

THE LITURGY OF DEATH

THE FUNERAL RITE OF THE NEW ROMAN RITUAL

By P.-M. GY

A FEW MONTHS after the publication of the *Ordo celebrandi matrimonium* (19 March 1969), and the *Ordo baptismi parvulorum* (15 May), a further section of the roman ritual of Paul VI, the *Ordo exsequiarum*, made its appearance. As in the case of the baptismal ritual, the decree of promulgation was issued by the newly established congregation for divine worship, which on 8 May replaced the old congregation of rites (1588-1969).

The reform of the funeral rites had to meet not only the general programme outlined in the conciliar constitution on the liturgy, but also a series of more specific directives:

81. The rite for the burial of the dead should evidence more clearly the paschal character of christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This latter provision holds good also for the liturgical colour to be used.

82. The rite for the burial of infants is to be revised, and a special mass for the occasion provided.

These two articles, which relate to two distinct rites in the ritual of Paul V, the *Ordo exsequiarum* and the *Ordo sepeliendi parvulos*, laid down the general lines along which the reform of the funeral liturgy should proceed. It should give clearer expression than did the older rites to the paschal mystery. It should reflect the variety of existing situations and traditions, and take account of the two particular directives bearing respectively on the liturgical colour for funeral services and on the production of a proper mass for the burial of infants.

The question of liturgical colour arose from a double consideration. The first was the symbolism obtaining in non-european civilizations, where white stands in many cases for mourning and not, as in the bible, for resurrection. The second was the importance of giving more adequate expression to the paschal mystery than is found in the 1614 ritual, which reserves black for the funerals of adults and white for those of infants.

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The roman funeral liturgy before the council

According to the roman ritual, the parish priest and clergy should proceed to the house of the deceased and from there conduct the body to the church in procession, to the accompaniment of psalms. On the completion of the responsory *Subvenite*, sung on entering the church, the office of the dead is recited (or if this is not possible, at least one nocturn). Next, unless the interment takes place in the afternoon, comes the celebration of mass. After mass, before the body is taken from the church, prayers are offered for the deceased, in particular for liberation from his sins (the *absolutio defuncti* or absolution). The body is then borne in procession to the grave, presumed to lie close to the church. There, after the singing of the *Benedictus*, the priest offers a final prayer and returns to the church.

This is a reasonably exact account of the roman funeral liturgy for the last three and a half centuries. Various modifications in the degree of solemnity adopted were imposed by circumstances, but the same basic pattern was always adhered to. Only certain particular liturgies, notably those of the monastic type, retained (as indeed, some of them still do) a far more developed ritual of the dead, inherited from the middle ages. Here, intercession for the deceased, continuing without interruption from the moment of death to the conclusion of the burial, provided an accompaniment of prayer and faith to every detail of the actions performed for the deceased from the washing of the body to the interment.¹

It will be useful to consider this 1614 ritual first in comparison with the preceding tradition, and then in the light of subsequent developments in the pastoral situation and the attitudes of the faithful: developments which were to bring certain modifications to the rite and to create the felt need for others.

The 1614 ritual and the older tradition

Compared with the ancient tradition, the 1614 ritual considerably curtails that part of the funeral liturgy which took place at the graveside following the celebration of mass, though more probably it simply ratifies a curtailment which had already come about in pastoral liturgical practice in the towns.² Furthermore, the revised

¹ We may notice here the observations of Phillipeau, H. R.: 'Textes et rubriques des *Agenda Mortuorum*', in *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft*, 4/1 (1955), p 59.

² Cf my article 'Les funérailles d'après le rituel de 1614', in *La Maison-Dieu*, 44 (1955), pp 76-78.

ritual attests to, and does little or nothing to reverse, a decline in the use of the office of the dead;³ it is the celebration of mass, except when this is not possible, that is considered as the centrepiece of the funeral rite. Nevertheless, though deeply embedded in western devotion since the high middle ages, the practice of celebrating mass before burial and in the presence of the body would seem to have been neither primitive nor universal. In the east, the principal liturgical action of the funeral service is a sort of *orthros*, similar to our own office of the dead, and not accompanied by the celebration of mass. As for the older funeral practice in the roman rite, it is still an unresolved question whether, as Dom H. Frank considers,⁴ the mass was regularly celebrated or whether, as Canon D. Sicard would hold,⁵ it was confined to monastic funerals.

