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A Resurrection Choir: Bringing the Support of the Parish to Funeral Liturgies, Part 1



Have you ever attended a funeral at which the only people singing were the cantor and the parish musician, or no one seemed to know the Mass parts? This may happen for many different reasons: the family and friends are too overcome with grief to even think of singing, the funeral is for a very elderly person and there is a very small turnout, guests from other parishes are not familiar with the repertoire, or family members of the deceased are no longer practicing Catholics and are unfamiliar with both the hymns and the mass parts.¹

Wouldn't it be nice to have a solid group of singers that could lead the congregation in both the music and the ritual actions? A group that could represent the parish? That could move beyond the sadness of death to the joy of Resurrection? And wouldn't the parish want to extend care to the family in some concrete way? One way would be through voices supporting the sung prayer in the funeral liturgy. Perhaps you need a funeral choir.

■ Professional Mourners or Ambassadors of Christ?

Professional mourners have been found in many different cultures. In ancient Greece, women followed the funeral processions, singing dirges and wailing lamentations, clapping hands as they went. This was common in early Egyptian and Jewish traditions as well. Italian women were hired to sing at the graveside and Irish mourners were called *keeners*. In her study of ancient Greek culture, Margaret Alexiou explained, "The lament was by no means just a spontaneous

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outbreak of grief. It was carefully controlled in accordance with the ritual at every stage.”²

Because today’s culture has lost touch with the power of ritual, it is important that people who understand and have faith in the rich and beautiful rituals of the Catholic funeral liturgy be present. In this sense the choir is not simply a group of mourners. Rather, the funeral choir members are ambassadors. Second Corinthians 5:19–20 says:

And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

The *Rite of Christian Burial* provides rich spiritual resources for understanding death as a return to God with hope for eternal life anchored in Christ’s Resurrection. Thus, as Resurrection Choir members help the people to participate in this celebration, they are ambassadors of Christ. One could also say the choir becomes the formal representative of the parish. On the reception of the body at church, the *Order of Christian Funerals* (#131) states:

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of reception of the body at the church has great significance. The church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in baptism, nourished in the eucharist, and where the community gathers to commend one of its deceased members to the Father. The church is at once a symbol of the community and of the heavenly liturgy that the celebration of the liturgy anticipates. In the act of receiving the body, the members of the community acknowledge the deceased as one of their own, as one who was welcomed in baptism and who held a place in the assembly. Through the use of various baptismal symbols the community shows the reverence due to the body, the temple of the Spirit, and in this way prepares for the funeral liturgy in which it asks for a share in the heavenly banquet promised to the deceased and to all who have been washed in the waters of rebirth and marked with the sign of the faith.³

This paragraph speaks eloquently of both the sacraments and the role of the Christian community. It bears strong witness to the priesthood of the people, as does *Lumen gentium*:

Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among people (cf. Hebrews 5:1–5), “made a kingdom and priests



to God his Father” (Revelation 1:6; cf. 5:9–10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.⁴

In my parish I have one elderly gentleman who goes to every single funeral. He has lived his entire life in this town, so knows most of the parishioners. While he is limited by bad knees and some arthritis, he feels that praying is a ministry he can do. Now, because of our funeral choir, there are many members formally engaged in this ministry as ambassadors of Christ.

Indeed, the *Order of Christian Funerals* itself calls for this participation in paragraph 153. “An organist or other instrumentalist, a cantor, and, whenever possible, a choir should be present to assist the congregation in singing the songs, responses, and acclamations of the funeral liturgy.”⁵

■ Establishing a Group

In this article, I will offer a “nuts and bolts” approach to the funeral choir that will present you with a series of questions to consider. Many of these should be answered before you begin a choir; others will be answered as you discover the best path for your parish. Some of this information will apply to your situation, and some will not.

Getting Started

Though the Church year begins with Advent and ends with the solemnity of Christ the King, in many ways activities revolve more around the school year. Because of this, fall is a wonderful time to invite and encourage parishioners to become involved in new ministries. If your parish does not already have a choir to sing at funerals, this would be an opportune moment to begin such a ministry.

A Name for the Group

So what are you going to call this new ensemble? The title itself could communicate a great deal about its role and

theology. "Resurrection Choir" and "Funeral Choir" are very common titles; other parishes may call this group the "Senior Choir."

