

Reflection for Funeral Ministry Team Meeting prepared by Dr. Sandra Cullen

Recall a funeral liturgy you attended (either the reception of the Remains or the Funeral Mass)

- Where was the coffin placed?
- What was put on the coffin? When?
- Where was the coffin placed after the reception? When was this done?
- Did people process with the coffin or wait in the church?
- Where did the mourners sit?
- Could you hear/see what was happening?
- Who proclaimed / chose the readings?
- What were the readings?
- Music?
- What was carried in procession? When?
- Flowers/cards/book
- Homily
- Prayer of the Faithful – who was involved in these?
- How did the celebrant lead the liturgy?
- Was there a funeral team involved?
- How did the undertakers approach their task?
- How was the sympathy line handled?
- How were the family treated?
- Did anyone from the family speak before during or after the ceremony?
- Was this a personal funeral?
- Was the liturgy appropriate?
- What was your impression of this funeral?

For small groups

Think of **your own** parish church as you reflect on these questions...

What does your parish do well in relation to funeral liturgies?

What one thing do you think your parish could do better?

The “Funeral Ministry Team” may well be the most important mission team in your church, how aware is the rest of your parish of the role of this team?

What suggestions do you want to bring back to your parish?

For personal reflection: What do I bring to this ministry?

Reflections and Experience
of being a member of a Funeral Team - Church Of The Divine Word, Rathfarnham
by Geraldine O'Keeffe

Our Funeral Team came together through invitation over five years ago in my parish in Marley Grange. It followed on from a Bereavement Group that had been in existence for quite a number of years. At some point the life of that group came to an end and it was to be replaced by forming a Funeral Group that would take on certain tasks and roles for funerals within the community. This was a new Ministry being introduced into our parish in Marley Grange, Rathfarnham.

Selecting the Funeral Team was done by invitation from some of the existing members of the Bereavement Group and perhaps the Parish Priest at the time. I remember a person coming to me and asking me would I consider being part of such a group. I just said yes, as my idea of parish and community life had taken on a different meaning for me around that time. I feel it was due to the fact that I was seeking to understand what my faith in God really meant to me now as an adult. Also I had experienced death on a more personal level. Both my parents had died within five years of each other. It had left a gap in my life and a great sadness.

I felt that being part of this new ministry would help me to understand more fully the meaning of life and death. It might ease my own fears around dying and encourage me to live my life to the full.

I had heard that phrase often from John's Gospel, 'I have come so that they may have light and live it to the full' (John 10:10). This concept of living life to the full was something I wanted to come to grips with. I didn't want to live my life thinking about dying, I wanted to embrace life and all the joys and sorrows that are part of our human existence. I felt by making a commitment to join this group that it would help to do just that. That might seem ironic but it made sense to me in that if I could accept that death was part of my journey as a human being then I could get on with the business of living and participating more fully in the life of the Church and the community to which I belonged.

Pastoral Reflections:

September 2003 – First meeting.

The first meeting was arranged and we met in the parish house with two of the priests. We just sat around the table and introduced ourselves. I did not know some of the people at the meeting. There were seven to start with and then we got two more new members, again this was done by invitation. If I recall I don't feel any person there had experience of being involved at parish level with funerals. It was a good place to start; we were all beginners so to speak, although many of us had personal experience around loss and death. We all felt and knew that we would need training and guidance until we felt more comfortable with the whole concept of this ministry. Concerns were raised as to how the community would receive us. Our parish priest at the time allayed our fears around that. He assured us that through our Baptism we are called to be disciples of God and therefore we have our role to play in the Liturgical and ritual life of the Church.

Ministry is “the public activity of a baptised follower of Jesus Christ flowing from the Spirit’s charism and an individual personality on behalf of a Christian community to proclaim, serve, and realise the kingdom of God”

From the various meetings we had with the priests in the parish I think we began to see that as baptised Christians we were being called to help build up this ministry in our community. But we still had some reservations and concerns as to how the community would perceive our participation and presence at funerals. From attending these meetings we became aware that we had to present this Ministry of Consolation in a very positive way into our parish. The next step forward was to organise a training program, in order that we would have the skills and knowledge to become effective as a Funeral Team in our community.

Our first **input** of Training around the Rites and Rituals took place at our Parish Centre, Marley Grange.

Workshop February 2004

Content:

- Input
- Rites and Rituals from the moment of death to the moment of burial
- Practical suggestions for parishes
- Issues for funeral teams
- Resources

I will just share on some of **these points briefly** in particular the ones that are relevant to **funeral teams**.

- Since Vatican II, over 40 years ago we have been influenced by a theology of ministry...
- “It’s my church too”... It’s my church too as men and women, as laity and priests, as all kinds of groups.
- It is all ROOTED in our Baptism

Rites and Rituals from the moment of death to the moment of burial:

How a Funeral Team can help and participate in these Rites and Rituals

- The needs of the priest – how can the funeral team assist him when he learns that someone had died in the community? [e.g. does anyone from the team know the person/the family? Has the person been ill for a short or long time? Other information that the team might be aware of that they can pass onto the priest].
- Permission and approval of the family – has the priest checked with the family about a member from the team calling on his behalf or with him?
- Preparation of the Liturgy – a funeral team would visit the homes of the bereaved with the priest to assist with the arrangements, pending the family’s approval.

