

ORDINARY TIME 2 (B)

# Today's LITURGY

*A quarterly publication for liturgy preparation*

August 29–November 27, 2021

**Small Parish?  
Tiny Choir?  
No Problem!**

By Melanie Coddington





# On Music, Death and Dying

## *How to Approach Funeral Liturgies as a Music Minister or Liturgy Director*

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*“Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church. Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.”*

—Lumen Gentium, no. 1

In those moments when people are at their most broken and vulnerable, they come to you. They come to you with more questions than answers. They come to you in the midst of grief, guilt, fear, confusion, tears, emptiness, anger, and in some instances, they come in relief. They come to you at this time when they and their families are at their best. And, when they are at their worst. In these times when their loved ones are slipping away from this world to the next, they come to you. In those moments when their very beings have been hollowed out by overwhelming grief, they come to you.

How will you receive them? How will you meet these people who have been with someone in that moment when the veil between this life and the next is at its very thinnest? What will you say to that person who was with their loved one when they witnessed a child of God surrender his or her last breath? Do you meet them where they are in their grief or do you expect them to meet you where you believe the Church says they ought to be? When they come to you to plan the Mass of Christian Burial for their loved one, what is the first thing you say? What is the first thing you ask? Do you make time to listen; just to listen? What words do you have to comfort the members of a family in this incredibly fragile moment of their lives?

As music ministers and liturgy directors and coordinators, you are not commissioned to simply provide liturgy planning sheets along with a list of Scripture readings and song titles from which the bereaved are expected to choose. You are much more than these professional titles state, and you did not choose this vocation to be utilitarian. You are, first and foremost, a servant of the Church and its life of prayer. You accompany people in the difficult times and movements of life, and what you have to say to those whose hearts are broken and laid bare before you will determine much of

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what happens in their world when the final committal of their loved one is but a memory. Yours is not to approach our craft in a perfunctory manner, no matter the obstacles, reasons, barriers and challenges. It is right and good to occupy your place as one who teaches other members of your community the poetry that is locked away in the rubrics, waiting to be released and interpreted by you so others will experience what you see in the mind's eye. You, who know and have the ability to see the deeper meanings of what is on the printed page. It is your place to gently and compassionately catechize the very people you are accompanying through some of the very most difficult and confusing moments of life itself. You are the ones who will lead them to and from the Cross to live ever deeper into the Paschal Mystery into which they, themselves, were baptized. So again, will you meet them where they are? Or, will you expect them to meet you where you are and where you think they ought to be? It is in such moments that you may consciously or unconsciously end up doing one of two things: you may be the very person and presence that welcomes a person or a people back home to the Church they may have strayed from. Or, you may be the one who confirms and cements the reasons they left. You hold that much power and privilege in such moments.

“In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chain of sin and death that bound humanity.” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 1)

The answer to all of the questions posed here is that you have much to offer by way of listening and comforting. You have much to teach this family about the sacredness of their own lives because such things are all found in the rubrics and rituals of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. The deepest meanings of the rubrics are waiting to be unlocked by one who can interpret them as only you, the poet and artist, can do. There are so many things you, and only you, can do to accompany them in this time and in the seasons of life to come.

“The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living.” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 7)

## Preparing the Mass of Christian Burial

When first meeting with a family, listen, more than talk. Ask questions about the loved one who was just born to eternal life. In the case of someone who passed away at an older age, remember that they were once children. Every-

one tends to forget that the aged were actually children at one time who ran, jumped, skinned their knees and did all the things that children, teenagers and young adults do today. Ask questions about who this person was and what they became. In listening to a family remember a loved one, you'll be able to offer informed recommendations when it comes time to choose Scripture readings and music.

“If it is the custom in the local community, the pall is placed on the coffin by family members, friends, or the priest.” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 161)

## Placing of the Pall

When I meet with a family, I intentionally take time to remember the story of their loved one back to them. It may go something like this...

