



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time June 26, 2016 C

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH AND FUNERAL SERVICES

A DEATH FORCES US TO PAUSE AND REFLECT— SOMETHING OUR FAST-PACED CULTURE AVOIDS. BUT CATHOLIC FUNERAL AND BURIAL PRACTICES ARE WORTH KEEPING ALIVE.

The following article was written by Katie Bahr in the November 2015 issue of US Catholic Magazine.

When Alexander Edelen lost his grandmother in 2013 he faced a difficult choice. Though he wanted to attend her funeral, his boss would not give him a day off for bereavement. "I guess, from an employer's perspective, a funeral is taking away a day that an employee is productive," he says. "But a person only lives once."

As a child Edelen spent a lot of time with his grandmother. On holidays her house was where relatives would gather. Other times she would watch him when his parents were at work. Because her illness was sudden, Edelen couldn't spend much time with her before she died. When he got married, she was too sick to attend the wedding.

Edelen, a parishioner at Most Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was determined to attend his grandmother's funeral. His family planned a traditional funeral Mass at the parish where his grandmother belonged for decades. Even though he could not get a bereavement day, Edelen still went.

"For me, the funeral and the wake were my last chance to see my grandmother and to say goodbye to her," he says. "Some things are more important than a Saturday at the office."

Though Edelen was surprised at his employer's expectation that he should skip a close relative's funeral, his experience is indicative of a shift in how society handles death. According to data from the National Funeral Directors Association, funerals in recent decades have become shorter and less religious. More people choose cremation, and a growing number choose not to hold services at all.

Deacon George Kelder, a funeral director for 30 years and assistant executive vice president of the New Jersey State Funeral Directors Association, has

experienced these changes firsthand—even among Catholics. In his diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, it has become more common for families to skip parts of the funeral, particularly the wake or committal if cremation is involved. Other times, they might hold the service at a funeral home or other location instead of a church. In Kelder's words, it's "Catholic funeral life."

*The **un-churched** may not understand the significance of the funeral rite, Kelder says, while those who are not religious would often prefer to not have Mass at all. But even among practicing Catholics, Kelder has seen the ceremonial connections become less of a priority. "Have you ever been in a funeral home (for a vigil) when the clergy arrives and everyone hightails it out prior to the prayers starting, so as not to overstay their welcome? It's almost comic."*

Kelder believes the changes in funerals are a troubling reflection of the changes in society. By focusing more on careers and worldly success, he thinks some people no longer have time for relationships and personal affairs, even when someone has died. "It's the reality of where we are," he says. "The living have to get back to their lives."

Many Catholics may not realize how much they lose by skipping the ceremonial steps along the way. "A good funeral gets the dead where they need to be and the living where they need to be, but our clocks are getting in the way," Kelder says.

No time for goodbyes

*Traditionally, funerals within the Catholic Church have followed the Order of Christian Funerals, which has three distinct parts: the **Vigil Service** (also known as the wake), a time for visitation, prayer, and remembrance; the **Funeral Mass**, a time to offer prayers for the repose of the deceased's soul; and the **Rite of Committal**, in which the body is committed to its final resting place. Father Edward Hathaway, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Alexandria, Virginia, believes that when done right Catholic funerals can be an awe-inspiring expression of the faith. They are also a source of comfort and familiarity in a time of loss and dramatic change; a place where Catholics can be reminded of their union with God and one another. ...*

"Funerals can be a very profound moment for people to confront their own mortality as well as the immortal life Jesus won for us on the cross," Hathaway

says. "We're confronted with the beauty of God, and that's what can give us hope if we lose a loved one."

Though most of his parishioners still follow church traditions when it comes to death, Hathaway has noticed some changes since he was ordained in 1991. Today people dress more casually for funerals. Eulogies and nontraditional music are more common. And visitation hours are much shorter—it was once common practice for wakes to take place the day before the funeral Mass from 2 to 4 pm and then again from 6 to 8 pm.

"Now with everyone working," Hathaway says, "who can come to the afternoon wake? People are commuting. They get home late, they will still come out for a wake in the evening, but now a lot of it is centered on the social thing of comforting the family. You don't always see prayer."

Occasionally, Hathaway says he experiences a culture clash when devout parents die and their non-practicing children decide a traditional funeral service is unnecessary. "Sometimes it's money-driven. Sometimes it's about a decrease in faith, and sometimes it shows a lack of awareness for how the sacrifice of the Mass is a benefit to the souls who preceded us," he says.

