

Saints and sinners: Funerals need to be more personal

A friend of mine called the other day complaining that a funeral service he had attended "didn't even mention the name of the deceased." He found the service unsatisfying. I know how he felt.

A funeral service does not have to be a three-hanky affair, but I am afraid some churches go to the opposite extreme.

Sometimes, at an Episcopal service — with which I am most acquainted — people aren't even aware that someone has died.

This is not an oversight on the part of the Episcopalians. It is the way that they want it. Like the British from whom their church is descended, they tend to view any show of emotion as a bit vulgar.

Dignity is what the burial service in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer strives for. And

to be sure, there is great dignity in the printed words, although much of the dignity can be lost if the reader does not read well.

That is partly what was wrong with a recent Episcopal funeral that I attended. It should have been an imposing service — the man who died had been a distinguished churchman — but it wasn't.

Here again, however, the Episcopalians pride themselves on the fact that the humblest member of the church gets the same service read at his funeral as the Queen of England will get at hers. Worldly status makes no difference. This, of course, is as it should be.

But the trouble with these Episcopal funerals I am talking about is not that they are too dignified or that the service is the same for everyone, but that they are too impersonal. A funeral should be personal. I am not suggesting that every funeral should have a maudlin eulogy.

By personal I mean that the words spoken must speak vividly and personally about the momentous matters of life and death that cannot fail to be on everyone's minds.

The members of the bereaved family, already experiencing "the constant missing of what



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used to be always here," wonder whether they have lost their departed loved one forever. What shall we tell them?

"When the blow fell, that was the one and only thought that kept beating like a hammer in my brain," said Arthur Gossip, the great Scottish preacher, when his wife died. "I felt I had lost her forever."

But later he was able to say, "I know now that I have not lost her. For love is not a passing thing one leaves behind."

Still later, Gossip was able to dedicate a book he had written to "my wife, my daily comrade still."

Gossip could have given an answer to St. Paul who asked, "Oh death, where is thy sting?"

"I can tell him where death's sting lies," said the Scottish preacher. "Ah, it is the bitter grudge

every second of the dear body to the senseless earth — anything, nothing, and the old overwhelming pain is back again."

But ultimately, it was his realization that love is eternal that made him sure he had not lost her. That knowledge filled the emptiness her death had brought.

There was something else. "When we are young," he said in the sermon he preached the Sunday after his wife's death, "heaven is a vague and nebulous place. But, as our friends gather there, more and more it gains body and vividness.

"And when your dearest have passed yonder, how real and evident it grows, how near it is, how often we steal yonder. Never again will I give out that stupid lie, 'There is a happy land, far, far away.' It is not far. They are quite near."

Catholics reach out to those who've wandered away from the church

By Jay Lindsay

Associated Press Writer
BOSTON — Caroline O'Brien didn't break from the Roman Catholic church. She quietly walked away.

O'Brien was an 18-year-old Harvard freshman with serious doubts about the church's stand on women's issues. The last straw was a Cold War sermon implying all Russians were evil. It turned her off, and she was gone.

"I just kind of got fed up," she said. Sixteen years later, she came back. Her return started with feelings of despair and an unplanned visit to Mass at the Paulist center in Boston. That led her to Landings, a Paulist program for Catholics who've left the church.

"My life is completely changed," said O'Brien, now 40. "I have so much patience. I know my place."

Landings and the Come Home Min-

istry at St. Anthony's Shrine, both in Boston, are examples of programs aimed at bringing inactive Catholics back into the fold.

The rise of such programs reflects Catholics' move from being an American subculture into the mainstream, where they haven't always been welcome, said religious studies professor Dennis Doyle of the University of Dayton.

Once a group blends into the mainstream, it has to increase evangelism to stay strong, he said. An obvious target for Catholics is their alienated members, he said, adding that reconciliation groups tend to emphasize that the church is changing, more understanding, more flexible.

"One key feeling that comes through ... is that the Catholic church is different looking," he said.

Some of these groups are using decidedly mainstream ways to get out their messages.

An ad in a Boston newspaper for Come Home was addressed to Catholics who had left the church due to "busyness, lifestyle, divorce, invalid marriage, feeling excluded, hurt feelings, ministerial abuse or ???." It urged them to get in touch with the ministry.

Certain church teachings have proven particularly troublesome to modern parishioners. For example, the church opposes remarriage after divorce unless an annulment is granted. It opposes artificial birth control. It won't allow women into the priesthood.

Peggy Lavoie, a layperson leading a Landings group in Boston, said many people view the church as rigid and anachronistic.

"The Catholic church is not a democracy," she said. "Some people feel they don't have the kind of power and the kind of democratic voice they're accustomed to in other parts of their lives."

But other faiths face similar issues, and besides, Lavoie said, disagreements don't necessarily end relationships in other parts of life, and don't have to mean a break with the church. "People who are mad at their families still get together at Thanksgiving," she said.

Landings focuses on getting people to talk about their spiritual lives and why they left Catholicism — and it adds good food and socializing to the mix. Lay leaders also make people aware of specific ministries that might help, such as groups for divorced Catholics.

Lavoie said many people find the church more willing than expected to

respond to their voice.

Still, Landings doesn't bend church doctrine to accommodate those who are uncomfortable with it, said the Rev. Jac Campbell, the group's founder.

"Where there's the ability to be flexible, you're as flexible as you can be, without being wishy-washy," he said.

O'Brien said her return to Catholicism didn't lead to total acceptance of church doctrine.

"I might not always agree with it," she said. "But it's my vehicle, it's how I connect with God."

About 250,000 people have gone through the landings program in 10 years, according to Campbell.

Jackie Stewart of the Come Home Ministry credits the basics of the faith, as well as its sacraments.

"The Catholic Church has mystery and tradition," she said. "People who

have been born and raised in the tradition miss it when they're away from it."

Campbell compares being born Catholic to being born American — it remains part of your identity no matter where you end up.

"It's the beginning church in Christianity," he said. "Once they're Catholics, the church never throws them away. Many of them, in their own hearts, it's just where they feel at home."

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