

Catholic Funerals and Eulogies, the Pall and the Flag

Eulogy

When a loved one dies, the grieving family and friends are anxious to honour the memory of the loved one in every way they can. One of the ways some wish to do this is to include a eulogy somewhere in the funeral rites.

Catholics are sometimes surprised to learn, as they prepare for the funeral liturgy, that a eulogy is not permitted and there is no provision for a eulogy by the family in the ritual. The General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* quite clearly states that the homily after the gospel reading is never to be a eulogy. On the other hand, the eulogy is often a significant feature in non Catholic funerals and sometimes appreciated by those present.

Two things should be kept in mind as people prepare for a funeral liturgy and the question of a eulogy is considered. The first is what is meant by the word, eulogy. According to the dictionary, it is “a formal speech or a piece of writing of high praise of a person” (The *Penguin Canadian Dictionary*). The second is that the funeral liturgy is, as is all liturgy, an act of praise and thanksgiving for Christ’s victory over sin and death, a proclamation of the paschal mystery. This act of worship belongs to the whole community, to the whole Church, and not to any individual or group. Any elements that do not give expression to this act of worship do not have a place.

Acknowledgement of the Deceased

The fact that a eulogy is not permitted does not mean that there is to be no reference to the deceased person during the homily. Those who preach are directed to dwell on God’s compassionate love and the paschal mystery as proclaimed in the scripture readings. As well, they are directed to be attentive to the grief of those present and to help them understand the mystery of God’s love and the paschal mystery in the life of the deceased person and in their own lives. References to the person’s life of faith and love are obviously appropriate. It is the “high praise” of a eulogy in the strict sense of the word, praise which has no reference to Christian life and sometimes is exaggerated, that is out of place in an act of worship.

In situations where the homilist does not know the deceased person, it might be helpful for family members or friends to share stories about him or her with the one who will be preaching, with the one presiding if this is not the same person, or with a pastoral minister who represents the parish.

There are other instances in the funeral liturgy where reference is made to the person for whom the funeral is being celebrated, at the various invitations to prayer, for example. These invitations are not speeches about the person but are intended to call the community to keep the deceased person in mind and to pray for the needs of the family and the community in this particular circumstance.

Words of Remembrance at the Vigil

The *Order of Christian Funerals* recognizes our need to reflect on the life of a loved one who has just died. It provides an opportunity for a family member or friend to speak at the (evening) vigil for the deceased—just before the concluding rite. The vigil is an important part of the funeral liturgy and its first liturgical moment. During it, the community gathers to support the grieving family and proclaim publicly the scriptures that express the Church's faith and hope in the resurrection of Jesus.

It is also a ritual that is less formal and more intimate than the main funeral liturgy, which is often a celebration of the Eucharist but can also be a celebration of a liturgy of the word. The vigil is more flexible and provides a greater variety of choices. The *Order of Christian Funerals* provides twelve versions of the service, with choices of scripture readings within each one and the possibility of choosing elements from various vigil services to make the rite more personal.

Because of the vigil's more intimate nature, it is more appropriate to include in it these words of remembrance that refer more directly to the deceased person, if the family so wishes. This too is not a eulogy in the strict sense of the word, that is, a formal speech of "high praise," but rather telling the story of the person. Those who prepare such words of remembrance will want to keep in mind that the vigil service is Christian liturgy, and the focus should be the Christian life of the person. They will want to also guard against making it unduly long.

Sometimes family members want to provide those who come to the funeral liturgy to share their grief with an account of the deceased person's life, with biographical details and a summary of his or her activities. The family might consider preparing a printed leaflet that can be handed out at the funeral or at any other appropriate time. Another opportunity for the family to share the story of the deceased person is at the reception which often follows the funeral liturgy.

The Pall

If we listen carefully to the texts used at a funeral liturgy, we discover that there are several references made to the baptism of the person who is now deceased. One reference occurs at the very beginning of the liturgy, during the rite of the reception of the body.

To emphasize the importance of the person's baptism, the Church in Canada encourages the use of a pall at the funeral liturgy. This pall is placed on the coffin during the rite of reception of the body by family members, friends, or by parish ministers.

This pall is a reminder of the white baptismal garment, a sign of the Christian dignity of the person. Just as the new Christian was clothed in the white garment when he or she became a member of the Church, the coffin is covered with a white cloth as the person enters into a new life in the resurrection of Jesus. Covering the coffin is a way to make a statement about the identity of the deceased; it proclaims that the greatest thing that can be said about the deceased person is that he or she is a sister or brother of Christ, a member of the Church.

The pall is also a sign of hope, of the resurrection, of new life beyond this life, a banner that points to a continued relationship to the deceased person in the time to come. Its use also signifies that in the eyes of God all are equal (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 38).

It might also be said that it is the white cloth itself that is the symbol; it does not need to have any symbols added to it to explain or add to what it means.

This identity of the deceased person as a Christian is considered by the Church to be fundamental and primary, and it is the focus in a special way. For this reason the General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* says that only Christian symbols may be on or near the coffin during the funeral liturgy. Flags and insignia of associations, even Christian associations, should be placed elsewhere, or at least taken off the coffin for the liturgy.

The Flag

When persons who are or were in the military die, family and friends often wish to display the (national) flag as a symbol of national service. They want to drape the flag over the coffin, as is the custom at a “military” funeral. For Catholics, however, baptism remains the fundamental identity. Other emblems should not displace Christian symbols reminding the community of the person’s baptism.

The flag could be put on a standard and placed near the entrance, where it will be visible to all as they enter. If, however, the family do want to have the flag placed on the coffin, it can be done when the coffin is being transported to and from the church where the main funeral liturgy is to be celebrated. The flag (which should be a suitable size) can then be removed and folded with appropriate ceremony and respect just before the pall is to be placed on the coffin during the welcoming of the body. The flag then becomes part of the ritual action in the liturgy. The pall will be removed after the liturgy, and the flag can again be placed on the coffin as it is being transported out of the church.

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