Advertise

You may wish to begin by stimulating parish interest in the choir before you start and then build enthusiasm. Use the bulletin, pulpit announcements, parish newsletter, signs at church doors, parish websites, and any other resources that you may have to get people involved. By showing your own excitement about this new ministry you may attract members. Is there a senior citizens group that meets at your parish regularly? Speak to them, and you are sure to attract several new members. But word of mouth still seems to be the best source of recruitment.

Rehearsal Time

Most funeral choirs tend to rehearse in the daytime, as they consist of retired individuals and stay-at-home parents. You will need to determine a rehearsal schedule for the group. Much will depend on your expectations and how ambitious your repertoire is, as well as the number of people you have interested.

Will you rehearse weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly? For an hour? An hour and a half? In the morning? The afternoon? Perhaps you will find that you need to rehearse weekly until you have a basic repertoire down, and then you can back off on the rehearsals to once or twice a month. Again, it depends on your group and your expectations. Every rehearsal we begin with prayer and remind choristers of the important role they will be playing in the parish. This sets an appropriate mood to join in song, prayer, and the occasional bit of laughter.

Repertoire

Unless many people from your other choir ensembles join the funeral choir, you will probably be working with an unknown quality and quantity for a while. No matter how well you have things prepared and thought out in advance, inevitably you will need to be flexible to accommodate whatever learning curve is required. In my case, I thought I would begin with simple, two-part selections, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that SAB and the occasional SATB selection were indeed realistic expectations!

In planning your repertoire, in addition to the musical ability of the group you must consider your budget. Will you use a choral version of a hymnal? Do you have enough hymnals on hand and available or are you looking at a major new expense? Will you use octavos primarily? Public domain hymns? Or is this an instance where it may serve you best to contact the publishers and purchase rights to create a permanent Resurrection Choir collection?

Have you considered the vocal ranges of a primarily older group? You may need to transpose music down by a step or a third. If so, then a nice three ring binder would probably be a very good idea, because you can continue to add selections to your repertoire as needed. (When my ensemble first began, we had prepared about 40 different

hymns, and wouldn't you know it? Two of the selections requested at the first funeral were new ones!)

For an inexpensive version of many of the traditional hymns that includes SAB and SATB arrangements, as well as simple instrumental descants, I would recommend OCP's *Traditional Choral Praise*. It is full of good selections at a price that will not break the budget. WLP also has a new version of the *People's Mass Book* that you may wish to consider. Again, much depends on both your parish and your ensemble.

So, now that it is time to actually start rehearsing how do you go about learning a whole new collection? Do not overextend yourself or your choir. Start with the old stand-bys first. They may vary depending on your worshipping community, but my guess is that "Amazing Grace," "How Great Thou Art," "Be Not Afraid," and "Eagle's Wings" will be at the top of the list, along with one or two sets of basic Mass parts. You will also want to have a few feature pieces for preludes, presentation hymns, and hymns after communion. I try to select pieces that dovetail with the Gospel if possible. While I have mentioned the most common funeral hymns, I like to push beyond those. Elsewhere I have written in great detail about expanding the funeral repertoire.⁶ When you are perusing music do not forget seasonal and Marian hymns.

During Advent, you may sing "Soon and Very Soon We Are Going to See the King" which is a great song of hope in the Resurrection. Christmas provides us with lots of great options. "Good Christian Friends Rejoice" tells us "Now ye need not fear the grave, Jesus Christ was born to save. Christ was born for this, Christ was born for this." Check out the words to "Hark the Herald Angels." You will be surprised at how well they fit a funeral.

Lenten songs are all about returning to God, and singing Alleluia with Easter hymns is one of the greatest examples of Resurrection hope. Consider the funeral of someone who has struggled with a lingering illness. How appropriate then to sing "Alleluia, the Strife is O'er." "Hail, Holy Queen" reminds us "and when our life breath leaves us, show us the face of Jesus." Spend time reading the texts of these common hymns; there are many that are applicable.

Although I am focusing primarily on the Mass of Christian Burial, in some parishes the choir also sings at the evening vigil service. That possibility will depend on your parish traditions. If your group sings at vigil services, you may need to expand the repertoire.

In the second part of this article I have included reviews of some of the current music offered by publishers.

