



TIME TO REFLECT



NOVEMBER 2021

The subject of death unsettles us.

Whether it concerns the sadness of the loss of loved ones or the fear of death itself, we are taken beyond our comfort zone and, as Christians, we are invited to make good use of this month of Remembrance.

It is good for us to acknowledge the many different ways in which death is marked in cultures around the world and through different ages which include:

Designated periods of mourning;

Vigils of Prayer for the deceased;

Different colours of mourning for communities: black / white etc;

A meal at the graveside and saving a portion for the deceased;

A wake where people freely come and go and talk and remember, in the presence of the body.

Increasingly in our culture, Funeral Rites place an emphasis on the person's life that has passed. It is natural to wish to remember and make present something of their life.

But there is always the danger that we can try to encapsulate in the space of an hour (the funeral itself) the entire story of a person's life. It cannot be done.

As Christians, who were baptised into the death of Christ so that at our death we may rise with him to the glory of heaven, the past life of a person is still important, but the hope of heaven is – we believe – something much greater than anything that this life can offer.

Death is real, it is raw, it is a detachment from all that we have known and bereavement can change us profoundly.

Closure is so important. That is why we should hold before God all those who have been denied the opportunity to bury the dead and to mark the moments around death and the days that follow in the way they would choose, as a result of the pandemic.

As Catholics, we refer to stages of the Funeral Rites.

While the Anointing of the Sick and Holy Communion can be given as health for the living or preparation for a good death, there is no Sacrament attached to death itself. The Sacraments are for the living.

When a person of faith dies, it is appropriate to ask for a priest or deacon to pray with the family at the time of death or in the days that follow.

Then there are times of prayer that we understand as further stages: the Reception of the Body into Church on the evening before the Funeral Mass or Service; then the Mass or Service itself. Again,

recognising different cultures: in the Archdiocese of Liverpool for many years now there have been Funeral Services led by lay people. Where there is a Mass, it must be a priest. But for a Reception of a body into Church or a Burial or Cremation, the prayers can be led by a lay person in the name of the community of faith.

And where burial and cremation are concerned, we use the term: committal. But the focus on burial remains. Where a body is cremated (which is very common now and only opposed if it is chosen for anti-Christian motives, which is not usually the case), then the Church recommends that the ashes are buried and given the same dignity of the burial of a body.

It is also good to be clear that where Catholic burial has been an area of difficulty where somebody has died by suicide, it is not the case that somebody who dies in such sad circumstances would not be allowed a Church Funeral or burial in consecrated ground.

We believe in the compassion of God especially in the saddest of circumstances.

While we affirm that human life is only God's to give and to take away, the Church understands that for somebody to reach the stage in their life where they see no alternative but to take their own life, the Church looks with the same level of compassion.

Another reality that is perhaps not so well understood is that the Funeral Rites celebrated by the Catholic Church are part of what is known as the Order of Christian Funerals. Where a family member of a Catholic who is a member of another Christian tradition dies, it is quite common for the Funeral Rites to be celebrated in the Catholic Church if that is requested.

As we contemplate the mysteries of life and death, and as important as it is to reflect on the life of the person we have known, our greatest comfort at the time of death is the Word of God proclaimed in the Church's Funeral Rites and in times of quiet prayer.

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord.

This explains why Christ both died and came to life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. We shall all have to stand before the judgement seat of God; as Scripture says: By my life – it is the Lord who speaks – every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall praise God. It is to God, therefore, that each of us must give account of oneself.

St Paul to the Romans 14:7-12

Eternal Rest give unto them O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon them.
May they rest in peace. Amen.