Whatever we are to make both of this question and of the statement of St Augustine that mass was celebrated according to the roman rite at the funeral of his mother Monica,⁶ one point about the mass for the dead at this time is important: the eucharistic sacrifice offered for the deceased on the third, seventh or thirteenth day after death was just as significant – and perhaps even more so – than the mass on the day of the funeral itself. After all, in each case the meaning of the action is the same: the Church is begging God that the eucharist, Christ's sacrifice, may bring definitive purification to the soul of the deceased and associate it with the elect.

The characteristic features of the prayers for the deceased in the 1614 ritual and the roman missal go back to a time (between the sixth and seventh centuries) when the catholic doctrines of the particular judgment and purgatory, defined respectively by Benedict XII (1336) and by the Council of Florence (1439), were not yet developed. In the New Testament and the various forms of the creed, both of which affirm so forcibly the resurrection of the flesh at the time of the *parousia* and of the last judgment, a certain obscurity surrounds the destiny of the soul between death and the general resurrection. Doctrinal reflection on this subject was to mature gradually over the centuries, helped particularly by the mythical image of a journey undertaken by the soul after death, protected by the angels and threatened by hostile powers. The stages

³ *Ibid.*, pp 79–80.

⁴ 'Der älteste erhaltene römische *Ordo Defunctorum*', in *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft*, 7/2 (1962), p 371.

⁵ 'Le rituel des funérailles dans la tradition', in *La Maison-Dieu*, 101 (1970), pp 33–35.

⁶ *Confessions* IX, 12.

of this development are not well known to us; and studies in the history of doctrine, which might have enabled us to trace its course, are still very inadequate.⁷ The process consisted in the spontaneous re-alignment of the ritual texts in the direction taken by the development of doctrine; a phenomenon of which there are abundant examples, notably in the bible itself. Only now and again did this development meet with difficulties. One instance of incomplete transition can be seen in the offertory antiphon *Domine Jesu Christe*, where a combination of mythical imagery and profound psychological insight testify to an as yet uncertain and undeveloped state of the doctrine.⁸

At the same time as the content of the old prayers was being more or less re-interpreted to accord with the development of dogma, a change also comes about in christian attitudes to death. What occurs is a sort of cleavage between two approaches: on the one hand the somewhat pietistic approach to the happiness of heaven that finds expression at the end of the middle ages in the funeral rite for infants, and on the other, the painful fear of death. There is no doubt that with the abridgment of the funeral rite which resulted in the 1614 ritual, texts expressing the fear of judgment were retained at more than one point in preference to those that conveyed ideas of peace and the hope of heaven.⁹

In a study that I made fifteen years ago of the 1614 funeral rite, I emphasised the book's pastoral character.¹⁰ In fact, it is inspired by a pastoral spirit absent from other sections of the roman liturgy at the time of the tridentine reform. But I failed to notice then the extent to which the 1614 funeral ritual shares in the clerical character which marks the whole approach to funerals at this period. From the start to the finish of the ceremony, the role of the faithful is to assist with devotion and recollection at actions, prayers and singing performed for their benefit by the clergy. This is characteristic of the theory and practice of the medieval liturgy. The liturgy, by its nature public, is celebrated by the Church's officials, the priests and

⁷ There is, however, an excellent study on the first centuries by Stuijber, A.: *Refrigerium interim* (Theophaneia II, Bonn, 1957).

⁸ This antiphon was in use to the tenth century (cf Gay, Cl.: *Formulaires anciens des messes pour les défunts* Etudes grégoriennes, 2 (1957), pp 96-97 and 101), but it is clearly more ancient than this. It has been the object of discussion in more recent theology. Cf Congar, Y.: *La Mystère de la mort et sa célébration* (Lex Orandi, 12, Paris, 1951), p 305; cf also the text of John Gerson published in *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 1951, p 251.

⁹ Cf on this point *La Maison-Dieu*, 44, pp 78-79.

¹⁰ In *La Maison-Dieu*, 44, pp 71-72.

clergy, in the name of the whole Church and for the benefit of the faithful.¹¹ Such a conception reveals both an exalted idea of the priestly ministry of prayer (certainly a New Testament notion)¹² and neglect of the active role of the whole assembly of the baptized at prayer. Perhaps there is no section of the liturgy which, right up to our own time, has been so deeply marked by this imbalance as the funeral rite, despite significant attempts to introduce the faithful to the singing of the gregorian chant.