■ Details and Logistics

While we have been talking about some of the larger pieces, there are also many little things to put in place. Do you have a dress code? Black and white? Normal attire? Choir robes? Where will the ensemble sit? In an ideal situation, the choir will be a clear and visible part of the congregation, but this may be affected by both the architecture of the worship space and the instruments employed.⁷

Have you developed a plan for the choir to receive communion? For entrances? Some of my choir members were not familiar with overhead microphones when we began and did not realize that if they whispered a nervous question to their neighbor everyone could hear it.

Making Contact

How will you contact members to let them know of an upcoming funeral? Even though I check my email umpteen times a day, not everyone else does, and many of your senior members may not even have access to it. This is an instance when the good old-fashioned calling tree is still a great resource. Depending on the size of your choir, you may want to break it down into two starting branches, or divide it by vocal sections.

One of the hardest lessons I have learned is this: delegate simple tasks. There is no reason you should have to spend time calling every name on that list. With one or two phone calls you should be able to move on to more pressing duties. However, you may want choir members to RSVP to you. That way you can estimate how many will be there on the day and make any adjustments to the funeral repertoire according to your numbers.

If you have many funerals and are blessed with a large number of choir participants, you may wish to divide the choir into two groups that take alternate funerals, or one team that sings at morning funerals and another team that sings at the evening funerals. While I am continuously amazed by the generosity of the parishioners, a run of funerals could wear them out or diminish the number of participants in your ensembles.

Funeral Day

You may want members to be there an hour ahead if you do not rehearse frequently, but 45 minutes or a half hour may be enough if you do a lot of funerals and the repertoire is familiar. In some parishes, where the choir members sing melody only and there is no rehearsal necessary, they are simply asked to show up a few minutes before the funeral begins.

■ Other Considerations

Is the presence of the Resurrection Choir an automatic part of parish funeral liturgies, or does the family of the deceased have a choice about inviting them? Consider this carefully. While you do not want to appear to play favorites at certain funerals, some families simply may be more comfortable with a cantor and an accompanist. You will need to be sensitive to these issues, at least until the choir is firmly established in the parish.

Will you be directing the choir as you accompany them, or will you need to hire another musician as accompanist so that you can direct the ensemble? This depends on your ability to accompany and give cues at the same time; it depends on the skill of the choir members; and it depends in a big way on the physical set-up of your worship space. If

you are playing the keyboard will you have a clear line of sight with the choir, or will your back be turned to them? There really are many details to think through.

Will you still need a cantor? Or can the choir lead the congregation without one voice singing out. Again, music selections, specific parish, and ensemble abilities are all factors. What you may also discover is that the Resurrection Choir is a launching point for new cantors! This could be an advantage both for funerals and other parish liturgies. If you are bringing in a cantor who is used to being more like a principal soloist at a funeral, make sure that you, the cantor, and choir members all have your signals straight.

Honorarium

I have written of the Resurrection Choir as ambassadors for Christ, and while this may be beautiful and good, it is not going to come free. The reality is that it will cost money for music and books, as well as electricity and gas to rehearse. Do you plan on recouping these expenses, or is that something the parish is willing to absorb as part of ministry?

In some parishes, there is a suggested honorarium for the services of the funeral choir, just as there is a set fee for organist or cantor. In other parishes, it is not expected, and the gratitude and generosity of those who have been touched by the ensemble will easily cover any expenses. Does requesting an honorarium get in the way of ministry and service? Or is it a fact of life?

Which approach is more comfortable for you? I guarantee some people will ask you if there is a fee for the choir when they are planning services, and it is best to have some answer in mind. Personally, I like to think of the choir in the same light as any other liturgical ministry such as reader, server, and lector. It is time given freely and willingly. If families wish to make a free will offering, that is fine. It can go towards new music or some sort of "thank you" for the choir.

Planning and Evaluating

Be sure to work with the liturgist and presider as you develop your ensemble. Be open to their suggestions as a way to streamline and smooth details. After a period of time you may want to have an evaluation by choir members, presiders, prayer and worship commissions, or anyone else who has a good sense of the parish and its funerals. Chances are these people will offer you some great constructive criticism, as well as pat you on the back for your efforts. Both are valuable!

You may discover that having a Resurrection Choir will change the way funerals are prepared in your parish. In my parish, the priest and I meet with the family to choose readings and appropriate music. We used to use the *Through Life to Death* planning resource by Reverend Joseph Champlin, as well as the parish hymnal. It can be an overwhelming process for a family to pick out readings and music in that fashion.

