

Practices of Death and Dying in Catholic Tradition

by Eamon Duffy

Most of what I have to contribute on the practices of death and dying in Catholic tradition is already in print, in three of the essays in *Faith of our Fathers**. In those essays I argued the need for some more robust ritual accommodation of what might be thought of as negative feeling in our current liturgical encounters with mortality – a franker and less bland and controlling acceptance of grief, guilt, anger, and fear – fundamental emotions and stances which I believe tend to be theologically downplayed, sanitised or edited out of current liturgical practice. And I emphasised the centrality of the imitation of Christ in his death as well as his life as integral to Christian discipleship, and suggested that any healthy Christianity must include a deliberate and realistic apprehension of our own mortality, expressed in conscious preparation for the act of dying.

This requires the recognition of death itself not merely as something which happens to us, but as an act which in some sense or other we need to own and perform, if not consciously in the hour of death itself, in which we may of course be comatose, distracted by pain or drugged by morphine, or for that matter screaming behind the dashboard of a car or under the wheels of a bus. But if we can't deliberately embrace our dying literally in our own particular *novissima hora*, then we need to do so pre-emptively, in the cultivation of Christian practices which enable us in some sense to accept and, in anticipation, internalise our own deaths as an *imitation Christi*, death performed as an expression, like his, of faith, hope and love.

I've not in fact got much to add to what I had to say in those essays, so I will begin from a different direction with two personal recollections, both of them derived from my Irish upbringing. Before doing that, however, I register one aspect of Catholic practice in relation to the dead which seems to me to underlie everything else, the simple fact of offering prayers for the dead, a practice which is of course now common in the churches of the reformation also, especially in the Anglican communion.



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Protestantism in its chemical purity outlawed this practice, but since the First World War it has become widespread among Anglicans and even some other protestants. To pray for the dead is to make strong affirmations about death itself – that it does not sever relations between the living and the dead absolutely. Further, that love, and loving concern, for the dead can still be expressed in the ultimate expression of hope, prayer, whatever we may think we actually hope to achieve by such prayer, and whether or not we believe in any kind of purgatory. So at the outset I want to register that I think everything essential to Catholic belief about the dead is contained in the simple petition, *Lord have mercy*, or, if you prefer, *requiem aeternam dona eiis*,

domine. The rest is elaboration and exposition.

But now to those recollections. I was raised in a working class family in what was by Irish standards a sizeable town on the east coast of Ireland, just south of the border with the north. It was an urban environment, where most people earned their living in factories – Carroll's tobacco factory making Sweet Afton cigarettes, Rawson's shoes, the Dundalk Bacon factory, or, my father's workplace, the Great Northern Railways engineering works, which made and repaired steam engines. But it was an urban community still very much in touch with its fairly primitive rural hinterland: milk was delivered daily to our door not in bottles, but ladled into milk-pails and canisters from the churn by the farmer who had milked the cows himself that morning, and who did his rounds by horse and cart. The river was one field away from our house: in summer everybody fished and swam there: my brothers and I earned the odd half crown every August helping local farmers bring in the hay, and many of my friends picked buckets of blackberries from the hedgerows in season to sell to the greengrocers. So though we were townspeople, rural ways were not far in the background. And that included rural ways with death.

One of my most vivid memories from the early 1950s, when I was about 6 or 7 years old, is of the death from cancer of the mother of a schoolfriend who lived a few doors away. As was customary, the children of the street were rounded up, and shepherded into the bedroom in which the corpse was laid out in an open coffin. She had been a cheerful, plump and smiling figure, with glossy auburn hair. The shock is with me still: the rubicund smiling mother had become a wizened doll, her face pinched, bony and a curious coffee-colour, her fingers stiff and twig-like, and, most disturbingly of all, her copious auburn hair apparently more abundant than ever, lapping in luscious waves round the shrunken figure in its dulse-brown shroud, seeming to fill the coffin and spill over the sides. I imagine, though, that my childish recollection has elaborated a sight which in all conscience needed very little exaggeration to bring out its shocking pathos and, I suppose, its terror. I imagine all the other children were as daunted I was, but we knew what to do. We blessed ourselves with the holy water in the bucket at the foot of the coffin, and knelt to on either side of it to say a prayer.

