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Lay-led funerals: the future for the Catholic church?

Isabella R. Moyer | Sep. 18, 2012 NCR Today

The diocese of Liverpool, England, has introduced a formal commissioning of laypeople to conduct funeral services. Diana Klein, *The Tablet*'s Parish Practice editor, has written a blog post [1] in support of this initiative. While the current shortage of priests is cited as the main reason, she also believes lay-led funerals are a practical option when a funeral Mass might be inappropriate.

> Christian funerals offer people an opportunity to thank God for the deceased's life, to express the hope that they are now with God in heaven. It is good that people turn to the Church when a loved one has died and it is important that, during the brief encounter we have with them at this time, the Church is seen to meet them where they are.

Lay-led funerals could be "a way of bringing the Church to the bereaved" while encouraging laypeople to "exercise their role to bring the world into contact with the Church."

Klein first experienced lay-led funerals in Africa, where geographical distance, priest shortages, and a short time between death and burial often make it impossible to offer a funeral Mass. The priest's role is then reserved for celebrating a Mass for the deceased shortly after the funeral.

I live in a rural parish where the priest shortage is a stark reality. If the pastor is away, a replacement is not always available. Sadly, we have had pastors who made themselves unavailable, even when they were present in town. Their rectory phone numbers were unlisted so they couldn't be disturbed after office hours. Late-night visits to the bedside of a dying parishioner were not on their agenda.

Meanwhile, we are blessed with a faith-filled, committed woman who devotes many hours a week to pastoral ministry in homes and in the hospital. She visits patients and prays with them. When a priest is unavailable to anoint a dying patient, she brings viaticum, food for the journey. She is often asked to lead the funeral vigil prayers with family and friends.

Asking a layperson with this kind of compassion and commitment to lead a funeral service in the absence of a priest seems right and good. It is a logical extension of the pastoral ministry some laypeople are already providing.

New ways are seldom accepted without a challenge. Will lay-led funeral services be interpreted as an inferior or second-best option, even when a Mass is not requested by the family of the deceased? Are we able to overcome the traditional view that ordained ministers are best-suited to be leaders of prayer, even outside of sacramental celebrations?

Diana Klein asks the question that digs deep into our own personal expectations of funerals. Are you willing to have a lay-led funeral for one of your loved ones?

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Links:
[1] http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/358/17