

Dear Friends,

At a recent gathering with priests we had a rather heated discussion about a sad trend in funerals. We are seeing a lot more Catholic people who have been very active in the Church being honored in ceremonies outside of Mass at funeral homes. One priest said in an angry voice, "The family didn't even call me!" He read about his parishioner's death in the obituary - on the morning of her funeral.

Here is what is happening. An elderly, life-long Catholic person who has been an active member of a parish dies. Her children, who have long since stopped worshipping do not wish to celebrate the funeral liturgy in the Church. Therefore, they contact the funeral home and inform those assisting with the final plans that all the family wants is a simple ceremony in the funeral home with burial or cremation to follow.

What's the problem with this? There are two answers to this question. First of all, for the deceased person who has been devout in worship with the faith community, it is quite possible that he or she may wish that a beautiful Catholic Mass, which is truly deserved, be celebrated. Anyone who is baptized into this faith has the right to Christian burial. However, we are seeing more and more children of the deceased indicating that they want nothing to do with the Church's celebration of the Mass. Often they will contact a minister from another denomination who will come in and say a few prayers and then proceed with whatever will happen after that.

The second problem is that the Church community is deprived of the celebration of the Mass in honor of the one who has died. For those of us who care deeply about our faith, the funeral liturgy is a moment for us to say goodbye, to share our grief and sorrow and to receive the Eucharist in communion with the One who suffered, died and rose to eternal life and the One who has called the faithful departed to be with him in eternity.

The problem is that the wishes of the deceased do not matter. The problem is also that what the Church offers and provides those who grieve does not matter. The death of a loved one is simply becoming an inconvenience that needs to be resolved as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Would we want our children to handle our death in this way?

I don't know what the answer to this problem is. We need to find one though. Perhaps what is needed is a little education. Our Church teaches us that:

*“The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God’s mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.”<sup>1</sup>*

Hope cannot always be found in resolving a crisis as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Hope comes to us when we seek God’s comfort and grace in the context of the worshipping community who gathers in love to offer support for a family that grieves the death of a loved one.

Preparation is also important. About ten years ago, I wrote up my post-mortem instructions. I have the entire liturgy all planned out. One thing people might want to do is to write out their wishes for their funeral liturgy. I would be very happy to help in this regard. A document that expresses funeral wishes is not legally binding like a will, or power of attorney, but it could help children, who are given the responsibility of taking care of a tremendous amount of details, a good sense of direction.

In joyful hope,  
Fr. Tim Seigel

---

<sup>1</sup> Rite of Christian Funerals, General Introduction, page 3.