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The *Order of Christian Funerals* envisions a community of faith accompanying those who grieve.

# Called to Console: Bereavement Ministry in the Parish

Robert Valle

The story of the raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel account offers a glimpse into the dynamics experienced during the death of a loved one with its numbing presence of grief, the comforting accompaniment of consolation, and hope in the resurrection. Martha and Mary, friends of Jesus, do not share their grief in isolation; the people of the village surround them in comfort. The Lord himself grieves and weeps at his friend's tomb before he calls Lazarus back to life. We—as followers of Christ baptized into his life and mission—are shown by the Master who travelled to be present to those he loved, to be with those who mourn the death of a loved one.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) envisions a community of faith accompanying with a compassionate presence those who grieve: “the faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love” (8). Parishes reflect the community that surrounded Martha and Mary when its members comfort the grieving with

loving words and actions—a living, tangible presence that incarnates the compassion of Christ.

The formation of a bereavement ministry begins to take root when the parish is first formed in the meaning of Christian death and in the ministry of consolation. This grounding can then be nurtured to develop a bereavement ministry in which parishioners accompany the grieving families through the initial days of mourning by helping them prepare the funeral liturgies; by their presence at the rites, engaging in the liturgical and music ministries; by caring for the liturgical elements and the details of the rites, seeing the funeral itself as a time of formation and evangelization; and by remembering and comforting the family beyond the days of the funeral rites. These pastoral works comprise a parish bereavement ministry that acknowledges pain and separation, bringing dignity and honor at the time of deep mourning and profound loss. A bereavement ministry may also evolve to recognize and acknowledge that families may still experience grief in the months following the death, and to offer additional support, long after others have moved on with their lives.

## FORMING THE PARISH COMMUNITY INTO A CONSOLING COMMUNITY

The pastor of the church forms the community to a “deeper appreciation of its role in the ministry of consolation and to a fuller understanding of the significance of the death of a fellow Christian” (OCF, 9). Since the death of a brother or sister in Christ is significant, the community should never allow the family to endure this time alone. The community answers the call and begins to accompany the mourning household.

The formation of a parish community in any aspect of mission takes time, perhaps even several years. However, this should not deter pastoral leaders from a graced challenge. Parishes have evolved to become sacred places of authentic worship, sincere hospitality, humble service, and social justice. Communities of faith should also discern how they might embrace a ministry of consolation. Formation in and study of the principles of the *Order of Christian Funerals* over the course of several seasons will help the local church continue to broaden and deepen its ministerial role as consoler to those who are mourning.

As the community begins to recognize that death is part of the Christian reality, the rites the Church celebrates take on a greater significance as part of the parish’s mission. Then the community can be instructed and formed in the rites that the Church prays at the time of death. After learning how the community accompanies families at the time of death of a loved one, members of the community can be called forth to discern and to offer their presence and time in the various roles of a bereavement ministry.

## THE FORMATION AND WORK OF A BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY

“The community’s principal involvement in the ministry of consolation is expressed in its active participation in the celebration of the funeral rites” (OCF, 11). Publication of a parishioner’s death and funeral arrangements makes it possible for members of the parish to take part in the various rites. If possible, announce death notices and funeral times at Sunday Mass with the other announcements. Post signs on bulletin boards. Some communities even utilize email notifications for parishioners who wish to know about deaths in the parish.

Much of the consoling work of a bereavement ministry can be grounded and tended by those already serving the parish in various liturgical and other service ministries. Many involved in bereavement ministry consider this service a natural extension of the service they already offer to the parish community. In addition to this core group of parishioners, look to others to become a part of this presence at the funeral rites. Often, retired members of the community are especially able to dedicate time for this ministry. However, there is no reason to limit participation solely to retirees. Develop a thriving bereavement ministry by extending an invitation that encourages all members of the community whose work and life schedules allow them to be available during the time of funerals. Parishioners should be encouraged to generously give this stewardship gift of time supporting the bereaved on behalf of the community. This might include parents who work from home and those who work shifts



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In coordinating a bereavement ministry, reach out to people whose work allows them to be available during the day.

other than daytime. With some keen observance and creativity, a coordinator for bereavement ministry may discover that many parishioners have life schedules with free time during the usual hours scheduled for funerals. Whether young or old, all can become a part of an accompanying, compassionate ministry to grieving families.

