
CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN FUNERALS TODAY (1)



Most Canadian Catholics today, when they experience the death of a loved one and are, therefore, very vulnerable, have to make decisions which their parents could never have imagined before, despite the pre-funeral arrangements they would have carefully planned: funeral Mass or prayer service at the funeral home? Burial or cremation? Cremation before or after the church service? Visiting hours or not? Condolences at the funeral home or at church? Catholic cemetery or private plot? Scattering of the ashes or safekeeping in a funerary urn? Funeral Mass and Eucharist or Liturgy of the Word? And so forth. These different possibilities give rise to different situations shaped by human and financial constraints, family relationships, distance, the faith of the deceased and the mourners, and possibilities suggested by the milieu. A committee of the Bishops' Commission on the Liturgy has made an in-depth study of these situations, and I would like to share with you some of the guidelines suggested.

MANY CHANGES

The words 'transformation, evolution, mutation' can describe the major changes which have occurred these past thirty years. We could never have imagined that one day in our country there would be more cremations (55%) than burials (45%). These are sudden changes for which we were not really prepared. In the still recent past, before the appearance of funeral homes, there was but one model of funeral rite: the body was laid out at the house, followed by a funeral in church, with burial and mourning period for the family. Usages and customs were fast transformed with the appearance of funeral parlours and liturgical changes: shorter period of mourning, a sharing of responsibilities among family and friends, new ways of doing things. At the church, funerals are no longer the same: black has disappeared as the funeral colour, and songs of hope are heard, with personal gestures and greater participation on the part of the assistants. Society is more and more 'secularized'. People do not all share the same beliefs. There are many questions regarding the hereafter, life after death, and God Himself. It is not always easy to bring up religious questions. Mass media throughout the world introduce us to different cultures and mentalities, on the occasion of state and other funerals. We have live transmissions of impressive funerals; remember that within a wee or so we were able to attend via satellite the funerals of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa.

NEW PASTORAL SITUATIONS

Human, social and family complexities are joined by new, unheard-of until now, ecclesial and pastoral situations. Most Canadian dioceses have begun a pastoral restructuring process. The number of ordained ministers has decreased, some pastors have the charge of two, three and even four Christian communities, and new collaborators share in the pastoral task. The baptised are no longer particularly bound to a specific church, and they are often unknown in the parishes they attend or from which they seek services. Before and during celebrations, pastors often have a 'splintered' assembly composed of people with diverse spiritual sensibilities: committed or Catholics those who practice occasionally, Christians of other Churches, members of other religions or traditions, people who are indifferent or atheist, members of sects, and seekers after alternative spiritualities. These new situations bring about new requirements on both the human and pastoral levels.

PRICELESS VALUES

Three great values have been highlighted in the choice of gestures posed at Christian funerals, and they were published in the 1972 Ritual. For one thing, those who came before us wanted to show the greatest respect for the body of a baptised person: funerals 'in the presence of the body' was a sign of the importance of the incarnation for Christian faith, as well as of the honor owed the bodies of the faithful departed who were temples of the Holy Spirit. The use of incense expresses this fundamental belief. Our parents and grandparents believed that unbreakable bonds had been created between the baptised and the Christian community at Baptism, and that is the reason why they insisted on having a church service, in the house of prayer, of baptism and of the weekly assembly of God's people. Our forebears wished in this way to witness to the real and wonderful link between the death and resurrection of Jesus and that of the departed loved one. That is why funerals were always held with the celebration of the Eucharist, the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ and the first-fruits of our own resurrection.

A PRECIOUS INHERITANCE

It is still these three great values that guide our principal actions, at Christian funerals. Can these basic values be exchanged for others? Before omitting or changing certain rites and gestures, I think it very important to retain the values which the Church has put forward for these important moments in life: respect for the entire human being, the community bond, faith in the Risen Christ and faith in our own resurrection. It seems to me that these are non-negotiable values, when we bid farewell, "goodbye" to a loved one who was baptised and who we want to surrender to God's care. It appears to me that any renewal of Christian funeral rites must be based on these three great basic values. Could these convictions be translated into new ways of doing? Would they be of greater quality and meaning? In the next two articles I want to point out some characteristics of Christian funerals and indicate a few practical guidelines for our diocesan Church. We are in fact faced with new personal, social, and community situations to which we must respond in the best pastoral way possible. Together we must rediscover what is basic to Christian funerals. If they are not, first, an opportunity to pay tribute to the departed, they still invite us to see the loved one's life in a new light to recognise the discrete but unmistakable traces of the Lord's passing in the loved one's life. At the door of his house the Father awaits you, and the arms of God shall open wide to welcome you. When the doors of life open before us, we shall see one another once again in the peace of God. By the blood of Jesus Christ, by his death on the cross, the forgiveness of God will deliver you. The water which gave you life will wipe your face clean, and your eyes shall see the salvation of God. When the last day comes, at the Lord's call you shall rise and walk, and as on your first day the Sun shall shine and you shall enter into the joy of the Lord.

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