

Funeral for: _____

Person Offering

Words of Remembrance: _____

Offering Words of Remembrance at a Funeral

While the Catholic funeral Mass does not indicate the inclusion of a eulogy, family members nonetheless sometimes ask to take a few moments to speak about their loved one who has died, offering some Words of Remembrance. Especially if the priest did not know the person well, it may be comforting for those who have assembled to hear something with a more personal touch. In order to help families or individuals to prepare their remarks in a way that both contributes to the beauty of the service and safeguards the integrity of the Church's public worship, it seems appropriate to offer some guidelines. **Personal remarks may be given by one person after the Opening Prayer, just prior to the Scripture readings.**

Putting Death into Context

We believe that for the faithful, physical death is really a birth into eternal life. At the funeral we pray that God forgive the sins of the deceased, and that the one who has died may move to a new level of existence in which, through God's mercy, s/he enjoys an intimate union with the saints and God. We die with Christ in the waters of baptism, and then emerge from those waters, rising with him. From that point on, nothing can hurt us but sin. We miss the physical presence of one who was important to us, whom we love. It is



our own loss that we mourn, even as we trust that our beloved is with us in spirit because s/he is with God.

How does a talk at a funeral fit in with this?

To put the talk into context, it is important to remember that the primary actions at a funeral Mass are the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the Eucharist. We are not so much celebrating the life of the deceased as we are professing our faith in the power of Jesus' resurrection to raise those who lived their lives loving Him. Our experience at Mass is actually a participation in this death and resurrection of Jesus, a participation which sustains us. This sublime mystery takes us to a point beyond the capacity of words to describe. We ritualize this event, and so enter into that Mystery. The Mass calls us beyond ourselves, out of our own grief and loss, into the sacramental and transcendent presence of God. The talk that is integrated into this ritual should be respectful of the ritual's meaning and be in harmony with its intention.

If you decide to ask someone to offer Words of Remembrance:

Try to choose someone you believe will be able to maintain his or her composure. It is certainly no problem if someone breaks down while speaking; however it is often wisest to choose someone not of the immediate family. It can be tough and stressful for someone who is mourning if s/he needs to compose a talk and deliver it in a public setting. Those offering these reflections are often nervous beforehand, and no one wants to put someone who is seeking the consolation of the funeral in the position of fretting and being distracted while thinking about a eulogy. If you are having a tough time deciding on someone to write and deliver a eulogy, that may be a sign that it is best to let it go; a personal reflection at a funeral is not necessary. Choosing not to include this is the default, and so is perfectly appropriate. It



is not a sign that you didn't care for the person, or that you are not "doing right" by him/her. The words and rituals already in place are often sufficient to convey what wants to be said.

What about reading a poem?

Sometimes, rather than giving a eulogy, families ask to read a poem after communion. Such poems can sometimes be a source of comfort; but they can also be cause for scandal. Sometimes the poems, while accurately reflecting the state of mind of those mourning, nonetheless carry a message that is not consistent with what we, as Catholics, believe. Other times, what is read is not really poetry, but more a touching set of verses that provoke emotion rather than express hope in the resurrection. Such recitations rarely add to the experience of worship for those gathered.



If you have been asked to speak:

You have been given a tremendous responsibility. In the context of the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and on the occasion of the death of someone sorely missed and mourned, you have been asked to offer some words of comfort and insight. What follows are some helpful suggestions offered so that what you say may add to the powerful experience of the funeral Mass.

1) Start with prayer. Find some quiet time to ask God to help you to retrieve meaningful stories or insights that will stimulate the communal memory of those who are gathered. Consider how the life of the deceased was a window for you and others into the life and love of God.

2) Make notes for yourself. Even better, write out what it is that you want to say. In my experience, those who speak off the cuff or from memory deliver talks that are scattered and do not have the effect they hoped for. If you are well acquainted with what you have written down, you will be able to scan the

page for reminder points, and it won't look like you're just reading it.

2) Your **reflections should last anywhere from three to five minutes**, but not longer. It is impossible to sum up every experience you have had with the deceased and focusing on one or two fondest memories will leave the most lasting impact. Remember, you don't have to carry the weight of making the funeral meaningful; the focus of this gathering is the action at the altar, not the Words of Remembrance.

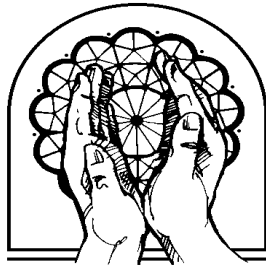
3) Talk about the person in terms of **how he or she modeled the life of Jesus**. Bringing out your loved one's human side is often comforting, even if you mention things that provide a chuckle in terms of their personality or their unique characteristics; it is not disrespectful to speak on "the lighter side." Take care, though, not to bring up anything that would be scandalous or inconsistent with the Christian faith s/he professed, (eg., "she was a good person, even though she didn't go to church much" or "he wasn't much of a praying man," "she sure loved the casinos," etc.). Stories that might be appropriate for the family gathering after the funeral may not be appropriate from the pulpit at a Mass. This isn't to say that you shouldn't tell stories about the person- in fact, such stories are often the most moving part of these talks. I am just suggesting that you exercise a bit of caution, to be careful that the stories are told in a way that fits in with the Mass.

It is often through the human stories of one who has died that we are able **to see how God made use of him/her to help us get to know God better**. Remarks and memories that call to mind the best in the person not intended to canonize him or her, but to help us see just how God was made known through his or her life. Through the eulogy, we offer gratitude to God for putting this person into our lives.

4) Some talks I have heard at funerals have made others present uncomfortable. Beware of discussing areas that might be too personal or which could be considered inappropriate for public expression.

5) If your emotions get to you and you find you are beginning to break down, don't worry. Step back from the microphone for a moment; take a breath or two. People are very understanding at funerals, and no one will mind if you need a moment or so to regain your composure.

Personal reflections can provide consolation and hope for families mourning the loss of a dear one. These thoughts are intended as a guide so that the personal remarks may truly reflect the spirit of our Catholic hope in the ultimate resurrection of all of the faithful departed.



Notes for preparing reflection:

