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The Funeral Rite: A Celebration of Life in its Fullness

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Abstract: Analyzing the new rite of Christian Funerals of the Roman Catholic liturgy, the author sees Christian death as an event of transformation of life rather than an event of destruction of life. It is a transition to a new way of living which inevitably includes bidding farewell to the old way of living. Consequently it is the celebration of the pain of a departure and the joy of an encounter. The new rite the emphasis is more on the interpretation of Christian death than on the liberation of the dead person from the pains of purgatory. Another characteristic of the new rite, according to the author, is the communitarian dimension of Christian death which it highlights. Death is the culmination of our relationship with Christ and the community which took place at Baptism. In the light of these considerations the author traces three aspects of death which the new funereal rite of the Roman Catholic Church: a. Christian death, a Paschal event; b. Christian death, a Gospel proclamation and c. Christian death, an event of communion. The Church celebrates the Mystery of faith in the funeral services in order to make us realize the full meaning of the events that has taken place, namely death and resurrection of Christ. Funeral rite is, therefore, not merely an act of suffrage for the dead, but it is the celebration of our faith in the Paschal Mystery in light of which we have to understand all that happens to us in our life.

Keywords: Suffrage, death and resurrection of Christ, paschal even, Christian death, proclamation of Gospel, death as communion.

The new rite of Christian funerals according to the Roman Catholic (Latin) liturgy has notable elements which indicate the specific meaning of Christian death. It does not consist merely in

some ceremonies and prayers meant as suffrages for the deceased person. It gives a new significance to death and its celebration. The simple and most apparent change in the colour of the vestments used by the priest indicates this: black, which symbolized the absence of life, is replaced by violet, which indicates the transition from one state of life to another through a process of kenosis. It is seen as an event of the transformation of life rather than an event of the destruction of life; it is a transition to a new way of living which inevitably includes bidding farewell to the old way of living. Consequently it is the celebration of the pain of a departure and the joy of an encounter. The violet colour is symbolic of this mixed feeling which the Church experiences at the death of a Christian. We may say that although this latter is still present in it. This was the understanding of death in the early Church as is evident from the funeral art found in the catacombs. For them death is a victory over sin and bodily corruption as well as the fulfilment of the longing for the second coming of Christ, expressed in the frequent invocation 'Maranatha: Come Lord Jesus'. In the middle ages the joy of the personal encounter of the Christian with the risen Lord is replaced by the fear of the encounter of the soul separated from body with the judge whom it was not easy to appease. The hymns and prayers such as '*Dies irae*' and '*libera*' bear witness to it. Another characteristic of the new rite is the communitarian dimension of Christian death which it highlights. Death is the culmination of our relationship with Christ and the community which began at Baptism. In the light of these considerations we shall deal with three aspects of death which the new funereal rite of the Roman Catholic Church puts in evidence:

- 1) Christian death, a Paschal event.
- 2) Christian death, a Gospel proclamation.
- 3) Christian death, an event of communion.

1. Christian Death: A Paschal Event

a) It is the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Paschal event of Christ is described by St. John as a passage from this world to the Father (John 13, 1-2). His death and resurrection which constitute this event are considered by the Church to be one act; they are the two sides of the same reality. The Christians

