

Funeral rites

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 23, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Tomorrow, there will be a Mass of Christian Burial for my Uncle Frank. I do not wish to write about him: You did not know him and I always find it a strange thing when a writer introduces his readership to someone whose life was private. But, I do wish to write about the funeral.

A priest once told me something very wise. He said, "The Church is really her best at a funeral." It is not only that the Church has inspiring and comforting readings and prayers to help the grieving, although that is part of it. It is not only that the funeral service gives friends and family a chance to come together and support one another, to share memories of the beloved who has died, to reflect on the many ways the departed's life has influenced the lives of the mourners. These things are all well and good, but they are not distinctly Catholic.

The sharing of memories, though comforting, does not provide any kind of answer to the enigma that death presents to us. Those memories may outlive the deceased, but they won't outlive my death. The finality of death is, it seems to me, inescapable and yet so much of our contemporary culture, even some of our Catholic culture, tries to turn away from the abysmal loneliness of death. Sympathy cards no longer use the word "death" or "dead." Obituaries in the newspaper say that someone "passed away." Some people have abandoned the word "funeral" in favor of the phrase "a celebration of the life."

The Church comes to a funeral and says something the world cannot say. It says that death is not the end. In our funeral liturgy, we are reminded that the death of our beloved is united to the death of Jesus Christ. So far from turning away from the suffering of death, we are reminded of an earlier, and a decisive, suffering. One of the things I most like about the funeral liturgy is that it is so little different from a regular Sunday Mass. This not only provides a degree of familiarity with the liturgy, which is a comfort itself, but it unites the funeral Mass to the on-going life of the Church, a life that will continue next Sunday and the Sunday after that. The funeral liturgy tells us that the death of our beloved is united to the death of Christ and, therefore, death is not a wall but a door.

You see, Saturday morning at Mass, someone will carry in an urn carrying my Uncle Frank's ashes. I will not recognize him in those ashes. But, when the priest leans over the bread and says, "Take, eat, this is my body," I will recognize my uncle in the breaking of the bread. What the Church says at a funeral is that our beloved dead are still with us there and then, at the altar in the Eucharist. What the Church says at a funeral is that death, like birth, is part of the Christian soul's adventure, an adventure that is never beyond the loving gaze of the Good Shepherd. What the Church says at a funeral is that death is itself dead, its power broken 2,000 years ago and broken tomorrow morning when the Church gathers, the Church on earth and the Church of the saints, to reaffirm our sure hope in the Resurrection.

The Church is her best at a funeral. This year, the Church has not often been at her best. Many of us have been upset with this statement or that, with this bishop or with the Vatican. We argue about what direction the Church should take, and argue we should, not for the sake of argument, but because we care about the Church. We care because we know that tomorrow morning, and all the tomorrow mornings of the future, will witness Catholics

gathering to commend another soul to the mercy of God, and proclaim anew that the tomb is empty. The world has said all it has to say upon the life and death of my uncle but I am greatly looking forward to being with him at Mass. Only the Church can do that and that is one of the reasons the Church is worth fighting for.

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