

IN SURE AND CERTAIN HOPE

The Rituals of Christian Death

By LIZETTE LARSON-MILLER

DEATH IS SO FRUSTRATING! It is maddening because we are not able to know what it is that happens, we have no scientific proof of what exists on the other side, we usually cannot control death, even with all of our technical abilities, we cannot dissect it, we cannot reverse it; if the truth be told, we cannot even deal with it! For professed Christians it seems a small consolation to be reminded that our tradition describes death as being equally frustrated because of the actions of Jesus Christ.

Hades is angered because frustrated, it is angered because it has been mocked, it is angered because it has been destroyed, it is angered because it has been reduced to naught, it is angered because it is now captive. It seized a body, and lo! it discovered God; it seized earth, and behold! it encountered heaven; it seized the visible, and was overcome by the invisible.¹

The real problem with the death-of-death theology present in the Easter event is that it does not match the fundamental experiences of many human beings, Christian and non-Christian alike. Death seems ominously alive, and even verbal suppression of the topic and avoidance of the physical reminders of death do not erase its lurking presence in the background of the living of life.

This persistent death is, of course, physical death. Believing Christians profess their belief in life after death, articulating faith in the eternal quality of the soul and hope that the soul will maintain a relationship with God until the second coming of Christ and the final judgement. A common consolation offered to mourners at the death of a loved one is a reminder of this ongoing life, the life of the soul or the spirit of the deceased and the end of physical suffering. The often numb response of a believing mourner may acknowledge this spiritual reality while at the same time feeling the renewal of the pain of physical separation from the deceased. The Gospel of John reveals this frustration, even in a dialogue with Jesus himself. Martha greets Jesus' arrival at Bethany with what is

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virtually an accusation: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. When Jesus responds that Lazarus will rise again, Martha says, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day' (Jn 11:21-23). The unspoken tension which is still palpable through the centuries is, 'I know that he will rise again but you could have prevented all this because what I really want is for him to be alive and physically present, now!' In the historical interpretations of this encounter and in contemporary theology and experiences this tension is omnipresent. Even in the 'best' of Christian deaths this tension between stated Christian belief and physical reality exists, and the movement of society away from the classical, dualistic view of the human person as spirit and flesh, soul and body, actually exacerbates the tension.

In the Hellenistic thought world of the early Church, a dualistic view of the human person was taken for granted, canonized by St Paul and experienced in the rise of ascetical movements throughout the Mediterranean area.² The stressing of a spirit/body dualism actually made the Christian theology of death more palatable for early Christians because if one ranks the spirit (or soul) separate and indeed over the body then the death and decay of the body is less important, or, in extreme situations, irrelevant. This underlying motif is repeatedly seen in the *Acta* of the martyrs where it emerges in the power of the soul over the body, specifically in enduring terrible tortures,³ and in the later accounts of heroic ascetics who conquer their body by means of their mind and soul.⁴

When this dualism is transferred to early Christian rituals surrounding death the same emphasis on the triumph of the soul would lessen the impact of the physical loss of the body, or so church leaders believed and taught.

Thus in the future no one should mourn and lament any longer and bring the saving work of Christ into discredit. For he has conquered death. Why then do you mourn unnecessarily? Death has become sleep. Why do you wail and weep? It is ridiculous when the pagans do it, but when even a believing Christian is not ashamed of such conduct, what excuse does he have? What pity do those people deserve who are so foolish and now, after much time, have such clear proofs of the resurrection?⁵

From Chrysostom in Antioch to Augustine in Hippo church leaders recounted their own stoicism in the face of death and urged a Christian sense of hope (and even joy) on their followers in contrast to the hopelessness of their pagan neighbours. The more intensely this sense of

dualism was stressed, the more death was seen as a release, a passage out of the slavery of the body into a freedom of the spiritual life and union with God. While this dualism was emphasized to the extreme in some radically ascetic groups, moderate Christians balanced a ranking of spirit over body with an acknowledgement of the goodness of creation, including the physical body.

