

FUNERALS AT SAINT BENEDICT PARISH



FR. JAMES MALLON

Pastor

Over the last few years, the issue of “how we celebrate funerals” has come to the fore, not just in our parish, but throughout the entire

Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth. I have been in conversation with many of my brother priests, and it appears that what we are experiencing here is identical to what they are experiencing. I can sum it up as this: most of our funerals are attended by a large majority of people who have no familiarity, or minimal familiarity, with Catholic liturgical rites.

In recent months, Fr. Simon and I have celebrated funeral Masses at which 90% of the people don't even make the sign of the cross, never mind understand the deep symbolism of the sacrifice of the Eucharist. This should not come as a surprise because the “attendees” at funeral are simply representative of the general population. In our part of the world, approximately 90% of baptized Catholics DO NOT participate in Sunday Mass on a regular basis. Yet, those who have drifted away from faith as well as non-Catholics and non-Christians seem to be the ones filling the pews at funeral Masses these days.

This situation is especially tragic when the deceased person, for whom the funeral Mass is being offered, was a person of faith. More and more we see elderly and devout Catholics with children and grandchildren who have no connection to the Church. At the funerals for these faithful people, the church is filled with their family members (and the friends and colleagues of these family members), most of whom have little or no connection to the Church.

The question we face is this: what is the best way to respond to this situation? There are a few principles that we need to acknowledge:

1) Celebrating the funeral rites for the deceased faithful is one of our responsibilities as a parish. We are committed to this as much as ever. Canon Law says that there are three purposes for our Catholic funeral rites: to provide spiritual support for the deceased, to honour their bodies, and to bring the solace of hope to the living (Canon 1176.2).

As an aside but related point, please note the wording in the very next line in Canon Law: The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine (Canon 1176.3).

2) We have an ancient custom in our Church that involves offering the celebration of the Eucharist for a deceased person. We are still committed to offering Mass for the repose of the soul of the deceased.

3) A fundamental principle of pastoral care is to meet people where they are.

For the past 150 years, in our part of the world, the funeral rites and the offering of Mass for the deceased were celebrated in the same liturgy. This was not the case in the past, and is often not the case in many parts of the world today (due to great distances, the need to bury the body quickly and a lack of priests). We have become accustomed to this manner of merging the funeral rites with the celebration of Mass.

When the vast majority of people at a funeral have no idea what we are talking about or what anything means, are we lovingly meeting them where they are? Or are we essentially telling them that they must meet us where we are, and it's too bad if they don't understand most of what's happening? At the end of a recent funeral, I found myself wanting to apologize to the people present, as the vast majority seemed to have no idea what the Mass was about. I was very conscious of just how odd so many of our sacred, liturgical symbols would seem to an “outsider” looking in.

In September 2014, our Archbishop addressed this same issue in a pastoral letter to the faithful of the Church of Halifax-Yarmouth. He recognized that we were facing a huge change with regards to society's attitude towards life, death and funerals. He recognized an increasing disconnect of many from faith and the Church. He also noted a rise in the number of funerals due to aging congregations, along with a decreasing number of priests. What follows is the section of the letter relevant to this topic:

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In many cases, instead of speaking of a funeral “with or without the Eucharist” – an expression which might be understood as referring to the level or quality of the service, it should be the ordinary practice to propose the funeral rite which best meets the family’s current situation or spiritual context.

This would better reflect and respect our Catholic faith and would enable people to feel more at ease in the present context which is increasingly secular. As a rule, it does not seem appropriate to celebrate a funeral Mass when, clearly, the majority of the people present are not in touch with our faith or not properly disposed to celebrate the Eucharist or to receive communion. It would be preferable in such circumstances to offer a funeral service in the form of a Liturgy of the Word. These matters should be addressed with the family of the deceased at an appropriate time, before the actual funeral takes place in the Church.

Although our bishop wrote these words almost three years ago, I do not know of any parish that has really tried to implement this, including Saint Benedict. Our starting presumption has been incorrect: that the majority of people attending funeral Masses will be people of faith. Hence, the norm has been to celebrate a funeral Mass, whereas a Liturgy of the Word Funeral may be suggested as the rare exception. In the few instances, over the last two years, when we have recommended a Liturgy of the Word to a family that is not connected to the Church, they have pushed for a Mass. Even though they themselves lack faith, their deceased loved one was a believer. Furthermore, this approach has almost felt punitive to those families who were unconnected to the Church, so we were less inclined to follow through. The result has been exactly what I have described: funeral Masses with 90% of attendees who are not familiar with the Mass.

After much reflection and discussion, we will be adjusting our approach to this issue at Saint Benedict Parish and will implement a new approach at the beginning of September 2017. The norm for funerals will be a Liturgy of the Word. Funeral Masses will be the exception. (This simply reflects the reality, because right now, a funeral Mass, at which there is a substantial gathering of the faithful, is actually the exception). What will this mean? Obviously, any parishioner who is active and known within our parish would have a funeral Mass because we know that many of the faithful will be there. Families who are not connected will be best served by a Liturgy of the Word; a Mass will still be offered for the deceased at another time. If gathering at a Mass is important to some members of the family, then they are welcome

to join our community at one of our weekday 9am Masses, which will be offered for the repose of the soul of their loved one. In this way we will once again respect the three principles I spoke about earlier:

- 1) The Funeral Rites will be celebrated for the deceased, fulfilling the purpose called for in Church Law and our tradition (we will pray for the deceased, honour the body and provide comfort and support for the living).
- 2) Mass will be offered for the deceased, with family members present if they so choose. Even if the family is not aware of or interested in the supernatural power of the Eucharistic sacrifice, one of the priests will offer an unannounced Mass, at another time, praying for God’s mercy to be upon this deceased person.
- 3) We will minister to the family in a way that they can understand and is meaningful for them.

Although it is not the primary concern, this change in our approach also has other benefits. If every funeral is a funeral Mass then it places particular demands on priests. It is not uncommon for Fr. Simon and me to work 60-80 hours in a given week. Often our weeks are booked up well in advance with essential meetings, deadlines and obligations. Funerals, of course, come at very short notice and can sometimes come all at once. A few months ago, we had six funerals within seven weekdays. Fr. Simon and I were both feeling that the situation was becoming critical in terms of our own ability to respond to the demand and maintain our sanity and health. Also, it makes scheduling funerals very challenging for our Funeral Ministry Team when we have to decide what has to be moved or cancelled to allow for the most ideal time for a Mass. By moving to Liturgy of the Word Funerals, as the norm, it gives us greater flexibility in responding to families and being able to offer them more options as both deacons and lay people are permitted by the Church to preside over funeral rites that do not include the Eucharist.

I know that for many parishioners this upcoming change may be difficult to accept. Just to reiterate, if you have made efforts to connect to our parish, we will gladly celebrate a funeral Mass for you – as many of our own parishioners will be present praying as a community for you on that day. These changes are being made to better serve the 90% who are disconnected from faith and from Church. As always, we ask for your patience and understanding. We live now in a very different world. We need to adjust how we do things while remaining faithful to the essentials. I believe that through this change we will be doing just that.