



Classic vestments for liturgy

"Almost" Catholics

Generation X, part 2

Planning funeral music

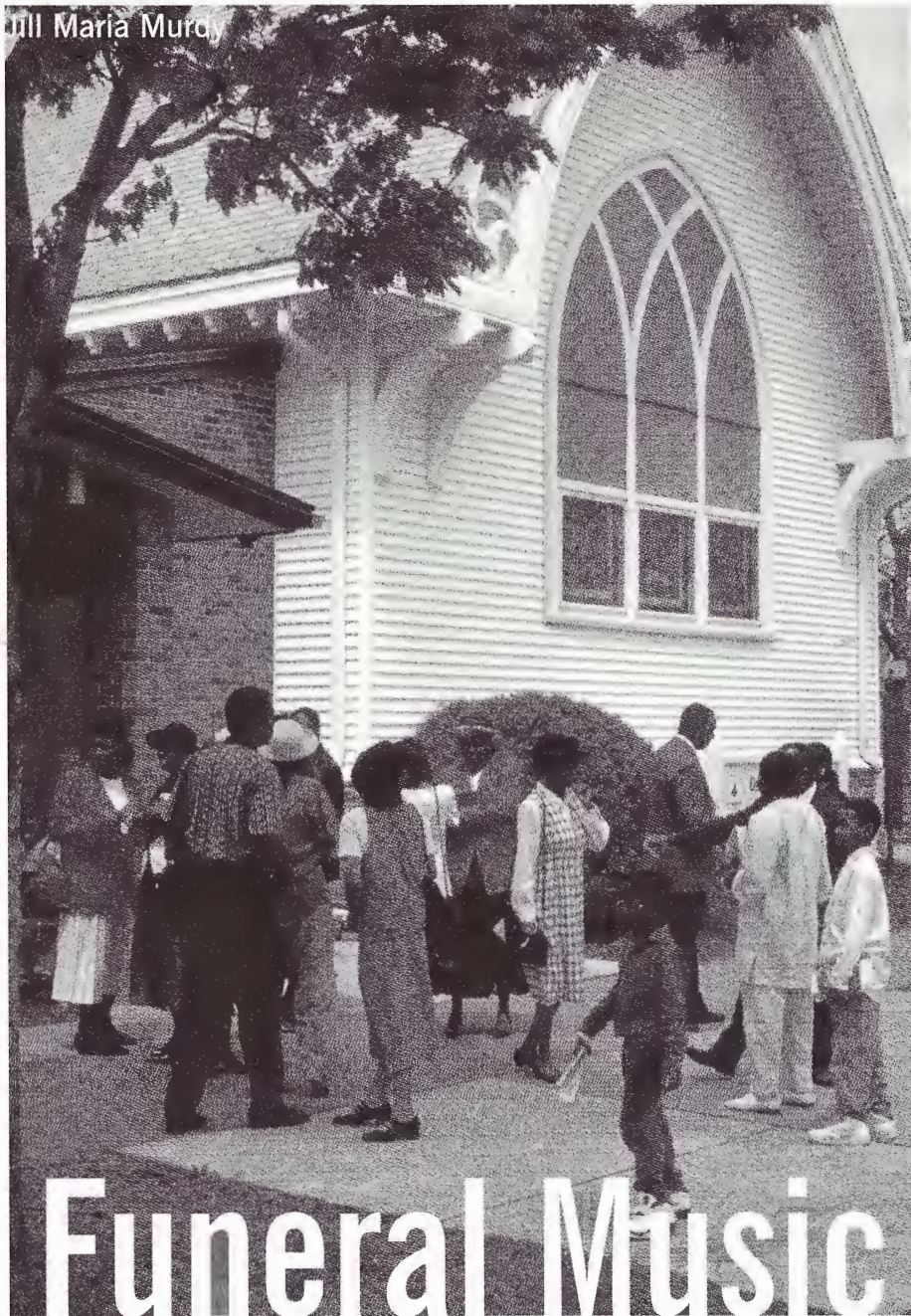
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Funeral Music Fundamentals

Funerals, like weddings, are among the most important and challenging liturgies that take place within a parish. These liturgies bring people together from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. People are often unfamiliar with the structure or shape of the ritual, including the invited soloists and musicians. Unlike any other

liturgies, which are understood to be clearly communal in nature, people can think that weddings and funerals are to be freely personalized and thus shaped in any way a person or a family likes. Anyone who has been involved in liturgy for very long could tell of both horror stories and wonderful experiences at funeral liturgies.

