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The Church at Her Best

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 2, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Many years ago, a priest said to me, ?The Church is her best at a funeral.? I thought at the time that this was not only right but wise, and my experience since then has confirmed it. Wednesday, many of us in the NCR family celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial for our friend Joe Feuerherd and, indeed, the Church was at her best. Why is this?

First, we have the liturgy itself. The Mass of Christian Burial is not very different from a regular Sunday Mass and at a time of strong emotional challenge, it is comforting to have a familiar ritual. I know that we live in an age and a culture in which Oprah-like personal self-expression is considered not only a right but a duty, but in fact, it is cruel to expect people who have just experienced trauma to try and give voice to their emotions. Don?t you cringe when you see some newsman pushing a microphone into the face of a survivor of the tornado in Joplin or the massacre at Virginia Tech? ?How do you feel?? the newsman asks. It is a cruel question at such a time.

Still less should those who have just lost a loved one be expected to devise an entire service. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I ran a bookstore/café here in Washington and we lost many waiters, bartenders and cooks to the AIDS epidemic. Some of them had no religion and had left the request that their friends host a memorial service. These were dreadful. Lacking a liturgy, these memorial services consisted mostly of eight or so eulogies from friends, but because the friends had not coordinated their talks, the eulogies were invariably repetitive. And, because few people?s friends have been trained in public speaking, they lack a pastor?s ability to articulate clearly, measure the cadence of their words, and fill the room when the microphone fails, all of which are essential to communication. Finally, and most importantly, people who are unaccustomed to speaking about the tragedies of life may seek to give expression to their deepest sentiments but they can easily lapse into sentimentality. Every time I attended one of these unscripted memorial services, I gave thanks for the Catholic liturgy.

Second, in our culture, there are reference points in the musical canon that help us to wrestle with the mystery of suffering and death, and these great cultural touchstones are invariably religious. Wednesday, at Joe?s funeral, the soprano soloist Ellen Kliman sang ?I Know that my Redeemer Liveth? from Handel?s ?Messiah.? At the Offertory, the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Goltz sang the Bach-Gounod ?Ave Maria.? At Communion, the quartet sang Bach?s ?Sheep May Safely Graze? and Faure?s ?In Paradisum.? These works of music do for a grieving family and community what words alone cannot do; they transport us emotionally. The emotions arrive at a place that is musically beautiful but utterly honest: These works of music haunt as well as comfort, inspire as well as ground the emotions, they grapple with the reality of death and new life that is at the heart of our faith. Maybe, in our secular age, there will be musical geniuses like Faure and Bach and Handel to write secular works of music that achieve similar emotional dexterity and profundity, but I doubt it and, in any event, there has certainly been no Bach in this century.

After the funeral Mass, Joe?s family and friends did what Catholics do at such a time: We ate and drank. We reminded ourselves that we are still alive. In the Gospel, after Jesus invites a doubting Thomas to put his finger

into the nail holes and his hand into his side, to face the reality of death, the Master eats a piece of fish. Here we discern our dogmatic belief in the resurrection of the body: Our bodies are integral to our dignity, and death has no more power over that body.

There is a final reason the Church is her best at a funeral, and it is hinted at by the above-mentioned observation about the lack of secular music for a funeral. The acids of secularization may have eaten away at large parts of our Western culture, but death still belongs to the Church. Why? Because the world has said its last about the life of our departed: You can read it in the obituary. Far be it from me, a wordsmith, remembering another wordsmith, to point out that words have their limits, but there it is. And, the problem is not the words, here, really, it is the focus. The world can remember a life, but it can never make sense of death, which is the one inescapable part of life. Only the Church can remind us that death is not a wall but a door. Only the Church provides a moment, indeed a sacrament, the Mass, where we can be united with our loved ones as truly as if they were sitting beside us in the pew. Only the Church can sustain ? not only sustain but even give voice to ? the belief that the deepest yearning of the human heart, the desire to live forever with those we love, that this desire can and will be fulfilled. This desire finds its fulfillment in our dogmatic belief in the Communion of Saints: Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love we share in Christ Jesus.

We live in an age in which death is met with euphemisms. You will search in vain for a Hallmark sympathy card that mentions the word death. We say that our beloved has ?passed away? when, in fact, he died. The Church, and only the Church, recognizes the reality of death and imparts to it human dignity and worth, because the Church, and only the Church, can say and sing ?I know that my Redeemer Liveth.? Christ?s death is the death of death. That is why, in the face of death, we can still give an account of the hope that is within us. That hope is rooted in dogmatic claims that only the Church proclaims. It is not only our Redeemer who liveth, it is our friend Joe too.

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