

PAIX LITURGIQUE

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The Weakened Preaching of the Four Last Things in the New Rite of Funerals.

**Fourth instalment
of our comparative study of practices old and new.**

It is striking how noticeably the new rite of funerals, which was ready by 1965 and published in 1969,¹ weakens the preaching of the *lex orandi* regarding particular judgment, purgatory, and the risk of damnation. This is even more the case in the way this new rite is commonly put into practice, which seems to reckon that the Gospel message as transmitted in the Church's traditional prayer has become unacceptable to modern man on account of its hard sayings.² In this pastoral care of the deceased everything happens as though one were afraid to proclaim the unsettling truths of salvation clearly: particular judgment; purgatory; the risk of damnation. In fact everything happens as if, in the words of Guillaume Cuchet (*How Our World Ceased Being Christian*, quoted below), the clergy itself no longer believed in them.

*Much discretion
regarding particular judgment, general judgment, hell, and purgatory*

“The rite for the burial of the dead should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This holds good also for the liturgical

color to be used” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*

81). In fact, funerals are situated at the first moment of the “paschal mystery,” namely death. Today, however, the preference goes for emphasizing its term, the resurrection, to the point of evacuating righteous fear of particular and general judgment. Traditionally the Church was wary of canonizing without inquiry all those whose remains she buried.³ The liturgy of burial in the extraordinary form was a good expression of this wariness—though with one exception in the case of baptized small children, for whom the funeral Mass is replaced with a festive Mass, for instance the Mass of Angels.⁴

There was a time when the bodies of these baptized children who had died before the age of reason were placed in a special section of the cemetery, where one could invoke them as so many little angels rather than pray for them.

The desire to give a more festive character to the celebration of funerals led to the suppression of texts “that smacked of a negative spirituality inherited from the Middle Ages,” as

Bugnini expressed it.⁵ This is how the admirable *Dies Irae* sequence came to be suppressed; in the traditional Mass it is set after the Gradual and Tract, before the Gospel, and is a powerful poem on the Last Judgment: “Day of wrath and doom impending/David’s word with Sibyl’s blending/Heaven and earth in ashes ending./O what fear man’s bosom rendeth,/When from heaven the Judge descendeth,/ On Whose sentence all dependeth!” So also the *libera me* response was set aside; it had been sung during the absolution before the remains at the end of the funeral Mass: “Deliver me, O Lord, from death eternal in that awful day. When the heavens and the earth shall be moved. When Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire. Dread and trembling have laid hold on me, and I fear exceedingly because of the judgment and of the wrath to come. O that day, that day of wrath, of sore distress and of all wretchedness, that great day and exceeding bitter. Eternal rest grant unto him (her *or* them), O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him (her *or* them).”

The *Libera me* was preceded by an admonition. It too has vanished: “Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord; for, save Thou grant him forgiveness of all his sins, no man shall be justified in Thy sight. Wherefore suffer not, we beseech Thee, the sentence Thou pronouncest in judgment upon one whom the faithful prayer of Christian people commends to Thee, to be a doom which shall crush him utterly. Rather succor him by Thy gracious favor, that he may escape Thine avenging justice who, in his lifetime, was signed with the seal of the Holy Trinity.” Asking for the salvation of the departed is not absent from the new prayers, particularly in those intended for non-practicing Catholics; the French ritual has: “Grant to our friend the happiness you keep for your faithful ones” (“Accorde à notre ami le bonheur que tu réserves à tes fidèles”). Yet there does seem to be a sort of human respect, a reluctance to mention indulgence (viz., pardon), rest, and the “dew” or “refreshment” for which the souls in Purgatory pine amid their sufferings. In the new texts there is mention only of the distance between these souls and God: in other words, only the pain of loss is mentioned while the pain of the

senses is left unmentioned, be it only spiritual as far as concerns purgatory.

It is also worth noting that, except on the rarest of occasions (e.g. one of the Collects for a deceased pope), the very notion of soul has been set aside, being perhaps deemed too difficult for our contemporaries.