The roman ritual in modern usage

Since the seventeenth century, the funeral liturgy has been affected by two sorts of change: firstly, those resulting from the developments in city-dwelling, and secondly, changes in popular attitudes towards death. On the grounds that cemeteries constituted a threat to health, the eighteenth century placed them at a distance from the churches, on the boundaries of the towns and villages.¹³ Again, the general development of the urban style of life and the advent of motor traffic led to the disappearance in the towns of the funeral procession. In some cases, the priest no longer escorted the body from house to church, or offered prayers at the graveside. On the other hand, in certain towns, for example in the german-speaking countries, the funeral liturgy in the strict sense started in the house of the deceased and concluded at the cemetery without taking in the church at all; mass for the deceased was celebrated at another time or on another day.

Furthermore, attitudes have also changed. There has grown up, even in the christian milieu, a sort of taboo with regard to death; one which has come to demand considerable discretion both in preaching and in formulating liturgical prayers in the vernacular. In many cases, the language of the traditional prayers on the subject of hell, judgment or the sins of the deceased would strike us today as unbearably cruel, had they not been softened down or adapted when the ritual was reformed or in the course of translation.

By the end of the second world-war the rediscovery of the paschal character of christian death and burial had been forcefully affirmed

¹¹ So St Thomas, *Summa Theol.* II, IIae q. 83, a. 12: 'Communal prayer is that which is offered to God through the ministers of the Church in the name (*in persona*) of all his faithful people'. Cf Marliangeas, B.-D.: *In persona Christi—in persona Ecclesiae* (Unpublished thesis in the *Institut Supérieur de liturgie*, Paris, 1966), pp. 113 ff.

¹² Cf Acts 6, 4.

¹³ Cf Ariès, Ph.: 'Contribution à l'étude du culte des morts à l'époque contemporaine', in *Revue des travaux de l'Académie des sciences morales et politiques*, 119 (1966), pp 25-34.

and in a theologically balanced manner.¹⁴ The result is to be seen in article 81 of the constitution on the liturgy. But unless we are careful, there is a real possibility that the keen sensitivity of our contemporaries with regard to death could reduce the new approach to a merely unreal pietism.

The development of the new funeral ritual

Once the *Consilium* for the implementation of the constitution on the liturgy was set up, with its various work-groups of which two (later three) were entrusted with the ritual, priority was given to baptism among the sacraments and to the funeral liturgy among the sacramentals. The work on the funeral ritual had three main objectives: 1) to set out clearly the essential elements of the tradition together with their doctrinal implications; 2) to ascertain the actual practice and needs in different countries; and 3) in collaboration with the group entrusted with baptism, to specify in what manner the general principles of liturgical reform should be applied to the ritual.

The inquiry into pastoral usage in the matter of funerals led to discoveries which would provide the basis for the work of reform. In the first place, as I have indicated above, existing styles of funeral liturgy proved to be far more diverse than could be inferred from a mere reading of the roman ritual. The varieties of local usage may be reduced broadly to three main types. In the first type, which comes closest to the traditional practice of the roman ritual and was to be found generally in such countries as Italy or France, the main liturgical action took place in the church. In the second type, very widespread in the towns of german-speaking countries, the body of the deceased was taken not to the church, but directly to the cemetery, where the principal liturgical action was performed. In the third type, the principal action took place in the home of the deceased, either because of distance from the church or in accord with local traditions. This usage is found in certain regions of Africa. The work-group of the *Consilium* concluded that each of these types of funeral service catered for real needs, that they constituted legitimate customs and that they should find their place in the new roman ritual.

Secondly, it became clear that the general development of urban life, so characteristic of contemporary civilization, had left its mark on the funeral liturgy. It had favoured the development of the

¹⁴ *Le Mystère de la mort et de sa célébration* (Lex Orandi 12, Paris, 1951).

second type of liturgy; and, where the first remained in use, it had led to the abandonment of the processions and even of the liturgical action in the house of the deceased or at the graveside. Of course, it was not the business of the ritual either to resist the new demands made by urban conditions – they are not bad in themselves – or to promote or accelerate them. But it was fitting that the new ritual should provide for a truly christian funeral celebration not only where old conditions still persisted, as in rural districts, but also where the urban situation was creating new conditions of priestly ministry.

In the autumn of 1965, an initial project for the funeral rite of adults was approved by the bishops of the *Consilium*¹⁵ and submitted to the Pope. With his authorization, it was put to the test in the second half of the year 1966 in different parts of the world, first in a small number of churches and then, progressively, in whole countries. In 1968, the work-group proceeded to examine the reports on the experiment sent in to Rome from different parts of the world.

