

speak of the everyday life of the deceased can find a natural home in the vigil rather than in the Funeral Mass. The Vigil for the Deceased encourages the retelling of the story of the deceased in multiple ways – in its symbolic actions, prayers, scriptural word, songs, as well as formal or informal speaking in remembrance of the deceased. Before being asked to “give praise and thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death” (OCF, 128), the vigil affords the opportunity for the bereaved to dwell for a time in death, to ponder its mystery and pain, to be consoled by God’s word and by the faith community whose work it is to console.

“...the church offers a rich ritual context to which the bereaved may bring their grief and pain, and in which their grief might be heard as they travel the painful path of separation and leave-taking.”

Moving on

With the Funeral Liturgy, there is a sense of moving on and moving more deeply into the paschal mystery.

Eighteen months ago, one of our sisters, Helen, was killed in tragic car accident. A community of family, friends, colleagues and sisters, bathed in grief, gathered for her vigil. As her family and community accompanied her body into the chapel, already redolent with memories, we heard the poignant and almost unbearable words:

*O Christ you wept
when grief was raw,
and felt for those
who mourned a friend,
come close to where
we would not be
and hold us, hold us,
hold us, hold us,
numbed by this life’s end.*

Amidst obvious grief and tears the word of God was proclaimed and we listened to the writings and reflections of this woman of the church. In this atmosphere of raw grief we sang in response:

*I am the beginning
and the end of all things.
I have met death,
but I am alive for all eternity.*

The assembly accompanied Helen’s body to St Mary’s Cathedral where a quiet Compline was prayed.

All that we did that June evening somehow made it possible for us to gather for Eucharist the following day, and to pray stumbling words of thanks and praise around the table – thanks for the life of Helen, for all that Christ had achieved in her and for Christ’s victory over death which now embraced this seemingly meaningless death.

Eucharist is the ritual enactment of this mystery, the celebration that expresses the meaning that the death and resurrection of Jesus gives to the death of a Christian. A Funeral Mass is not only about remembering and giving thanks for the life of the deceased. Central to the Eucharistic Prayer is the action of *anamnesis* in which we give thanks for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and for all that Christ has achieved in the life of the departed. It is with the memory of the deceased and the memory of God’s promises that the assembly can approach the eucharistic table and find in sacrament the fulfilment of hope in these promises.

To pre-empt this central celebration by having a Vigil Mass seems not only to disrupt the flow of the ritual process but also to deprive the bereaved the opportunity to at least begin to deal with the reality of death and enter gradually into a journey of separation. Celebrating a Vigil for the Deceased creates a readiness for the bereaved to stand together around the eucharistic

Preparing a Vigil for the Deceased

The Vigil is usually in the form of a Liturgy of the Word.

Structure:

- ♦ Introductory Rites (Greeting, Opening Song, Opening Prayer)
- ♦ Liturgy of the Word
- ♦ Prayers and Intercessions
- ♦ Concluding Rite

(OCF#69-71)

table giving praise and thanks to God for the mystery in which lies the source of their hope – Christ’s victory over sin and death.

God’s word proclaimed

At the heart of any Vigil for the Deceased is the solemn proclamation of the word of God. A ‘proper’ vigil will be an assembly of pray-ers summoned to come together in night-watch prayer because one of its members has died. This liturgical gathering will keep prayerful watch with the word of God as its inspiration and source of hope. This gathering which is not accidental, nor the celebration in which it engages an optional frill, will be a meeting place of words and stories, a place for God’s word to embrace the words of grief and memories of the bereaved. This ‘proper’ vigil will be one which is deeply conscious of loss and grief, in the midst of which a word of hope and consolation is proclaimed, a word which “tells of God’s design for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called his own” (OCF# 56).

