

Homily, 26 October 2014 Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[148] Exodus 22:20-26; Psalms 18:2-3,3-4,47,51; 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10; Matthew 22:34-40

—✠—

This weekend we have been asked to preach on Funerals and the Funeral Rites in particular. The link to the readings will come from Matthew (You shall love your neighbor as yourself) and by extension to the works of mercy (To bury the dead. To pray for... the dead.)

—✠—

For a couple of years after I was first ordained, I worked as a part-time, on-call chaplain at Lakeside Hospital. I covered nights and weekends for one week every month.

Many of my calls were to the emergency room, and the rest, obviously, to patient rooms. Yet in either case, almost all my calls were “death” calls. That is, the patient had died or was expected to die soon. So my ministry was seldom to the patient, but to the family and friends.

After a while, when I had become an “experienced” chaplain, I came to realize that most people are absolutely unprepared for the death of a loved one. I once had an older gentleman tell me that he never expected his mother to die. His mother was in her late nineties and had been seriously ill for a long time. The two of them had never discussed it.

Once in a while, even in cases of sudden and unexpected deaths, a family would surprise me, because despite their grief, they knew how to cope ... what to do. They were religious families who drew on the death and funeral rituals of their tradition.

Though the people closest to the deceased were lost in grief, others – aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins, close friends in the faith, and pastors – they would begin those final works of mercy for the deceased: comforting the sorrowful; praying for, and burying the dead. Their love of neighbor did not end with death.

—✠—

It is the funeral rites of the Christian churches support people as they perform these last great works of mercy for a loved one who has died.

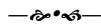
And our Catholic Funeral Rites are quite beautiful in their simplicity and dignity and expressions of hope.

Unfortunately many people have turned away from the funeral rites. "Just cremate me and have a party," is a common sentiment today.

But it's a sentiment that dismisses our hope in the resurrection of the body and also dismisses the very human need for ritual and closure when faced such loss.

For parish priests, helping a family plan the funeral liturgy is one of the most solemn and fulfilling moments in their ministry.

Of course it helps when the family is familiar with rites. So I'd like to briefly, but carefully, review with you our funeral rites.



Every Sunday as mass we say together at the end of the creed "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

These words are more than just poetic license. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. We do not look forward to eternal life as disembodied spirits. Paul put it quite bluntly when he wrote to the Corinthians:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith.

God has given each of us a great dignity -- and that dignity is given to our whole being: both body and soul.

This is why the Church asks us to have the body present for the funeral rites. It is a declaration of our belief in the resurrection. If circumstances necessitate it, the Church permits cremation, but urges that, whenever possible, it be put off until after the funeral service.



At the heart of the Funeral Rite are public liturgies: the Vigil, the Funeral, and the Committal. They are in essence one liturgy broken into three movements.

This great liturgy begins with an invitation to pray:

“My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death. Confident that God always remembers the good we have done and forgives our sins, let us pray asking God to gather our beloved to himself.”

The Vigil is typically an evening service held the day before the funeral. It is usually held at the funeral home, though it may be held in the church.

At the Vigil we keep watch with the family. With Christ present among us we pray, we listen to scriptures and a homily for words of consolation and hope. We entrust the deceased to God. We offer brief eulogies or share little stories to remember the one who has died.



The Funeral Liturgy begins as the coffin is sprinkled with Holy water and the family covers it with the pall. *“In the waters of baptism,”* prays the priest, *“our beloved died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he now share with him eternal glory.”*

The Funeral Mass is the central celebration for the deceased. It is our main prayer for the one who has died, giving thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death. Through this affirmation and witness to Christ’s victory we also express the close connection between the living and the dead in the communion of the saints.

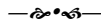
At the end of mass begins the Final Commendation:

“... now we have come to the last farewell,” the priest may say, inviting us once more to prayer. *“There is sadness in parting, but we take comfort in the hope that one day we shall see our beloved again ... therefore, let us console one another in the faith of Jesus Christ.”*

As the coffin is incensed and sprinkled with holy water, those gathered sing a song of farewell. Then all depart, save for those who will accompany the body and the family to the place of committal.



The Committal Rite is our final act in caring for the body of the dead. If the body was cremated, the urn must be placed in a grave or in a niche at a columbarium. The ground which will receive the coffin, or the urn, is always blest. As the last act of the committal service the Church encourages a final gesture of leave taking: we may witness the lowering of the coffin into the grave, adding, if it is desired, flowers or the first shovels of earth.



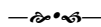
The Vigil Service, the Funeral Mass, and the Committal: these are the public rites of Catholic Funerals. But death is also a time of personal and family grief. These moments too are provided for in the rites of the Church.

When death draws near, the Church offers us the Sacraments of Anointing and the last reception of the Eucharist, called Viaticum, or food for the journey.

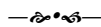
There are “*Prayers after Death*” which the priest or deacon may offer with the family at the bedside.

There is brief prayer service called “*Gathering in the Presence of the Body*”, which may be offered when the family gathers at the funeral home when the body is prepared for burial. It is a quiet moment of private recollection as they confront the mystery of death:

“*With God there is mercy and the fullness of redemption.*”



Other prayers or devotions are also encouraged. These prayers may take place wherever the family thinks best: at funeral home, the church or chapel, or simply at home with family and friends. It is a time to pray Rosary, or perhaps even to sing some part of the Office of the Dead.



Throughout the Funeral Rites, the Church provides an abundance of scriptures, prayers, litanies and songs from which to choose in preparing the services. Planning guides are available and we encourage you to study them and discuss them with your families.



Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the work of friends and others at the time of death: making meals, running errands, doing

chores, picking-up people at the airport, or those whose ministry is to prepare the funeral luncheon.

The little burdens we lift from those who grieve make it easier for them to focus on the great task before them: burying the dead.



Death is part of life and preparing for it is a very gentle gift you can give to those you love. It will make their work easier at a time of great sorrow and loss.

I'm not sure we are ever fully prepared to die, but we can be prepared for death.

There are pamphlets on the Funeral Rites of the Church in the Narthex, please take them as you leave today.