

Life is Changed Not Ended

part 1



The time immediately following death

The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heartrending grief for the family and close friends.

(Order of Christian Funerals 52)

Perhaps the greatest proof of love is the grief we feel for its loss. Even though every death is felt in a unique way, we are always faced with the loss of love—and we need to grieve. If we did not, we would be less than human.

And grief needs to be shared. We need to know that we are not alone in our loss, that others too know that love has gone from our lives. My mother died over twenty years ago, but I have never forgotten her wake. After two hours of standing in line shaking hands, I was depressed because of inane remarks like “She looks so alive.” Then a woman I did not know took my hand and said that she hoped we were pleased with the way mother’s hair looked since she had tried very hard.

It turned out that she had done my mother’s hair for years and had come to consider her a friend. Amid all the well-intentioned but vague generalities, here was someone who not only knew and cared for my mother but who had found a concrete way to share our loss.

Reflecting on experiences like these can show us the deep human need to share our grief both in word and in gesture. We need rituals to express our own sorrow and to unite us so that we do not have to face the pain alone. Anything less deprives us of

that unique opportunity for personal and spiritual growth that only grief provides.

Yet we live in a culture that more and more is denying us the chance to grieve and to grow through our grief. Visitation hours are cut back; a memorial service at the “convenience” of the family takes the place of a funeral.

Overdone cosmetic embalming was enough of a denial of death; now there are companies which will arrange for the complete disposition of the remains, including the burial, without anyone being present other than employees. After leaving the deceased

for the last time, the mourners are confronted next either with a neat grave or an appropriate urn.

As American Catholics we need to become aware of how our way of ritualizing death is different from the culture around us. Instead of giving in to convenience or denial, we are called to celebrate the death of a Christian. How we can do so is the subject of this series.

“Through a careful use of the rites, the (Church’s) minister helps the mourners to express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation through faith in Christ and his resurrection to eternal life.” (OCF 52)



Questions

Why the title Order of Christian Funerals?

An **Order** or **Ordo** is a collection of several rites. Because Christian burial entails several different rites, the title Order is more appropriate than rite in describing the ritual book.

What role does the church envision for families in the burial of their dead?

The Ordo is very specific on this point. “The family and friends of the deceased should not be excluded from taking part in the services sometimes provided by undertakers, for example, the preparation and laying out of the body.” (OCF 11)

The family should be allowed to assist in whatever way they deem appropriate. Direct contact with the body of the deceased after death and during the rites of vigil, funeral mass, commendation, and committal is of great spiritual and psychological help to a family as they struggle to come to grips with the reality of death. They should work closely with the hospital, funeral home, and parish to see to it that the body is prepared, laid out, and buried according to Christian beliefs and their own family customs. Family members may place the pall over the coffin.

The family should also be involved in the planning of the Funeral rites. They should take part in the selection of texts, music, and ministers. It is the role of the priest or other trained members of the parish to explain the rites to them in order that they may more fully take part in them. Such planning may even begin before death, if the circumstances allow.

Recently I attended the burial of an aunt. Her funeral was held at 7:00 PM at night! They brought her body to the cemetery the next morning at 8:00 AM. Aren't funerals supposed to be in the morning? We have always been accustomed to funerals in the morning.

Today, however, mornings are not always the most convenient time for family and friends of the deceased to come together. With the customary work day beginning at 8 or 9 AM, the evening is often the best time to gather the most people.

The **Ordo** tells us that the funeral rites “should be scheduled at times that permit as many of the community as possible to be present.” (OCF 11) This is because the community’s role “is best expressed in its active participation in the celebration of funeral rites, particularly the vigil for the deceased, the funeral liturgy, and the rite of committal.” (OCF 11)

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Life is Changed Not Ended

part 2



God has Created each person for eternal life

In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity. *(OCF 1)*

One of the most welcomed liturgical changes after Vatican II was the transformation of the former Requiem Mass into what was popularly called the Mass of the Resurrection and is now named the Funeral Mass. The color of the vestments changed from black to white.

