
CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN FUNERALS TODAY (2)



In sharing with you the Bishops' Commission on the Liturgy study group's reflection on Christian funerals, I recalled the many changes which have occurred these past thirty years regarding our way of acting and doing, upon the death of a loved one. Besides, I reminded you of the three great values stressed by the 1972 Rite of Christian Funerals: a deep respect for the human body, the deceased person's belonging to the community through baptism, and faith in Christ's resurrection and in the resurrection of the dead. These three values were illustrated by the presence of the body in the parish church at a eucharistic celebration.

CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

Today, we could rightly ask: "What are Christian funerals?" Ever since September 11, 2001, we have witnessed many forms of prayer, recollection, shows of solidarity, condolences, and religious services. On Parliament Hill in Ottawa, where over 75,000 people came in a show of solidarity and sympathy with the Americans, a three-minute silence was kept, speeches were made and music played, but there were no prayers, with no mention of "God" at all... Was this a Christian funeral service? Although each one present may have silently commended the deceased to God's care, the service was first and foremost a national homage paid to the victims of the tragedies, but it was not officially a Christian funeral service. Christian funerals are celebrations of the paschal mystery in the life journey of a loved one to the Lord. The characteristics of a Christian funeral service in which the loved one is handed over to God include the Eucharist surely, but also the gathering of the believers, the Word proclaimed, the prayer of the assembly, that of the priest, pastoral agent or another of Christ's faithful, and the commendation and farewell.

EUCHARIST AND FUNERALS

There is a link between the Eucharist and the funeral service, between the memory of our faith and our hope in the resurrection, between our hope in the resurrection and the resurrection of Jesus, as well as in the death of the loved one and the final resurrection. It is not always possible for the Eucharist to be celebrated immediately following the person's demise. In warm climates of the Southern hemisphere bodies must be buried within twenty-four hours. In other countries, because of the mourners or the minister's availability, a memorial Mass is celebrated later, at a time when family and friends can get together more easily; this is another way for the Church to show solidarity with its grieving brothers and sisters. In still other places, there is a funeral chapel at the cemetery, and it is there that a Liturgy of the Word is celebrated for family and friends.

COMPASSION AND CONSOLATION

Christian funerals call on the Church to exercise its ministry of compassion and consolation and to accompany the bereaved. The importance of the Church's presence at this time of encounter with death is of decisive import: words and gestures, at this emotionally-laden time, are critical. Family and friends expect, at this time, to see Church people who are caring and attentive, filled with empathy and respect. At times, the shock of the event or the suffering caused by the loss render people awkward and at a loss for words. At such a time it is important to be delicate in showing the Church's solidarity with the grieving period now beginning. In the same

way, those preparing the funeral must listen to the concerns of the deceased's family, for the celebration to reflect as closely as possible what is being experienced and lived by this particular ecclesial and family unit gathering for a final farewell. Those preparing the service are to be attentive to the spiritual sensibilities of the assembly, so as to allow the Good News to express the truth of the situation. While pastoral ministers are now fewer in number and tasks are more and more demanding, what has just been mentioned may sound utopian. Still, such attitudes of openness and dialogue can make of the funeral preparation a special time for being with the grieving family, like the Risen Christ walking with the disciples along the road to Emmaus and explaining to them everything having to do with him. Despite the complexity of today's pastoral situations and personnel constraints, it would be a very bad idea to adopt a business, 'rules are rules' attitude.

SOLIDARITY AND BEING WITH

Christian tradition describes funerals as a multi-layered liturgy: at the deceased person's house, the funeral home, the church, and the cemetery. This step-by-step unfolding shows a great understanding of the grief process which is, also, multi-faceted. By inviting the mourners to enter into this process, the Church can be with them in solidarity throughout the period of spiritual and personal grief. 'To be with', 'to accompany' are key words, guidelines, directions pointing the way. In our days when the Christian initiation of adults helps the Church rediscover the remarkable nature and the diversity of approaches to an encounter with the Risen One and with Christian being, the Church's presence to the dying and the grieving is a service of making human the living person's final moments, a service which can also be an opportunity to bring the Good News and to lead others to an encounter with the Risen Christ.

COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITIES

This death and funeral ministry calls for new attitudes, structures and more involvement on the part of the community. Responsibility for being with and accompanying the dying and the grieving lies with the entire Christian community. For this to become reality, though, it is hoped that the baptized, clergy and lay people, deepen together their understanding of Christian funerals through religious education and workshops. It will also require the setting up of special committees and training sessions on how to be present to the dying and their loved ones, how to be with the bereaved and celebrate with them in a Christian way. Those who are part of these committees should be mandated in a special way to perform this particular ministry in the absence of a priest or where there is no eucharistic celebration. A future article will give some guidelines.

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« From A Bishop's Journal » (436) (15 May 2002)