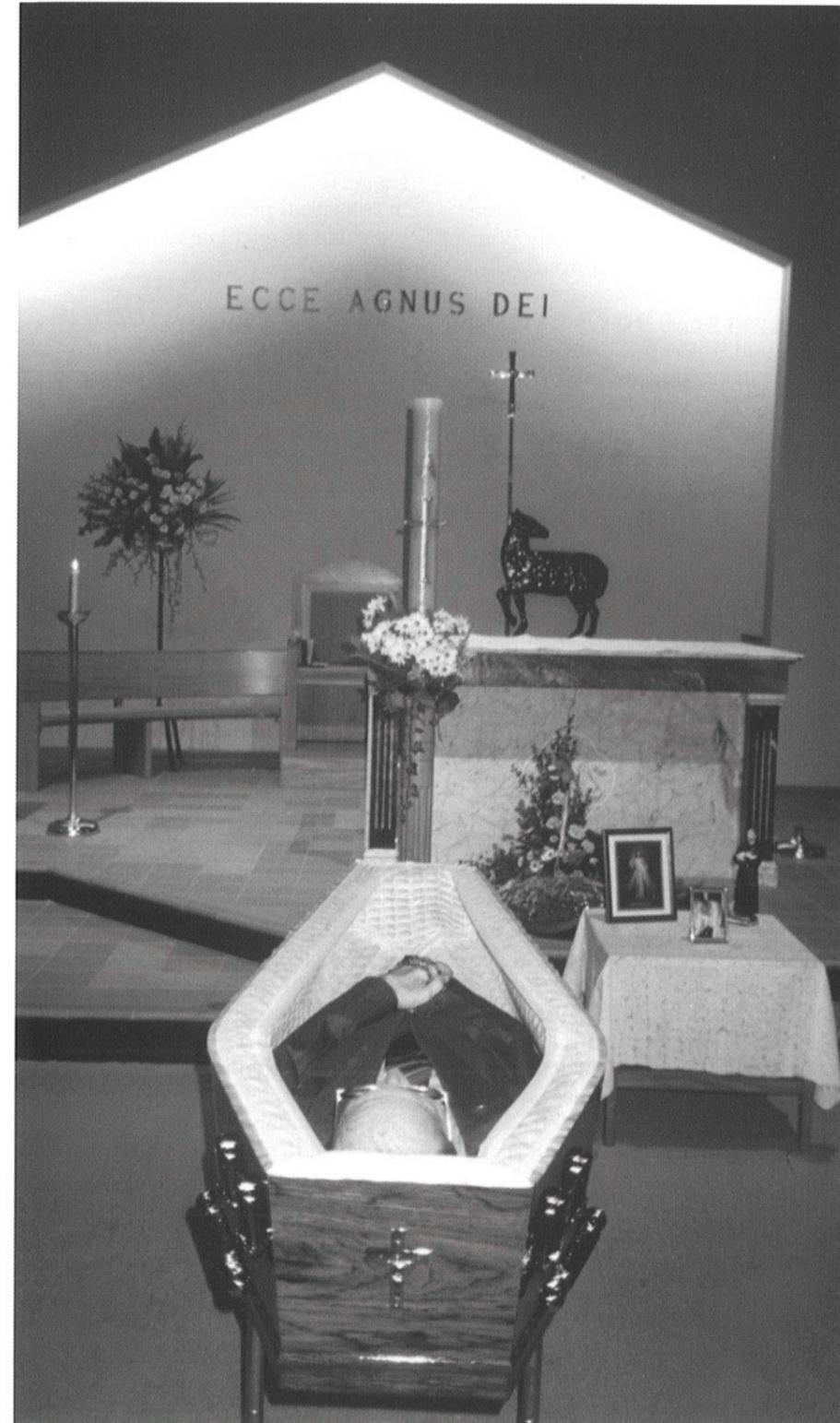
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INFORM

Current thinking on Catholic Issues

77

REGISTERED BY AUSTRALIA POST PRINT POST APPROVED PP243504/0004 JANUARY 2002 – 3 KEATING STREET LIDCOMBE NSW 2141



“When I die I want a proper Vigil...”

Order of Christian Funerals

A Catholic funeral is not a reward for a person who has lived a good life. Rather, it is an expression of the love of Christ and the Church for a member whose earthly life is now completed. It is an expression of our faith in the Lord’s mercy and kindness and about the hope and consolation we offer to the bereaved.

In this context, Margaret Smith explores the meaning of the Vigil for the Deceased found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, highlighting its important place in the overall sequence of rites.

INFORM

A publication of the Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney designed to provide wide access to current thinking on Catholic issues. Published five times a year, it can be obtained from:



Locked Bag 888, Silverwater DC NSW 1811 Tel: (02) 9643 3660 Fax: (02) 9643 3669

Published with ecclesiastical approval. ©2002, Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney. EDITOR: Patricia Bolster RSM LAYOUT & DESIGN: Annette Loughlin-Smith

“When I die I want a proper vigil.” The person who expressed this wish – a priest – must have had a variety of vigil experiences, some which ‘met a mark’ and others which ‘fell short of a mark.’ He went on to say that, when he died, he wanted the same kind of vigil that would be prayed on the occasion of the death of any member of the parish in which he served. As a priest he wanted no privilege in death but rather to take the same place in death as any other member of the baptised community. A contrasting situation is that of Kevin who, after participating in a Vigil for one of his bowling club friends, a vigil which might be called ‘proper’, said: “I don’t want any of this new-fangled stuff when I die.”

