

THE PURPOSE OF THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL

With Catholic funerals being in the news lately, I thought it would be good to post this as a reminder of what the Catholic funeral is and is not.

Requiem Part III: The Purpose of a Catholic Funeral

This is the conclusion of a three-part series on death and funerals.

“Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis. Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them” (Entrance Antiphon for Funeral Mass)

Now days when you open the newspaper and read the obituaries, you will notice different words often substituted for the word “funeral”. It is sometimes called a “memorial service” or a “celebration of life”. But do these terms adequately describe a Catholic funeral? Not really.

While we gather at the funeral home with the family, we often do memorialize the deceased and celebrate parts of their earthly life. But when it comes time for the actual Funeral Liturgy, whether it be within the context of a Mass or not, the focus shifts from remembering and celebrating the person’s earthly life to focusing on the life to come. Like all liturgies (public acts of worship), the central focus should not be the people but God. The Order of Christian Funerals gives the reasons why we celebrate funerals. It says:

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral”.

So, we are there first and foremost to worship God. Everything that we do as Christians should be in some way, shape, or form an act of worship. We give praise and thanks to God for creating this life and now taking this life back to Himself. Holy Mother Church also encourages the faithful to have the Funeral within a Mass whenever possible. The Mass is the highest form of prayer and we need all the help we can get.

Since the Liturgy is centered on God, the Catholic Church does not allow eulogies during the funeral. That’s something that can be done at the funeral home before the formal funeral liturgy begins. In accordance with this universal norm of the Church, St. Henry’s does not allow any eulogies during the Funeral Mass or Liturgy. In that same spirit, we also do not allow obituaries and poems to be read during the Liturgy. Those should be done at the funeral home during the wake.

The Funeral is also not the time to canonize the deceased. It can be consoling to think that our loved ones are in heaven. However, that judgment is not ours to make no matter how well we knew them in this life. For in truth, the only one who knows the depths of every human heart is the Lord God Himself which is why He is our final judge. Just as it would be wrong and judgmental to say that a person is in hell, it would be equally judgmental to claim they are in heaven. In both instances, we are trying to take the place of God. In the Funeral Rites, the Church instead entrusts the soul of the deceased to God's mercy and leaves the judgment up to Him. The Order of Christian Funerals continues:

“The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins...Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession.”

Therefore, one of the main purposes of the Christian Funeral is to pray for the soul of the departed. How wonderful it is to be a Catholic, to know that even in death, our prayers and penances can still make a difference. (Since the funeral liturgy is a time of penance, white is not the only option. There are actually three options for the liturgical color [white, violet, or black].) This past week, we observed All Souls Day, a day to pray for all the souls in purgatory. This is what we do at every funeral. Should our departed love ones have any further need for purification in purgatory before entering into God's presence, our prayers and penances can assist them. This is why it is so important to have the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered for the dead. Put it in your final will to ensure it gets done! St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, told her sons as she lay on her deathbed: “Bury my body wherever you will. Let the care of it not cause you any concern. All that I ask is that you remember me, wherever you may be, at the altar of the Lord.”