

Funeral Planning – Some Considerations

[The *Order of Christian Funerals* was approved by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in 1986, was published in 1990, and its use was mandatory from Easter Sunday 1991. It is this publication that is the foundation of what follows.]

The pastoral problems that can arise with funeral planning all too often result from current Church practice having not been explained to people as well as it should have been, or as frequently in case some missed it the first time. There is then a risk of ill-feeling being created and even greater upset caused when, upon being called following a death, or meeting with the family later to plan the funeral, the priest is faced with having to explain why things are done the way they are, or why the Church doesn't do what the family may be asking. In the case of families who regularly practise their faith, there is always the hope that they are aware of these things and therefore the priest won't be put on the spot. However it can be extremely difficult if family members are unfamiliar with what the Church does and make requests influenced by what they may have seen elsewhere rather than accepting the guidance of the priest.

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Requiem Mass or Funeral Service?

What do we believe about what happens after we die? Our belief, surely, is that we will be found worthy to enter heaven. While that is our ultimate hope, we are also only too well aware of the faults and failings for which we may still be held to account by God, and (in addition to the Church's teaching on the possible experience and cleansing process we call "purgatory") this is why the Church encourages prayer for those who have died in case such spiritual assistance may yet benefit them. Inevitably it is a subject, and a concept, we struggle with even in terms of the language at our disposal as we strive to understand and express in temporal terms something that is obviously theological and other worldly.

I say all of this as a preliminary to repeating something I have mentioned on a number of occasions in the past to do with funerals. The basic reality, which has not been explained well over the years, and therefore people continue to struggle with it, is that the funeral is for the living. The prayers offered during the funeral are for the dead, but the funeral itself is for the living. Let me explain.

Every funeral, no matter the culture or faith (or lack of faith), serves a basic social purpose: to express our farewells to the deceased and to reverently dispose of their body according to local custom. That's basically what the funeral is all about from a sociological point of view. In the case of perhaps the majority of people in our own country, there is then also a religious (faith) dimension to the funeral. What I think it helps to bear in mind is that, in light of

our hope for the person who has died¹, they are already with God. They may still need our prayer support and help, we don't know, and therefore we are encouraged to pray for them – initially through the spiritual rites accompanying the funeral, but also through our on-going prayers and in Masses offered for their intentions. But the funeral itself, and the choice of rites (whether a funeral service or a requiem Mass) is very specifically for the needs of the mourners.

This is why I keep offering the pastoral advice that people shouldn't make specific requests in their Wills for what *they* want at their funeral (at least not without discussing things with family members first) because the reality is that it won't matter to them – they will be with God. What does matter is how well the choice of funeral rite assists the needs of the mourners in terms of consoling them in their grief and helping the process of healing.

If the deceased was a practising Catholic, so too the immediate family, then the celebration of a requiem Mass should be the obvious choice. *The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral*². In saying this, the rite assumes the best possible situation - that the majority of people at the funeral will be practising their faith and will all, therefore, potentially be receiving holy communion, the central action of the Mass.

If the immediate family is not Catholic, or, for whatever reason, they have fallen away from the practice of their faith, then it makes no sense at all to make them sit through Mass, a rite they are either not, or no longer, familiar with and which (whether we like it or not) hasn't been a part of their everyday lives. It would be far more appropriate to celebrate a service with them that contains exactly the same components in terms of hymns, readings and prayers, but without the eucharist - which they wouldn't be able to receive anyway. They should feel a part of the ceremony, not excluded from a central part of it as they would be if a Requiem was being celebrated. Mass for the deceased can be celebrated later with their faith community, but meanwhile a simple funeral service may be much more consoling and personal to the family than a more involved rite that has become foreign to them.

Having said that, there is always the hope that the situation might cause family members to want to put things right with God and the Church in confession and that a requiem Mass might be their choice after all - the Church's hope being for Mass *if* it is appropriate. But I think that needs to be decided in light of the circumstances at the time and in discussion with the priest rather than being

¹ (and especially if they were absolved of their sins before they died)

² *Order of Christian Funerals*, para 5

requested, regardless, in a person's Will for example.³ You might want a Mass, but hopefully you won't *need* a Mass because, we believe, you will already be with God. The question (and the Church's pastoral concern) is, therefore, what is your family's immediate need, what would be most helpful, consoling and healing for them?

Music

One of the most problematic elements of the funeral can be the choice of music, or rather of hymns. The rite is very clear on the subject: *The texts of the songs chosen...should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.*

Subsequent guidelines from our Bishops' Conference make it clear that, because it quite specifically doesn't "express the paschal mystery" or "relate to the readings from Scripture", secular music is not to be used - with the possible exception of suitably reflective pieces of classical instrumental music and even then these would be better played by the organist than from a recorded source. Every parish has hymn books and these provide a more than adequate choice of appropriate hymns, and everyone joining in and singing to the praise of God is infinitely more desirable than sitting listening - even to classical music.

Despite explaining all of this, families (especially those who are not church-going) often adamantly refuse and insist on their choice of secular music. The bottom line is that such music is not allowed. A time of bereavement isn't the occasion to get into a discussion on the subject and it would be far better if people would respect what the priest is saying about the Church's teaching. And, really, that's the bottom line: what we are doing is *of* the Church, and what we do *in* church should be appropriate *to* church and to the reality of the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. If people can't accept this and insist on things that are not of the Church, then perhaps they need to celebrate their funeral elsewhere. It's a sad thing to have to say, but it may be the only option if the family creates an impasse like that.

The Scripture Reading

The practice has grown up over time of inviting a family member or a friend to read because it seems a nice thing to do. The problem is that not everyone is used to speaking in public in the way that is required in proclaiming the word of God clearly and audibly. And this is important because of the specific message of the reading and the homily that will follow. In recent years the Church has begun to train and commission people to be ministers of the word in order to

³ "The *Order of Christian Funerals* makes provision for the minister, in consultation with the family, to choose those rites and texts that are most suitable to the situation: those that most closely apply to the needs of the mourners." (*OCF*, para 43)

better ensure that the word of God is proclaimed properly and well and now says, therefore, that only commissioned ministers should be asked to read. That is their ministry. If a member of the family, or a friend, *is* a commissioned reader then they may be asked, but they need to study and prepare the reading ahead of time.

“A Few Words”

The instruction in the rite on the subject of what is often called the eulogy is a little confusing. On the one hand it says there shouldn't be one but then it also says that a family member or friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased – which would be a eulogy. What certainly is recommended is that if such a reflection in celebration of the person's life is included, it should be brief. Some things are appropriately included, whereas certain other stories and anecdotes may not be, or are personal only to the family. Also, how many eulogies have we heard that painted such a picture of sainthood that some in the congregation may have wondered if they had come to the right funeral!

Those who are in the best position to speak about the deceased – those who were closest to them – may be the least able on the day. One possibility is for the family to write down what they would like said and for the priest to read it for them (getting a copy to him well in advance). On the other hand the family may prefer that nothing be said and to just leave everyone with their own thoughts and memories.

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The time immediately following a death is the worst possible time for making many of the practical decisions that have to be made or to be hearing things from the priest that you perhaps weren't aware of before. What I hope this article will do is provide current pastoral information and guidance for you to read and reflect on in quieter and far less emotionally charged times. I hope also that it will encourage you to talk together with other family members so that choices will be known and decisions made in advance.

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