As the General Introduction of the *Order of Christian Funerals* (1998) clearly states, "Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console, and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should *express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death* and should be *related to the readings from Scripture*" (30, emphasis mine).

Hymn resources

When selecting music for funerals, many parishes simply turn to "Be Not Afraid," "Eagles' Wings" and "How Great Thou Art." This is truly a shame, for in doing so they deprive the funeral participants of many other rich possibilities.

The first place to begin when planning a funeral is with the excellent resource guides that accompany most contemporary hymnals. Often there is a whole section of the hymnal entitled "Funeral Music" or "Mass of Christian Burial." In these sections the editors have compiled their lists of hymns. Start, but do not stop, there. Look under similar thematic units such as "Hope," or "Resurrection," or "Journey." I can quickly complete this article by offering you a list of all these selections, but you know where to find them.

Seasonal hymns

When planning a funeral, keep in mind the liturgical season. Perhaps this is most obvious with Easter hymns. It is easy to remember to use "The Strife Is O'er" for a funeral during the Easter season because a funeral is a celebration of resurrection. But do not forget the other liturgical seasons: Advent, Christmas and Lent. These seasonal hymns are the most overlooked, and they have gems. I take a special delight when I use such hymns in a funeral liturgy.

One of the most memorable Advent

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funerals I attended was for the father of a friend who taught high school choir. As the procession left the church, her choir sang "Soon and Very Soon, We Are Going to See the King." It was one of the most joyous celebrations of resurrection I witnessed in that rather stiff parish. Another Advent favorite of mine is "Comfort, Comfort You My People," which continues to sing:

Comfort those who sit in darkness
Mourning 'neath their sorrows' load.
Speak unto Jerusalem
Of the peace that waits for them;
Tell her that her sins I cover,
And her warfare now is over.

The clear Christmas example is "Good Christians All Rejoice," which cries out, "Now you need not fear the grave, Jesus Christ was born to save. ... Christ was born for this, Christ was born for this."

The season of Lent is a little more problematic, as it is difficult to find uplifting themes within the songs of repentance and mercy. World Library Publications has a hymn by Jerome Siwek, set to PICARDY, which is very nice: "We Acclaim the Cross of Jesus." In keeping with a Lenten theme, it could easily be sung a cappella at communion. The sixth verse states,

Cross of conquest, tree of triumph,
Glorious means of our release:
From you Christ's own blood,
descending,
Wins for ours eternal peace.
Through this wood may God grant
mercy,
and his love in us increase.

Marian hymns

In recent years I have had ample opportunities to sing with people on their deathbeds. Often, these moments provide a peace and respite from the struggle and give other family members, who may be uncomfortable with death, a way to enter into the moment. Two profound hymns I have found are Marian hymns, and their appropriateness continues into the realm of the funeral.

In "Hail Holy Queen" there is a line that says, "and when our life breath leaves us, O Maria, show us the face of Jesus, O Maria." "Mary, Full of Grace"

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sings "Mother, Virgin pure, Hope and refuge sure, Lead us safely to Jesus." In using these works, there is both the familiarity of old hymns and the appropriateness of the text. It is a good combination.

Scriptural hymns

The most obvious place to start is Psalm 23. There are probably more metric and through-composed versions of this psalm than almost any other. "My Shepherd Lord" is set to ABBOTS LEIGH, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" is set to ST. COLUMBA, and there are wonderful contemporary settings like Marty Haugen's "Shepherd Me, O God," Christopher Walker's "Because the Lord Is My Shepherd," and even Joseph Gelineau's "My Shepherd Is the Lord."

There are numerous versions of Psalm 27 as well. I have a special affinity for this psalm, as it is one of the choices listed for baptism, confirmation, ordination and funerals. It is definitely a "womb to tomb" psalm, a psalm that can follow someone through life. Its message of hope is infectious, "I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living." Owen Alstott's "To You O Lord" is a personal favorite.

Marty Haugen has a lovely setting of Psalm 42 in "Song of the Exile," as does Bob Hurd in "As the Deer Longs," which is set to the traditional WALY WALY. Lucien Deiss' "My Soul Is Longing" is a classic setting of Psalm 63 that can be a wonderful processional song.

There are clearly other scriptural choices beyond the psalms. For instance, any of the communion hymns that follow the Corinthians concept of one body would be appropriate. The simple Taizé hymn, "Jesus, Remember Me," is an excellent choice if a funeral is expected to be very emotional. This

hymn is so easy to sing along with, and it encompasses both the grief and the hope that the family and friends may be feeling. Bob Hurd's "Shelter Me, O God" takes Luke 13 and gives it a very beautiful setting. His "Come unto Me" is another appropriate song. It encompasses both Isaiah 62 and Matthew 11:

Come, come unto me;
I will make you a jewel,
Precious and rare the glory
you'll bear in the crown of God.
There are deeds you alone must do,
there are words only you can say.
Trust in me, and do not tremble,
for I go with you to show you the way.