Funeral rites of the Catholic Church

The focus of this article will be that of the Vigil for the Deceased, that much neglected night-watch assembly of believers to which the bereaved bring their memories of the deceased, their grief and loss, and in that context of faith begin their formal leave-taking.

It is telling to read the funeral notices in the newspapers. I have done this over the space of a week and, in the Melbourne newspapers – the *Age* and the *Sun-Herald* – found only two instances which made reference to a vigil. In one case it was designated as ‘Vigil Prayers’, in the other ‘Vigil Mass’. Many notices advertise that ‘rosary will be recited’ at a certain time on the night before the funeral. Many more notices give only the time for the principal funeral celebration and advertise it as Funeral Service, Requiem Mass, Thanksgiving Mass to celebrate the life of ..., Mass of Christian Burial, Funeral Mass. In these numerous cases there is no evening gathering for prayer prior to the funeral.

The new funeral rites of the Catholic Church – *Order of Christian*

Funerals – are just over ten years old. These are still relatively early days of implementation, and maybe confusion and a good deal of unfamiliarity are still to be expected.

The terminology in the newspaper funeral notices suggests a certain amount of confusion. Are Vigil Prayers the same as a vigil? Is the recitation of the rosary the same as a vigil? There seems to be a practice when a priest dies that a *Vigil Mass* is celebrated as well as a *Funeral Mass*. How does this fit when the principal funeral celebration is, where possible and desirable, a *Funeral Mass*?

Just recently, a woman who was present at the vigil for one of our deceased sisters, asked: “Is this only for the nuns?” Is the vigil for a privileged ‘class’ within the church? Such can only be an anomaly demonstrated by the church’s encouragement of the use of the white pall which is a symbol that all are equal in the sight of God. Where are we in our understanding of the *Order of Christian Funerals* when we read that “the vigil for the deceased is the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy, or if there is no funeral liturgy, before the rite of committal” (OCF# 54).

Three distinct moments

The *Order of Christian Funerals* offers a wonderful source of wisdom and a rich repertoire of rites with which to mark the death and new life of a Christian. The ritual process of the *Order* is organised around three points in time which follow a natural movement from death to committal – the time between death and the Funeral Liturgy (usually a Mass), the time of the Funeral Liturgy and the time after the Funeral Liturgy. At the death of a Christian, these are times which the church has always observed as occasions of prayer at which the faith community gathers as a liturgical assembly to raise to memory the life of the deceased and the memory of its own story – that of Jesus who has already made the journey from death to life.

It is the first of these occasions of prayer, the Vigil for the Deceased, and its place in the overall ritual

process, that seems to be the least understood. The whole time between death and the funeral is a time of waking, during which and at a certain point the church encourages a nocturnal celebration – the Vigil for the Deceased. The vigil is referred to as the *principal* rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy (OCF, 54). This presupposes that there are other ‘rites’ or times for prayer during this waking time; the *Order of Christian Funerals* calls these Related Rites and Prayers – they are related to this time of waking. Designating the vigil as the *principal* rite during this time between death and the funeral suggests that it has a certain status in the ritual process. It is not to be regarded as a frill or as something ‘new fangled’.

‘Keep watch with me’

The Catholic community is not at all unfamiliar with the experience of some form of prayer – usually the rosary – on the eve of the funeral. The revised *Order of Christian Funerals* has reclaimed the *liturgical* character of this night-watch gathering of faith, grounding the prayer in the proclamation of and response to the consoling word of God. “The vigil is the first occasion among the funeral rites for the solemn reading of the word of God” (OCF, 56).

With the vigil, the time of waking takes on a more formal and public character as the wider Christian community comes together as a liturgical assembly “to keep watch with the family in prayer and find strength in Christ’s presence (OCF# 55). This is when the parish offers its first communal act of worship to God and an act of consolation to the bereaved. At this time, the community turns to “God’s word as the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of death” (OCF, 56). It is an opportunity for the bereaved to dwell for a time in death with a word that consoles and inspires faith. The model for celebration of the Vigil for the Deceased is not surprisingly, a Liturgy of the Word.

