

A Time to Reflect...

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” (The Apostles’ Creed)

Our belief in the resurrection of the body was probably the main reason the early Christians treated the body with such reverence. This reverence continues to be found today in our funeral. I was recently reading a description about Catholic funeral practices and noticed how the various choices were presented, stating that a priest can conduct a funeral in the context of a mass or outside of a mass; a liturgy outside of mass can be done either in the church or in the funeral home. I know that there are many choices to be made and that there are many circumstances leading people to make their decisions and many pastoral reasons for making them. It is important to realize that celebrating a funeral mass with the body of the deceased present has been and still remains as the preferred standard.

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principle celebration of the Christian funerals.” (General introduction of the Order of Christian funerals)

Many times the deceased has left some desired choices and many times the family of the deceased has to make some of these choices. Often guiding the decision is how active in the practice of their faith someone is, either the deceased or his/her family. The funerals I’ve celebrated cover many different scenarios: the deceased was very active in the church as was the family; deceased was active but the family was not; both the deceased and the family were very occasional in the practice of their faith; and you can come up with many more.

When someone dies we want to remember the things they’ve done; how they have touched our lives and the lives of many others. We want to “celebrate their life,” and at the same time we want to pray for the person who has died. There can be a tension between how they have lived and what we all hope for them. However, we always need to remember that we pray for the deceased. We pray that they receive the reward of eternal life for how they lived their life! We pray that God has taken them to himself! We pray they share in the resurrection after they die and the resurrection of the body at the end of time.

This past week, on November 6th the Augustinians celebrated mass for all the deceased members of our Order. The prayers for that day contained parts of one of St. Augustine’s sermons. In it he deals with praying for those who have died. I share with you some words of St. Augustine that seem appropriate:

“There is no doubt that the dead are helped by the prayers of holy Church, by the saving sacrifice (mass) and by alms dispensed for their souls; these things are done that they may be more mercifully dealt with by the Lord than their sins deserve.... When these acts of mercy are solemnly performed for their sake, who can doubt that we are truly giving them our support? The prayers we offer to God for them are not futile. We must not waver in our belief that they are profitable to the dead.... Due attention should be paid to the burial and construction of tombs (graves) for the dead according to our means, for these are counted as good works in the Scriptures.” (Sermon 172)

Since the mass always celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that would be the best prayer that we can offer for anyone who has died. As we celebrate a funeral mass we are praying that all the connections with our baptism, living our Christian life, our hope of resurrection and eternal life are fully celebrated.

Next week I will be reflecting on cremation in our burial rites.

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