

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

Over the past few weeks I have been using my column to address some of the issues related to preparing for a happy death. This week we will consider issues related to the funeral Mass and burials.

The first thing to note is that every Catholic should have a funeral Mass offered for them. As more Catholics have become irregular in the practice of their faith more people are settling for prayers at the funeral home. This is very sad because it shows a lack of understanding of the importance of the Mass. At every Mass Jesus Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross is made present and we unite our prayers to His sacrifice. At a funeral Mass we ask our Heavenly Father to accept the sacrifice of His Son specifically for the sake of the person who has died so that their sins will be forgiven and atoned for. We pray also that they will be welcomed into heaven and that their family and friends will be consoled knowing that Jesus Christ died and rose so that we can rise with Him when we pass from this life. The Mass is the greatest prayer that can be offered because it is the prayer of Jesus Christ Himself. Therefore, there is nothing better we can do for someone who has passed from this life. Please let your family know that you want to have a funeral Mass and if they disregard your wishes—*come back and haunt them so they don't make the same mistake twice!*

Additionally, Catholics should be buried in Catholic cemeteries. The information on the web page for our local Catholic cemeteries, www.ccaw.org explains why this is important. "Because Catholic cemeteries are formally consecrated to God through holy ritual, the earth set apart and designated by the Church for use as a burial plot becomes part of both the local and the universal Church. On this sacred ground, the Lord will provide consolation in your bereavement, as well as peaceful rest for those that sleep in the hope of eternal life....The Church considers her cemeteries to be holy, sacred ground. A meeting place between hope and reward in Jesus Christ."

Being buried in a Catholic cemetery is also a matter of belonging. In a Catholic cemetery we are laid to rest alongside our brothers and sisters in the Faith. Also, Masses are regularly offered in Catholic cemeteries for the souls of those who are buried there. Additionally, when coming to visit our graves our loved ones and friends will be consoled and inspired by the symbols of our Catholic faith which adorn a Catholic cemetery. We are so fortunate to have our own parish cemetery where our parishioners can find their own place of rest near the church where they grew in faith and received the sacraments. Finally, there are two very practical reasons for arranging for burial in a Catholic cemetery. The costs are usually lower than in other cemeteries and any profits the cemeteries realize are used for the work of the Church. Therefore, in choosing to be buried in a Catholic cemetery you are furthering the work of the Church.

So, what does it cost to be buried in a Catholic cemetery? I spoke to the folks at Catholic Cemeteries about this. I was told that the cost of a plot in our parish cemetery is \$350 for registered parishioners. (Non-parishioners pay \$500 to \$700 depending on whether they belong to a neighboring parish or not.) For opening and closing the grave, Catholic Cemeteries currently charges \$1175 for single depth and \$1600 for double depth. These prices will go up a little on January 1, 2010. The Staff at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Mechanicsville can be reached at 301-475-5005. They will be happy to meet with anyone about preplanning. *Tell them I sent you and they will give you a plot with a view.*

Catholic Caskets

While there are official Catholic cemeteries, there are no such things as "Catholic caskets."

However, some Catholic monks are now selling caskets as a way of supporting themselves. I guess now that we "baby-boomers" are becoming senior citizens, selling caskets will be a lot more lucrative than selling fruitcakes. The Benedictine Monks of St. Meinrad's Abbey in Indiana sells "Abbey Caskets.". Like plots in Catholic cemeteries, these caskets are significantly less expensive than ones purchased elsewhere. As caskets are subject to tremendous price mark up, ordering yours ahead of time could really save some money. Abbey Caskets handles pre-orders and you can reach them at 1-800-987-7380 or www.abbeycaskets.com and, "no", I'm not getting a commission.

Catholics and Cremation

A few years back a woman called me to ask if she could have her husband cremated. I told her it would depend on whether he was dead or not. Seriously, because of the costs involved in embalming & burials, more people these days are choosing cremation. Again, our Archdiocesan Catholic Cemeteries website has some excellent information on this issue which is excerpted below.

“The Church earnestly recommends the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed, it does not however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching” (Code of Canon Law 1176). The Church now allows for cremation of the body, providing that family members making that decision are not doing so because they fear the body is lost forever and has no future together in Christ with the immortal soul.Since the human body has an eternal destiny in any form, the Church requires that cremated remains of a body be buried or entombed immediately after the Funeral in the same timely manner as a body. Cremated remains of a loved one are not to be scattered, kept at home or divided into other vessels among family members, just as it is clear that these practices would desecrate a body in a casket.”

In short, burying of the body is still preferred because this practice keeps before us the truth that we will rise again both body and soul. Additionally, cremation, which often occurs right after death, can actually hinder a healthy mourning process by thwarting a family’s ability to fully confront the mystery of death in the presence of a body that can be recognized in love.” I can say from experience that the funeral Mass with the cremated remains as opposed to having the body present definitely has a different atmosphere. When the body is still present in a casket our memories of our loved ones are vivid. There is also a greater sense that the funeral is a time of saying “good bye.” With only the “cremains” present there is more of a sense that the deceased is long gone.

In any case, when cremation is the choice the ashes must be treated with the same respect as one would treat a body. Putting the ashes on the mantle piece is not acceptable. Those of you who saw the movie *Meet the Parents* will recall that such practices also run the risk of turning our loved one’s ashes into kitty litter. Another reason for burying ashes or putting them in a wall niche at the cemetery, called a “columbarium”, is that it gives the survivors a place to go to lay flowers, to grieve and to remember. I know a woman whose daughter died of cancer a few year’s ago. The daughter’s husband had her ashes scattered in all their favorite places. Good for him I suppose but the poor mother has no place to go to place flowers or say a prayer for her daughter and it only adds to her grief.

Again, if you pre-plan your funeral you will be doing your family a great favor. The same is true in regard to having your will prepared. I’ve heard of too many families that have been divided over property because Dad or Mom never wrote a will. By the way, when writing your will don’t forget to leave something to the parish where you were prepared for entering the glory of heaven. In doing so you will doing a work of charity even after you have left this world. Some of us just might need some extra “brownie points” to get in the gate!

Until we have experienced it, we will all have questions about what it will be like to pass from this world. However, if we are sincerely trying to be faithful to Christ and His teachings we do not need to fear the moment when it comes. St. Paul, who was given a vision of life after this life wrote expectantly: “*Eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has ready for those who love Him.*” (1 Cor 2:9-10) We should live and die with the same sense expectation.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley