

A Personal Reflection on the Funeral Liturgy – and on the Church

I grew up in a single-parent household as my father passed away when I was only 3 months old. Mom raised me steadfastly and, although not without problems, I had a wonderful childhood and remained very close with her. I went away to college in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2000; it was my first extended time away from my home in Illinois. Mom and I talked every week. After I graduated from college, I moved back home for 7 months while I secured employment. Those were a wonderful 7 months while I renewed my relationship with her; it took on a new dimension as I was becoming a young adult and preparing to go out on my own. I consider those 7 months a gift from God.

I eventually moved back to Minnesota, having taken a job as a Coordinator of Liturgy at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis. Those first few weeks there were a trial by fire as I was learning the ropes of my work. I'd call her every few days almost in tears asking what I've gotten myself into...that I wasn't cut out for the job...what was I thinking! She always encouraged me to hang in there, telling me that there was surely a learning curve and that I would get the hang of things. After about a month, I started to feel more comfortable in my work. I called mom and told her I think everything was going to be okay. That was to be my last phone conversation with her. She died suddenly and unexpectedly that week. I'm convinced that her role on earth was complete – her youngest son was now on his own and was okay.

I have an older brother and sister, both with their own families, and we gathered to plan the funeral services. There was a lot involved in those days leading up to the funeral; to this day, it was a whirlwind of activity that I don't quite remember clearly. Working for the church, I became responsible for planning the funeral liturgy. Working in the area of liturgy, I wanted to make sure to plan all the various parts of the funeral rite – from the prayer services with just my family before we began the wake and before we moved from the funeral home to the Church for the Mass, to the Vigil service that took place during the wake the evening before, to the Mass itself, and to the Rite of Committal at the graveside. I even presided and led the prayers with my family and the Vigil Service. I still have copies of all the files I used to plan the liturgy – and I review them each year around the anniversary of her death.

The funeral rituals and the entire planning process were blessings. They provided me words and gestures when I had none. The prayers of the liturgy allowed our family to voice its grief, but also the hope of heaven. Most importantly, the funeral planning process gave me something to do immediately after her death. I was not left with my raw feelings of grief to deal with on my own. Rather, the funeral process helped me situate my grief in the worship of the Church. In other words, the funeral planning process gave me something to do with my grief.

I ministered as an altar server during the Funeral Mass. The pastor asked me if I thought I would be able to get through the Mass. I thought I would be able to. Still, he scheduled additional altar servers and said that if I became too overwhelmed, that I could go sit with my family. I was able to serve at the Mass. Honestly, I can't tell you much about the liturgy or the homily. I do remember that at the end of Mass, after the priest incensed my mother's casket, he handed the smoking thurible to me and asked me to incense the casket. As an altar server, I loved being the incense person – the thurifer – at Mass. I learned how to carry the thurible, and how to incense the priest and the people at Mass. That was my favorite part of being an altar server, and mom knew that (because I always loved talking about it). So here – in my final farewell – I was able to partake in a ritual gesture that was so important to me.

I made it through the Mass without being too emotional. The liturgy was giving me things to do. But then we came to the end: "In peace, let us take our sister to her place of rest." I remember passing the first pew with my family as I was walking in the closing procession, and I broke down. The grief came out abruptly and fully. My aunt came out of the pew to help me continue the procession. As I was walking down the aisle, through teary eyes, I looked out at the assembly. They were all singing the closing song: Amazing Grace. "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun." The choir and those gathered sounded beautiful. I tried to sing with them but could not.

On reflecting on that experience, I came to profound realization about the Church and its liturgy. This realization was more profound than any homily I've heard or any lesson on liturgy in graduate school. It's this: when you can't sing; the Church sings for you. When you can't pray, the Church prays for you.

So when you can't bring yourself to sing – or to pray – at Mass because you are dealing with grief, or anger, or frustration, or (add your own obstacle), come to Mass. Bring that obstacle to Mass with you. Let the Church sing and pray for you. When coming to Mass feels like empty ritual, when you come not as a response to an invitation but only to fulfill an obligation, come anyway, and let the Church carry you in prayer and song. When you can't sing, the Church sings for you. That is the Church's gift to us. But also remember that, when you come to liturgy and are able to enter into the song and prayer of the liturgy, you sing and pray for others who cannot themselves sing or pray. That is our responsibility – our little gift – we can offer to the Church.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found –
was blind but now, I see.*