Among the many prayers one can choose from, the old collects that remain have been transformed:

□ The

Postcommunion of the traditional Mass on the day of the funeral says: “Grant, we beseech Thee, almighty God, that the soul of Thy servant (*or* handmaid) N., who this day has departed out of this world, being purified by this sacrifice, and delivered from his (*or* her) sins, may receive both indulgence and everlasting rest.” In the new liturgy it becomes: “Grant, we pray, almighty God, that your servant N., who (today) has journeyed from this world, may by this sacrifice be cleansed and freed from sin and so receive the everlasting joys of the resurrection.” Why has the notion of indulgence been expurgated?

□ Among

the Collects one can choose from, the traditional Collect kept in new liturgy says: “O God, Whose property is ever to have mercy and so spare, we humbly entreat Thee on behalf of the soul of Thy servant (*or* handmaid) N., whom Thou hast bidden this day to pass out of this world: that Thou wouldst not deliver him (*or* her) into the hands of the enemy nor forget him (*or* her) for ever, but command him (*or* her) to be taken up by the holy Angels, and to be borne to out home in paradise, that as he (*or* she) had put his (*or* her) faith and hope in Thee he (*or* she) may not undergo the pains of hell but may possess everlasting joys.” This prayer has become: “O God, whose nature is always to forgive and to show mercy, we humbly implore you for your servant N., whom you have called (this day) to journey to you, and, since he (she) hoped and believed in you, grant that he (she) may be led to our true homeland to delight in its everlasting joys.” The doubtless incomprehensible notion of soul has been evacuated, and the retroactive request—since all times are present to God—that grace not have abandoned the person for whom the prayer is made as he was leaving this world has not been kept, again doubtless because it was too complex theologically.

Certain innovations are cause for concern:

□ It seemed good to tolerate—while discouraging—incineration if it is not requested for ideological reasons.⁶ Was it necessary to state explicitly that “The rites ordinarily performed at the cemetery chapel or at the grave or tomb may be used in the crematory building. If there is no other suitable place for the rites, they may be celebrated in the crematory hall itself . . .”?

□ Was it fitting to introduce a Mass for “funerals of children who die before baptism”? Although the Church does not specify the “state” or “place” of children who die without baptism, she does clearly teach the need for sacramental baptism or for the baptism of desire to arrive at the beatific vision: “In the present economy there is no other way [beside baptism] to communicate that life to the child who has not attained the use of reason. Above all, the state of grace is absolutely necessary at the moment of death; without it salvation and supernatural happiness—the beatific vision of God—are impossible” (Pius XII, *Allocution to Midwives*, 29 October 1951). The highly debatable contemporary document that claims otherwise is only a study, an opinion, proposed by the International Theological Commission (“The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptized,” 19 April 2007). Whatever the case may be, the Mass presented in the new Missal, though manifestly intended to console the parents, does take a step in that direction: “May they [the parents] find comfort in knowing that you have taken him (her) into your loving care.” Likewise in the introduction to the final commendation and farewell: “Let us commend this child to the Lord.” The rubric in the *Rite of funerals* (n. 237) even says: “The other texts may be chosen from those in the rite for baptized children.”

□ The traditional liturgy bans the *Alleluia*, since, as full of hope as the *Requiem* Mass is, it is essentially a petition to free a soul from the pains of purgatory. The new liturgy introduces it in Masses for the dead that are celebrated in paschaltide, and even at other times, for instance (*Rite of Funerals* n. 114) “Psalm 115:9: ‘I will walk in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living.’ Or: ‘Alleluia’.” All in all the sung *Alleluia* would be less ill-adapted on Good Friday!

The overall effect of this decreased mention of the four last things has been even more disastrous for the faith of Catholics because it went along with a general movement of demythologizing the former catechism, “whose judgment, hell, mortal sin, and Satan have more or less borne the brunt” of the reform, as the clergy “rather abruptly stopped speaking of all these sensitive topics, as though it had stopped believing in them, just as in their discourse a new vision of God, along more or less Rousseauian lines, triumphed: the ‘God Who is Love’ (no longer merely the ‘God of love’) of the sixties and seventies.”⁷

Actual practice makes things even worse.

Here we shall take a look at a few of the more telling things “seen and heard” at funerals in our parishes. This will bring home the number of wasted opportunities for evangelization at modern funerals—when they are even celebrated, that is.