Removal

- The removal takes place from the hospital, home or funeral home the evening before the Funeral Mass or on the day of the Funeral.
- The **funeral Team** could lead prayers in the home or the funeral home if the priest is unavailable
- Respect, humility and sensitivity are the order of the day here.
- When it comes to the final goodbyes and the closing of the coffin, the prayer leader can ask people to step outside in order to give the family privacy to say their final goodbyes.

Reception of the Body Into the Church

- Funeral team can gather at the entrance to the church with the priest. [aside-procession to the Altar – mirroring Baptism again]. Baptism begins at the door of the church to welcome the new member that has been brought or comes to be baptised. A Christian funeral also starts at the entrance to the church. After the opening prayer and blessing of the coffin the members of the funeral team/servers/priest can then process into the main body of the church.

Some other roles that funeral members can do

- Act as acolytes.
- Put the symbols on the coffin or ask family members to do it.
- Symbols of the person's life can be brought in this procession by the family and placed on a table – (this is something a funeral team could mention to the family when they visit to help make the funeral arrangements)
- Do a reading.
- Show family to their seats.

Funeral mass

As I said if any of the funeral team knows the deceased, they could pass this information to the priest – for his homily

- When the family leave the church, the funeral team could be there, in the background, to lend support if necessary.

Then we had a **practical Session** – this session took the group from the door right through the procession to the Altar and as far as the opening prayer

Purpose of this session – it will be extremely useful when such a group is set up and running in a parish and also when such a group in the absence of a priest, preside over a reception themselves.

The next session May 2004 – where do we go from here?

It is hoped that we would do an entire enactment from the reception/removal of the body into the church, to the moment of leaving the church after the funeral Mass the next day. The removal is a very traumatic time for the family because they are now moving to the wider community – It is a PUBLIC ACTION. A funeral home or the person's home is a much more private place.

Resources

- (a) Volume III of the lectionary
- (b) Order of Christian Funerals (Irish Edition).

This was a very worthwhile workshop for us as a team starting into a new Ministry of Consolation. It also was a bit overwhelming taking it all in. But I think the general consensus was that it gave us a greater appreciation and understanding of our role as a Funeral Team in our parish.

I took the opportunity to participate in this training session as I felt the role-playing could teach me how to preside at the Reception of the Body into the Church, if this situation arose within our community. I have a list here of further training that our Funeral Team did.

Issues for Funeral Teams:

- Commitment/ongoing Training
- Confidentiality
- Continuity
- Empathy
- Ethos
- Humanity
- Humility
- Respect
- Sensitivity
- Sincerity

Resources for Funeral Teams:

Order of Christian Funerals (Irish Edition)

A Celebration of Life: When a loved one dies (Redemptorist Publications)

Celebrating a Catholic Funeral (The National Centre for Liturgy) www.liturgyireland.ie

My Personal Reflections on being part of this ministry since 2003.

In our first year of existence we were asked to look after the November Liturgy of Remembrance. We spent time in the preparation of this Service of Remembrance and we now plan and present it each year. It is a time when we come together as a community to pray and remember our loved ones and those who have died during the year. We have I feel worked well as a group together, that is not too say that by times we have had our differences within the group, well that is how I have experienced it anyway. But our focus was always on the practice of good ministry as a funeral team, leaving our own individual agendas aside.

Difficulties: Initially meeting on a regular basis helps to address any differences or difficulties that may have come to light. Just be mindful not to place too much emphasis on this especially in the early days of forming your team. You will need to look at what skills and training would be required in order that you may feel comfortable and confident in this Ministry of Consolation, in your parish/community.

Stage 1

- Forming – gathering the people
- Testing – is this for me do I have a sense that I would like to be part of this ministry?
- Some people may feel initially or more definitely that the ministry is not for them. But I believe that a good way to measure that is to give yourself a reasonable amount of time to make a decision around leaving the group/ministry.

After the first year

- We were commissioned and validated as the Funeral Team at the Sunday mass.
- Since then we have made good progress and we have been involved with all of the funerals in our community.
- We have visited the homes of the bereaved with or without a priest.
- We have led the prayers at the Funeral Home and in the person's house.
- We have assisted at the Reception of the Body in the Church.
- We have helped the families concerned to choose the readings and have most times read on behalf of the family at the evening liturgy.
- We have accompanied the priest to the graveside and led some of the prayers there.
- I have gone with the priest to the Crematorium and led the prayers.
- We have prepared and compiled our own Funeral Book so the person who is bereaved can have the book to choose the readings and Prayer of the Faithful.

- I believe as a Funeral Team that we have been very effective and committed over the last number of years to this ministry. In the future Funeral Teams may be called upon to face other challenges and might be asked to participate at a different level. I would hope that we would be able with training to accommodate these challenges in the Church of today.
- We attend workshops each year in The Irish Hospice Foundation, Nassau Street. There is a yearly allowance made to us to attend workshops and any course that we feel would benefit us in our ministry.
- We have our own book "Order of Christian Funerals" and our own sprinkler to bring to the funeral home, if are leading the prayers. The Bible, the Cross and our Stoles that we wear for the funerals in our parish/community.