Recently I began using a different approach which seems to be much more user friendly for the families.

It involves suggesting combinations of readings and hymns that fit well together to highlight a central theme in the readings. While the families may still select any readings they wish, these suggestions seem to make planning a more manageable task during times of grief, and also help open the discussion with the priest about the life of the deceased.

■ Words of Parting

It is early fall now, and the feasts of All Saints and All Souls are fast approaching. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you had your funeral choir in place by then? In fact, that would be a wonderful time for this ensemble to make their first appearance. Begin practicing now, and invite your members to bring a friend. You will be surprised as you watch your numbers grow!

There is another wonderful advantage to this group. Once they become comfortable together, you may be able to utilize them for the big liturgical seasons as well, inviting them to sing at one of the Christmas masses or during the Triduum or Easter Sunday. This would take the strain off your other ensembles.

In many instances, your choir members may be a very social bunch. If so, perhaps after a monthly rehearsal they would like to share coffee and homemade treats or go out to lunch. Similarly, after a funeral, they may wish to be present to the family by attending a funeral luncheon, or share a bite together. The summer would be a wonderful time to invite them over to a barbecue as a way of saying, "Thank you."

Returning to the funeral rite one last time, we hear this document echoing *Sacrosanctum Concilium* as it says in paragraph 150:

The full and active participation of the assembly affirms the value of praying for the dead, gives strength and support to the bereaved, and is a sure sign of faith and hope in the paschal mystery. Every effort, therefore, should be made by the various liturgical ministers to encourage the active participation of the family and of the entire assembly.⁸

This is the perfect job for your choir, your ambassadors. And remember: do not let age be a factor. I have learned that a lot of 80 year olds have more energy than some younger folks, and appreciate the outlet! So often it is when we think we are ministering to others that we find out we are really being ministered to. Your choir members will discover that the funerals are a rich and sacred experience, and as a choir director, you will find that your energy level is uplifted by those around you. After our last funeral, a chorister came up to me and said, "You know, this is changing my own thoughts and feelings about death. I used to be afraid of dying, but since I've been involved in this choir and attended more funerals, I'm really gaining a new understanding of the hope in the Resurrection." So, sing a joyful alleluia! as you and your choir join together in the Resurrection song!

Part 2 of this article will provide reviews of appropriate funeral music currently offered by music publishers. It will appear in the November/December issue of *Rite* magazine.

RESOURCES

The Liturgy Documents, Vol. 1, fourth edition (LTP), specifically:
General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002), #312–313
Liturgical Music Today (1982), #30–33
Music in Catholic Worship (1972, 1982), #36
Built of Living Stones (2000), #51, 88–90, 226–227

Order of Christian Funerals, Ritual Edition, Study Edition (LTP)

A Sourcebook about Christian Death edited by Virginia Sloyan (LTP)

Facing Death Together by Margaret Smith (LTP)

I Am the Resurrection and the Life: Resources for Parish Funerals (OCP)

Liturgy Preparation (OCP website): ocp.org/en/PFTN/funeral.php

All Saints/All Souls Planning (GIA website): giamusic.com/sacred_music/planning/allsaintssouls.html

A website describing the work of one funeral choir: funeralchoir.freeservers.com/main.html

Keening the Dead: geocities.com/CapitolHill/5567/keening.html

NOTES

1 See paragraph #30 of *Liturgical Music Today*.

2 Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 4.

3 *Catholic Rites Today*, "The Order of Christian Funerals," Allan Bouley, ed. (Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 571.

4 Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, #10.

5 *Catholic Rites Today*, "The Order of Christian Funerals," Allan Bouley, ed. (Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 575.

6 Jill Maria Murdy, "Funeral Music Fundamentals," *Ministry and Liturgy*, vol. 29, #8, pp. 14–16.

7 See *Built of Living Stones*, #51, 88–90, 226–227. See also GIRM #312–313. Paragraph 312 says, "The choir should be positioned with respect to the design of each church so as to make clearly evident its character as a part of the gathered community of the faithful fulfilling a specific function. The location should also assist the choir to exercise its function more easily and conveniently allow each choir member full, sacramental participation in the Mass."

8 *Catholic Rites Today*, "The Order of Christian Funerals," Allan Bouley, ed. (Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 575.

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