## Music Ministry at Funeral Rites

Music ministry plays an integral role in supporting the gathered mourners during the funeral Mass (and potentially the additional rites) just as it supports the assembly’s song at other parish liturgies. A competent organist, pianist, or other instrumentalist with a cantor and a faithful group of parishioners serving as a choir supports this mourning assembly’s song and its participation in all the responses and acclamations of the funeral liturgy (33). Members of a bereavement music ministry also guide the assembly in the proper postures and gestures during the Mass without the necessity of the presider giving vocal instructions or cues. Though an occasional invitation from the presiding minister is certainly helpful and aids those unaccustomed to Catholic liturgy to feel more at ease during worship, the presence of a number of parishioners modeling posture and gesture and animating vocal participation allows the mourners to enter more fully into the rites without constant directions interrupting the prayers, songs, and silence.

## Preparing the Rites with the Family

The family of the deceased should always be involved in the planning of the rites, especially in the selection of texts, rites, music, and in choosing potential liturgical ministers (17). A phone call may be the best way for the minister or a member of the bereavement ministry to make an initial contact with the family. This does not take the place of a face-to-face meeting to prepare the various rites, but is rather a means to introduce oneself to the family members, to discuss how they will be accompanied during the days of the rites, and perhaps to hear about the deceased’s life and the circumstances of the death. Members of the community who are new to bereavement ministry and



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perhaps unaccustomed to speaking with people in difficult circumstances will find that simple questions and prompts help family members to open up and be at ease, and to begin telling the story of their loved one's life, articulating those aspects that will be helpful while preparing the funeral: Tell me about your loved one's life. What are the significant memories you hold dear? Was the death sudden? Who are the other family members? Do you have a support system in place?

In addition to this initial contact, and prior to meeting with a minister, prepare a simple packet of materials that includes a planning sheet for the liturgy, a list of appropriate music that is part of the parish's repertoire, the texts of Scripture and prayers from the rites, and a simple cover letter answering some of the most frequently asked questions. The materials do not take the place of a one-on-one gathering with the family but provide tangible aids to prepare these sacred rites. Encourage the family to read the selections of appropriate readings and to choose those passages that resonate with their hope in the resurrection and evoke the memory and life of their loved one. While a minister or parishioner can help shape the family's needs and choices and integrate them into the liturgies, the family needs to spend time encountering the various Scripture, prayer, and song texts before meeting with the bereavement ministry.

Begin with prayer for the deceased when meeting with the family. This prayer may simply offer sincere words asking for God's presence for consolation for the family, and for professing hope in the resurrection. Many of the prayers within the *Order of Christian Funerals*—perhaps one of the Collects—are appropriate and can serve as a stream of continuity from the time of preparation to the rites themselves. Continue by asking once again about the deceased, and if appropriate, the circumstances of the death. This will assist the presider and other ministers to garner much more than information. These conversations regarding death help families open their hearts and reveal the importance of the deceased in their life, and how they gathered,

if it was possible, at the time of the death. So many benefits and graces can be received with these initial conversations: families are comforted because a member of the community is listening to them, and the presider and bereavement ministry are able to take those words to shape rites that become authentic expressions of a Christian life and its passage through death.

Throughout the preparations, take time to form the family in the ritual actions, symbols, and texts of the various rites. If necessary, describe the movements from funeral home (or another place of keeping vigil) to the church and to the place of committal. Engage the family by naming the symbols they will encounter, particularly at the funeral liturgy, and breaking open for them the meaning of each symbol within the rites. One will notice immediate recognition or recall when identifying for the family the symbols of the funeral liturgy that directly relate to the Rite of Baptism: the Sprinkling with Holy Water with the waters of Baptism; the Placing of the Pall with the clothing

with a white garment; and the presence of the Paschal candle at both liturgies. Their loved one's faith journey on earth ends as it began. A minister or member of the bereavement team can also help the family members notice the connections between the texts of chosen Scripture passages and the prayers of the funeral rites, then guide them to select hymns and songs that move beyond standard selections to truly reflect the faith life of the deceased.

Members of the family should be encouraged to take an active part in some of the liturgical ministries (15). The Placing of the Pall, the Placing of Christian Symbols, and the Preparation of the Gifts are all elements of the liturgy that family members can easily become a part of within the funeral. Those who are actively involved in parish life and would be at ease during the rites could serve as readers. However, if grief is deep and participation in a liturgical ministry would be burdensome, prepared and trained members of the bereavement team and other parishioners can take the roles of reader, pall bearers, gift bearers, and when allowed, serve as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. This is a comfort to families knowing that the community supports them within the rites.

