

Introduction

The death of a loved one can cause us great sorrow and pain. We often feel anguish at the physical absence of someone whose presence brought joy to our life. When the circumstances surrounding death are unexpected or tragic our grief may also be tinged with anger and bemusement. The inevitable question as to why the person has been called from this life at this particular moment arises. Mourning is a perfectly natural reaction to the passing of a loved one. Scripture reminds us that Jesus himself wept at the death of his friend Lazarus.

Yet Christ made clear on that occasion that he is the Resurrection and the Life. He bore testimony to this through his death and resurrection whereby Jesus conquered sin and death forever. This is the cornerstone of our faith as Christians. Indeed, Christ is the source of our hope. Therefore, after the initial sadness associated with the loss of a friend, we are consoled by the expectation that those who have passed from this life in faith may enter into eternal life with God. Death does not mark the end but rather it inaugurates the fulfilment of new birth which was begun for us at Baptism, strengthened at Confirmation and nourished in the Eucharist.

The Christian funeral is not a sacrament but it is a liturgical celebration. It expresses the Paschal character of Christian death in the hope of the resurrection. It also provides for a sense of communion with the deceased, above all through prayer for the purification of the soul.

The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey's end, in order to surrender him "into the Father's hands." She offers to the Father, in Christ, the child of his grace, and she commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory. This offering is fully celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice; the blessings before and after Mass are sacramentals. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1683]

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There are four principal elements to the funeral liturgy:

1) The greeting of the community

Relatives and friends of the deceased are welcomed with words of "consolation". This is designed to offer hope and instil in those assembled a perspective beyond "this world" and one focused on faith in the risen Christ.

2) Liturgy of the Word

Relatives will often be involved in the selection of appropriate readings from Scripture. Together with the homily they are designed to illuminate the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ.

3) The Eucharistic Sacrifice

Here the Church offers her communion with the departed. She offers to the Father in the Holy Spirit the sacrifice of the death and resurrection of Christ. God is asked to purify his child of his sins and their consequences and to admit him to his Kingdom. Through the Eucharist the gathered faithful learn to live with the one who "has fallen asleep in the Lord". The deceased is a living member of the Body of Christ and the faithful join in praying for him and with him.

4) Farewell

This is the final "commendation to God" by the Church. It is the last greeting by the community of one of its members before his body is brought to the tomb.