

Death, Faith, the Funeral Liturgy, and Life

This reflection is being prompted by a reading of “A Eulogy for Eulogies: An Interview with Bishop Frederick Henry of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Calgary.” In the Spring 2004 Edition of the National Bulletin on Liturgy, Volume 37, Number 176, pages 47 to 52. Notwithstanding all that is to be read there and the instructions to be found in the Funeral Rite, it has become common practice here in the Archdiocese of Montreal English sector to allow eulogies. We tend not to call them eulogies and ask the families to be brief and sober, with a serious attempt at giving thanks to God for the life of the deceased or otherwise reflect on God’s presence and action in that life and the lives of family members.

Recently, I heard of a priest who allows a limited number of family and/or friends to say words once everyone has arrived at the sanctuary, before going any further with the liturgy, while everyone sits down. The speakers are invited to come up ostensibly to welcome the congregation in the family’s name. As one would expect, the family may refer to the significance of this moment in their lives and the life of the deceased. May 21, 1996 Archbishop Jean-Claude Cardinal Turcotte issued a pastoral letter “Celebrating the Reality of Death in the Church: Pastoral Guidelines for the Liturgical Celebration of Christian Funerals.” Its purpose was primarily to address the issue of whether funerals should be celebrated in funeral homes and so-called “chapels”. No allusion was made to the giving of eulogies. In the absence of specific directions on this issue, I am inclined to try allowing families to make use of such a “welcome rite” upon arriving at the sanctuary, as mentioned above.

Over the years, I have found it a very significant process to invite the family to select Scripture texts to be read at the Funeral Liturgy. I recommend the Sunday pattern: Old Testament reading, with a Psalm or Hymn version of a Psalm sung by the Cantor, and New Testament reading. A Cantor sings the Gospel Acclamation, and I proclaim a Gospel I have chosen myself. This works very well. If the family regularly attends Sunday Mass, they may also want to participate in the Prayers of the Faithful, as well as the Gift Procession at the time of Offertory. These points of participation truly help to make the Funeral a Liturgy, a work of the people.

Families generally don’t spontaneously ask to say anything, and I don’t offer an opportunity. I have only allowed “eulogies” when the family manifests a need to say something, and only after asking them to tell me the nature of what they need or want to say. During my early years, I made no attempt to oversee what would be said, and as the article reports, on a few occasions I also found some of the words inappropriate or presumptuous about the eternal destiny of the deceased. No one can judge – favourably or unfavourably – but God. However, most of the time, I have found the words shared to be not only appropriate, but also an expression of the glory and mercy of God.

Occasionally, I have regretted not having heard those words before I gave the homily, but most of the time I have found the Holy Spirit to be a marvellous choreographer of all that finds its way into the Liturgy. Allowing words of welcome by the family has the merit of allowing the homilist to benefit from what has been said – either to build up the faith of the bereaved, or correct erroneous impressions about death, judgement, our Christian faith, the Resurrection, and life after death. I agree that, given the purpose of the Funeral Liturgy, anything inappropriate is to be avoided, and it’s good to limit the family’s words to between three and five minutes – in all.

At the moment of death, the soul finds itself in the radiance of God’s presence, and that bright light precipitates the particular judgement, when the soul sees itself much as God sees it. Aware of its unrepented sins, the soul spontaneously recoils from the pure love of heaven, and mercifully is offered by God a time of purification in “Purgatory”. This simple realization will help us avoid speaking in a presumptuous manner about the deceased already being in heaven, in God’s joyful presence.