## A TIME OF EVANGELIZATION

The funeral liturgy is an opportunity to form the assembly in a deeper understanding of the life of their loved one as a Christian—as a member of the Body of Christ and of the local community. Greet the family at the doors of the church (184). This threshold to the building is also the threshold into the life of the Church. The presence of the ministers and parishioners at the doors, waiting for the family to arrive, represents the attentive care of the entire community during this time of grief. Processions between the place of vigil and the church, and from the church to the place of committal—though often omitted—take on heightened meaning during the funeral liturgy. Measured, reverent, and dignified, the family, ministers, and community accompany the deceased on the final journey on earth from the doors of the

church to the altar of God at the beginning of the liturgy, and from the altar to the doors of the church at the end of the liturgy. This reflects the “journey of human life, the Christian pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem” (42).

Attentiveness and care to the liturgical elements and symbols should reflect the simple beauty and dignity with which the Church celebrates all liturgies. Worship engages all the senses. We see the light and fire of the Paschal candle; we smell the burning incense and watch the smoke rise; we taste the bread and wine; we hear the Word proclaimed; we sing the music of grief at death and victory of life; we gently touch one another at the Sign of Peace. Each of these sacramentals and ritual actions is approached with reverence appropriate to this time of mourning at the death of a loved one and of confidence in the resurrection.

A worship aid including the order of the liturgy, directions for postures, the people’s responses, and hymns and songs assists with the full participation of those gathered who are unfamiliar with the liturgy. For parishes unable to provide a worship aid, the presider can and should give simple directions throughout the liturgy (40). However, an even more discreet manner to aid the assembly in its role is with the presence of members of the parish community, choir, and other ministers, who mirror for the assembly the proper postures and gestures at the appropriate time and encourage their participation in the responses, acclamations, and songs.

## REMEMBERING BEYOND THE FUNERAL

The days and months that follow a funeral can be filled with emptiness. A member of the bereavement ministry especially attuned and compassionate to the needs of those who grieve may be able to contact the family members to simply acknowledge that they are remembered and, if needed, to call their attention to local groups that support and journey with people experiencing the death of a loved one.

The parish may also celebrate Mass for the month anniversary and perhaps on the year anniversary. Some communities send cards marking the year anniversary, promising that the deceased will be remembered in prayer. Many parishes follow and honor the rhythms of the liturgical year by recognizing November as the Month of All Souls and erecting altars of remembrance where people place photos of their loved ones and by celebrating a Mass for the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls). Keep records of the addresses for the next of kin after the funeral rites with the intent of sending invitations for this Mass. After the Mass, a simple reception allows community members to again be present to the grieving.

Parishes answer the call to be the consolation of Christ for others when they bless those who mourn with comfort. Developing a bereavement ministry begins with the formation of the entire community in the meaning of Christian death. As a parish grows in the understanding that death is not only a family experience, but is also significant for the faith community, it will embrace the understanding that families should never endure the grieving process alone. Ministers and parishioners who study and reflect on the *Order of Christian Funerals* will



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Providing a place of remembrance during the Month of All Souls honors those who have died and offers consolation to the grieving.

encounter a vision of pastoral care that includes a parish’s commitment to accompany the grieving with a consoling presence.

A ministry to the bereaved begins with the presence of ministers and parishioners attentive to the families in the days surrounding the death of their loved one. By first listening to the experiences and stories that were integral to the deceased’s life, ministers and members of a bereavement ministry assist the grieving to face death with a deep Christian hope. The guidance offered in the preparation of the rites, the presence of the community at the rites, the care and reverence within the liturgies, and the pastoral care shown in the weeks and months after the funeral, serve to bless families and households who mourn with the grace of comfort and consolation. Grieving families do not hold their grief in private, but are embraced by the community so that, together as members of Christ’s body, the entire Church proclaims and celebrates hope in the resurrection. ♦

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ROBERT VALLE is the director of music and liturgy for Saint Joseph Church in Downers Grove, Illinois, where he conducts a music ministry of several choirs, cantors, and instrumentalists; guides the liturgical life and ministries of the parish; and develops initiatives in the area of adult faith formation.

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