And then a second memory, more than thirty years on. In the summer of 1986 my mother died suddenly while staying at my sister's house in our home town. Jenny my wife and I flew back in haste, because funerals still take place only a couple of days after a death in Ireland. We arrived hotfoot from the airport to find the house heaving with relatives and friends, and my mother laid out in her best two-piece suit in an open coffin on the dining-room table: my plane had been delayed, so the departure to the parish church for the reception of the body was imminent, but the priest had not yet arrived. Since I was a professional theologian, the general view was that I was ideally qualified to lead the communal recitation of the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, which we did till the hearse and the priest arrived, when we set off to walk the mile or so to the church. My wife, daughter of an Anglican vicar, was then only a recent convert to Catholicism, having surrendered a couple of years earlier after holding out nobly for sixteen years: she had never before seen a corpse, nor ever attended a funeral. Confronted with my mother's body and invited to admire it, she commented haplessly on the beauty of the glass rosary wrapped round my mother's hands. My

sister, with that devastating combination of practicality and spontaneity which is one of the things that most endears her to me, prised the beads from my mother's fingers and handed them to my thunderstruck and rather horrified wife.

The reception of the body into the church which followed was overwhelming. There were several hundred people there, a lifetime's accumulation of friends and neighbours, and more recent acquaintances from the pensioners' club at which my mother had been an enthusiastic amateur vocalist. I remember nothing of the service itself, or what the priest had to say, but I will never forget that every single person in the church came up to us afterwards and spoke to me about my mother, pressed my hands, said they were sorry for our trouble. Next day after a mass at which a local choir sang the *kyrie*, *sanctus* and *agnus dei* from the Mozart Requiem, and the congregation belted out the protestant revivalist hymn *Shall we gather at the river* in homage to my mother's childhood sojourn during the first world war in dour Dungannon, under the stern supervision of her father's Presbyterian family, we walked behind the hearse to the town graveyard, a mile and a half away, on the main Dublin-Belfast road. At that time the Dundalk bypass had not yet been built, so the traffic between the island's two capitals slowed behind my mother's coffin to walking pace, and many of the shopkeepers along the route drew down their blinds or came out to stand in their doorways as a mark of respect for a woman they knew little or nothing about, but whose status at the centre of a funeral entitled her to the gesture.

These are two very different but related memories. Are these examples of distinctively Catholic practices, or merely of the customs of any semi-rural society, where the rawness of death is mediated through a strong phalanx of shared social rituals?

Where would one have found a closer resemblance to these two incidents, in an Irish protestant funeral, or an English Catholic funeral in, say, Surbiton or the Thames valley? And was it deep wisdom, or a kind of abuse, to expose six- and seven-year-old children to the sight of an emaciated corpse, whom many of them had known only months before as a blooming and healthy young mother?

What the two memories have in common, I suppose, is a raw realism about the fact of death – the corpse on display, in one case horrifically so, but within a ritual framework which sets manageable boundaries on the experience, by containing it within a set of social and religious conventions which helped to tame its terror: familiar words and actions – the holy water, the prayers, rosary, *de profundis* – all of which say to us: this is indeed terrible, but we know what it is, and here are the ways in which we deal with it. You don't have to invent anything, or ask yourself what is to be done: here is a procedure, familiar, tested, to be trusted. If that is so, then such considerations seem to suggest that a liturgy with relatively little variation, not too much flexibility in it, might be the right way to deal with death: the point of the procedures is that they are familiar, can run more or less on autopilot in the extremity of bereavement, and can be operated with minimal intervention from religious professionals.