enter into this paschal journey at their baptism (Rom. 6, 1-10). What was symbolically realized in their lives when they received this sacrament has to be actualized in their lives throughout their journey in this world and has to reach its climax when they will hand over their lives into the hands of the Father as Christ did on the cross in total obedience to His will. When this happens the divine life fully permeates their persons and they share in the resurrection of Jesus. Just as Jesus, descended from David according to the flesh, was declared son of God according to the Spirit (Rom. 1, 4), the Christian will be acknowledged as son by the Father at his death. We shall see now how this is expressed in liturgical symbols in the new rite of Christian funerals in the Roman Rite: The liturgical Constitution which gives the doctrinal foundation of the renewal of liturgy after Vatican II says explicitly: "Funeral Rites should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death." I .¹ The Eucharistic celebration is an integral part of the funeral rite precisely for this reason. It is not a mere act of suffrage for the dead, but it is a celebration of the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ in which every human being was personally included, by virtue of the fact that Christ at his incarnation assumed the whole human race in their existential reality. The death of a Christian is the historical re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Christ in the course of time. By celebrating the Eucharist on the occasion of his or her death the Church ritually interprets it as a paschal event. It is for this reason that the Church prays at the funeral liturgy: "You turn the darkness of death into the dawn of new life."² The Church recommends that the paschal candle alone may be placed the head of the deceased.³ This is to show that the body of the deceased person is illumined by the light of the risen Lord. The sprinkling of the body with holy water and the incensation of the body are symbols that remind us of baptism. The singing of 'alleluia' which is a paschal song is permitted in the funeral Mass for the same reason. The burial of the Christian is interpreted not merely as a return to the dust, but as the planting of a seed which will germinate into the fullness of life in eternity: "In your presence, Lord, those who die still live, and our bodies do not perish in death, but are transformed by your power."⁴ Paschal Mystery is at the core of our Christian life. To proclaim our faith in this Mystery, interpreting

death as entrance into life, in the midst of a world in which the stark reality of death seems to take away the meaning of life, is not an easy task. As the philosophers of Athens laughed at Paul when he proclaimed this Mystery (Acts 17, 16-21), some men and women of today look at our claims regarding resurrection as a mere product of imagination or they look at life as something to be lived and enjoyed only in this world. Celebrating the resurrection at funerals is a challenging proclamation of our faith. "There is no greater threat to faith in the paschal mystery than the phenomenon of death. In the face of human death to proclaim life founded on the death and resurrection of Jesus is one of the Church's strongest affirmations of faith in that Christ-life, for there is nothing in the experience of death itself that even hints at the viability of such a faith. It is for this reason that the Christian funeral is above all else a celebration of the paschal mystery."⁵

b) It is the proclamation of the resurrection of the Christian.

The proclamation of the death and resurrection is not merely a recalling to mind of an event that took place in the past. It is the realization of the Christ-event in the person of the deceased. When the Christian dies he rises from the dead. The words of Jesus to Martha are already verified in the case of the deceased person: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11, 25). There are innumerable references in the funeral rite which proclaim the death of the Christian as his resurrection. We shall just quote one prayer which seems to express this truth clearly: "Lord God almighty Father, our faith testifies that your Son died for us and rose to life again. May our brother (sister) share in this mystery; as he (she) has gone to his (her) rest believing in Jesus; may he (she) come through him to the joy of the resurrection."⁶ Our baptism, the symbolic act by which our faith in the resurrection of Jesus is expressed makes us members of his risen body, will be fully realized in our body at our death; our bodies will be transformed by the Spirit of Jesus. What we see in the coffin is only the mortal remains of a person who has already been born with an immortal body. What we celebrate at the funeral is this transformation, the resurrection of the Christian.

2. Christian Death: A Gospel Proclamation

The Gospel is the Good News of God for the human community. Its content is Jesus, the risen Lord, who destroyed our sins and restored to humanity the new life from death. It is the ultimate answer to all the bad news in the world. It has to be proclaimed wherever sin, the cause of death, is present. It is the story of the transformation of human history into salvation history. It is proclaimed throughout the world and at every epoch until the complete victory over sin and death will be realized. It was proclaimed for the first time at Christ's death and resurrection. It is proclaimed by the Church whenever she gathers together as a community in the name of Christ especially at the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word is the proclamation of the Word of the Lord, the risen Jesus. When we celebrate the Christian funeral, the Church proclaims it in a special manner. Let us see how this is done:

a) The recitation of the psalms. The psalms are the songs of the people of Israel who remembered, reflected and prayed over their history. They acknowledged the God who entered into their lives in order to lead them into the Promised Land. The life of every Christian is a journey towards his ultimate destiny which is to enter into communion with God and His people. In this sense we may say that every Christian life is a journey towards the Promised Land. All that has taken place in this journey can be understood in its full significance only if they are interpreted in the light of God's plan. When Christians have completed their journey through life and reached its culmination in death, the Church offers this interpretation through her liturgy. That is why the psalms have a very prominent place in the funeral rite of the Christians. This is shown in the selection of psalms used in the funeral liturgy:

