

“On Funerals”

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Once, a college professor inscribed in her will that she did not want a funeral. Rather, she preferred that her students go to the local pub on a Friday night and drink to her. I began to wonder: what they would talk about? Would any of them have known her well enough to actually have a sustained conversation about her? Or would all the students gather at the pub and, grateful to have a free drink, imbibe and converse about other topics? To say that having a drink at the pub is the culmination of a life seems to be strangely lacking.

Funerals have fallen out of fashion, it seems. The trend in choosing a Memorial Service, a “Life Celebration”, etc. rather than a funeral is multifaceted. Just in the past ten years, the cost of funerals and grave plots have increased by about 28%, according to the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). Lack of religious belief adds to this malaise. But this downward trend also betrays the idea that when a loved one’s life is over, there is nothing beyond that. This manifests an astonishing conclusion that life has no meaning or purpose, to say nothing of the immortality of the soul.

Reasserting the importance of funerals is to point towards a transcendent vision of man who possesses an immortal soul given him by his creator. I was pondering this lately as I attended the funeral of someone who had died tragically. The funeral had all the trappings of a full Requiem Mass in Latin, complete with choir and the public recitation of the graveside prayers. The priest’s homily mentioned how the Church is in a unique place to offer hope and comfort for the soul of the dead and those loved ones left behind. Holy Scripture, God’s words to his people, is what uniquely provides this comfort. In a funeral the anguish of our hearts go straight to God’s ears and he answers back in Scripture, a personal answer to our devastation. It is at a moment like this when the soul wants God’s answer, not a human one.

What seems to be misunderstood is that the point of departure for a funeral is Christ, not the deceased. If the launching point of “Life Celebrations” is the one who has passed on, then these “rites” are more akin to structured receptions rather than a liturgy. Consequently, these “Life Celebrations” cannot comfort the family and friends of the deceased in the way that funerals can.

Life Celebrations, et al. appear to provide consolation to families because through personalization, we appear to create meaning, as the NFDA claims. But the fact is that we cannot create meaning in this way. The family of a friend who’s child died young after a horrific and seemingly unjust battle with cancer is not consoled by the fact that little Joanie loved horses. We are consoled because Christ who endured a horrific and unjust death has trod the path before Joanie and affirms her suffering in his own, and has taken her mysteriously into the peace that

only he can give. Meaning has to be discovered through participation of what is greater than ourselves. A service capitalizing on the deceased's preferences communicates no comfort to those who are left without him. The answer to our desire for consolation lies in funerals because the focus is on the transcendent nature of the person grounded in our shared human nature.

The Catechism's words here, are apt, "It is by the Eucharist thus celebrated that the community of the faithful, especially the family of the deceased, learn to live in communion with the one who 'has fallen asleep in the Lord,' by communicating in the Body of Christ of which he is a living member and, then, by praying for him and with him." (CCC 1689)

My conclusion is that funerals are to be preferred to their alternative "liturgies." Likewise, structured receptions, poetry readings, and evenings at the local pub spent reminiscing about the deceased are to be embraced in their rightful place, not as a liturgy but as a remembrance. Funerals are necessary not just because the Church says so, but because funerals bring the faithful together with the unfaithful to pray for the deceased and remember him before God. And that more adequately comforts all of us, no matter our relation to the deceased.

So, to funerals. I'll drink to that.