When the sacred makes way for the secular

How often does one hear that a funeral Mass, rather than being said to pray for the repose of the soul of the deceased and to shorten his suffering in purgatory, is celebrated “to honor the deceased” or at best “in memory of the deceased”? Take for example the Burial Mass of General Jaruzelski, the last Communist leader of Poland, in Warsaw cathedral on 30 May 2014; both expressions were used: Mass in his honor and Mass in his memory! See also the following examples from French parishes; the list is not an exhaustive one:

a) *Santo subito*: our hero the deceased

This is the most banal reflection on the loss of meaning in Christian funerals: the interment that becomes an “in-heaven-ment,” as we noted in our *Letter* 49. The supernatural vision of death as the soul of the deceased returning to the Divine Judge has disappeared in favor of the celebration of the deceased’s earthly life. Granted, it is often the family that is responsible for this eulogy of the deceased.⁸ But few are the priests to restrain its wrong-headed approach to funerals; some even encourage it. As a result, not only are no prayers said for the repose of the soul of the departed, but it has come to the point that sometimes the deceased—who in some cases never darkened the door of a church and lived as an utter pagan—is put forward as a model of “friendship,” “humanity,” “devotion,” “zest for life,” tolerance,” etc., and one is encouraged to pray to him for the earthly needs of the living

b) To the strains
of “Highway to Hell”

In 2008 and 2009, surveys of British and Australian funeral homes revealed that most of the songs requested for funerals were secular. In both countries the song “Highway to Hell” by AC/DC was in the top ten. To be sure, this study did not exclusively target Catholic funerals, but whether through contagion or ignorance such songs have in fact contaminated Catholic funerals. Many bishops, however, are aware of the problem and have published decrees restating liturgical norms and expressly forbidding secular songs in liturgical celebrations. Still, mending bad habits is hard, especially when the very meaning of Christian burial is not made explicit to the family and when certain laypeople in charge of funeral preparation believe that it is “normal to play secular songs or music in church, as this shows compassion for the family and friends of the deceased.”⁹

c) They bury Freemasons,
don’t they?

What is said about music also applies to spoken interventions, which often intrude into the liturgy to the point that they sometimes encroach on the readings. Poems, personal recollections, humorous anecdotes, recordings of the deceased’s voice, airing

of dirty family laundry, etc.: it's all there! The deceased is not prayed for: his life story is recounted. The liturgical 'profanation', in the literal meaning of the word, reaches its nadir when gesture meets word. The favorite things of the deceased—his football, his guitar, etc.—are sometimes placed on top of the casket or beside it. This heathenization of Christian burial turns into a public scandal when these things explicitly call to mind the deceased person's anti-Church commitments, specifically his membership in Freemasonry. One example among others: on 14 November 2013, in the cathedral of Perpignan, was celebrated the funeral of a local elected official, a notorious Freemason, whose casket conspicuously bore the symbols of his affiliation.¹⁰

d) . . . they don't bury strangers, however!

"Your grandmother wasn't a parishioner, I don't have the time to bury her, check with the funeral team." This sentence, uttered by a pastor, is a good summary of the tragic relationship that exists between many contemporary priests and the Catholic people. The facts of demography dictate that the number of funerals to celebrate remains constant while the number of priests keeps decreasing. In fact, celebrating funerals looks to many priests like a imposition they sometimes have no scruple in shirking. Naturally the result is to worsen the distress and lack of comprehension of the relatives and, if they've already drifted from the Church, it can only push them farther away. It is true that in certain rural parish groupings, where the priest serves thirty, forty, or more parishes, it is practically impossible for him to celebrate all the funerals. But solutions can be found, and in fact there have been experiments in certain dioceses, for example making use of traditionalist priests who have so far been refused any real parochial assignment.

Shared responsibilities

Priests often give in to the "demands" of liturgy consumers, whether they are practicing or non-practicing Catholics, or even areligious. There is a strong tendency in modern society to banish all outward signs of mourning. Funeral homes in France have abandoned black as a color, replacing it with grey, a color judged to be less

traumatizing. And the great success of cremation, rather than being a practice manifesting hostility to Catholicism—which until recently reproved it—is due (in addition to the financial aspect) to our contemporaries’ urge to rid their mind of death’s degrading aspects and of the fate that nature has in store for the corpse.