From these reports, of which some few details have been published,¹⁶ a number of points emerge: 1) the very favourable response of the *sensus fidelium* to the conciliar decision to throw into clearer relief the paschal chapter of christian death; 2) the need for a strenuous effort to form the clergy, to enable them to benefit from the pastoral opportunities inherent in a more flexible ritual; 3) the need to enhance this flexibility still further by allowing certain supplementary modifications; 4) the wide range of difficulties arising either from the absence of vernacular funeral hymns or the failure of the people to participate in these, or from circumstances where singing would be out of place.

Taking into account these results of experience, the work-group of the *Consilium* corrected the first project and filled it out on a number of points. A notable addition was the funeral rite for infants. (One or two episcopal conferences had explicitly requested of the Apostolic See that the case of children who die before baptism should be considered.) Thus completed, the *Ordo Exsequiarum* was presented anew to the bishops of the *Consilium* in October 1968. After papal approval, it was promulgated on August 15, 1969.

¹⁵ Cf Gy, P.-M.: 'Ordo exsequiarum pro adultis': a report presented to the *Consilium* – in *Notitiae*, 2 (1966), pp 353–63.

¹⁶ Cf *Notitiae*, 2 (1966), p 363; 3 (1967), pp 155–64.

The structure of the funeral liturgy

The new ritual recognizes that the roman funeral liturgy falls into three distinct types, according to country or circumstances. If these differ somewhat in the procedures they adopt, each contains elements of varying importance: between them, these elements constitute the christian funeral as the expression of the faith and prayer of a community which accompanies the body of a departed member to the tomb. Four such features may be enumerated: the greeting of faith extended to the friends and relations of the deceased, the celebration of the word, the eucharistic sacrifice, the farewell to the deceased or the final commendation of him to God.

What I have called the greeting of faith is the first exchange of words between the priest and the friends and relatives of the deceased. It concerns not only the president of the celebration, but in different ways all those who take part in it. It enables those present to give mutual expression to what has brought them together, namely a shared sorrow, but also a common prayer and hope. In a manner comparable in some ways to the greetings contained in the rites of baptism and marriage, the priest wishes to intimate to the relatives of the deceased that he makes their sorrow his own, that their suffering and the liturgy coincide. Furthermore he speaks to them of hope, which brings comfort to grief without displacing it. These few words of human sympathy are also words of 'consolation' in the New Testament sense of *paraclesis* (no. 16), thus fulfilling one of the permanent functions of the ministry of God's word. This *paraclesis*, which continues in the readings, the homily and the prayers, will prove particularly valuable for those whose faith gives little in the way of strength or light in their bereavement.

The *paraclesis*, the biblical readings and the accompanying homily have the double function of directing the light of God's word on to the events of death and burial and of expressing the faith of the community. No. 11 of the *Praenotanda* recapitulates some of the main themes of these readings: the paschal mystery up to and including the resurrection from the dead (which it would have been more appropriate to mention explicitly), the hope of re-union in the kingdom with those who are dear to us, respect and devotion towards the dead, and the grandeur of the christian life.

The range of the proposed readings and the rules for their use call for several comments. First, the variety of the readings is intended to provide a biblical fare both richer and more varied than we were given in the past. From now on, priest and faithful alike will be

spared the tedium of the same continually repeated texts. It is now possible to set before people, as the variety of circumstances demands, the great richness of the word of God on the subject of death and the ultimate meaning of existence. Furthermore, the extensive range of the proposed texts, together with the rules for the number of readings to be adopted (nos. 39, 45, 63), provides for a maximum of adaptation to circumstances and to the particular religious mentality of the deceased and of their families. It will be possible to cater for widely varying capacities for assimilation, which will not be the same in a contemplative community and in a group where faith may be weak.¹⁷ Whenever possible, the family of the community itself will be invited to choose the readings (cf nos. 23-24) and it would be good for a relative of the deceased to read one of them, thus giving a personal witness of his faith.