More importantly the prior emphasis upon forgiveness and remission of the sins of the deceased was balanced by the comfort and even the joy of our faith in Christ's victory. Both forgiveness and joy are needed in a celebration of Christian burial.

A few years after these changes in the funeral liturgy were made, I was sitting at lunch with a fellow member of the faculty—a priest who prided himself on being “traditionalist.” He was bemoaning what he called the “hypocritical cheerfulness” of the new funeral liturgy. Having buried both a good friend and a former teacher within the previous three months, I was forced to disagree with him. Though neither the friend nor the teacher had been perfect people, I knew they had been men of faith for whom Christ's love had been very real. In celebrating their deaths we were not being hypocritical but continuing the best of authentic Catholic tradition.

For Good Friday is only half the story of redemption and is incomplete without the glory of Easter. In the same way, the reality of death and grief is incomplete for Catholics without the comfort and hope of faith.

After the death of someone we love rituals are meant to put us in touch with the painful, even wrenching reality of loss—not to cripple us but to set us free to find consolation in our faith.

Catholic funeral rituals express our continuing love and care for the deceased, and these rituals can begin that inward letting-go which will hand over the deceased to God's mercy. These same rituals seek also to help us put our own lives back together again with new hope for the future.

When celebrated with honesty, the funeral rites for a Christian are neither “hypocritical cheerfulness” nor a denial of death.

The loss and the pain that we pass through are part of the rites, but so too is our faith in Christ's victory and the knowledge that his love conquers even death.

“At the death of a Christian, whose life in 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.” (OCF 4)



Questions

Can there be a church funeral for a someone who is baptized as a Protestant?

Funeral rites may be celebrated for baptized non-Catholics at the discretion of the local bishop (OCF 18) unless the deceased would not have wished this or a minister of his or her own faith is available.

Funeral rites may be celebrated as well for those who are not baptized or who are not Christian, if they have been enrolled as catechumens or merely expressed a desire to become part of the Church. The rites may be celebrated in an adapted form even for the non-Christian spouse of a Catholic. There is a new prayer for such services. (OCF 398-36)

Can there be a church funeral for children who die without baptism?

The rites for the funerals of children are extensively revised in the new OCF. The bewilderment and pain of loss are acknowledged, and the bereaved are encouraged to seek the compassionate presence of Christ who “still sorrows with those who sorrow.” (OCF 239) And so “funeral rites may be celebrated for children whose parents intended them to be baptized but who died before baptism.” (OCF 237 & Canon 1183)

In addition, there is a *Rite of Final Commendation for an Infant* for use “in the case of a stillborn or a newborn infant who dies shortly after birth.” (OCF 318) In these difficult pastoral situations parents and family will now have a better chance to mourn the hopes and dreams that they have lost with their baby and to entrust everything in faith to God.

Can there be a church funeral for a suicide?

Yes, previous laws denying Christian burial in certain situations have been revised. The new rite contains two prayers for use when the deceased committed suicide. (OCF 398-44&45)

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Life is Changed Not Ended

part 3



The ministry of consolation

“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.” (*O C F 8*)

A common misunderstanding about the celebration of a Christian’s death in the Catholic tradition is that there is really only one service, the funeral Mass, with a few special prayers before and after. In the liturgical books, though, the funeral Mass is the center of a series of services beginning with the Anointing of the Sick celebrated long before death. Nor is the funeral liturgy the last rite: the committal service is the conclusion of the series of rituals which we call the Order of Christian Funerals.

Why do the liturgical books provide an extended series of services?

Human beings adapt to changes, especially important ones, slowly and often after great struggle. The Lord Jesus is frequently portrayed in the Gospels as spending time in prayer with his Father; yet even he underwent the agony in the garden before he could accept God’s final call for his life.

