

Celebrating Funerals in the Absence of a Priest

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Funerals are still very significant social and religious events for Irish people. One often hears the remark that ‘the Irish do funerals well’. We certainly turn out in very significant numbers and do so as a mark of respect for the deceased and as a way of offering consolation and support for the bereaved family. Central to our funeral liturgies is the prayer that we offer in thanksgiving for the gift of life that has now been returned to God and to intercede with God for the deceased, that God may pardon their sins and welcome them in the company of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The funeral liturgy has many elements, all of which are meant to console and offer hope to all who participate in them. These elements may include prayers in the home before the body is removed, prayers in the funeral home, the reception of the body at the church, the funeral Mass and the final committal in the cemetery or prayers in the crematorium. Over recent decades, people have become familiar with the local priest presiding at all these stages of the funeral services.

As the clergy are ageing and their numbers in steep decline, it will soon not be possible to have an ordained

priest or deacon present for all of the elements of the funeral or even to have a funeral Mass on the day of the burial, as has become customary. The average funeral takes at least fourteen hours of a priest’s time, and sometimes longer if the circumstances involve a tragedy or very sensitive family circumstances. Many large urban parishes can have several funerals during the week and this puts enormous pressure on the parish priest, as now most parishes have only one full-time priest, often with responsibility for a second parish.

It is obvious then that change in the way we celebrate funerals will have to come. In many parishes, up until the 1970s, a layperson regularly received the body at the church and led the prayers. Sometimes the funeral Mass was not celebrated until some days after the burial.

The Order of Christian Funerals, the official texts for conducting funerals, mentions that apart from the celebration of the funeral Mass, these other elements of the funeral services can be conducted by a layperson. Several dioceses in Ireland have already trained lay people to conduct these services and they have begun to exercise their ministry.

Apart from leading the prayers of the funeral liturgy, the funeral ministers may also be ministers of consolation. They may visit the home to support the bereaved family, explain to them the elements of the funeral service, help them to choose readings, prayers and appropriate music for the funeral Mass. In a busy parish, they might help the priest in preparing his homily, providing him with biographical details about the life of the deceased, the family context and any other relevant details. This would enable him to address the bereaved with sensitivity and speak the message of Christian hope in a way that will resonate with them.

The introduction of this funeral ministry will inevitably take place gradually. It may begin with the new ministers sharing in the leadership of the prayers in the home, funeral home or the church. They may place the symbols on the coffin, proclaim the scripture readings, read the prayer of the faithful or lead a decade of the rosary. Such a gradual introduction may facilitate people becoming more familiar with a liturgy that is not led by the pastor, when this may be no longer possible.

Eventually we will see a return to that older practice when the funeral services and burial were conducted apart from a celebration of the Eucharist, and when this was celebrated at a later convenient time when the priest could be present. In some countries, there is a practice where funerals are conducted by lay ministers and then at regular intervals, perhaps weekly, a Mass is celebrated where all who have died over the previous period are remembered

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by name. This situation may not be too far away in large urban parishes, where more and more only one ordained priest is available to care for several parishes simultaneously.

The Order of Christian Funerals reminds us that ‘the Church calls each member of Christ’s Body – priest, deacon, layperson – to participate in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn’. We do this already, but as we move forward, it will be necessary that we have a variety of ministers who can exercise leadership in this regard, not just priests and deacons. It is a ministry to which any baptised person may be called. Obviously, those who are called to it will have to be people of faith who are sensitive in dealing with bereavement and who have been adequately prepared to exercise the ministry.

While we might regret the absence of ordained priests at many familiar liturgies and services, we will see the emergence of a variety of other ministries, responding to various pastoral needs, which will bring new enrichment to the life of the Church.