This healthy tension between cultural norms and Christian beliefs in the burial rituals is well attested to in a variety of writings from the early centuries of Christianity. While it is true that the first extant comprehensive funeral liturgies in written form emerge from the ninth century,⁶ death and funerals were certainly realities in the early Church, and the rituals adapted and developed in the first five centuries reflect normative Christian beliefs and provide the foundation for contemporary Catholic Christian funeral rites.

But what of the body/spirit dualism in contemporary western societies? The growing development of holistic healing itself is an indicator of the strength of a movement which sees the body/spirit, physical/spiritual dimensions of a human being as interrelated and whole. While this is not unique to contemporary societies it presents new challenges to the scientific way of thinking which undergirds most contemporary education. A holistic view of the human person demands that the intangible dimension of the soul or spirit be taken seriously as a primary factor in a person's health, just as an illness of the body is acknowledged to influence the emotional health of an individual. A more recent and popular spin-off of this holistic thinking, however, has been to emphasize not just the goodness of the body, but the centrality of the physical body to the detriment of any emphasis on the soul or spirit. If the body becomes the locus of one's spirituality (and a visit to any gym in Southern California will tell you this is a dedicated and fast-growing religion) then the saints and behavioural models will be the young and the healthy, the apostates will be the unfit, and the shunned will be the elderly. The ramifications for reflecting on death within this cultural milieu are that death, and any thought of death, is to be avoided, and ultimately that a person who dies is dead. The finality of the event is such that any theology which speaks of hope, or worse, of joy, is not just wrong but sadly misguided, and a ritualization of this is as embarrassing as being confronted publicly with a person who is homeless, physically disabled or mentally handicapped. The embarrassment was at least obscured when few could understand the prayer texts or the rituals of the requiem mass, but the unavoidable frankness of the new *Order of Christian funerals* makes hiding behind an art form a thing of the past. In addition,

the normative funeral mass has as one of its foci the body, albeit hidden in a coffin, making it even harder to avoid the confrontation with death and the questions of finality or hope. In this view, the funeral liturgy, or any ritual of death, actually becomes a stumbling block in the attempts of many contemporary westerners to continue their denial of death, and is therefore an uncomfortable event.

So why do people, particularly those with no church affiliation or religious compulsion, keep coming to funeral liturgies? The arguments for basing the answer on family obligations, respect for the deceased, respect for the family of the deceased or just plain guilt would all have a basis in truth, but perhaps there is a more fundamental issue at work here, and that is the human necessity of ritualizing major life events and passages.

The insights of anthropologists and sociologists have contributed to a whole new way of looking at liturgy, startling some sacramental theologians by how much all religions share in a common human ritual pool and providing a firm context for the renewal of sacramental rites in the understanding of the importance of rites of passage.⁷ But just as important is the reassurance of something always suspected, that ritual is a necessary part of being human: 'there is no escaping ritualization, the stylized cultivation or suppression of biophysical and psychosomatic rhythms and repetitions'.⁸ While there are many levels of ritual necessity, liturgical ritual fits into one of the higher levels; 'in it we actively act in order to be acted upon'.⁹ This higher level of ritual may not have the necessity factor that the most fundamental rituals have, for example, not everyone present at a funeral may be able to enter into the ritual event at the same level, but the fundamental need to ritualize a death in some way may be what drew that outer ring of people to the event.

The ritual levels mentioned above are only a hint of the complex psychological, anthropological and theological demands placed on the orchestration of rituals which we call funeral liturgies. These liturgies need to be constructed so as to allow for flexibility, liminality and adaptability. To examine whether or not the new *Order of Christian funerals* contributes to accomplishing these needs, some of the rituals will be examined below in conjunction with the areas of social science and theology.

