
CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN FUNERALS TODAY (3)



In a first article I wrote about the many changes that have occurred in our way of marking the demise of a loved one. Another article dealt with the characteristics of Christian funerals, stressed the Church's indispensable ministry of compassion and consolation, and pointed out that the entire Christian community is responsible for this great ministry. Today I would like to offer a few practical suggestions.

"LAST WILL"

Due to the many rapid changes we have been dealing with, in our society, it is a good thing that will yet alive a person set down his or her "last will" regarding one's funeral and make determinations regarding the succession which follows one's demise. This would go a long way towards clarify many things. One should add a note to the last will and testament stating whether there is to be a Christian funeral or not, whether the funeral is to take place in the church with or without celebration of the Eucharist, and whether there is to be burial or cremation. If there is to be a Christian funeral, one could also choose the Scripture readings and the liturgical hymns to be sung, hymns that are expressive of one's own faith. There are many examples around us of the difficult situations which many families have had to face, where executors who were not members of the Catholic Christian community did not always respect the final wishes of the deceased.

GRIEF COMMITTEE

Where time permits, it would be a good idea for the parish pastoral team to meet with the parish pastoral council to study together with the liturgy committee or the Grief Committee the question of Christian funerals. It would also be a good thing for such a study and reflection take place at the deanery level so that a common policy be determined and respected by all in the deanery.

IMMEDIATE CONTACT

As soon as a death occurs it is important to advise the parish leaders so that a meeting can be set up with the family in order to respond adequately to the family's immediate needs and desires. Today's situation calls for cooperation between funeral homes and the Church to create a link with the Christian community, the bereaved, and other people involved (cemetery caretakers, choir, servers, lunch committee, etc.).

LEGISLATION

Church legislation on funerals is rather meager, hardly a few articles. Here are a few¹: "Church funerals must be granted to the faithful, according to law. Church funerals by which the Church gives the faithful spiritual help and honours their bodies while offering the living the comfort of hope, must be celebrated according to liturgical law. The Church strongly recommends that be maintained the pious custom of burying the dead; however, the Church does not forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine. For all deceased Christian faithful, the funeral is to be generally celebrated in the church of one's own parish. However, it is permitted to every faithful as well as to every person looking after such matters to choose

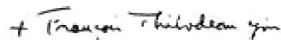
another church with the accord of the pastor of that church, while keeping the other pastor (of the deceased person's parish) informed. If the parish has its own cemetery, the deceased faithful must be buried there unless another cemetery has been legally chosen as a final resting place by those who are in charge of these arrangements. Each diocesan bishop may publish his own specific guidelines. For example, he may forbid the celebration of the funeral Mass at the funeral home. However, it is praiseworthy to hold a liturgy of the Word in the funeral home. At the funeral inappropriate eulogies are to be avoided."

CONTINUING RESEARCH

As a Church, we are trying to respond better to the family or a human unit confronted with death, as we adopt new attitudes and suggest the organizing of grief committees. How can we humanize the period of death and mourning, show concern for those who are trying to make sense of what they are experiencing, and celebrate with them at the time of death of a loved one? The death of a baptized person is not meant to be a private affair, it concerns all the other baptized who together with the deceased were plunged into the death of Christ in order to rise with him.

COMING HOME TO GOD

I end this reflection with a beautiful poem by Robert Lebel, *Coming Home to God...* "As we come home at the end of the day, at the end of a journey, and find close to Him rest for the heart. \ Learning at His feet the meaning of Love... and rekindling the fire he came to light. \ Learning to thank Him, to ask him forgiveness, and kiss him without fear in the presence of all! \ Seeking to hide oneself forever, in his gaze... blessed silence of simple folk who understand one another. \ Sadness and joy of the soul, anxiety and hope, passion and worry... everything, everything passes before us. It is true that He knows everything. He sees everything, yet... \ He waits for our hearts to find rest in Him. Coming home to God... like we come home to loved ones. \ Tired, consumed with cares, but capable of loving. \ Being there, just there... Letting one's arms relax... and letting oneself be enwrapped when He opens His. \ I love You, God, I love You, further than any heart can go, more than any mistake. And I know that I am loved, not alone but with all those you have given me. They are here at my side and I bring them to You: let them come in to You, just as we come home..."



+ François Thibodeau

Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (437) (22 May 2002)

¹ From the French Study Edition. The English Study text has not yet been made public.