

## HOLY DEATH

Funerals should focus on Jesus Christ; burials on dignity of lives He created

*By Gene Fadness Editor, Idaho Catholic Register March 24-April 6, 2023*



When Father Paul Scalia began his homily at the funeral Mass for his father, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, he did what should be done in a homily at a Catholic funeral. However, in doing so, he took those in the congregation and in the national media – many secular outlets such as USA Today re-printed his entire homily – by surprise.

Prepared to hear a lengthy tribute to a man who had served as a prominent and controversial justice on the nation's highest court for 30 years, the congregation instead heard Father Scalia take a different approach.

"We are gathered here because of one man," Father Scalia began. "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."

"It is He whom we proclaim. Jesus Christ, son of the father, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, buried, risen, seated at the right hand of the Father. It is because of Him, because of His life, death and resurrection that we do not mourn as those who have no hope, but in confidence we commend Antonin Scalia to the mercy of God," Father Scalia continued.

Father Scalia then proceeded to focus not so much on Justice Scalia's accomplishments, but paid homage to what God had accomplished for the late justice in his life: his baptism, his frequent reception of the Eucharist, his marriage and the Holy Spirit's constant nourishment of a lifelong faith.

Of course, a funeral homily can and should include memories and tributes to the deceased, but the primary purpose of a Catholic funeral, according to the Order of Christian Funerals, is to “offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and hope of the just.”

The document goes on to say that “the Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.” The second purpose of a Catholic funeral is that the Church “commends the dead to God’s merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins.”

A Catholic funeral, then, that follows what the Church says is to be done, becomes a puzzle, sometimes a source of anger, to non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics who may be expecting what they would witness at a Protestant funeral or a service at a funeral home where people gather to hear tributes and humorous stories about the deceased. Instead, the Catholic funeral is centered on Christ, with specifically chosen readings, appropriate music and a homily centered on those readings.

### **Homilies should be based on readings chosen by family**

Regarding the homily, the Order of Christian Funerals goes on to say, “A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading ... but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the Paschal mystery of the Lord. ... Through the homily, members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God.”

Pope Francis’s brief homily at the funeral of Pope Benedict XVI produced something of a controversy. Critics complained that it was impersonal. In the Pope’s defense, some commentators said the Christocentric homily is just what the theological and self-effacing Benedict would have wanted; he would not have wanted a long, glowing tribute. Many who responded to Pope Francis’s critics said funeral homilies are not eulogies, thus Francis’s approach was liturgically correct. Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny characterized the homily as pastoral, a “spiritual tribute,” explaining that a eulogy belonged in “another time and place.”

Father Paul Wander, pastor at Tri Parish Community based in Cottonwood, said Catholic funerals are about “healing the living.”

“We do this by praying for the one who has died,” he said. Eulogies (also called “life sketches,” or family tributes), can be shared after the Mass is completed or before it begins, he said. Father Wander says he always tries to include some personal information and stories about the person in his homily, but the focus of the homily is Jesus Christ.

Father Roger LaChance, now retired, also has noticed that music at some funerals, while perhaps desired by family members, is not appropriate to a Catholic liturgy. The Order of Catholic Funerals states that music should be chosen “with great care,” should be related to the selected readings, and serve to “support, console and uplift the participants, and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ’s victory over death and in the Christian’s share in that victory.”

The Church also has an Order of Service for funerals without Mass. The memorial service should also focus on Christ, with readings chosen from the lectionary and prayers offered for the deceased and the family. A memorial service may be held in a church, funeral home or a private residence.

Vigils – sometimes called “wakes” or “viewings” – are typically held the evening before a funeral Mass or memorial service. Priests, deacons or lay people may preside at the vigil, which can include readings, a brief homily or reflection and prayers. In Catholic tradition, it is customary to pray the rosary or Divine Mercy Chaplet at a vigil service.

Some families will use this time to share family tributes and memories, especially in cases where the following day’s observance is a funeral Mass.

### **Cremation permitted, but only for the right reasons**

In 1963, the Vatican issued an instruction that stated that the Church’s tradition prefers burial over cremation, but that cremation is allowed if done properly and for the right reasons. That document has been updated several times, the most recent being in 2016 and called “To Rise With Christ: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation,” issued Oct. 25, 2016.

The Church's view about the repose of a body or cremains in one consecrated place is rooted in the Church's strong belief in the body and soul as a single created entity that is a sacred temple of the Holy Spirit, and used by the Spirit throughout life to carry out many good works.

"By burying the bodies of the faithful, the Church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body and intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity," states the 2016 instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"She (the Church) cannot, therefore, condone attitudes or permit rites that involve erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration, or as the definitive liberation from the 'prison' of the body."

Instead, the Church considers the body so sacred that burial of the dead is considered a "corporal work of mercy."

In fact, the catacombs are filled with tiny graves with the epitaph "adopted daughter of..." or "adopted son of..." inscribed on them. These inscriptions refer to the many babies and young children Christians rescued from the trash over the centuries. Tertullian, a second-century Christian author, wrote that Christians sought out the tiny bodies of newborn babies from the refuse and dung heaps and raised them as their own or tended to them before they died. If they died, they were given a proper burial.

The Church states the dead should be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places that will make it possible for family members and the whole Christian community to pray for and remember them.

Cremation may be chosen because of sanitary, economic or social considerations. It should not be chosen because of a denial of Christian teaching or hatred of the Catholic Church and religion, the 2016 instruction states.

"The Church raises no doctrinal objections to this practice, since cremation of the deceased's body does not affect his or her soul, nor does it prevent God, in His omnipotence, from raising up the deceased body to new life." The document goes on to state, "The Church continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of

the deceased, because this shows greater esteem toward the deceased. Nevertheless, cremation is not prohibited unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.”

### **Spreading of ashes not permitted**

The Church states that cremains must be laid to rest in a sacred place, such as at a cemetery or at consecrated columbaria, which are now found adjoining many Catholic parishes.

“The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect,” which is likely, especially after subsequent generations have passed away.

For these reasons, conservation of ashes in a domestic residence is not permitted, unless granted permission by the Bishop in extraordinary circumstances.

Further, ashes may not be divided among various family members. “In order that every appearance of pantheism (worship of the universe), naturalism, or nihilism (belief that life is meaningless) be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects.”

Finally, it should be pointed out, neither burial of a physical body or of cremains precludes the donation of vital organs to save people’s lives. As long as the sacredness of the body is preserved, organ donation is allowed, even encouraged.