And so for the sick there are the Anointing and Communion; for the dying there are Viaticum and the Commendation. For mourners too before the funeral Mass there are a number of brief rites to help them begin to face the shock of certain crucial moments as their relationship with the deceased is forced to change.

Prayers with the Family and Friends

Prayers After Death—meant for use either immediately after death if the Church's minister is present or for use during the first pastoral visit of the Church's minister with the bereaved

Gathering in the Presence of the Body—meant for use when the bereaved gather either to prepare the body for burial or for their first viewing after the preparation

Transfer of the Body—meant for the moment of separation when the coffin is closed and the funeral procession begins

Vigil for the Deceased

With Scripture readings, homily, and intercessions, the mourners are also asked to celebrate a vigil with the body of the deceased. More than just visitation or intercession for the deceased, the vigil is meant to focus on the proclamation of the Word of God as the bereaved struggle with the meaning of death and grief.

Funeral Liturgy

The center of the rites is the funeral liturgy itself (if at all possible including Mass). During this service the whole Church is asked to gather to support the mourners as they gather to ponder their loss and grief in the context of the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection.

Committal

Meant to be not just verbal prayer but an actual interment or entombment in the context of prayer, the last stage for the mourners is placing the remains in their final resting-place.

Obviously, few celebrations of Christian death will involve all of these possible rites; yet they are provided if needed. Their very richness challenges us to ask ourselves how seriously each of us has answered our Church's call to participate in the ministry of consolation.



Questions

Why do we sprinkle the body with holy water?

Holy water is baptismal water. It is blessed so that children and adults may be baptised in it.

Thus, sprinkling of the body of the deceased reminds us of the baptism of the deceased person. It may be used at two times: when the body is received at the church door the priest says:

In the waters of baptism.

John died with Christ and rose with him to new life.

May he now share with him eternal glory. (OCF 160)

The body may also be sprinkled during the rites of Final Commendation as a sign of farewell.

The sprinkling of the body is not a "purification" or prayer for the remission of a person's sins, as in the rites immediately preceding the reform of the liturgy. Sprinkling with baptismal waters recalls the forgiveness of sins *already received* in baptism, when the deceased first was joined to Christ's body, the Church.

Why is the body incensed?

Incense has three meanings:

- 1) We honor the body of the deceased "which through baptism became a temple of the Holy Spirit." (37)
- 2) Our prayers for the deceased "rise like incense." (Psalm 142)
- 3) Incense is a sign of farewell.

What is a funeral pall?

The funeral pall is a white garment which is placed over the coffin by the family and friends of the deceased after the body has been sprinkled with holy water. The pall is a reminder of the baptismal garment which the deceased received on the day of his or her baptism. It is a sign of Christian dignity and equality in Christ.

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Life is Changed Not Ended

part 4



The vigil: ties of friendship

We believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death. (OCF 71)

Members of the community should console the mourners with words of faith and support and with acts of kindness. (OCF 10)

American Catholics can be proud of our tradition of support for mourners. Paying respects at the funeral home or wherever the deceased is laid out is a well-established custom. Even when we might not have known the deceased personally, a professional or personal connection with a member of the family makes us abruptly adjust our schedules just to pay a visit and say a few kind words or provide a shoulder to lean on.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* calls us not to end but to expand this long tradition. The individual conversations which lie at the heart of our "visitation" are crucial and allow even those who have little connection with the deceased to give their support. Yet there remains a core of family and friends who need something more, who need to gather, to share, to remember, and to let God's Word bring meaning and hope to their grief before they come to the funeral liturgy.

For these mourners the new *Order* expands the possibilities given in the previous rite. That rite called for a priest to lead a service of scripture, homily, and intercession at some point during the wake. The *Order* keeps that format and encourages the mourners to proclaim the scriptures if

they can. (OCF 15) A family member or friend may speak in memory of the deceased (OCF 62), and nonbiblical readings may be used in addition to those from scripture (OCF 23). Appropriate music such as a well-known psalm or hymn is also encouraged. One of the services from the *Liturgy of the Hours* may be substituted as well. Moreover, any Catholic, ordained or lay, can lead the service.