For these reasons, Hathaway feels strongly about providing education around funerals. He also thinks the funerals themselves can be strong teaching tools, giving people who don't normally enter church the opportunity to ask the big questions about life, death, and their own mortality. In his own life, Hathaway says it was his father's funeral that helped him cement his faith.

"I was 21 years old and I was confronted with those questions, which were very important to my vocation," he says. "'What am I doing?' 'What is the meaning of life?' I decided, 'If it's supernatural, let me focus more on that than I have been.'"

Discomfort with the dead

Other changes to funerals over the years have more complicated causes than packed calendars. Mark T. Higgins, a Catholic and co-owner of Hall-Wynne Funeral Service and Crematory in Durham, North Carolina, says he's noticed an increasing discomfort when it comes to death in recent years. "We're looking at a generation that doesn't want to look at death," he says. "People want to make it simple; they want to get the body disposed of quickly. The same people who are in the delivery room when the baby is born, when they are around death, they don't want anything too graphic."

In the 2013 book *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Westminster John Knox) coauthors Thomas Lynch, a Catholic poet and funeral director, and Thomas Long, a Presbyterian minister and theologian, trace the modern discomfort with death back to the origins of the funeral industry, which began

soon after the Civil War. For most of human history, when a person died their family or friends would prepare the body and take care of the funeral preparations by themselves. The body would be laid for visitation in the parlor of the family home. When it was time for burial, the deceased would often be laid to rest in a family cemetery.

"When funeral directors began to take over the embalming of the dead, they disappeared from our sight and we began to become disconnected from the process," Long says. "We decided that we didn't really like or couldn't tolerate the dead."

This distance from death was a departure from other cultural traditions, Lynch says. "In most cultures, a corpse can be a bit of an encumbrance. Someone has to help dress the person and move the body, someone has to cook and prepare a meal. Everybody has a part to play because they know that nobody is going to bury the body for you. But in this culture, you can get on the phone, call your undertaker, and he returns with a box of ashes. We can disappear the dead without much trouble."

Lynch and Long both say they are troubled by how this disconnect plays out in the funerals they see—people seem so afraid of death that they refuse to acknowledge it. Fewer people choose to accompany the body to the gravesite or the crematory. And while it is still expected for the remains to be present in a Catholic funeral Mass if at all possible, more and more non-Catholics are choosing to hold memorial services in which the bodies are not present. "We're the first people in the history of the world for which the dead are no longer welcome at their own funerals," Long says.

Lynch has stronger words. He believes funerals at which the body is purposely not present are not just misguided but "inhuman."

"Those are the bodies we fought for, slept with, loved, sat with, got comfort from, and lived with," he says. "If we're going to dispatch them to the ground, we should go to the cemetery. If we're going to burn them, we should go with them to the fire. ... Any church that has forgotten how to deal with the dead is of no use to the living."

Kelder has noticed the disconnect with death in some Catholic burials, where the Rite of Committal might take place in a tented area of a cemetery surrounded by astroturf, with the actual burial happening later. "Our burials can sometimes be so sanitized that we lose the aspects of what we're doing and that connection is severed," he says. "Sometimes because it's such a painful thing to work through, you have to get your hands dirty."

He and others find hope in the recent interest in farm-to-table eating and home births. Just as more people are

hoping to reconnect with where their food comes from and how people are born, they think people should be willing to reconnect with how people die. “Hospice is a good step to equate us to dying,” Kelder says. “We may not like it, but it happens to all of us. Witnessing our spouse’s death, our parents’ or children’s deaths, I think, is very vital to the process.”

A loss of faith?

While a lack of connection to the dead is bad, Long believes the changes in funerals are reflective of an even bigger problem—a lack of faith across society. “Sometimes we clergy have the sense that funeral directors somehow ‘took over’ the funeral from the church. But I don’t think funeral directors could have taken this job over if we were not so willing to give it up,” he says.

Long points to significant theological and cultural changes at the end of the 19th century that he says caused Christians to lose their grasp on the idea of heavenly hope. One cause of this shift was the Civil War, which presented challenging images of mass deaths. “Many Americans had a very individualistic and literalistic picture of ‘my loved one going to heaven and being welcomed by Jesus,’” Long says. “But this deeply personal image became difficult to maintain with over a half million dead lying on the battlefields of Virginia and Pennsylvania.”

That, combined with a more scientific world view, caused many Christians to doubt their earlier ideas of heaven and the afterlife. As Americans grew wealthier and more enchanted by the pleasures of this world, they began to lose interest in the joys of the next, Long says. “The more you like this life, the less intriguing the next one becomes,” Long says. “When the dead aren’t going anywhere, we have to figure out some other way to find meaning about them.”