The psychological stages of coping with death have been explored in an important and well-known study by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross,¹⁰ published in 1969, the same year, coincidentally, that the Roman Catholic *Ordo exsequiarum* made its appearance. While the *Rite of funerals*, in its English edition, was hailed as a profound example of the spirit of

Vatican II, it is ironic that despite its appearance in the same year as Kübler-Ross's study a more direct link was not established between the rite and the stages of human grieving. In spite of the tremendous progress made liturgically in the *Rite of funerals*, the most common complaint was that the rites did not allow theologically for the presence of the cross, nor psychologically for the pain and grief of the mourners who had suffered a profound loss. Even the popular title 'mass of resurrection' seemed to be a cultural attempt to deny the mourners their grief, in a manner reminiscent of John Chrysostom's preaching centuries earlier (see above, page 268). The lessons learned from this are apparent in the new *Order of Christian funerals (OCF)*, published in 1989 (for the dioceses of the United States). The very design of the rites, specifically in the process implied in the title *Order*, allows for a greater flexibility in ritual process. The normative order of the rites (normative being the model which comes first in the collection of rites) is tripartite: 1) Vigil and related rites and prayers; 2) Funeral liturgy (usually a funeral mass); 3) Rite of committal. The first part allows for as many or as few rites which may be wanted or needed between the time of death and the funeral liturgy. Particularly the section 'Related rites and prayers' allows for a variety of structured, and therefore communal, surroundings of the family and friends of the deceased with prayer and consolation.

The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heartrending grief for the family and close friends. The ministry of the Church at this time is one of gently accompanying the mourners in their initial adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails.¹¹

Developing the insights from the 1969 *Rite of funerals*, the vigils and related rites of the *OCF* balance a confident hope in God with a recognition of grief and loss, such as in the 'Invitation to prayer' in the related rite titled 'Prayers after death': 'In this moment of sorrow the Lord is in our midst and consoles us with his word: Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall be comforted'.¹² Another way this first part contributes to a healthy acknowledgement of grief is the stress on eulogizing. The vigil liturgies all allow for a period of remembering and articulating the life of the deceased, stories which allow the mourners to speak about 'the deceased in the past tense, thereby distinguishing memory from reality' and allowing them to take a 'significant step in their own grieving process'.¹³ The difference between the vigil service and the eucharistic liturgy has been described as primarily one of distinguishing between the 'story of the deceased' and the 'story of Jesus:

his life, death, and resurrection, and on the hope Christians gain from this story'.¹⁴

The second part of the sequence of rites is the 'Funeral liturgy', most commonly a eucharistic liturgy. The general introduction to the rites reiterates that all of the funeral liturgies have three purposes: 'to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God';¹⁵ to 'commend the dead to God's merciful love';¹⁶ and to 'bring hope and consolation to the living'.¹⁷ All three of these purposes are woven into the funeral liturgy, the first two in a very direct way, the third by implication. Psychologically this second major part of the sequence of rites moves the mourner to focus on the 'hope and consolation' based on the ritualization of a basic Christian belief in the resurrection.

Into your hands, Father of mercies, we commend our sister in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, she will rise with him on the last day.¹⁸

This 'Prayer of commendation' from the concluding rite of the funeral liturgy psychologically contributes to the journey of passage which the mourners are making by clearly expressing the separation and goodbye, preparing the bereaved for the 'Rite of committal' to follow. 'Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our sister. May our farewell express our affection for her; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope'.¹⁹ The Christian commendation fulfils one of the two main symbolic functions of funeral rituals, 'to separate the dead person from the living and to allow the living to bid that person a farewell'.²⁰

