

## Monastic Scribe LXIII: December 1, 2023

### FAITH-FILLED FAREWELLS

Saint Benedict, in his Rule, has a chapter which he calls “Tools of Good Works.” These include daily practices to keep the gospel alive in one’s life. One of these tools is “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die” (RB 4:47). As I plod along in my golden years, that is not difficult to do. But it is meant for everyone. The willingness to face one’s death is the freedom of living fully now.

The month of November was dedicated to pray for the dead, I have given some thought to how we say farewell to our deceased loved ones and how we respect and treat the body. The growing practice of cremation has changed many of our rituals. And the culture we live in has also effected how we bury our dead and remember them. In some ways we have become more impersonal to our dead. Some say we are afraid of death and want to avoid it, even avoid talking about it. I would like to offer a few suggestions about how we bury our deceased loved ones. These are not official church teachings but are certainly based on Christian ritual and practice.

First of all, the remains of our deceased, whether the body is in a coffin or the ashes in an urn, deserve respect and honor. These are the remains of a human person. They are holy. Think of Jesus and his human body – it was (and is) the same body in his thirty-three years on earth, was also the same body when he was in the tomb for three days, and then the same as a resurrected imperishable body. He is risen, body and spirit. So will you be some day. Of course, his body was risen before it decayed and returned to the earth. You may contend that your body will be absorbed back into the earth. Yes, but your spirit (soul) is marked by that body. It identifies only with that body. In its resurrection, it will call for that same human body in some form. The Creed says, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Jesus showed us that his resurrected body, now one with the entire creation, could appear as his human body. So shall we! Thus we need to treat the dead body or ashes with great respect. Honor them and keep them in a reverent space until interred. They are holy and present the dead person to us.

My second suggestion is to restore a communal wake service. This is a very personal part of the Christian burial ritual. This is the time and place to say individual prayers, to share personal memoirs of the deceased. It can be brought

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together at the end by prayer of a priest or relative. We have the time and place to share our memories, our thanks, our memories. In many cultures the body was never left alone until buried. The Irish custom, perhaps marred at times by too much eating and drinking, was a communal farewell that would never leave the body unattended. In Ireland I have witnessed the morning after the wake with a procession to the church led by the hearse with the body, followed by everyone else on foot. You could feel the significance of what was happening. So give some thought for a wake service for your next burial service. It can be the night before or in the morning or afternoon previous to the funeral Mass.

My third suggestion is about the Mass of Christian Burial. I have a pet peeve about calling this "A Celebration of Life." It is, rather, an act of worship of the living God where we join our deceased brother or sister with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in its return to the very bosom of God. Yes, it is a celebration of life but it is the life of Jesus that we celebrate with whose life and death we now join our beloved deceased. There is now allowed a short (five minute) eulogy by a family member and this should not become an encomium of praise for the deceased. That is why we needed to have a wake, to express all the personal thoughts. A Mass of burial can raise up our thoughts about our own death, and comic relief may be used to relieve and avoid this feeling. Death is part of life in all of nature. It should not be avoided. Our hope and trust in resurrection gives the real relief to our fears.

At a Mass of Christian Burial there are often strangers, some of whom will probably not be either Catholic nor Christian. They should certainly be welcomed in every way. But we need, as a community, not to be embarrassed to express our faith before them without demanding they accept it or not. Let them see how we mourn and invite them to be one with us. Let them see our faith and our love.

There is also the interment at the cemetery or columbarium. This is a place to be both reverential, personal and physical in saying goodbye. This is the final part of our ritual. To sum up, we need rituals to express in word and deed what we are unable to express in words only. You may have some of your own rituals to say farewell to a loved one. I hope my suggestions might help you to more fully join with each other in praising and thanking God for the person we return to God this

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day. You can let me know any particular rituals of yours by writing to [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org)

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.