Eighty-three years ago, a poor working class Irish-American family brought their infant son, James, dressed in a pure white christening gown (his baptismal garment), up the steps and into the vestibule of a Catholic church in Brooklyn, New York. This small, poor immigrant family, all dressed in their Sunday best, presented this child to God and he was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Now, 83 years later, you, his family, gather in the vestibule of our parish church one last time, to put his christening gown on him. You, the family, not the funeral home director and not the altar servers, but you, his family will clothe this child of God one last time before we say goodbye – the brothers and sisters, spouse, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. However, you are not alone in this moment. You are surrounded by his parents and those who brought him to the parish church in Brooklyn, New York so many years ago. You, who are here now, are surrounded by all of the family members who live on the other side of the veil in that great cloud of witnesses gone before us at this moment. When family gathered in flesh and bone dress this child of God in his christening gown this one last time, you are not alone. I tell the family that it will be you who clothe him this last time by placing the pall on the coffin. Would you like the children and grandchildren to participate? Nieces and nephews? Who would you like to have clothe grandpa this one last time in his christening gown? And, if it's crooked, not to worry. You can take whatever time you need to straighten it out to your liking. If this ritual takes two minutes, great. If it takes four minutes, that's fine, too. Take the time you need. We'll wait.

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## Gathering Song

Here is an opportune moment for you to help a family to connect their past, to the present, to the future. On the night before my father's funeral Mass when all the relatives had finally made it into town, close to 50 of us gathered in a circle to pray. I asked the question, "Who do we remember who are no longer with us in this life who have now welcomed Pop home?" We remembered each person by name. I wrote them down. The next day when we celebrated my father's funeral, the cantor sang all of those names in John Becker's, "Litany of the Saints" as his body was processed into the church and to the foot of the altar. Chris de Silva's litany of remembrance, "Lux Aeterna," is another option to carry this ritual moment.

## Placing of Christian Symbols

"A symbol of the Christian life may be placed on the coffin." (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 163)

Unfortunately, this beautiful directive is very often reduced to the lowest possible common denominator. The intent on the part of all is noble and good, but the deeper meaning of this rubric is so often lost in the literal interpretation of the rubric. More often than not, what happens at this moment is that the funeral director places a standard-issue brass crucifix on the coffin that was just purchased from the funeral home when it reaches its place at the foot of the altar because article 163 in the *Order of Christian Funerals* says it should be thus. However, the rubric summons us deeper to more thoughtful reading of the directive. This is known as the more, or *the Magis*.

I invite the family, immediate and extended, to take down the crosses that reside over the thresholds of the doors of their homes. I invite them to bring the Our Lady of Guadalupe or Sacred Heart of Jesus portraits that adorn the walls of their home. Bring them all to the church on the day of the funeral. The crucifix or holy medal you wear around your neck? Bring these, too. Bring these to the vestibule where we will gather before the Mass begins. Place these sacramentals on the coffin after you process in behind your loved one's body and after it arrives at the foot of the altar while we're singing the Gathering Song. These sacramentals will be blessed with your loved one's body during the Final Commendation. When you return them to their places at the end of this day, these consecrated items will be forever changed. You will think of your loved one whenever you pass through the door of your home and see that cross or look at that portrait. Your loved one will forever be with

you in your comings and goings. The crucifix or holy medal you place around your neck at the end of this celebration will remember you to your loved one. Your sacramental has been blessed and consecrated and you, yourself, have been transformed and made anew again.

## Choosing Scripture Readings

When you meet with the family, explain to them that our understanding of remembrance is three-fold.

### The First Reading

We remember from whence we came. We remember all those who loved those into being who loved us into being. We remember all those gone before us. We remember things as we see ourselves in the images of our family pictures of people who have passed away long ago, some of whom we never met during their lifetime on earth.

### The Second Reading

We remember here and now. We remember that Jesus said to those who were with him, "Do this in remembrance of me." We remember that when Paul was writing the Epistles, he was writing to young and growing Christian communities.

