



# Why are Catholic funeral rites *different*?

**DEAR FATHER KERPER,** At 75, I find myself at lots of funerals — some Catholic, others not. No two funerals seem alike. I have two questions. First, is a celebration of life the same as a funeral Mass? Second, are eulogies and homilies the same?

Your two questions arise as the Catholic response to death undergoes immense change. Until about 60 years ago, most Catholics followed the same routine: open-casket wake, requiem Mass and full-body burial in a Catholic cemetery.

What used to be common is now less ordinary.

Let's fuse your questions into one big one: What do Catholic funeral rites do that other services cannot do? Answer: Celebrating these rites, especially the eucharistic sacrifice,

actually assists deceased people in their journey toward eternal life.

Our ancient and beautiful rites unite the dead with the crucified and risen Christ, who operates in and through the eucharistic sacrifice as well other liturgical rituals.

This long-standing belief flows from the doctrine of the communion of saints, which affirms

Christ's unbreakable bond with the baptized

faithful, living and dead.

To put it another way, the living truly assist and comfort the dead who move toward the fullness of salvation. This assistance comes in the form of prayer for the dead, almsgiving and good works.

Our belief in the inherent spiritual power of funeral rites, especially the Eucharist, is unique to Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

By contrast, groups that emerged from the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century do not pray for the dead. In their view, prayers for the dead have no real effect. At the moment of death, one is either saved or lost. No third possibility exists.

Classical Protestant liturgical books have funeral rites, but these consist mostly of thanksgiving prayers for the life of the deceased and prayers to console the mourners. They have no prayers focused on the dead.

Indeed, the difference between Catholic and Protestant funeral prayers is remarkably sharp.

## **CELEBRATIONS OF LIFE VS. CATHOLIC RITES**

Is a celebration of life the same as a Catholic funeral? No.

Whereas many celebrations of life have no prayers for the dead and look backward on the finished life of the loved one, Catholic rites direct our gaze forward to resurrection and eternal life. This happens through traditional rituals and prayers used at funerals. These include symbols (holy water, paschal candle, pall and incense), biblical readings, homily, intercessions for the dead, final commendation and committal

prayers at the grave.

In a true sense, the crucified and risen Christ operates through all these sacred things and unites himself with all living who pray for the dead. This becomes clearer when the funeral includes Mass.

There we see the eucharistic Lord in the presence of the mortal remains of loved ones, their family and friends and the priest. This expresses the essential unity of the body of Christ, which includes the living and dead.

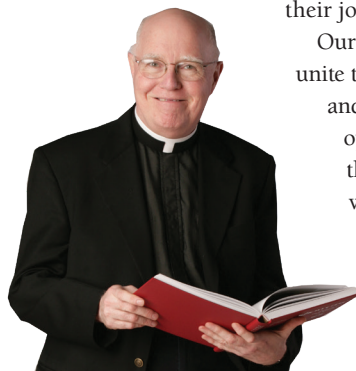
Though these events have existed for years, there's a new twist: many Catholics now replace the Catholic funeral with secular celebrations of life.

Four factors undergird this trend: secularization, shyness about public expressions of faith, religious diversity within families and misleading myths about Catholic funerals.

While celebrations of life may help to heal the trauma of losing loved ones, they avoid common prayer and avoid mentioning God. Yet we must acknowledge God's presence among grieving people who no longer have any church affiliation or belief. Most people do the best they can. Surely, the Lord will not withhold his compassionate love.

## **HOMILY VS. EULOGY**

Just as celebrations of life are not the same as Catholic liturgies, eulogies are not the same as homilies. As such, the *Order of Christian Burial* contains an emphatic prohibition: There is never to be a eulogy. It also defines the general content of funeral homilies.



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First, “The homilist should dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord.” Second, he must show how “the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased.”

What, then, is the “sound” of a good homily? On Jan. 5, Pope Francis provided preachers with a perfect specimen — a funeral homily shaped entirely by Church directives. It was brief, scriptural, theologically sound and discretely personal. Rather than reading a data-filled obituary, Pope Francis showed how Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s entire life imitated Christ’s suffering and faithfulness toward his sheep. Only at the end did Pope Francis utter the name “Benedict.” Some criticized Pope Francis for his brevity. But anyone with ears to hear or eyes to read would have known exactly what Pope Francis meant.

Let’s look at the usual setting of the funeral homily: the sacrifice of the Mass within a church. Here religious reverence clashes with informality. Whereas the homily consists of God-talk, even prayer, the eulogy draws on storytelling, childhood memories and so forth. Today, eulogists, even devout people, rarely speak of God.

Eulogies, by their very nature, do not fit well into Catholic funerals. Yet the Church recognizes that some people have emotional and spiritual needs to speak about their loved ones. The *Order of Christian Funerals* grants this concession: “A member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation.” But notice that these words of remembrance happen outside the Mass itself. There are other alternatives as well. For example, eulogies can be given after the burial, before Mass begins, or during or after a celebration of life.

As you continue to attend different types of funerals, I hope you will notice the beauty and richness of Catholic rituals, music, prayers and customs. If you find them consoling and grace-filled, please share your experiences with others who have settled for much less than what the Church offers. ■

## HISTORICAL NOTE

Up until the mid-1960s, Catholic funerals rarely had eulogies. This began to change with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Bishop Philip Hannan, the auxiliary bishop of Washington, delivered a eulogy at the president’s funeral Mass at St. Matthew Cathedral in Washington.

Actually, Bishop Hannan’s “eulogy” had all the elements of a homily, but everyone still called it a eulogy. At the time, the word “homily” was just coming into use.

The real eulogy, by the way, was delivered by Chief Justice Earl Warren on Nov. 24, 1963, the day before the Mass.

As millions saw a Catholic bishop giving a “eulogy” during the president’s funeral Mass, they too gradually demanded eulogies for their funerals.

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