



Your Mom's Funeral Belongs to Her

GETTY IMAGES

Dear Father Kerper: Recently my sisters and I were discussing funeral plans for our 88-year-old mother who has dementia. My siblings, all raised as Catholics, want a quick cremation without calling hours, Mass or burial. My mother has been a faithful Catholic all her life and frequently said that she wants a traditional Catholic funeral. How can we ever agree?

Many Catholics now share your predicament. At first, these tensions seem primarily to be about finances, efficiency and convenience. However, they often reflect deep differences about the nature of the human person, the sacredness of the body and the possibility of bodily resurrection.

In your case, your siblings, even though Catholics, may have slowly shifted to an understanding of death that lacks some key Christian elements. As a result, perhaps they see no point in bothering with ancient Catholic rituals that express entirely different beliefs.

Your mother's funeral, however, belongs to her; it should reflect her beliefs, not those of her children.

After reaching a reasonable agreement about arrangements, one may hope that the prayerful and well-planned celebration of the complete Order of Christian Funerals will help everyone to reconsider basic Catholic truths about life, death, human dignity and eternity. After all, worship is also "catechetical" in that the words, objects and rituals teach – sometimes powerfully.

Catholic funeral rites challenge two common views prevalent in our society.

First, many people, even Catholics, believe: "When you're dead, you're dead. There's nothing beyond the grave or oven. Why bother?"

Second, many view the body as the disposable container of one's soul or vague "life force." But the human person is a communion – a unity! – of flesh and spirit. Both are profoundly sacred; both have permanence into eternity.

Let's begin with the words of Catholic funeral rites.

From earliest times, the Church has commonly spoken of death as sleep. We see this in St. Paul's writings. For example, in Ephesians he says, "Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will give you light" (Eph 5:14). In the gospel story of the raising of a dead girl, Jesus says to the disbelieving crowd, "Go away, for she is not dead but asleep" (Mt 9:24).

These New Testament texts build on the Hebrew Scriptures, which likewise use "sleep" rather than "death." See, for example, 1 Kgs 2:10: "Then David slept with his ancestors."

This preference for "sleep" over and against "death" makes perfect sense. Think about it: when people sleep soundly they

appear to be dead; but they eventually awake. Sleep, then, is temporary, necessary and restorative. Death likewise has these three qualities.

This substitution of "sleep" for "death" undergirds the practice of "viewing" or "waking" the bodies of deceased people.

Christians, following Jewish customs, felt a strong obligation to "keep vigil" over the bodies of the dead, showing their abiding respect and performing the charitable work of "accompanying" the "sleepers" on their journey from earthly to heavenly life. The "wake" functioned as a transition for both the living and the dead by which both gently adjusted to the new situation of "sleep."

Wakes also allowed the entire community, not just the deceased's family, to pray for the dead and to support the mourners with their personal presence.

Though many people, even Catholics, object to "calling hours" or "wakes" on the grounds that viewing a dead body is somehow indecent or unsettling, the practice actually affirms a core principal of Christian faith: we can gaze upon the face of a "sleeping" loved one and only because we believe that "sleep" culminates in the resurrection. Put another way, we can endure Good Friday only if we expect Easter.

Now let's move from words to three ritual objects.

The Order of Christian Funerals employs three baptismal objects: the large Easter candle, which stands at the head of the deceased; the holy water sprinkled over the human remains; and the white pall – a much-enlarged replica of the baby's white gown – draped over the casket.

For more information on Christian burial rites, contact your parish or see the *Guidelines for Christian Funerals, Cremation and Burial* at catholicnh.org/catholic-cemeteries.

The Diocese of Manchester has 69 Catholic cemeteries. To locate one, please visit catholicnh.org/catholic-cemeteries.

“We celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life, which has now been returned to the author of life.”

Order of Christian Funerals, General Instruction 5.

These three sacred objects, present at the beginning and end of one's earthly existence, manifest and affirm the essential unity – and continuity! – of Christian existence.

Put briefly: the celebration of baptism begins our dying into the Passion of Jesus and the full celebration of the Order of Christian Burial begins our rising with Christ in eternal life.

God has ordered our whole existence – body and spirit – toward life, not death.

Anyone who hears and sees the Order of Christian Funerals properly celebrated will inevitably recognize the profound sacredness of human remains, whether corpses or ashes.

While the Church graciously acknowledges that various circumstances and preferences may preclude the celebration of the complete Order of Christian Burial, the Church strongly encourages full body burial in consecrated ground accompanied by the riches of the Catholic liturgy.

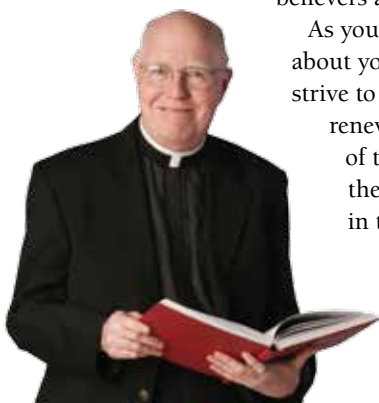
Sad to say, some people have introduced new practices meant to honor the dead. Some of these, however, have inadvertently done the opposite.

On Aug. 15, 2016, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome issued a very rich and beautiful reflection about these new customs.

The congregation identified the following practices as incompatible with the dignity of human remains: permanently keeping ashes in one's own custody; mixing ashes of multiple people together; scattering ashes in open fields, lakes, oceans and rivers; and encasing ashes in pendants, earrings or other forms of jewelry.

While such actions don't jeopardize the salvation of cremated people, they sadly destroy visible and tangible links between the deceased, the community of believers and subsequent generations.

As you work through disagreements about your mother's arrangements, strive to guide your siblings toward a renewed and deeper understanding of the permanent sacredness of the human body, which “sleeps” in the grave. Perhaps a gentle discussion about Catholic burial practices, obviously cherished by your mother, will help them to follow the wisdom of the ages over the cold efficiency of modern times. ■



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

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