The third part, the 'Rite of committal' is probably the part of the ritual sequence which most counters the cultural desire to deny death. The most common middle- and upper-class American committal service is not a committal at all – there is little connection to the earth and to burial. It usually takes the form of a saccharine prayer service done in the cemetery chapel, and following the departure of all the mourners the cemetery workers bury the coffin. If a more realistic service is needed, the mourners may gather at the burial site to participate in the prayer service, but the hole is either not yet dug or covered up, allowing the mourners to avoid any contact with the earth. It is exactly this artificiality which the *OCF* hopes to counter. The rite is to take place at the grave, with a focus on the earth through a blessing of the grave or thanksgiving for its prior blessing and through the words of committal: 'Because God has chosen to call our brother from this life to himself, we commit his body to the earth for we are dust and unto dust we shall return'.²¹ Even stronger is the closing rubric which suggests

'where it is the custom' that a sign or gesture of leave-taking may be made. The suggestion in many commentaries on the rite is that the committal be a real committal, that the coffin be lowered into the ground and a gesture of leave-taking be done, such as the 'throwing of dirt or flower petals, sprinkling with holy water, [or] singing a blessing or farewell song'.²² Although the gesture of leave-taking is often avoided, its inclusion may contribute to the mourners' ability to move toward an acceptance of the death.

The brief overview above of the interaction between ritual and psychology still begs the question whether the rituals themselves are the rite of passage, and for whom, or whether the psychological passage of the mourners could be at odds with the sequence of rituals. If the latter is true, then the rituals may be merely manipulating the emotional/psychological state of the mourners into a two-day ritual process. If the ritual itself bears the significance of the rite of passage, however, then the rituals need to be done fully, sensitively and communally in order to help move the mourners from one stage to another. But the psychological considerations are obviously not the only realm in which the funeral rituals are operating. The Christian funeral should articulate the Christian faith; faith in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, faith in eternal life, and faith in the incarnation.

The *OCF* is much more closely modelled on the parallel movement of the deceased with the paschal mystery than the old requiem mass, and more nuanced in that regard than the 1969 *Rite of funerals*. If the purpose of a rite is indeed to 'construct access to the transcendent which has previously committed itself in definite ways to human existence',²³ then the funeral liturgy is the *sine qua non* in ritually acknowledging a firm belief in the commitment of God to human beings, even in death. The fullness of the humanity of Jesus was crowned with his dying a human death, the fullness of the divinity of Jesus was crowned with his resurrection and both of these events, together with all that dying and rising entail, are brought together in the funeral liturgy. 'In the waters of baptism she died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May she now share with him eternal glory.'²⁴ The same theology is present in virtually every eucharistic liturgy, but its articulation at the ritualization of Christian death raises the stakes, there is no longer the option of neutral ground in the face of imminent death. The ultimate destination (or even the immediate destination) of the deceased is intimately connected with belief in Jesus Christ, who he was, and what he did.

Almighty God and Father, it is our certain faith that your Son, who died on the cross, was raised from the dead, the firstfruits of all who have

fallen asleep. Grant that through this mystery your servant who has gone to his rest in Christ, may share in the joy of his resurrection.²⁵

The theological and ritual articulations of faith in Jesus Christ and eternal life both contain an ambiguity, however, and it is the 'already' and 'not yet' tension. Scripture and other forms of tradition do not answer clearly where the deceased person is, or if they do, a conflicting answer can be found on the following page. The funeral liturgy contains the same tension: 'because she put her hope and trust in you, command that she be carried safely home to heaven and come to enjoy your eternal reward';²⁶ 'For the deceased who in baptism was given the pledge of eternal life, that he may now be admitted to the company of the saints';²⁷ 'we commend our sister in the sure and certain hope that . . . she will rise with him on the last day'.²⁸ Faith requires living with this and other tensions, and the ambiguity is nowhere more prevalent than in the face of death, because we do not know what happens on the other side and the scientific proof necessary to convince many of us is still not published.

