

The Focus of Funerals

 bulldogcatholic.org/2018/02/08/the-focus-of-funerals

February 8, 2018



Q: We recently had a funeral for a family member. I was a bit annoyed by how much the priest talked about Jesus and how little he talked about the person who had died. Isn't the funeral supposed to be more of a celebration of the person's life?

A: You bring up a phenomenal point. Most funerals are exactly what you were expecting. They are either crafted to be a “celebration of life” or as a way to “formalize” one’s goodbye...but this isn’t what a funeral is primarily about.

Don’t get me wrong. A family that wants to celebrate the life of their deceased relative is doing something right in wanting to remember the one they love. And of course it is very important to have the opportunity to say our goodbyes to those who had died. Those are good things; remembering who they were and saying goodbye are both significant things to do in the midst of pain, loss, and sorrow.

But they are not the only things. In fact, they are not even the most important reasons why we celebrate Catholic funeral Masses. One might say that there are four principle reasons for a funeral Mass.

At the funeral Mass for his father, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, his son, Father Paul Scalia, stood up to give the homily and after a few words of introduction and thanks, began by stating, “We are gathered here because of one man. A man known personally to many of us, known only by reputation to even more. A man loved by many, scorned by others. A man known for great controversy, and for great compassion. That man, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth.”

Obviously, everyone in the church had originally thought that Father Scalia was talking about his own father. But Father Scalia was cognizant of who the real focus of the funeral Mass is: God. The first reason for a funeral Mass is the worship and praise of God.

The funeral Mass is not where the priest or deacon gets to “canonize” the deceased, although the temptation is very strong to offer that kind of false consolation. All of us are tempted to say things like, “So-and-So is in Heaven now...”. But we can’t possibly know that! There might be a lot of good things to say about someone, but we are most often in the dark regarding the state of their soul. So, while we may reference the deceased, it is always in relation to Jesus.

| The funeral Mass, like everything we do as Catholics, is all about Jesus.

1. The funeral Mass, like everything we do as Catholics, is all about Jesus. I think that we might have a bit more clarity if we realized that this is the case for every celebration in the Church. Baptism isn’t about the person getting baptized. It’s about how Jesus is making that person a new creation. First Holy Communion is not about the young people coming forward. It’s about how Jesus is nourishing them with his very Self. Confirmation is not about the person “taking a step”. It is about how Jesus is commissioning them and filling them with the Holy Spirit. A wedding is not about the couple apart from Jesus; it is about the couple being united in Christ for the mission of Christ. An ordination is not about the man being ordained, it is about Jesus.

2. The second purpose of the Catholic funeral Mass is to thank God for his endless mercy. Before he died, Justice Scalia wrote these words, “Even when the deceased was an admirable person, indeed especially when the deceased was an admirable person, praise for his virtues can cause us to forget that we are praying for and giving thanks for God’s inexplicable mercy to a sinner.” Consider that the next time you are invited to attend a funeral: you are there to thank God for the inexplicable mercy he has given to the sinner whose body is in the casket.

3. Third, we are called to proclaim and renew our own faith in Jesus Christ. Whenever we celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice, we “proclaim his death and resurrection until he comes again”. This is eminently true when it comes to the funeral liturgy. We profess that Jesus Christ has conquered death by his own death and resurrection. And we renew our own participation in that great mystery.

4. Lastly, and above all, the primary reason why we celebrate the Eucharist for the deceased person at their funeral is to pray for them. The Mass is the most powerful and life-giving prayer God has ever given to us. When someone has died, unless they have chosen Hell, they are most likely in need of purification before entering Heaven. This purification can be difficult and painful; the Mass aids the person for whom we are praying.

There is great grief and sorrow when it comes to death, especially when the one who has died is someone we love. Have you ever been in that situation where you just wish that they would come back so that you might be able to help them in some way? Have you ever wished that you could do something to demonstrate your love for them that would be meaningful? You can.

We offer Masses for our deceased loved ones because we believe that this actually does something. It accomplishes something! It makes a difference for them. When we pray for someone who has died, we are assisting them in their process of purification en route to Heaven. In what way could you possibly love them more?

The funeral Mass is a chance to say goodbye and to celebrate the life of the person you’ve loved. But it is also far more. It is the chance to worship God and to thank him for his inexplicable mercy, to proclaim and renew our faith in Jesus Christ, and to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that will immensely bless the person who has died.