

Catholic Funerals as Moments of Evangelization

Celebrating our Rites and Liturgy

Proclaiming the Good Word to all.

Looking for God's blessing in times of challenge!

Prepared by Susan Shefchyk for the General Assembly of the Clergy Nov '14

Evangelization is a process

Pre- evangelization: (preparing the soil and planting the seed)

- opening people up to the message
- beginning relationships
- opening to a sense of belonging
- a time of invitation
- pray for/ pray with

Evangelization: (nurturing the new plant)

- conversion is the goal
- time of proclaiming the Good News
- encountering Jesus Christ
- beginning a personal relationship with Jesus Christ
- making a decision – responding to Jesus Christ

Disciples

- Continual maturation
- Catechesis
- Equipping for ministry (inside and outside of the Church)
- Renewing – ongoing
- Missionary disciples

Apostles

- Serving
- Proclaiming
- Engaged in social justice and evangelization

Pre-evangelization – evangelization – disciples – apostles

BUT IT IS NOT A SIMPLE LINEAR PROCESS!

Can FUNERALS be an opportunity for evangelization?

Maybe not in the fullest sense – time is short and intense!

But we can be EVANGELISTIC!

Q: Who is being evangelized?

Answer: Everyone / Anyone

Family
Friends, neighbors, co-workers
Parish community
Small Faith-sharing group
Priests/ Deacons
Parish Pastoral workers
Funeral directors/employees
Community ...

WHO IS COMING TO OUR DOOR ...

Active Catholic parishioners approaching the parish;
Some or most of the family will be active and participating in the sacramental and liturgical life of the parish. Extended family and circle of friends mixed in terms of Catholic and non-Catholic.

Deceased was an active Catholic in the parish at some point but not at time of death; immediate family may or may not be active Catholic (or Catholic) and extended family and circle of friends mixed in terms of Catholic and non-Catholic.

Deceased (pre-planning) or family approach a parish/priest for a funeral although they may not be active in the parish.

For the majority of funerals, there will be a wide range of religious realities ...

- Parishioners (active and not so active)
- Active Catholics from different parishes or dioceses
- Latin or Eastern Rite
- Estranged or lapsed Catholics
- Protestant brothers and sisters
- People of other religions/faiths
- People with no religious affiliation/belief
- People hostile/cynical/fearful to the Catholic or Christian tradition

*We must reflect on where is God's blessing in this situation?
How is God surprising someone / us?*

So what can we do? Share the Good News in word and action

Hospitality: starts with the first contact with family;
liturgy decisions; during the liturgy; after the funeral.

Using the beauty of the Liturgy: signs and symbols are natural
outgrowth of our faith – incarnational; ritual action must be done with skill

Homilies --- Kerygmatic – Proclaim the Good News – Not eulogistic

HOSPITALITY from the start

Listening to the family; listening to what God is saying.

We are there to love and serve the family.

Who is God calling to conversion – where is God's blessings in these moments?

Don't simply start from the point of view that everyone is an active Roman Catholic and the only option is a Funeral Mass in the Church.

Avoid assumptions, ask gently and listen carefully.

Options to be discussed with family:

Funeral Mass or Funeral liturgy outside the Mass in the church

Funeral Liturgy outside Mass (Liturgy of the Word) in the Funeral Home

Hospitality during the Funeral Liturgy

Don't compromise our symbols and rituals -- let the beauty of our liturgy show itself and be prepared to help those present understand the symbols and ritual actions.

Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.

Pope Francis Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* #24

The physicality of our rituals and symbols reflect our incarnational faith.

Presiders must engage the rituals with skill, and they must do so in a manner that manifests hospitality and authenticity.

Hospitality at the church ...

Who greets the people as they come into the church?

Funeral home staff Not necessarily! What about parishioners welcoming guests?

Have concerns that most of the assembly will not know the responses and postures used during the Mass? ... then perhaps consider

- using Mass participation cards for these liturgies
- inviting the assembly to join in with the music ministry (use music in hymnals, give page numbers)
- invite a group of parishioners to “seed” the assembly with faithful who know and can model the Mass responses.

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Presiders – What can you do to create a welcoming atmosphere?

Explicitly acknowledge and welcome the guests from the start.

Instruct the assembly as to postures and actions throughout the liturgy... invite them with gestures and words

Explain what is happening at key stages in the liturgy (think in terms of Commentator function). This can be done by Presider or another person who is prepared and working with the presider.

Invite readers up to the ambo during the Liturgy of the Word ; Use their names to call them forward; let the readers know that you will be there for them if they need support in a moment of distress.

In a simple one line sentence explain the Eucharistic prayer as an ancient traditional prayer of the Church.

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THE HOMILY

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”

St Paul 1 Letter to Thessalonians 4:13-14

Homilies must be kerygmatic – proclaiming the Good News but clearly with recognition of the deceased.

- reserve one reading (Gospel) for the presider to select.
- **NO EULOGIES** during the Funeral Mass;
- use Vigils more effectively or encourage eulogies at the reception.

Funeral Mass -- Liturgy of the Eucharist

In any mixed assembly, we are called to understand and accept that things may be “messy” and to remember ...

THE LORD MADE HIMSELF VULNERABLE and we can view the events around the Liturgy of the Eucharist in this setting as a time of such vulnerability.

It is not the time to make decisions as to whether the person coming to communion should or should not receive. This is a complex issue.

We have to ask:

- ? Do you truly have all the information needed at that moment to deny someone the sacrament?
- ? What would the consequences be of challenging or denying someone at that moment? To that person? To others witnessing?

People may approach for communion out of ignorance, but rarely malice!

How might we guide the mixed assembly regarding the Liturgy of the Eucharist at a Funeral Mass?

Say something and say it with compassion and respect for those present.

One suggestion from Fr James Mallon:

“By coming up to receive the Eucharist (Holy Communion, Host) you are making a public declaration that you are an active Catholic.”

Other wording can be used but make sure it is simple, clear & understandable.

Those who are not, should be comfortable remaining standing in their place (standing as a sign of respect for the Communion Rite, or do we need to pastorally adapt the standing in unity during communion?)

Invitation to come up for a blessing (clear instruction on receiving communion Versus hand posture for a blessing) or prayer.

Funeral Liturgy outside Mass (Liturgy of the Word, Memorial service)

Note – a Mass for the Dead may be celebrated at a later date for the deceased in the parish church.

Lectionary of Mass, Masses for the Dead (new CCCB publication)

Celebrated normally in the church but also may be celebrated in the funeral home, home of the deceased, parlor, chapel of rest or cemetery chapel (Order of Christian Funerals #460)

The role of the Homily remains the same but there can be more Flexibility in terms of eulogies and the liturgy.

What about those who never get to our door?

Should we care? Of course!

What might we do?

- pastoral care teams for sick and elderly
- catechesis in the parish
- catechesis and relationships with Funeral Homes/Directors
- collaboration between other ministers who may have contact with sick or dying in hospitals/hospices