All of this is to suggest that the Vigil for the Deceased is not to be dismissed lightly.

While the vigil is the principal rite

celebrated between death and the funeral liturgy, it takes its place in an overall sequence of rites in which the church desires to be present with the deceased and the bereaved from the time of death through to committal and beyond. The *Order of Christian Funerals* offers an ensemble of rituals ordered in a process and celebrated over days of high emotional and ritual intensity. Within this ritual framework each liturgical rite – Vigil for the Deceased, Funeral Liturgy and Rite of Committal – has its own time, its own work and its own purposefully different focus. Throughout this whole process, the church offers a rich ritual context to which the bereaved may bring their grief and pain, and in which their grief might be heard as they travel the painful path of separation and leave-taking. The rites offer a ritual environment in which Christian faith is brought to bear on the mystery of death, not in an attempt to explain death away, but rather to enable believers to become more deeply steeped in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that death which makes sense of all our deaths. It is within this ritual context that the Vigil for the Deceased takes its place. As the principal celebration in the time between death and the funeral liturgy, it anticipates the funeral liturgy which is “the *central* liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased” (OCF# 128).

Why a Vigil?

One of the difficulties in not providing the opportunity for a vigil or dismissing it lightly, is that we attempt to do and say everything in the funeral liturgy. There have been funerals where the baptismal nature of the Rite of Reception of the Body has been eclipsed by an inordinate use of mementos. And mementos cannot do the work of symbol. How many of us have sat part of a captive audience through two or three ‘eulogies’ which sometimes take longer than Mass itself? The time for speaking publicly in remembrance of the deceased – usually before the Final Commendation and Farewell – is a time of *ritualised* remembering. If the option is taken to speak at this point in the funeral liturgy, it seems

The Order of Christian Funerals

The Order of Christian Funerals is one of the Rites of the Catholic Church revised by the Second Vatican Council. It guides the Catholic Community with various rites and prayers to express consolation and hope to those who grieve, to thank God for the blessings received by and through the deceased throughout their life and to ask God’s mercy for all of us who need forgiveness.

“In the face of death the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity.” (OCF#1)

ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

(Congregation for Divine Worship - 29th April, 1987)

GENERAL INSTRUCTION (OCF #1-49)

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|-----------------|---|
| PART I | Vigil Related Rites and Prayers (#50-127)
Funeral Liturgy (#128-203)
Committal and Commendation (#204-233) |
| PART II | Adaption for Children (#234-242)
Vigil (#243-263)
Funeral (#264-315)
Committal (#316-342) |
| PART III | Sacred Scripture (#343-347) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Adults ♦ Baptised Children ♦ Die before Baptism |
| PART IV | Office for the Dead (#348-372) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Morning Prayer (#373-384) ♦ Evening Prayer (#385-396) |
| PART V | Additional Texts (#396-403)
Prayer of Commendation (#404-410) |

important that it not be considered as ‘time out’ from the liturgy, or an occasion for relating anecdotes or biographical accounts of personal relationships with the deceased which can have little to do with the paschal mystery and with the liturgical assembly which celebrates that mystery. Ritualised remembering demands a leanness and economy of words which are a fitting and honest tribute to the deceased before the assembly bids its farewell. There have been the occasions when the funeral liturgy consists of so much reminiscing whether by words or mementos, favourite songs or poetry, that one wonders if there could be an element of subtle denial of death. Eucharist, the celebration that is encouraged at the death of a Christian, places remembering in the context of that larger story of which we make memory and in which we find our hope – the story

of the death and resurrection of Jesus which gives meaning to the death of a Christian.

So what might our priest friend, quoted in the title of this article, have meant by a *proper* vigil? That there be a vigil, a nightwatch of prayer, is taken for granted. The descriptor ‘proper’ assumes an understanding that the vigil has its rightful place in a natural flow of rites, that it is allowed its own focus, and that its ‘work’ is different from and prior to the work of the central liturgical celebration, the Funeral Liturgy.

Unfortunately, a good deal of what happens at the Funeral Mass is really the work of the vigil. The time of waking is the natural time for telling stories, not that reminiscing about the life of the deceased ceases with the celebration of the vigil. But sharing of treasured memories (and sometimes the not so treasured) and mementos which

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