This led to a transition, moving funerals from being a ritual to accompany the dead on their way to heaven to being focused on getting mourners to a place of healing. “Funerals shifted from dealing with both the dead and the living to dealing almost exclusively with the living, and they became all about grief management,” Long says.

Outside the Catholic Church, many Christian and secular funerals have morphed into highly personalized celebrations of life, in which multiple people who knew the deceased person will share stories and anecdotes about his or her life. Lynch thinks those funerals can cause harm if they force mourners into false emotions. “A good funeral should allow for the entire emotional register,” he says. “It should allow for the grin to give way to a wince, and nobody should be shocked by that ... The problem with a celebration of life is that it says, ‘We’re here for the good laugh, but not as much for the good cry.’”

Father Hathaway believes problems arise in funerals when people replace the primary purpose—praying for the souls of their loved ones—with the secondary purpose of providing comfort for those left behind. In his parish, Hathaway has seen an increased push for eulogies which are not traditionally a part of the Catholic funeral Mass. (Many parishes around the country have forbidden eulogies from the funeral Mass, while others allow them only occasionally.) While there should be time for families and friends to reminisce and laugh about the deceased person, Hathaway believes the funeral Mass should be primarily about prayer.

“For me, the most disappointing thing at funerals is when someone makes a long eulogy with no reference to the person as a child of God or a person of faith, or sometimes even talks about things that are contrary to the faith, like how much beer they could drink,” he says. “Sometimes the emotions can run the whole show. We do need to acknowledge our emotions, but what’s beautiful about the church’s liturgy is that when we don’t know what to say, it provides us with the words.”

Though celebrations of life are not encouraged in the Catholic Church, Higgins says he has heard of churches loosening their restrictions to allow multiple eulogies, secular music, or even special events like balloon releases at the wake service. Within the funeral Mass itself, Higgins thinks churches should be more careful. “If there’s one too many things, the service can get hijacked and become all about the person and their particular interests and quirks,” he says. “That’s not the witness of the funeral Mass.”

“The appeal for a celebration of life service is strong because somehow it’s not as sad, not as in your face, but I think people who go to a well-done funeral will constantly comment on the beauty and the transcendence and the power of that funeral through its timeless ritual,” Higgins says. “We’ve been doing this a long time, and it doesn’t require a lot of embellishment.”

A faithful farewell

One funeral Higgins can remember that reached the level of transcendence was that of Terence McCann, who passed away in 2012. When Terence’s wife, Bodie, was planning the funeral at Immaculate Conception Church in Durham, she wanted it to reflect some of her husband’s lifelong passions while also remaining true to Catholic rituals.

The couple met in the church choir, so it was fitting that the funeral Mass have the beautiful choral music he loved. Bodie also wanted the funeral to reflect Terence’s love of God, his family, and the parish—all elements of his life that she took into account when preparing his funeral.

During the funeral, chosen hymns reflected Terence’s Irish heritage and naval career. Over the course of the

funeral's three parts, Bodie says she had time to socialize with friends and family at the wake and to pray in a Mass that reflected who her husband was. And she had time to say goodbye.

"It was very respectful of his life, and I think it really honored who he was and what he stood for," she says. "I believe that ritual is supportive in grief and can be supportive in lots of life's passages."

Though she has been to many different kinds of funerals through the years, Bodie said she was happy she went the traditional Catholic route. "I experienced the arc, the whole story, and that was very important to me," she says. "I have seen people not want to do this or that, for fear of it being uncomfortable or too sad, but in the long run that would have been a mistake for me. I would have regretted not being part of the send-off that he deserved."

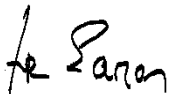
According to Higgins, one of the reasons Terence's funeral was so successful had to do with the way it was both personal and prayerful. By combining all aspects of her husband—the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual—Bodie was able to say goodbye in a way that honored him completely.

Terence's funeral is an example of how other Catholics can proceed when it comes to death. Just as Catholics find themselves face-to-face with Jesus' suffering every time they see a crucifix, they should be prepared to face death when it shows up in their lives. And if Catholics truly believe in life after death, they need to accept that the souls of deceased loved ones still remain. Having a funeral that honors both who the person was and offers prayers for where he or she has gone can be one final way to show love.

"When a funeral is done well, these are some of the finest moments for the church," says Higgins. "The purpose is to get the dead person where they need to go and to usher that person physically as a community of faith. When we do that, when we act out that play, we are getting ourselves to a more solid ground."

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Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.