

Music and Hospitality Are Key to Funeral Liturgies

▲ by Mike Nelson

OXNARD, Calif. (CNS) – Those involved in planning funeral liturgies know that a lot more goes into this ministry than simply coordinating readings and songs.

There often needs to be special attention paid to family members who are not only grief stricken but who may have fallen away from the church or be at odds with other family members.

A music director at a Los Angeles archdiocesan parish said she worked with a daughter, estranged from her sisters, in planning her mother's funeral. The daughter was worried that there might be hard feelings, "a scene" or something unpleasant that would mar the liturgy or aggravate the family discord.

Over the course of several meetings, in person and on the phone, the music director spent several hours with the daughter, helping her choose appropriate music and readings, but also simply listening to her story, addressing her worries and fears, and sharing her own experience of losing her parents.

The music director also made sure that the daughter understood the primary purpose of the funeral Mass.

On the day of the Mass, the daughters and other family members were all present. Few sang – not all were active churchgoers – but there was reverence and respect for the liturgy and each other.

And there were no "scenes." Until the very end.

As the music director, who also was the cantor, sang "On Eagles' Wings," she noticed that as the daughters began to depart the church, they stopped and hugged one another, tightly and tearfully. It was all the cantor could do to maintain her composure and continue as this healing and reconciliation took place.

Key to Understanding

The belief that God is truly present in the midst of pain and sorrow is key to understanding what makes a truly meaningful funeral liturgy. Indeed, celebrating the funeral rites of the church – the vigil service, the funeral Mass and burial – can make a world of difference to those mourning the passing of a loved one.

"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," states the Order

of Christian Funerals.

So in a funeral Mass, we celebrate God's gift of life and the deceased's reunification with God. Parish ministers who are charged with planning and executing the rites can help family and friends understand this through their knowledge and pastoral compassion and sensitivity.

Being "pastorally sensitive" does not mean that "anything goes" with regard to rituals, prayers and songs. A knowledgeable and compassionate priest, music minister or liturgy director will assist the family members or friends who plan the liturgy in making selections from a wide array of choices.

Music in particular "is integral to the funeral rites," according to the Order of Christian Funerals. "It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that word alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love.

"The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture."

If there are songs of a nonsacred nature that were beloved by the deceased or somehow special, a reception following the liturgy is the appropriate place for them, as it is for extended eulogies.

Spirit of Hospitality

A pastorally sensitive minister also takes time to know the family prior to the liturgy, whether or not he or she knew the deceased personally. That requires a spirit of hospitality on the part of the ministers, since it is often the case that some or most of those attending the liturgy will be family, friends and acquaintances who may be non-Catholics or inactive Catholics.

The work of ministering and consoling those who attend a funeral Mass is the work of the entire parish community: the parish staff who oversee the planning and implementation of the funeral rites and parishioners who pray each Sunday for the souls "who have gone before us."

We do not journey alone in this world, nor should we be alone as we prepare to enter God's kingdom, or as we bid farewell to those who go before us. Our funeral rites can help make that transition more comforting and make God's kingdom on earth more real to us all.



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