The message of the readings is carried on into the homily, the content of which is governed by them. Hence, the sermon should not normally take place at another moment in the ceremony, except in the special case of funerals of the second type, where for practical reasons it is sometimes more convenient to preach at the graveside than in the cemetery chapel (nos. 64 & 73). In any case, the object of the sermon is to expound the word of God rather than to eulogize the deceased; though in certain circumstances it will be fitting to touch on the christian witness borne by the deceased in his lifetime. The need to break with an older tradition of funeral sermon is affirmed in the rubrics in the phrase 'avoiding the literary *genre* of the panegyric' (no. 41). It should be added, however, that the variety of proposed readings makes possible a choice of texts appropriate to the christian lives of those whose funeral is celebrated and their efforts to live in fidelity to the gospel. It would be well if in the funeral liturgy the inspired word should in some sense reflect that fidelity.

The eucharistic sacrifice which the Church offers for the deceased belongs to the very heart of the paschal meaning of christian death, as the *Praenotanda* recall from the outset. In offering the paschal sacrifice, the *Ecclesia* asks of the Lord that this christian who in his life has been nourished on the pledge of eternal life, be admitted to the paschal fulness of the banquet of the kingdom (cf no. 57). In

¹⁷ In funerals of the second type, the small dimensions of the cemetery-chapel do not favour a long ceremony. It is taken for granted that ordinarily there will be only one reading in these cases. The same may be said of funerals of the first type where those participating can hardly be called devout christians.

celebrating the eucharist, the Church takes the sacrifice and Pasch of Christ into its hands as a means of intercession.

The affirmation by the second vatican council of the paschal¹⁸ as well as the propitiatory character¹⁹ of the mass has given a wider significance to the eucharistic celebration for the dead. The prayers of the masses for the dead in the new roman missal have sought to give expression to this rediscovered doctrinal richness. The same intention is evident in the prayers for the dead, with their dominant note of hope, which hold an important place in the new roman eucharistic prayers.

The celebration of mass at funerals is considered by the ritual to be normal practice, even when the mass has to take place at another time than that of the interment, as in the case of funerals of the second type (no. 59). Discreet encouragement is even given to offering mass at the house where the death occurred, in circumstances where this is thought desirable (nos. 59, 78). However, the possibility remains of having a funeral without mass (no. 46), either because the ceremony is presided over by someone who is not a priest (no. 19), or for some pastoral reason. There is one problem, peculiar to de-christianized countries with a catholic tradition, which the roman ritual does not consider: namely, the family whose faith is uncertain, which has long abandoned all religious practice but which continues to resort to the priest for marriages and burial. In such cases a funeral without mass would seem preferable, with the proviso, of course, that the priest can always offer the eucharistic sacrifice for the deceased at some other time.

If the celebration of mass, despite its central importance, can be separated in certain cases from the funeral service, the same does not hold for the rite now known as the 'farewell to the deceased or the recommendation of him to God',²⁰ a more meaningful concluding action which has taken the place of the old 'absolution'.

The prayers and responses which are sung before the body is

¹⁸ Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 47; *Lumen Gentium*, 3; *Christus Dominus*, 15; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

¹⁹ Cf Council of Trent, S. XXII, ch. 2 (Denzinger-Schönmetzner 1743 and 1753).

²⁰ The word *commendatio* in liturgical latin signifies the different liturgical actions on behalf of the deceased person as well as the *commendatio decedentis animae*, the recommendation of the soul of the dying person. See my observations on this point in *L'Eglise en prière* (3rd ed), p 261, and, for the mozarabic liturgy, Férotin, *Liber Ordinum* ch. 107, 126 etc. The word *valedictio* is specifically christian – the equivalent of the pagan goodbye, *vale*. So we find *valeas in Christo*, or *in Domino*. The word *valefactio* is used in the same sense. Cf Férotin, *op. cit.*, ch 108.

taken from the church are a feature of the funeral liturgy to be found in carolingian times.²¹ In them the various themes of prayer for the dead are interwoven without any one of these themes being the specific characteristic. Whatever the original meaning of the word '*absolvere*' in the roman liturgy, towards the end of the middle ages the term came to associate the prayers following the funeral mass with the ideas of remission of sin and 'absolution',²² which were a current feature of the funeral ritual in general.²³ In the byzantine east, on the other hand, we find at this point the rite of the *apasmós*, the farewell kiss to the deceased, borrowed from paganism²⁴ and easily reinterpreted to express christian hope, as may be illustrated by the commentary of Simeon of Thessalonica:

Lastly, the final greeting song for their departure from this life and their separation from us, and also because there is a communion and a reunion. Indeed, in death we are by no means separated one from another, for we all travel by the same road and we shall all be reunited in the same place. We shall never be separated, since we live for Christ. We are going towards him; and in the resurrection, through our communion in the true faith, we faithful will all be gathered together in Christ.²⁵

It was along the lines indicated by Simeon of Thessalonica that the *Consilium* decided to re-interpret the 'absolution'. It is to be understood, in the words of Cardinal Lecaro, as 'the last farewell by which the christian community salutes one of its members before his body is taken to the tomb' (no. 10).