Another realm of theological articulation in the funeral liturgy is the result of belief in the incarnation. If the incarnation is taken to be a theological statement about the status of human beings, rather than a theological statement about God, it calls into question any extreme dualism. The funeral rituals recognize both the goodness and the reality of the physical body on the part of the deceased, and the real sense of loss of that physical being on the part of the bereaved. 'Almighty and ever-living God . . . in you the dead, whose bodies were temples of the Spirit, find everlasting peace.'²⁹ The 'Gathering in the presence of the body', the 'Rite of commendation' concluding the eucharistic liturgy and the 'Rite of committal' ending the funeral sequence all focus on the corpse itself as bearing great meaning and being worthy of respect. Together they reveal the intimate relationship between many of the rituals and the actual body. The recent debate over how to incorporate cremation into the normative funeral sequence centres on this very issue: should it be immediate cremation (where no body would be present at the funeral liturgy) or cremation as a means of final disposition following the funeral liturgy?³⁰ The point of the debate is whether or not the rites and gestures focused on honouring the body have to be omitted if the body is absent and only ashes are present.

This recognition and honouring of the body always exists in a tension with belief in the soul and its unique relationship with God and eternal life. The complexity of this theological issue is further complicated when the concept of sin is brought in. For many Christians, particularly those

with friends of other faiths (or no faith), the idea that actions done here on earth can have any lingering effect in another realm, a realm which is neither spatial nor temporal, is quaint at best, and offensive at worst. But this theology is also prominent in the funeral liturgy:

To you, O Lord, we commend the soul of your servant; in the sight of this world she is now dead; in your sight may she live for ever. Forgive whatever sins she committed through human weakness.³¹

The theological ramifications described above are only relevant to Christian believers. What of non-believers who die surrounded by Christian mourners? What of a believing Christian who dies and is sincerely mourned by non-believers? Would not using the *Order of Christian funerals* be a sham because it assumes faith on the part of the deceased and at least a critical mass of believers from among the mourners?

One approach might be the recognition of a basic need for ritualizing an event as important and final as death without the overtly theological emphases seen in the *OCF*. This is the route taken in the *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) of the American Episcopal Church. The prayer book contains a service titled 'Burial of one who does not profess the Christian faith' which contains rituals associated with Christian burial but without the false assumption that the deceased believed in any basic Christian tenets. The thrust of the service is consolation for the mourners and trust in the mercy of God.

Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to your never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that you are doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for.³²

Another approach, however, might be to see in the Christian funeral rite, particularly one with as much anthropological integrity as the *OCF*, a prophetic gospel voice. There are other ways to proclaim faith than written theological texts; ritual, done well and with integrity, can also proclaim faith. The funeral liturgies in particular offer an opportunity to counter the worst of American and other western cultures' influence on the liturgy, because funerals, like weddings, are culturally rooted events which extend beyond the official membership of the Christian Church. In a controversial article published in 1988, M. Francis Mannion attacked the insidious influence of the American cultural values of rugged individualism, the false intimization of all human relationships, and the politicization of society on the liturgy.³³ A parallel situation

could be found in the insidious effect of the denial of death on Christian funeral liturgies. The denial of death, or more broadly, the denial of mortality and ageing for many Americans, is really a terror of death so extreme that Ernest Becker defines 'real heroism' as 'first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death.'³⁴ But for the many who do not wish to be heroes, facing a Christian funeral liturgy, in the vernacular with understandably clear statements about physical death, gestures towards the corpse, and a giving up of control to God, is to face head on the terror of death. Even many church-going Christians think their faith is on firm ground until faced with this ultimate challenge, and must then decide if Christianity is indeed an 'immunity bath' from fear of death and death itself.³⁵

The prophetic dimension of the new funeral rites may just be able to counter some of the death-denying culture and embarrassment in the face of obvious faith because it is so faithful to human ritual necessity. The process of ritual acts assists in the rite of passage for the mourners and for the deceased alike, because it can remain in the ambiguity of liminality, where there is room for many levels of ritual involvement. While the structure of the liturgy may function as a feast of communal identity for the gathered Christians, the liminal status of funeral liturgies and funeral time can allow for an inversion of symbolic meaning so that even those terrified at the reminder of death and powerlessness can remember the deceased through an event which moves that death to an 'historical occurrence'.³⁶

Death is still frustrating and maddening when considered from an academic view, it is still terrifying and final when considered from the perspective of experience, but the anamnestic and prophetic dimensions of the *OCF* allow for a ritualization of all of those emotions, while sustaining the mourners with a promise of more.