Unfortunately, the ordinary liturgy in the parishes has adapted to this climate, or in fact encouraged it, for example by adopting violet—or even white!—in preference to black; or even by singing musically festive songs with joyful lyrics.

White ornaments, festive songs, and a votive candle placed on the casket all contribute to spreading the mistaken belief that heaven’s glory is automatically granted. This is exacerbated when preaching on the four last things is kept to a minimum, if not entirely absent. The erroneous principle at work is that those in attendance are not inclined to hear the Church’s catechesis in these matters—especially since so many non-practicing Catholics or even unbelievers are thought to be amongst them—and therefore the content of what is presented during the ceremony is that of a joyful entry into heaven if the deceased was a practicing Catholic, or, if he lived away from the sacraments, is reduced to humanist-sounding considerations that run no risk of offending anyone.

As for the whole notion of the “scandal” that the deceased might have caused—if he died in a situation of public sin, say—it is now unknown. Indeed the funeral is just as “festive,” including all the liturgical honors, whether the deceased was a politician who pushed immoral laws, an unworthy husband, a blasphemous artist, or a faithful Christian. Scandal—strictly speaking: bad moral example—then resides in the fact that a notorious sinner who has died without expressing sorrow for his sins is given the same consideration as if he had “fallen asleep in the Lord.”

But, as a diocesan priest reports: “It is no easy task to resist the families, who, as they are ignorant of the meaning of Christian funerals, seek to introduce secular, or even provocative, elements into funeral services. Often relatives of the deceased person are surprised at my refusal to include testimonials that lack any reference to Catholicism and are provided by friends lacking any supernatural concerns. The 'liturgical'—in quotation marks!—model provided by the television, especially by American TV shows, has a devastating effect. Many people mistake Hollywood’s syncretistic 'liturgy' for the Catholic liturgy”

While most families who ask for a Christian funeral for one of their members nowadays are profoundly mistaken as to its meaning, there nevertheless are many, even if some of them do not attend Mass on Sundays, who still want a dignified, beautiful, and authentic Catholic ceremony. The death of a close relative is the first and most powerful preaching on the shortness of life and the need to prepare for the hereafter. Furthermore funerals bring into churches many people who no longer darken their doors. Therefore they are a unique opportunity for catechesis, especially on the four last things and a healthy and holy fear of judgment. It is infinitely sad that nowadays, because of a demagogical fear of offending, or perhaps simply out of a loss of faith, they have been amputated of all their apostolic vigor.

1. *Ordo exsequiarum* (typical edition, 1969). We here refer specifically to “Rite of Funerals,” *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI*, trans. ICEL (New York: Pueblo, 1976).

2. See Laurent Jestin, “Foi douteuse, espérance trop sûre d’elle-même. La dérive des funérailles chrétiennes,” *Catholica* (Autumn 2007).

3. This is why the *Caeremoniale episcoporum* 1.22.6 indicated that the funeral oration “in praise of a deceased distinguished person” had to be given before the absolution, not after the Gospel, and in ordinary garb (*in nigris*).

4. Cf. *Rituale Romanum*, tit. 2, c. 6 and 7.

5. A. Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy, 1948-1975*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 773.

6. Instruction of 24 October 1964.

7. Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment notre monde a cessé d'être chrétien* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), 216, 265.

8. One could object the great funeral orators (Bossuet, Massillon, etc.) often made use of panegyrics as an homage to the departed. But note that the four last things were always mentioned, sometimes in terms so terrible that they would be unbearable today; furthermore, the funeral oration was not considered a homily, but as a sacred speech given *in nigris* by the sacred orator, not after the Gospel, but at the end of the ceremony, just before the absolution.

9. Words spoken by a liturgical formator of the diocese of Auch. Her words were reported by the association *Pro Liturgia* in 2011.

10. When, in 1865, Archbishop Darby of Paris saw fit to give the Absolution at the Invalides for the funeral of Marshal Magnan, Grand Master of the Grand Orient of France, Pope Pius IX sent a letter dated 26 October 1865 deploring this religious act because “. . . the deceased, during his life, had the misfortune of filling an office in that proscribed sect commonly named Grand Orient.”