary in the ritual text is to make plural the references to the deceased.

The homily should pose no difficulty, since as the rite points out the homily is not to be a eulogy but rather a proclamation of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It is the Good News that needs to be proclaimed and not the life story of an individual. "A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy... but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the

Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 27)

If there is a need for a more personal emphasis, this could be done following the prayer after communion

before the rite of final



commendation.

As the rite states,

"a member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins. (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 170) The vigil service and the committal service also provide an opportunity for any individual emphasis that may be felt necessary.

Before communal funeral Masses would be introduced, the people of the parish obviously would need to be informed and educated about the practice. This could be done through several homilies, especially appropriate near the feast of All Souls, as well as through a series of bulletin

announcements and through specially prepared booklets available at the parish and at local funeral homes. Such booklets could explain the practice, answer questions which might arise, and help the family appreciate the meaning of Christian burial and the funeral liturgy. Besides educating the people, education of funeral directors would also be necessary. In most cases, they are the ones who first deal with the family of the deceased and first make suggestions regarding the funeral.

Communal funeral Masses might seem odd to people at first, but communal penance services and communal anointings of the sick were equally odd at one time. Now they are an accepted part of the liturgy and an accepted part of parish life.

Communal funeral Masses would benefit the parish in the following ways:

1. They would be in keeping with our liturgical practice of having communal celebrations of the liturgy rather than a series of private celebrations.
2. They would allow more time, attention, and resources to be given to funeral liturgies. We might, for example, be able to provide people to read, to lead song, to provide hospitality, to distribute communion, etc, if such volunteers knew their services might be required once, rather than two or three times on a given day.
3. They would provide a larger assembly for the celebration. Rather than having one funeral with twenty people followed by a second with thirty people, we could have one funeral Mass with a larger congregation, with greater participation.

4. They might help to stop the trend of having our funeral Masses become commemorations of the deceased rather than celebrations of the paschal mystery. In many cases funeral Masses imitate the worst features of poor wedding liturgies. We have favorite scripture verses, favorite songs, favorite poems and much too much emphasis on a person rather than on the Lord.

5. They would lessen the burden on parish priests, who in addition to their many pastoral duties, often must preside at two or three Masses in order to accommodate the number of funerals.

6. They would keep priests, especially those in parishes with a large elderly population, from becoming funeral presiders operating on automatic pilot.

7. They would help us to respond to the growing shortage of priests.

Communal funeral Masses may eventually become part of our liturgical practice due to a lack of priests. Before that happens, communal funeral Masses should be considered because they make sense theologically, liturgically, and pastorally. As Catholics we are part of the body of Christ, part of the Church, part of a community that communally celebrates its faith in word and sacrament. When we die our funeral Mass should be a communal celebration as well, one that includes those parishioners who have died with us. If in life we were together in Christ, should we not be so in death?+

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When one of its members dies, the Christian Community encourages the celebration of the Mass. In the proclamation of the Scriptures, the saving word of God through the power of the Spirit becomes living and active in the minds and hearts of the community. Having been strengthened at the table of God's word, the community calls to mind God's saving deeds and offers the Father in the Spirit the eucharistic sacrifice of Christ's Passover from death to life, a living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, of reconciliation and atonement. Those present offer prayers and petitions, especially the sacrifice of the Mass, for the deceased, whom they entrust to God's merciful love.

In the eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian Community's celebration of Christ's Passover from death to life, the faith of the baptized in the paschal mystery is renewed and nourished. In the Mass, we are united to Christ's death and resurrection and the mystery of our salvation is appropriated and achieved. *"I tell you most solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day"* (John 6:53-54).

At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the eucharistic table, the Christian Community intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. Even after our death it is the celebration of the eucharist that continues nourishing our journey and enables our reception into eternal life. Through the celebration of the eucharist the grace and merits of Christ's death and resurrection are received into each of our lives. Death does not end our relationship to this mystery of Christ's saving power. Hence the practice of offering masses for the deceased.

Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the

principal celebration of the Christian funeral.

The Christian Community through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. At the funeral rites, especially at the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession.

Those who are baptized into Christ and nourished at the same table of the Lord are responsible for one another. When a member of Christ's Body dies, the faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love. Christian consolation is rooted in that hope that comes from faith in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ whose mystery is continued and made truly and fully present in the celebration of the eucharist. Christian hope faces the reality of death and the anguish of grief but trusts confidently that the power of sin and death has been vanquished by the risen Lord who comes to us in the eucharist.

Therefore it is not only appropriate but most desirable that our loved ones be buried with the celebration of the eucharist as the heart of the funeral rites. The Lord continues the victory of his cross over our sin, over our death in the eucharistic celebration. We hope that this explanation has helped you understand the reasons why the celebration of the eucharist is central to the death of a Christian. The celebration of the Mass at a funeral is not just a social custom but the very source of our eternal salvation offered to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Adapted from the *Order of Christian Funerals*

following the funeral.

If we look at the option given in #170 of the *Order of Christian Funerals*, we can draw some conclusions about what the Church envisions taking place at this time. First of all, such a talk is not required. The rubric says someone "may speak." It is probably better for priests and others involved in dealing with families at the time of death, not to make this option known. If the bereaved ask about it, it can be explained. But raising the option can make the family think this option should be exercised, or make them feel guilty if it is not.

The rubric says "a member or a friend of the family" may speak. This envisions only one speaker, not a series of individuals. Since the *General*
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Instruction of the Roman Missal restricts the pulpit to the proclamation of the word of God, the homily, and the general intercessions, the pulpit is not to be used for such words of remembrance. (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 272*) The speaker might use the lectern used by the leader of song, or he or she might simply stand near the casket.

Such words of remembrance should not be unduly long. If we look at the outline of the rite given in the *Order of Christian Funerals* we see such words of remembrance are not included. The option simply appears in the rubric at the beginning of the rite of final commendation. This indicates that such words of remembrance, if spoken, are to be brief. They should certainly be shorter than the rite of commendation which follows.

This would mean such words of remembrance should be less than four or five minutes in length.

This now brings us to what is meant by "speaking in remembrance of the deceased." The fact that such words of remembrance are spoken during a liturgy which celebrates the paschal mystery and proclaims our faith in the risen Lord, tells us these words should be words of faith. They might relate how the deceased tried to live out his or her Catholic faith. They might recall how the deceased served the parish or community in some particular ministry. They might describe an incident which demonstrated the deceased's strong faith and confidence in God. They might recount how the individual had to embrace the paschal mystery in his or her life by accepting terminal

illness or old age. Such words of remembrance should lead people to give thanks to God or to reaffirm their Christian commitment.

Someone who wishes to speak at such a time, needs to be given guidance by the priest, or by others responsible for the liturgy. It is also wise to require the speaker to write out what he or she will say. This allows the material to be reviewed, it provides a restraint to speaking overly long, and it gives the speaker more control in a situation where he or she might be overcome with emotion.+

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