The meaning of the rite must of course govern the manner in which it is performed. Normally, the main element of the *valedictio* should be some hymn, familiar to the entire community and sung by all. Where the old roman responsory *Subvenite*²⁶ (or its translation)

²¹ Cf Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiae ritibus*, III, 15, 3 (sacramentaire de St Denys, 9 ff).

²² Cf *Pontifical de la Curie romaine* (ed. Andrieu, Vatican Press, 1940), pp 505 ff.; Jungmann, J.-A.: *Die lateinischen Bussriten in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Innsbruck, 1932), pp 288-89.

²³ Cf the byzantine funeral oration: 'God of spirits and of all flesh . . . pardon him, merciful God, all the sins he has committed in his thoughts, words or deeds'. Goar, *Euchologion*, p. 424; cf also the earlier reflections of the Pseudo-Dionysius: 'You may answer that we are undoubtedly right, but one point remains unclarified: Why does the priest beseech the thearcic Goodness to pardon the dead man's faults?'

²⁴ In itself this farewell is not specifically pagan but profoundly human. One still comes across it today in different cultures, in Africa for example. So it is stated that the salutation addressed to the dead man by his neighbours may have its place, according to local custom (no. 65).

²⁵ *De ordine sepulturae*, PG 155, 683.

²⁶ *Ordo romanus*, 49, 3; cf Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani*, tom IV, p 529.

is known or can be learnt, it would serve very well to express the passage from the community of this world to that of the angels and saints. In addition, out of a concern not to abandon the heritage of the gregorian chant, the ritual has retained a series of *ad libitum* responses (nos. 187-191). These should be employed in the vernacular only in so far as they convey the essential meaning of the *valedictio* and can be given a genuinely popular musical form. The episcopal conferences have the authority to introduce other hymns at this point, provided, as is expressly laid down in no. 10, that they suit the circumstances; which means, once again, that they should adequately express the farewell of the christian community. Moreover, whatever may have been the original significance of the sprinkling and incensation of the body, these actions, too, will be understood in the new ceremony as expressing this last farewell.

A special difficulty arises when no concluding hymn is possible. In such a case the celebrant could propose (or the particular ritual might even suggest) a few invocations or very simple words capable of expressing the *valedictio* of those present (no. 47).

Given the significance of the *valedictio*, it was quite obvious that its use should be restricted to funerals properly so-called. Absolution at the end of a mass *absente defuncti corpore*, whether celebrated for one deceased person or for the departed in general, loses its meaning. But it should be possible to vary the position of the *valedictio* in the order of the liturgy, according to whether the community disperses at the end of the church-service or accompanies the body to the grave. In the latter case, the ritual caters for the possibility of transferring the *valedictio* to the final moments of the ceremony at the graveside. The singing of it by the entire community would then mark the conclusion of the funeral service.

Hymns and prayers

We have already seen that the structure of the funeral liturgy is made up of four essential parts. Each of these consists, in different ways, of readings, hymns and prayers. We have already considered the subject of the biblical readings, in connection with the liturgy of the word. But a number of questions remain to be considered on the subject of hymns and prayers.

In funerals, as in other liturgical ceremonies, it is desirable that the psalms and non-biblical readings should supplement one another, both in the mass and in the rest of the liturgy. The proportion between the two will not always be the same. The needs of a monas-

tic community will clearly be different from those of a german country parish with a long-standing devotion to some canticle of Christ's passion. The ritual encourages adaptation to such varying situations, while at the same time laying down a number of important directives (no. 12). First of all, it insists that priority be given to biblical prayer (meaning in this instance the psalms), not in the sense that such prayer should always predominate in quantitative terms, but because in itself the inspired word is the privileged expression of the support afforded by faith to those confronted by suffering and death.²⁷ Of course, to be effective, the psalms, like all prayers, need to be accompanied by instruction. This instruction should bring out, above all, the forcefulness with which the psalms speak simultaneously of suffering and of confidence in God. The bearing of the psalms on the paschal mystery also needs to be made clear; and the danger should be borne in mind of their meaning being narrowed down to the confines of pietistic interpretation, as sometimes happens with the *De Profundis*. Furthermore, even if these principles are observed, the parish priest will need to limit the use he makes of the psalms to the instruction he has actually given, and to be careful to select for the different stages of the celebration psalms (or canticles) which are appropriate. With regard to the psalms, it is expressly allowed that the more difficult verses may be omitted, and an attempt has been made to give priority to those psalms which are more readily intelligible.²⁸

