

# Eulogies during the Funeral Rites

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Death does strange things to those who mourn the loss of a loved one. Grieving is not a matter of feeling sorrow one minute and jubilation the next. This reality strikes deeply in the heart and soul, evoking some outlet to the loss felt. Our Catholic funeral rites try to embrace this reality and experience in the lives of the Church's members and all those who mourn the loss of someone they have loved in life.

One particular aspect that often evokes a number of questions from pastors and those who prepare funeral liturgies in the parish is the inclusion of eulogies during the celebration of the funeral Mass. Interestingly enough, the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF), the prescribed book for Catholic funeral rites, makes only one reference to the word "eulogy" when speaking of the homily during the Liturgy of the Word. Priests or deacons who preach at funeral Masses are reminded that "a brief homily should always be given at the funeral liturgy, but never any kind of eulogy" (OCF, 141). There are several reasons why "eulogies" are not included in the Catholic funeral rites.

The first is due to the fact that Catholic funerals are not designed exclusively for the deceased. That may seem a callous thought, but in fact, the intent of the funeral liturgy provides an opportunity for the *community* to gather "with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery" (OCF, 129). Thanking God for Jesus' triumph over death now manifested in the life and death of the deceased, entrusting our beloved dead to God's eternal care and finding hope and consolation in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus – these are the reasons and the purpose of celebrating the funeral rites of the Church.

A second reason why eulogies are not included in the Catholic funeral rites is the power proclaimed in the Word of God and expounded upon in the homiletic discourse that is to follow. "The homilist", we are directed, "should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord as proclaimed in the scripture readings" (OCF, 141).

A provision is made in the celebration of the Vigil Service for the Deceased and again in the Funeral Mass and Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass for a family member or friend to "speak in remembrance" of the deceased immediately following the concluding prayer and before the dismissal. The rite does not permit multiple persons to share this remembrance, nor does it promote lengthy discourses. The reason is simple. There is an

implied integrity to our public rites warranting a certain decorum and care on our part. We owe this integrity and respect to the memory of the deceased. Multiple comments can become unwieldy and even outright disrespectful of the deceased, especially if the one speaking has not been trained. Speaking in remembrance of the deceased does not include a recap of the deceased person's entire life or lengthy poetry. We are celebrating a holy act of prayer and praise to God in the funeral rites.

One pastoral response that might offer an alternative to the multiple eulogy issue is to provide the opportunity for those to wish to speak to do so at the funeral home during the visitation. This might be done moments before the Vigil Service for the Deceased begins as people are gathered together, or immediately following the service. Another possibility is to have the deceased eulogized at the gravesite after the prayers of Committal have been offered. Limiting the length of the words of remembrance might be best achieved by having the priest-celebrant or parish staff member who oversees the preparation of funeral services preview and/or edit the text that has been prepared before it is delivered. In this way, the integrity of the Church's public prayer is maintained and the opportunity provided appropriately for those who wish to speak in remembrance of the deceased.