Such a service is a challenge to many customs associated with fraternal or military organizations or various ethnic traditions. Yet it is open to many adaptations. Within the context of the visitation many of those customs would be effective preludes to the vigil itself.

Within the service a speech in memory of the deceased could include reciting a favorite poem or

explaining a drawing done by a grandchild. If the Rosary is still a popular devotion, there might be a place for reciting a “Hail Mary” in the service of intercession. Many of the bright ideas that don’t work at a funeral Mass could be very effective in the more intimate setting of a vigil.

For that is the purpose of any vigil: to watch, to wait, to prepare. Especially for those who are grieving deeply, the process must not be rushed. They need an evening of remembering and of prayer before they can face the task of giving away to God in the funeral liturgy the one they loved.



Questions

Why is the name for this rite “vigil” and not “wake”?

“Wake” has come to be a general term for all of the activities while people keep watch with the body of the deceased until the funeral liturgy. Many of these customs, both secular and religious, are of real help to the mourners. To indicate that the principal activity for this time period is the service in which the Word of God is proclaimed and common prayer is offered, this rite has been given the appropriate name of the Vigil.

May the Rosary be part of the wake?

Yes, when the mourners would find consolation in the Rosary during this time of waiting, this devotion should be continued.

Yet the Rosary is not a part of the principal service, the vigil, which is focused on the Word of God and common prayer.

Is music appropriate during wake or vigil?

Yes, many people have been very moved by music in the intimate surroundings of a funeral home. Secular music, such as school almas maters, which would be inappropriate for the funeral liturgy can be very powerful at a wake. However, during the vigil itself only religious music is appropriate; indeed the OCF encourages such music as an “integral” component. (OCF 68)

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Life is Changed Not Ended

part 5



The funeral liturgy

At the funeral liturgy the community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery. (*OCF 129*)

The center of the funeral rites is the funeral liturgy itself which if at all possible should include the celebration of the Eucharist. At no other point in the series of rites does the difference between common American practice and authentic Roman Catholic tradition become more obvious.

We can understand the difference by asking ourselves what a Roman Catholic funeral is not meant to be. First, it is not a memorial service. The focus is not on the deceased and on keeping his or her memory alive. Instead the service focuses upon God and the wonders that his grace continues to work among humankind. Second, the homily is not a eulogy in which a mere human being tries to interpret the meaning of the deceased's life. Rather, "the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord." (*OCF 141*)

Nor is the funeral liturgy a dirge as in the old Requiem Mass. Christian faith affirms that neither human sin nor grief nor the absurdity of life can prevail over the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

And so, unless the vigil was held in the church, the liturgy begins at the

entrance to the church with the reception of the body. Just as in Baptism the deceased first shared in Christ's victory, now he or she is welcomed for the last time into the assembly with holy water (and a white cloth) and with the lighted Easter candle placed near the coffin.

God's Word is spoken again. The Eucharistic Prayer in which we offer everything back to the Father is proclaimed. All the baptized share in the one bread and the one cup. So important is Communion that when a priest is unavailable, the new Order encourages Communion from the Reserved Sacrament. No one should be deprived of the closest possible unity "with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead." (OCF 143)

The liturgy usually concludes with the Final Commendation and Farewell. The mediaeval rite had ended with an Absolution. The 1969 rite and the new Order ask us to say farewell in Christ. The reality of the final separation can no longer be denied since the deceased and the

mourners will soon leave the church. Yet the whole assembly sends them forth, affirming in gesture and song our belief that the Good Shepherd will lead us all one day home to the new and eternal Jerusalem, the city of endless life and peace.



Questions

Is music appropriate for the funeral liturgy?

