

Celebration of Life or Rite of Christian Burial?

In preparation for someone's Funeral Mass, I always make a point of finding out a bit about that person's life. I talk to family members, I read the obituary submitted to the newspaper or funeral home, and I may also read "words of remembrance" composed by some relative in advance of the Mass.

The Funeral Mass or, more properly, Rite of Christian Burial is, after all, celebrated for a particular deceased person and I see no problem integrating personal details of that person's life or work which may include values that speak to the faith we are celebrating and proclaiming.

There are some priests whom I would regard as "reactionary" against some abuses to the Church's liturgy who have, all but, excluded personal references to the deceased in their homilies at the Mass. They are, I believe, exaggerating the rubric which distinguishes a "eulogy" from a "homily." It is, I believe, a reaction against priests, family and guests turning the Funeral Mass into a mere "Celebration of Life." But, as per usual, the "reactionary" approach throws *"the baby out with the bath water."*

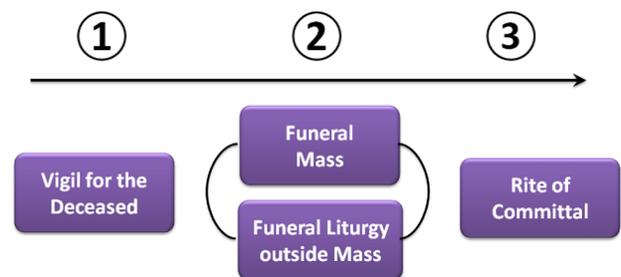
However, many Catholics have adopted the reductive attitude about Funeral Masses for their loved ones as mere "Celebrations of Life." It is not that there is anything, per se, wrong with the celebration of someone's life: It is, rather, that the **Funeral Mass is not the time or place**. The Mass is the commendation of the soul of a loved one into eternal life. We celebrate the Sacrifice of the Lord for the remission of sins of the deceased and, by our prayers commend him/her into the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I would suggest that the temptation to reduce the Liturgy of the Church to a "Celebration of Life" has a number of causes:

- Many Catholics don't really understand what the Mass is. It is not merely a recitation of faith in historical facts. It is a re-presentation, here-and-now, upon the altar of the Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

The actual, saving grace of that moment is brought to bear against the insult of death to our beloved!

- Many Catholics forget about the immensely hopeful prospect of sanctification through Purgatory. In other words, if we have not severed our relationship with God through Mortal Sin but, nevertheless, die with some sin on our souls, the prospect remains for cleansing and passage into the Eternal City where, **"nothing unclean will enter, nor anyone who does abominable things or tells lies,"** (Rev. 21:27)
- Related to the above, some may have slipped into a "Protestant" conception of Atonement which only envisions Heaven or Hell after death. In this conception, Jesus Christ is the substitute who takes upon himself all the sin of the world, and those who have faith in him will be saved. However, this does not, from a Catholic understanding, adequately address the problem of people of faith who, nevertheless, are sinners. Are we really made holy to enter into heaven, or are these residual sins just overlooked by God? As it is, because we continue to sin after we have been baptized and professed our faith, *"we work out our salvation in fear and trembling,"* (Philippians, 2:12). And Jesus, using the metaphor of prison, speaks of *"not getting out until you have paid the last penny."* (Mt. 5:26)
- And, of course, there is an understandable need to collect memories and photographs and recollections to keep the beloved in "living memory".



Obviously, the ultimate good for ourselves and our beloved is the be caught up into the vision of God and eternal life. Memories and recollections have their place, but they are nothing compared to that.