Catholic prayer and practice about death has, of course, in the past gone in for another kind of raw realism, hammering home both the universal and particular inevitability of death. The old Penny Catechism encouraged devout lay persons to dispose themselves for death every night as they lay down to sleep: St John Fisher placing a skull on the end of the altar whenever he celebrated Mass can stand for a long tradition of intense

consciousness of the *memento mori*, of the skull beneath the skin, which is deeply embedded in Catholic piety. And the terrors of death dwelt upon were not merely physical: death was located in the church's liturgy and catechesis within the framework of the Last Things: sin and judgement, heaven and hell, were at least as prominent as hope and mercy in the liturgy of death.

That liturgy was itself characterised by a strong emphasis on mourning, on holy fear, on our urgent need of God's mercy. The vestments were black or violet, most of the texts of the liturgy sombre, even at times frightening: there were sublime evocations of light and peace in texts like the *In Paradisum*, sung as the corpse left the church, but the stupendous evocation of final judgement and the end of all things in the *dies irae* also said or sung in pre-conciliar masses for the dead stands for this dimension of the old liturgy. So too did the choice of scripture readings and psalms in the office of the dead, above all the daunting sequence of nine readings from the book of Job round which the major part of the office for the dead was structured.

*My spirit is broken, my days are extinct
The grave is ready for me
My days are past, my plans are broken off
And the desires of my heart.
They make night into day
The light, they say, is near to darkness
If I look for Sheol as my house
If I spread my couch in darkness
If I say to the pit, you are my father
And to the worm, my mother or my sister
Where then is my hope?*

That kind of graphic encounter with mortality in the form of graves and worms and epitaphs has been tidied away in the post-conciliar liturgy: those who seek to minimise the revolutionary impact of the Second Vatican Council need only lay the old and new liturgies of the dead alongside each other to see not minor readjustment, but a radically different ethos. Gone are the daunting passages from Job, replaced by far more explicitly upbeat and reassuring passages from St Paul: ministering clergy more often than not now wear white, not violet (and black vestments are in fact forbidden), the note of judgement is muted if not quite to inaudibility, and the prayer texts are saturated with messages of comfort and hope. The continuing deployment of psalms of penitence and lamentation in the Divine Office do, it is true, provide a strong element of continuity between the old and new modelled liturgies for the clergy, but with the exception of the *de profundis* they are absent from masses for the dead and other liturgies shared by the laity, so that overall, there is no escaping the dramatic contrast.

And that of course can perfectly plausibly be seen as almost entirely gain. When preparing these remarks I consulted a friend who is a Catholic deacon, who for the last twenty years has exercised a special ministry to the dying and the bereaved. He is a passionate advocate of the new liturgy of the dead, specifically as embodied in the Order of Christian Funerals. Here is some of what he has to say about it.

"The first thing that I would say is that while funerals are clearly about the dead, they are also about the living. They are about helping people to live on with the reality of often

extreme loss and consequent bewilderment, when they wonder if life has any meaning at all. I shudder when I hear the words of Henry Scott Holland – ‘Death is nothing at all . . .’ In reality HSH presents these words as a parody of some folks’ attitude to death, and then goes on to say that it is actually a shattering, earth-shaking event. I have never attended a grieving family and found them anything but suffering a seismic shift. I never have to convince them of the terrible reality of death.

“The OCF caters – I believe – for both the need of the living and the dead. In the first place, as I always point out to the grieving, the OCF proclaims, from the first words of greeting at the church door, and above all else, the reality of Easter Resurrection and the promise of Easter that we receive in Baptism. ‘In the waters of Baptism X died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he now share with him eternal glory.’

“Not only are the prayers written in beautiful English (some of them lifted from the Book of Common Prayer) but they are so varied that a choice can be made to speak to the breadth of circumstances confronting the minister from the death of a child, through tragic death to the peaceful end at the conclusion of a full and creative life that all must wish for and only a lucky few attain. The needs of the intensely church-involved are catered for, as are those semi-detached Catholics whose funerals I have been doing....for 20 years now.