1) Psalm 22: *The Lord is a shepherd and a host*. This a psalm which is very much used in the Funeral Rite in order to indicate that Christian life is one that is constantly guided and taken care of by the Lord who is the Good shepherd; through death he makes his sheep enter into the security of his final abode and makes them participate in the eternal banquet

2) Psalm 23: *The Lord's solemn entry into Sion*: Death is the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus who said: "Do not let your hearts

be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, I would have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14, 1-3). At our death we meet Christ who has completed his journey through history and has entered into his Father's house. At the death of every Christian he returns to take him or her into his home.

3) Psalm 41: *Desire for God and His temple* expresses the same

4) Psalm 113 (1-20) which describes God's wonders at the Exodus is used in the funeral liturgy in order to show that the Christian life is also an Exodus under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus towards the Promised Land of eternal life.

Besides, the psalms also express the sentiments of grief and hope that animate the event of death. "The Church employs the prayer of the psalms in the office for the dead to express grief and to strengthen genuine hope. Pastors must therefore try by appropriate catechesis to lead their communities to understand and appreciate at least the chief psalms of the funeral liturgy" (Psalms 50, 129, 122etc).

b) It is the proclamation of Christian hope. The Church is entrusted with the message of the death and resurrection of Christ so that she may proclaim it to the nations as a response to the search of humanity for fullness of joy and life. Christian faith is not so much a collection of truth about God or set of rituals to pay homage to the divinity as the proclamation of the promises of God for humanity. When we celebrate the funerals of Christians this aspect is highlighted. We proclaim our hope. In this sense every celebration of the liturgy of the dead is an act of evangelization. What we say at every Eucharistic celebration: "We proclaim your death O Lord until you come" is verified in a special way in the funeral liturgy. We announce the coming of the Lord in the life of the Christian whose death we are celebrating. It is the event of Parousia in the case of the deceased brother and sister. That is why the celebration of the death of the Christian is a joyful event, in spite of the fact that there is an element of absence and sorrow in this departure. We know that this is only temporary; we shall all meet with our departed brothers and sisters in the fullness of relationship and communion

in the company of the Lord whose second coming we have celebrated in the funeral liturgy of our brothers and sisters.

c) Funeral Rite, an occasion for evangelization. The Rite of Funerals says: "Priests should be especially aware of persons, Catholics or non-Catholics, who seldom or never participate in the Eucharist or who seem to have lost their faith, but who assist at liturgical celebrations and hear the Gospel on the occasion of funerals. Priests must remember that they are ministers of Christ's Gospel to all men."⁸ The occasion of death is a time when people irrespective of their creed and other ideological belonging express their solidarity with their friends and acquaintances by being present at the funeral celebrations. A Christian interpretation of death can be a very good means to communicate the message of the Gospel to all those who are present for the occasion, not with a view to proselytization, but to give greater meaning to their presence, by sharing our faith vision with them and thus deepen their sense of solidarity with the deceased. It could be also an occasion for them to reflect on their lives.