### The Gospel Reading

We remember all that we hope to become. We pour our hopes and dreams into the children we bring into this world and into our daily labors in whatever corner of the vineyard we are charged to tend.

In helping a family to choose readings, ask them to pray about the loved one for whom they're planning this celebration and what the choice of readings will say about this individual's life as a Christian. What will you remember about this child of God and his or her place in the reign of God in the Scriptures that family, friends and loved ones will hear in this celebration?

## Choosing Music

Once you've listened to a family tell you about their loved one and his or her place in the family, you'll be able to make meaningful recommendations that go far beyond the plug and play lists and choices that would be made by simply providing a form and list of song recommendations. You'll be given the opportunity to minister and catechize a family.

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## Final Commendation and Procession to the Place of Committal

“The coffin [and Christian symbols] may now be sprinkled with holy water and incensed.” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 173)

“If a symbol of the Christian life has been placed on the coffin, it should be removed at this time.” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 176)

After the deacon or priest says, “In peace, let us take our brother/sister to his/her place of rest,” the music begins for the Procession to the Place of Committal. When this song begins, a member of the family, not the funeral director, steps into the center aisle and retrieves the sacramentals that were placed on the coffin at the beginning of the Mass. This family member takes the time to give each sacramental back to the family members. It takes a small bit of time to do this—good ritual takes time. The beauty of the moment is that the music will carry the ritual.

The Final Commendation and the Dismissal song seem to be one of the most challenging straits to navigate when preparing the music for a funeral Mass. Invariably, every music minister alive has met the family who wants to sing their loved one home to, “My Way,” “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” or any number of other songs we probably wouldn’t identify with the Paschal Mystery. In all situations, it’s so important not to use the phrase, “liturgically inappropriate.” For one thing, it exposes one who cannot articulate in a meaningful way, just why we might not want to sing dad to his final place of resting with a self-centered melody. It is also akin to a person in power telling one who occupies a lesser place of power, “... because I said so.” Such phrases slam doors shut and don’t allow for epiphanic moments of enlightenment. I’ve found that if one has shepherded a grieving family through a process that includes all of the aforementioned in this article, very often, this question actually takes care of itself quite easily. The family realizes on their own that such songs are far better placed at the reception where everyone can sing along while watching the slideshow that the children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews spent the last five days preparing.

*“These many beautiful days cannot be lived again,  
But they are compounded in my own flesh and spirit  
and I take them in full measure toward  
whatever lies ahead”*

Daniel Berrigan, S.J.

## Coda...

Stay in touch. At Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, my role and responsibilities include being one of the primary points of contact for families who have been notified of the death of a daughter or son. To accompany the parents, families, friends and classmates of more than 65 students who have died in my years at LMU is an overwhelmingly humbling experience. In the majority of cases, these deaths were unexpected. In addition, there have been hundreds of faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, regents and benefactors whose funerals I’ve helped prepare over these many years. If you have worked in ministry for a period of time, your experience as a minister has traveled a similar path.

I make it a point to enter the date of birth and date of death of every one of the individuals who leave this world into my calendar along with the names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers of the individual’s immediate family members. Admittedly, this has become easier since the advent of electronic calendars most of us use to manage and chronicle our schedules. Every evening before I close my eyes and every morning when I wake up, I check my calendar to see who was born into this life or born into eternal life on that date. I offer a prayer for that individual and for their families and then soon after, I send an email or text message, or place a phone call just to let a mother, father, son or daughter know that someone still remembers them and their loved one. It’s a practice that has enriched my daily prayer, gives me a reason to be grateful for every breath I take, and be thankful for every morning that greets me when I awaken. Most importantly, it allows me to remain in contact with all of these families and to do just a tiny bit of good in the world by touching someone who lost someone yesterday, 30 years ago, or sometime and somewhere in between.

*“One word is enough to feed thousands.”*

David Whyte

You are that one word of God that lives within the Word of God. And, you feed thousands.

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