“Whether I am doing the funeral of a still-born baby, an accident victim, a suicide, a sick mother leaving behind an infant, a heroin/alcohol addict or an old man after a long and fulfilled life I know that the OCF, coupled with the excellent funeral lectionary, will provide me with the resources to speak to that particular grief and loss.”

That is a powerful endorsement, rooted in demanding and sometimes harrowing experience at the coal face in hospital, crematorium and house of mourning, if coal face isn't too tactless a metaphor in the context of crematoria: and as someone who has never ministered to the dying or the bereaved, I don't have the impudence to say a word against it.

BUT....assurance of resurrection can become a glib failure to take seriously enough the EXPERIENCE of loss, bewilderment, and anger which death arouses. The fierce language of lamentation and protest, of ANGER about death, not least anger with God, which is so deeply embedded in the older liturgy seems to me to carry its own deep authenticity and wisdom, and it corresponds to something very widely experienced. To move too readily from the articulation of the horror and loss of death, what Newman calls the “masterful negation and collapse of all that makes me man” can be to offer a sticking-plaster as a nostrum for an amputation.

My own wife took more than five years to emerge from the desolation of the loss of her mother, and to her dismay in those years she found very little comfort in the hopeful assurances of the liturgy, for which she was simply not humanly ready. This may for all I know be an unrepresentative case, but the basic experience of prolonged grief is surely not uncommon, and the eagerness of the new liturgy of the dead to preach hope and resurrection without much admixture of darker feelings seems to me not to offer much purchase, nor any objective correlative, for those dark and negative feelings which have to be lived through, not suppressed.

For the same sort of reason I am suspicious of the elaboration of certain kinds of symbolism at funerals – the placing of various objects on top of the coffin for example to express aspects of the dead person's life and interests – as a generalised post-

modern clutter, like the teddy-bears and sloppy messages that multiply now round the site of any celebrity death or mishap: kitsch distractions from the tremendous realities of loss, sorrow, sin and redemption which are the proper matter of the liturgy.

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Letter to the Editor

Is it a sin to have more than our fair share?

Dear Sir,

Blessed John Paul II talked of ecology during an address he gave in the USA in 2001. "Thus is seen the harmony of man with his fellow creatures, with creation and with God, which is the plan willed by the Creator. This plan was and is continually upset by human sin, which is inspired in an alternative plan, portrayed in the Book of Genesis itself (Chapters 3-11), which describes the affirmation of a progressive conflictual tension with God, with one's fellow men, and even with nature. Yet, man's lordship is not 'absolute, but ministerial...'"

Interestingly, over the last decade there has developed a religious movement in North America and Ireland known as Green Sisters. In her book of that name Sarah McFarland Taylor describes how Green Sisters are environmentally active Catholic nuns working to heal the earth as they cultivate new forms of religious culture. Inviting us into their world, Taylor offers a first-hand understanding of the experiences of women whose lives bring together orthodoxy and activism, and whose lifestyle provides a compelling view of sustainable living. As a result lawns are being uprooted and organic crops are being sown.

In another initiative the WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is trying to get spiritual leaders to guide their flocks to be stewards of the Earth. In Genesis God speaks to Noah and establishes a covenant between him and every living creature on the ark. Over 80% of people in the world identify themselves as religious. Faith-related institutions operate half of the world schools. In sheer numbers they could be a major influence for conservation and tackling global warming.

The difficulty at the individual level is that the problem of pollution and global warming is of such a scale that it can only be tackled at the governmental level, and there is little that an individual can do about it. At the human level there has been a growing awareness that we must use fewer plastic bags, we must recycle and manage our waste and we must not waste food. This awareness experienced by a minority must be expanded to the whole population.

How can this be done? At one time it was thought to be wrong to drink and drive, and although people were exhorted not to drink and drive they showed little response. However, when a law was passed and breathalysers were used to enforce it attitudes totally changed. Today the law receives full general support and it is effective.

The same principles must be applied to the faithful's attitude to the stewardship of the