3. Christian Death: An Event of Communion

Apparently death is a moment of separation. In fact we all experience the absence of the person who has passed away. To speak of communion on this occasion seems to be unreal. And yet, in the Christian vision of faith, death is a moment of a deeper solidarity and personal communion. In the new rite of Funerals this aspect of death is expressed very clearly.

a) Death is the culmination of communion with Christ. In Baptism the Christian is joined with Christ in his passage from the world to the Father by participating in his death and resurrection symbolically. The whole life is a constant struggle to give full meaning to this symbolic action. The participation in the Eucharist makes the Christian grow in this communion because through the reception of the body and blood of the Lord, the Spirit of Christ transforms the body of the Christians; they gradually become a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led person. They become capable of living and acting like Christ. Their death is not to be seen merely as a separation of the soul from the body, but a transformation of the whole person in such a way that they, like Christ, are capable of

saying “Into your hands I commend my spirit”, thus becoming truly the son of God in the Son Jesus. “Today you will be with in paradise” (Lk. 23, 43) That is why the Church considers the death of the Christians their birthday. This idea of communion is expressed very beautifully in the new funeral rite. Death is considered to be response to a call from God, the Father, to His children to enter into communion with Him: “Lord hear our prayers and be merciful to your son (daughter) whom you have called from this life. Welcome him (her) into the company of your saints.”⁹ “Lord, may our brother (sister) whom you have called to yourself, find happiness in the glory of your saints” (antiphon to be sung during the procession to the Church with the dead body).¹⁰

b) **Death is the culmination of our ecclesial communion.** The Church is not a mere juridical or doctrinal body; it is a community that is gathered together around Christ the risen Lord, in communion with him and with one another in the power of the Spirit. The ecclesial community that lives in the world is not yet fully yet a community of the Spirit, nor is it therefore in full communion with Christ and his members. At the moment of death, freed from all types of alienation, the Christians enter into this communion in such a way that the Church that is formed is beyond all institutional, juridical, religious expressions. It will be the *ecclesia ab Abel*, that is, a community in which all human beings will be united. The funeral rite of the Roman Rite expresses this very well when it prays as follows: “Almighty Father, eternal God, hear our prayers for your son (daughter) whom you have called from this life to yourself. Grant him (her) light, happiness, and peace. Let him (her) pass in safety through the gates of death, and live for ever with all your saints in the light you promised to Abraham and to all his descendants in faith.”¹¹ The promise of Abraham that he would possess the land and be the father of many nations is fulfilled at our death. The Church is the community which has shared the faith of Abraham and found its fulfillment in Christ (Rom. Ch. 4). At our death this faith becomes a reality, for then we will all be gathered together in the land of Promise with Christ as the centre and His Spirit as the unifying link. The Church as communion, beyond all juridical, doctrinal, religious groupings, will be realized.

c) Death as an event of birth from the womb of the local community. The local community of the Church is the womb in which the Christians are formed to live their lives in its fullness in the great family of God after the event of death. During the earthly life, the Spirit of Jesus, acting in the Church, perfects the limbs of the Christians so that they can function as parts of the risen body of Christ, by relating themselves to all the members of the family of God. It is a struggle with all its pains and tensions. At death the Church, mother of the people of God, in whose womb the Christian has been growing, offers this child to the Father, after having tried her best to shape him or her according to the image of Christ. We find this idea expressed in the new funeral rite in the following text: "Father, we entrust our brother (sister). to your mercy. You loved him (her) greatly in this life; now that he (she) is freed from all its cares, give him (her) happiness and peace for ever. The Old order has passed away: welcome him (her) now into paradise where there will be no more sorrow, no more weeping or pain, but only peace and joy with Jesus, your Son and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever."¹²

d) Death as a moment of farewell by the local community. Our earthly sojourn is a life of relationship with persons with whom we have shared our joys and sorrows; they are those with whom we have celebrated our faith, struggled in hope and lived in love. They have become part and parcel of our very being. Death separates us at least for the time being from these persons. The Church is aware of this; she wants to give expression to the feelings of separation which is experienced at the death of our dear ones. Liturgy of death celebrates our human relationships, our pain of separation. The rite of final commendation, which is a new element in the revised funeral rite after Vatican II, is the liturgical expression of these human feelings. It is performed after the Eucharist, before the body is taken for burial to the cemetery. In the old liturgy it was called the rite of final absolution wherein the stress was on the intercession of the Church on behalf of the deceased for the remission of their sins and the speedy entry into heaven. Instead in the new rite this is replaced by the final commendation by which the human dimension of death as a separation and farewell is expressed.¹³