While it is not exactly scriptural, Dan Shutte's "Holy Darkness" is a text inspired by St. John of the Cross and would be a powerful selection for a situation such as an accident or a young death — when people are trying to accept a tragedy. With many urban parishes turning to evening funerals and private family burials the following day, it would also fit the evening mode. Here is the refrain; the verses to it are equally compelling.

Holy Darkness, blessed night,
heaven's answer hidden from our sight.
As we await you, O God of silence,
we embrace your holy night.

Soloists

While a soloist might be employed within the liturgy, there are several elements to consider here. The Mass parts are the most important music and belong to all the people gathered in assembly, so the sung version of "The Lord's Prayer" is not appropriate. There are really only one or two places within the celebration that allow for a soloist. The first would be for the preparation of the gifts, and the second possible one, though it really is not in the rubrics, would be a meditation hymn

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after communion. Any more use of the soloist crosses the line from prayer into performance, which is never good liturgy.

Keep in mind that the soloists may be friends or relatives of the deceased and may break down during the song. It is good to have the soloist stand physically near the musician, who can keep an eye on the situation or be ready to take over, either by turning the selection into a moving instrumental or by joining the singing.

Funeral choir

While soloists may not be the greatest idea for funerals, the concept of a funeral choir is a good one. Because so many new people gather together at any funeral and because there are often such strong emotions involved, singing can be the last thing on anyone’s mind. Many parishes gather together a regular funeral choir. This has many advantages.

- There is a group of strong voices to help lead and guide the singing and to know the parish rituals. Because

they may be less attached to the person who died, these participants are less likely to become choked up and unable to sing.

- If someone will have very few mourners, a choir helps bring dignity to the funeral.
- This stable body could learn the beautiful “In Paradisum” chant and continue singing any closing hymn as the mourners file out in procession.
- The funeral choir provides another way for some individuals to minister within the church.

Special requests

Most hymn choices are easily managed within any funeral. Now comes the wild card — that song that Grandma always loved. What do we do with the requests for “Danny Boy” or “The Dance” or “Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goalpost of Life”? In looking for lists of funeral songs on the internet just to see what others were saying, I shuddered to find one site that listed about six hymns and then gave popular songs for funerals. This list included everything from the theme of the Titanic to Ella Fitzgerald’s “They Can’t Take That Away from Me” and Cat Stevens’s “O Very Young.”

When discussing the choice of hymns with the family or friends, it is important to ask: Where is Christ in this song? Often by doing so, someone may be persuaded to move in a different direction and forgo Grandma’s favorite. Using the internet, it is very simple to pull up the lyrics of almost any song that may be in question; all the parties can look at it to better determine its appropriateness.

The problem arises when a song — for instance, Lee Ann Womack’s “I Hope You Dance” — may not be *religious* but does have some sort of *spiritual* element. The choice about whether to include such a song can become very unclear. What is the pastoral and liturgical way to handle such requests?

The choice of hymns may vary in different churches depending on a parish’s guidelines. By developing a list of appropriate hymns using the

resources specific to your church, you may avoid this difficult situation. Remember, a decision made about music could easily alienate a family from the church. A funeral is an emotional time, one in which liturgists can “give” a little. It is not the time to live up to our “terrorist” reputations.

Funerals can also be a time to get a little creative. If you really do not want “Danny Boy” encroaching on your liturgies, there are other options. You could play “Londonderry Air” as an instrumental prelude piece or use another religious setting of this song called, “He Looked Beyond My Fault and Saw My Need,” which would be quite appropriate.

Other songs that are simply inappropriate for funeral Mass might be acceptable as part of a prelude or after the final prayers (if the service is not going to contain a rite of committal at that time). Certainly Elvis’s “My Way” and Sinead O’Conner’s “Nothing Compares to You” fit in this category. I have also attended services in which they cranked the tape of “Daddy’s Hands.” I think it is safe to say that any taped music would only be appropriate outside the service itself.

Conclusion

Time is of the essence in funeral preparations; make the ministry easy for yourself and for the family. Have a prepared sheet to help the family members structure the liturgy well. By providing them a guideline of hymnody and instrumental music that may be appropriate, you are doing a service to yourself as well as to the family. Remember, the service music may not be to your personal taste, but you are ministering to others. Be liturgical and pastoral and you will provide a great service to all. **ML**

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