

Console One Another With These Words

Selected readings from Catholic funeral liturgies,
and the lessons they teach us about
death and resurrection, grief and hope.

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Death and resurrection, grief and hope

The readings that we will examine tonight explore the mystery of ***death and resurrection*** (the Paschal Mystery). This theological concept is always at the heart of the Christian faith, yet when a loved one dies, it suddenly commands our full attention and challenges our faith in new ways.

The readings also address ***grief and hope*** for the mourners who remain behind. The pastoral challenge at a funeral is to affirm and support the mourners' grief, while encouraging their faith to move them toward hope.

Universal need to grieve

Death and dying are an inescapable part of the human condition. All of us will deal repeatedly with grief throughout our lives. Whenever a loved one dies, we look to our *personal faith* and the *faith of the Church* to provide comfort and meaning.

Each time we bid farewell to a departing loved one, we also anticipate the moment when we will be the one who departs, and others will grieve for us. Thus, the mourners at every funeral contemplate their own mortality, as well as that of their deceased loved one.

Funeral liturgies

Funeral liturgies play an important role in the grieving process. For people of faith, funerals are much more than a time to honor and say good-bye to a lost loved one. They afford the mourners and those who support them an opportunity to recall and celebrate their shared faith in resurrection, at a time when they most need to be strengthened and consoled by that faith.

The funeral readings

The readings for the funeral liturgy remind us that the beliefs which we express in our prayers and rituals are solidly grounded in Scripture. That is important, because there is so little that we can say definitively about resurrection and eternal life. Though pious platitudes about "being in a better place" cannot provide much comfort, the authoritative words of Scripture can.

The families of the deceased often have the opportunity to select readings from a collection of suggested passages. These readings contain a wealth of images and messages that can bring

deep solace to mourning families. At the same time, they can help all in attendance to explore more deeply their own beliefs and hopes with regard to death and resurrection.

The Word of God has great power to speak to each grieving family and community in each situation. Some of the suggested readings apply especially well to certain circumstances. Often, the families will pick up on that fact and select readings which they find most consoling.

There are a number of options from the Old Testament, the New Testament epistles, and the Gospels, as well as a number of Responsorial Psalms.

- Old Testament: 7 choices
- New Testament epistles: 19 choices
- Gospels: 19 choices
- Psalms: 10 choices

[See the complete list of suggested Scripture readings.]

Old Testament

Because all of the Old Testament passages were written before Christ rose from the dead, we cannot expect them to express a fully developed theology of death and resurrection. Still, they can offer deep insights into how persons of faith experience human mortality. Even though these ancient authors have not yet seen the coming of the Messiah, many of them express hope in God's power to save his people, both individually and collectively.

[See the notes on selected Old Testament readings.]

New Testament epistles

All of these passages reflect on the mystery of death from a Christian perspective. The vast majority are from St. Paul. However, there are a few lesser used passages from 1 John and the Book of Revelation, and one from the Acts of the Apostles, as well.

[See the notes on selected readings from the New Testament epistles.]

Gospels

Most of the Gospel passages heard regularly at funerals feature Jesus speaking about the Paschal Mystery that he would personally bring to fulfillment by his own passion and death. These teachings carry a special authority, because they come directly from the Lord. Not surprisingly, they are among the most comforting of all the suggested funeral readings.

[See the notes on selected Gospel readings.]

The funeral homily

There is a big difference between a eulogy and a true funeral homily. A eulogy just reminisces about the deceased, without offering any theological insight. The purpose of the homily is to proclaim and reflect on the Paschal Mystery in light of the Scripture readings and the particular circumstances of the deceased. Both the Scripture readings and the life and death of the deceased can be revelatory, shedding light on the great mystery of death and resurrection.

Themes that every funeral homily should address

In order for the funeral homily to provide comfort and solace to the mourners and to strengthen the faith of the entire assembly, it must address two key themes:

1. **The mourners' grief.** The pain of losing a loved one must be acknowledged and affirmed, though also put in the proper perspective. Some of the Old Testament readings are especially good at expressing this sorrow, while some of the passages from the New Testament epistles are especially good at putting grief into perspective for believing Christians.
2. **Reasons for hope.** The readings express many reasons to cling to hope, even at a time of loss and grief. This hope is what the mourners need most of all, and the Scriptures provide it in abundance.

If possible, the homily should also address **the cause and/or circumstances of death**. These can be the proverbial elephant in the room, which no one wants to acknowledge. When the circumstances are especially painful or tragic, the homilist should attempt to deal with them honestly and pastorally, in the light of faith. Well-chosen Scripture readings can help with this pastoral challenge.

Formulating a coherent message for a particular situation

The homilist's task is to weave together the selected readings in a coherent way and to apply that combination of messages to the particular situation facing the mourners.

We will look at examples where the deceased:

1. was a practicing Catholic who died peacefully of natural causes.
2. suffered for years from a degenerative illness.
3. died suddenly from an accident or medical emergency.
4. died as a result of violence.
5. committed suicide.
6. was estranged from the Church.

[See the combinations of readings for different situations.]

Conclusion

Funerals offer a unique pastoral opportunity, because everyone in attendance is focused intensely on the same spiritual need. They all want God to comfort them in their sorrow and to reassure them that their deceased loved one will be with God for all eternity. A good choice of readings, applied to the particular circumstances of the deceased, can provide that comfort and assurance. If the funeral liturgy is done well, everyone tends to leave the church feeling more hopeful and more at peace.