e) Funeral Liturgy, an act of the Christian Community. At times there is a feeling that the funeral celebration is an act of the priest, performed around the body of the deceased person. This is corrected in the new funeral rite by presenting it as an act of the whole community over which the priest presides. "In funeral celebrations all who belong to the people of God should keep in mind their office and ministry: the parents or relatives, those who take care of funerals, the Christian community as a whole, and finally the priest. As teacher of faith and minister of consolation, the priest presides over the liturgical service and celebrates the Eucharist. Here we need to take note of two things: the role of the people and the role of the priest:

i) The role of the people in the funeral liturgy is to express its solidarity with the bereaved family and to express its affectionate communion with the deceased person. The new rite very well provides for it, by requesting the community to keep vigil and celebrate the Word of God in the home of the deceased person¹⁴ This is a custom which the Christian community practised from very early times. Another ceremony of the funerals is the solemn transfer of the body from the home to the church. The community accompanies the person in his last journey to the parish where he used to gather together with the other members of the Church for the celebration of the Eucharist. Finally the community bids farewell to its member through the rite of final commendation. All these show that the funeral rite is the act of the whole community, expressing its relationship with the person who has passed away. The community which has lived and struggled through life now accompanies the person in his last journey towards the attainment of the goal. This community is pained at the departure of its member, but at the same time it rejoices that one of its members has reached the goal. We can compare this to the feeling that parents have when a daughter is married and leaves for her husband's home. They feel the sadness of separation, but they also feel happy that their child is well settled in her life.

ii) The role of the priest in the funeral liturgy is not that of ritualist around the body of the deceased person, but that of the animator of the community. He should act as a minister of consolation

and comfort to the family, as well as a proclaimer of hope to the Christian community. The celebration of the Eucharist which is the centre of the funeral rite is a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ verified in the person of the deceased. All these aspects of the funeral liturgy must clearly appear in the manner in which he celebrates the Eucharist, in the way in which he says the prayers and performs the rituals, in his homily and above all in the human approach which he should show towards the family and friends of the deceased person. He must embody the attitude which Jesus had towards the dear ones of the deceased even though he knew that he was going to raise him from the dead as in the case of the resuscitation of Lazarus: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'where have you laid him? They said to him, 'Lord, come and see'. Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him'" (John 11,33-36). Even when he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb, he says it with a deep emotional feeling. The priest who is supposed to be the representative of Christ, who performs the liturgy in the name of Jesus, should have the human approach which Jesus had.

Conclusion

No matter what be the event that our Christian liturgy celebrates, it is always the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. In some of the events the visible element is sorrowful, while in others the joyful aspect has predominance. In other words in some we see more the pain of death while in others we are faced with the joy of the resurrection. But the hidden invisible reality in all of them is the paschal event. When we experience the pain of death in the passing away of a person dear to us, the liturgy presents us with the total reality. We can perceive it only through faith. So the Church celebrates the mystery of faith on these occasions in order to make us realize the full meaning of the events that have taken place, namely death and resurrection. Funeral rite is, therefore, not merely an act of suffrage for the dead, but it is the celebration of our faith in the Paschal Mystery in light of which we have to understand all that happens to us in our life.

Notes

1. SC n. 8J.
2. Rite of Funerals n. 34.
3. Rite of Funerals n. 38.
4. Rite of Funerals n. 174.
5. Richard Rutherford: *The Death of a Christian: The Rite of Funerals*, New York 1980, p. 116.
6. Rite of Funerals n. 170.
7. Rite of Funerals n. 12.
8. Rite of Funerals no. 18
9. Rite of Funerals no. 33.
10. Rite of Funerals no.35.
11. Rite of Funerals no. 167.
12. Rite of Funerals no. 168.
13. Rite of Funerals no. 46, 47.
14. Rite of Funerals no. 26ff.