Just as with the vigil, the OCF refers to music as an "integral" component of the funeral liturgy. (OCF 30-3) In most situations of grieving, getting the rites over with as simply as possible is not a help to the mourners. In faith Catholics are called to *celebrate* the funeral liturgy. We are asked to lift up our minds and our hearts to the risen Christ. Music touches the heart!

Can there be a Catholic funeral without a priest?

Yes, provided the local conference of bishops has given its approval. The OCF is a prayerbook for the whole Catholic community; it is arranged so that any Catholic in case of need can lead any of the rites. Except for the Eucharistic Prayer at the funeral liturgy, a deacon or layperson leads the community in word and ritual. (OCF 14)

Can the American flag be used to drape the coffin?

Yes, the American flag or the flag of another nation or the insignia of associations may drape the coffin—but not in church (OCF 132) and never during the funeral liturgy itself (OCF 38). As the Scripture says, "do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people" (James 2:1). Rich or poor, saint or sinner, ordained or lay, veteran or member of a religious order: in church we are all equal, for none of us has earned our salvation. Whatever sort of life we have lived, our faith and hope are in God's free gift of grace—symbolized at the beginning by the white robe of baptism and at the end by the white pall of the funeral. No other cloth carries that message.

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Life is Changed Not Ended

part 6



The committal prayerful remembrance

Whenever possible, the rite of committal is to be celebrated at the site of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment, rather than at a cemetery chapel. (*OCF 204*)

The funeral liturgy is the center of the funeral rites but not the conclusion. The deceased's remains must be given their final disposition. This practical necessity is also a moment of deep psychological and spiritual significance. The journey of the deceased's remains ends at last in a grave or mausoleum (or sometimes in the sea or a columbarium). Inwardly the mourners need some experience of closure. They need to know that the deceased has been laid to rest. Their grief will not end at the committal, but they need to know that they have done their best and that—at least physically—the deceased occupies a new place in their lives.

Anything less than this is at least potentially a false mercy for the bereaved. In calling for the service of committal to include the *act* of committal, the Roman Catholic tradition is simply calling us to face the reality of death.

The weather might be terrible, the ground muddy, and the sense of finality almost overwhelming; but experience shows that there is something both powerful and consoling about reaching down with the other mourners to throw a clod of dirt into the open grave.

Real growth as a human being and as a Christian takes place in the real

world. How we pull our lives together after a death is a very individual process.

Our prayer together at the time of death can lay a solid foundation for that process if our words and gestures bring together both the fact of loss and our faith in a loving and merciful God. In the committal, more than anywhere else in the funeral rites, ritual and pastoral care are one and the same.

Individuals and the parish community can also continue the ministry of consolation after the funeral rites are finished. Sharing a photo of the deceased from a personal album or dropping a card on the deceased's birthday or the couple's anniversary are simple ways of letting the mourn-

ers know that the person they loved has not been forgotten. Ethnic customs regarding special prayers on the month or year anniversary can also be helpful. Many parishes (and some cemeteries) have special prayers in November or at Easter during which those who have died during the previous year are remembered.

When carried out in the midst of the community of faith, the committal can help the mourners to face the end of one relationship with the deceased and to begin a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude, and the hope of resurrection and reunion. *(OCF 213)*



Questions

Can Catholics be cremated?

Yes.

The celebration of funeral rites for Catholics who are cremated is permitted with the permission of the local bishop. The issue of cremation has always centered around respect for the human body which God's spirit enlivened for so many years and which is destined to be raised up on the last day. Burial in the earth or at sea, entombment, or even cremation can be a respectful way of placing the body to rest in expectation of its resurrection at the Last Judgement. Only when one of these means of disposition of the body reflects an anti-Christian motive is such a means forbidden by the Church.

It is important to note, however, that the *Order of Christian Funerals* is arranged so that cremation takes place whenever possible *after* the funeral liturgy and *not before*.

In 1997 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops received permission from the Holy See to allow the funeral Mass to be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains.

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