A number of questions arise concerning the content and form of the funeral prayers. The function of these is to convey in a style acceptable to our contemporaries the essential meaning of the funeral liturgy, which consists in the expression of three inseparable elements; the Church's faith regarding the destiny of man, the human duty of homage to one who has died, and prayer for his salvation. If the faith of the Church is to be truly reflected in these prayers, they need to express clearly and comprehensively the relationship of christian death to the paschal mystery. This need has indeed been more than adequately met. A further need was to remove from those prayers which ask for the soul's final purification

²⁷ Cf the patristic texts cited in *La Maison-Dieu*, 44, pp 72-74.

²⁸ It is for this reason that Ps 113, *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*, which deals directly with the paschal meaning of christian death and has been used in this sense throughout christian tradition, is mentioned only as a possible substitute because of the pastoral difficulties it raises. Yet it does express the essentials of the funeral rite better than the Psalm *De Profundis*.

(prayer in which the substance of the catholic belief in purgatory is implicitly contained) any remaining allusions to a mystical journey undertaken by the soul after death.²⁹

The criticism is sometimes made, in view of the biblical view of man, that in the roman prayers for the dead it is the soul in particular that is prayed for. The criticism is partly justifiable. It certainly holds good for the prayers of the ritual for the burial of infants, which seem to have been composed at the end of the middle ages. These prayers refer only to the infants' souls, already happy in the vision of God, and contain no hint of the existence of their bodies. Of course, it is neither necessary nor desirable that each prayer should attempt to contain the whole of christian eschatology. But taken as a whole, the prayers need to make quite clear both that man is called to rise again in his body and that meanwhile, except in the case of an infant, the soul must be purified in order to enter into the happiness of God. Of these two truths, the first is explicitly and insistently taught in the New Testament. The second, on which the New Testament sheds no light, is to be found in the Church's prayer from the earliest times; and she has recognised in such prayer an expression of her faith. However, although the two doctrines are equally true, it does not follow that exactly the same weight should be given to each. Our task is to work towards a new and ever more faithful liturgical expression of the deposit of faith.³⁰

It has been the practice up to now for the liturgy to pray only for the dead and not for those who are still living and stricken by the grief of bereavement. In the sixteenth century, the reformers adopted in general the opposite approach. The living had the duty of praying for themselves, but it was not in keeping with the gospel to pray for the dead. An examination of the liturgical heritage of the reformation and of the full religious significance inherent in the funeral service led the *Consilium*, while still retaining the importance of prayer for the deceased as the catholic faith requires, to give approval to two other elements: first, prayers for those who are suffering,³¹ and secondly, thanksgiving for all that the Lord brought about in the life of the deceased. Such prayers might well be introduced at the part of the funeral service which takes place in the

²⁹ Compare, for example, the prayer in no. 169 with its original (Mohlberg 1617). On the other hand, the text of the *Subvenite* does not appear to have presented any difficulties.

³⁰ Cf *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6; *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.

³¹ Cf nos. 34 and 169, and also the 'invitatories' for the farewell to the deceased, the litanies, and (for little children) nos 225-6 and 235-7.

house of the deceased. On more than one occasion the traditional anglican liturgies³² provided inspiration and even models for the composition of new texts which are nevertheless in keeping with the particular genius of the roman ritual. (It is worth noting that, in comparison with the missal, the ritual has always exhibited a less austere tone and a greater variety of content.)³³

Two particular difficulties arise in connection with prayers for the funerals of infants. First of all, either because of the decline in infant mortality or because of changes in family attitudes, the death of an infant affects us more painfully today than in the past. It is appropriate, then, that the prayers, while proclaiming that the baptized child shares in God's happiness, should not appear indifferent to the suffering of the parents. The other difficulty had to do with the funerals of infants whose parents had wished to baptize them but who died before being able to receive the sacrament. The prayers for this situation should be designed to bring genuine comfort to the parents and to those who share in their mourning, without placing the seal of the *lex orandi* and of the Church's *magisterium* on the private opinions of theologians. Hence the texts in the ritual³⁴ pray only indirectly for the dead child, but implore the mercy of God for the parents who entrust their child to him in faith and hope.