Father of mercies and God of all consolation . . . your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by dying has destroyed our death, and by rising, restored our life. Enable us therefore to press on toward him, so that, after our earthly course is run, he may reunite us with those we love, when every tear will be wiped away.³⁷

NOTES

¹ Attributed to John Chrysostom, and published in Gabe Huck and Mary Ann Simcoe (eds), *A Triduum sourcebook* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1983), p 111.

² While there are many sources and resources dealing with this phenomenon in the early Church, one of the most interesting is Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

³ The example of the martyr Perpetua at the beginning of the third century will suffice: 'Perpetua awoke from a kind of sleep and she began to look about her. Then to the amazement of all she said: "When are we going to be thrown to that heifer or whatever it is?"' When told that this had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her person and her dress.' *The martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* 20.8-9 in Herbert Musurillo (ed), *The Acts of the Christian martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

⁴ See for example the *Life of St Antony* by Athanasius, English translation by Robert Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

⁵ John Chrysostom *In Matt. homilia* 31.3 (PG 57,374).

⁶ It is a fairly common approach in summaries of the history of funeral liturgies to date the first comprehensive funeral liturgies to the medieval Church, particularly the ninth century. See the work of Richard Rutherford, *The death of a Christian: the rite of funerals* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1980), pp 37-39.

⁷ The foundational study which has influenced a whole generation of new rites is that of Victor Turner, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, 'Modes of ritual necessity', *Worship* vol 53 (1979), p 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 134.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On death and dying* (London: Collier-MacMillan Ltd, 1969).

¹¹ *Order of Christian funerals*, 52 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989).

¹² OCF no 104, A.

¹³ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, 'Liturgy and pastoral care: the parable of dying and grieving', *New Theology Review* vol 1:4 (November 1988), p 21.

¹⁴ William Cieslak, *Console one another* (Washington DC: The Pastoral Press, 1990), p 103. Cieslak is careful to note that this is not an exclusive situation - the story of Jesus is certainly part of the vigil liturgy and part of the story of the deceased's life.

¹⁵ OCF no 5. ¹⁶ OCF no 6. ¹⁷ OCF no 7.

¹⁸ OCF no 175, A.

¹⁹ OCF no 171, A.

²⁰ Beverley Raphael, *The anatomy of bereavement* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1983), p 37.

²¹ OCF no 219, A.

²² Cieslak, *Console one another*, p 150.

²³ Xavier John Seubert, 'Weaving a pattern of access: the essence of ritual', *Worship* vol 63 (1989), p 490.

²⁴ OCF no 160. This prayer accompanies the sprinkling with holy water with which the funeral mass begins.

²⁵ OCF no 164, A. ²⁶ OCF no 164, B.

²⁷ OCF no 167, B. ²⁸ OCF no 175, A. ²⁹ OCF no 218, C.

³⁰ See the concise discussion in H. Richard Rutherford, 'Forum: cremation American style: a cultural revolution for Catholics', *Worship* vol 66 (1992), pp 544-549.

³¹ OCF 175, B.

³² *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1979), p 157.

³³ M. Francis Mannion, 'Liturgy and the present crisis of culture', *Worship* vol 62 (1988), pp 98-123.

³⁴ Ernest Becker, *The denial of death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p 11.

³⁵ G. Stanley Hall, 'Thanatophobia and immortality' *American Journal of Psychology* vol 26 (1915), p 562.

³⁶ Grimes, 'Modes of ritual necessity', p 137.

³⁷ OCF no 399, 1.