There is no point here in discussing in any detail the composition or the liturgical sources of the ritual,³⁵ which is a combination of old texts and new ones composed specifically. It also encourages particular rituals to complement these by compositions in the vernacular (nos. 22-3). A difficulty peculiar to the construction of a funeral liturgy is that, apart from the mass and the *valedictio*, funerals do not pre-suppose a progression of themes. For the most part, the prayers are interchangeable (as the rubric preceding no. 167 expressly admits). However, a particular importance attaches to the choice of opening prayers, especially if the faith of those present does not appear very strong.

The Praenotanda

Without discussing the *Praenotanda* of the entire ritual, I would like here to draw attention to one or two points which have not been mentioned in the previous pages.

³² The *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Scottish Book of Common Order*, and the *Liturgy of South India*.

³³ Cf nos. 48, 168, 198, 199.

³⁴ Nos. 235-7 and 266.

³⁵ Cf *La Maison-Dieu*, 99, p 109.

Numbers 16 to 20 and 23 to 25 afford a general view of the place of the funeral in the life of the christian community and in the field of pastoral activity. The funeral celebration concerns not the priest alone, but the entire community. All its members must be active in the celebration and it is they who create its religious and human context (nos. 2-16). All are there to give witness to their faith; it is the concern of everyone that funeral practice be in keeping with the gospel (no. 2). It is for everyone to give evidence of christian paschal hope, while at the same time showing respect for those who are suffering (no. 17) or who do not share their faith (no. 18).

It is with all this in mind that the priest must understand his own role. When he conducts a funeral service, it falls to him to be 'an educator in the faith and a minister of the paraclesis' as well as to preside over the liturgical action and the eucharist (no. 16). A wide variety of means are placed at his disposal for preparing the celebration with the family of the deceased and shaping it to suit the concrete situation (nos. 23-24). The ritual also invites priests to reflect on the fact that their ministry towards the dead forms an integral part both of their own pastoral activity and of the christian mystery (no. 25).

No. 19 provides for the case in which the place of the priest will need to be taken by a deacon or even a layman. It should be noticed that the two paragraphs of this section envisage quite different situations. The second paragraph deals with the case in which the priest presides over the ceremony in the church but is unable to be present at the house of the deceased or at the graveside. The faithful themselves are then encouraged to make the liturgical prayers which the priest cannot preside over. The first paragraph envisages a funeral of whatever type from which the priest is absent altogether. In this case the activities of the priest, with the exception of the mass, may be undertaken by a deacon or even, in virtue of a permission granted by the Apostolic See at the request of the episcopal conference, by lay people deputed for the purpose.

The responsibility of the episcopal conference in all this stems from the general task entrusted to it with regard to particular rituals. This task is the subject of nos. 21 and 22 of the *Praenotanda*. Briefly, the role of the conference is to organise and adapt the particular rituals in such a way that the pastoral liturgy will best meet the needs of the faithful. For this purpose, the ritual places at their disposition a number of means, two of which call for special mention: the choice of one or several types of funeral (no. 9) and the option of

substituting for the formulas proposed in the principal rite others taken from chapter iv (no. 22 § 2).

No. 14 of the *Praenotanda*, together with the first chapter, deals with the question of the office for the dead, a matter of some importance for ecclesiastical or religious communities as well as in country districts where a strong christian tradition survives. No. 14 represents the first part of a discipline which will be complete when the general instruction on the new roman breviary is published. Meanwhile, four directives are given: 1) apart from the office of November 2nd, the existing offices may be retained, but there is no obligation to retain them; 2) where they cannot be celebrated fittingly, they should be suppressed; 3) it will often be advantageous to replace these offices by some celebration of a more flexible kind; 4) these services or celebrations should not immediately precede the mass (no. 29). Where the two cannot be separated, it will be best to concentrate on bringing out the significance of the mass (no. 39).

One last point. Particularly in large towns and in countries of non-western tradition like Japan, there arises the question of cremation. This was the subject of a holy office instruction in 1963. That instruction, while emphasizing the Church's preference for the traditional style of burial, authorized the practice of cremation in circumstances where it does not derive from anti-christian intentions, but prohibited any religious rite in the building where the cremation takes place. This last condition is modified by no. 15 of the *Praenotanda*.³⁶

³⁶ This article first appeared in the french review of pastoral liturgy, *La Maison-Dieu* 101 (1970), pp 14-32. It is published here in translation by kind permission.