

TO SAY A FEW WORDS

Guidelines for Those Offering
Words of Remembrance
at a Catholic Funeral

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PART I

The Privilege

It is always an honor to be asked to say a few words at the funeral, wake, or memorial services of a friend or relative. You were probably chosen for a good reason. No doubt you loved and admired the departed and knew him or her very well. While you may have had some experience with public speaking, most likely you have a limited amount of time to prepare your remarks. Nervousness, as well as your own personal grief, may be at play here, and both are certainly normal responses to the situation at hand.

The information found here is tailored to help those who have been asked to speak at a Roman Catholic funeral. The booklet offers some advice for preparing your remarks and suggestions to help you with your actual presentation. Three sample sets of remarks can be found starting on page 23.



The Preparation

The faith that Roman Catholics believe and practice is rooted in the divinity of Jesus Christ and his promise of eternal life. Death was no stranger to Jesus during his life on earth. He counted mourners among the “blessed” and assured them that they will be comforted. He came to pay his respects to the two sisters of his friend Lazarus who had died. Jesus himself suffered the agony of death, managing to comfort his grieving mother as she watched him in his final moments. Likewise, he forgave the good thief, Dismas and promised him eternal life, even as they both endured the misery of the cross. And who can forget the good news of resurrection that Jesus gave to the world on Easter morning, through the grieving women who came to visit his own grave?

The good news of resurrection, faith in the promise of eternal life, and care for all in need — therein lies the essence of the Christian message. These immeasurable gifts from God are what we remember and celebrate during a Catholic funeral. What takes place during a Roman Catholic funeral service — the scriptures, the music, the homily, and the words of remembrance — should certainly maintain a focus on these primary elements.

There is no reason to be concerned that you might consider yourself ill-prepared or lacking the experience that is necessary to preach Catholic doctrine. Preaching is not your obligation; the privilege of preaching is reserved to the priest or deacon who is

presiding at the funeral. The talk you have been asked to deliver will take place within the context of a religious service and your remarks should reflect the sacredness of the Christian message.



The Church at Prayer

You may recall the old adage, “All politics is local.” In the case of the Church, however, not just the local but also the regional and the universal must be considered. Each and every Roman Catholic parish is a part of the universal Church, and the Vatican therefore governs the celebration of the sacraments and rites within each local church. Specifically, the order of the service, the formulas used, and the exact text are all used with Vatican approval.

By the same token, the local bishop is the chief liturgist in his diocese or archdiocese, and it is his privilege to regulate the church’s celebrations as he sees fit in accordance with Vatican directives. For example, a local bishop may limit the number of people that can offer a remembrance at a funeral held in his diocese.

Last, but certainly not least, certain parish customs may come into play in the celebration of a person’s life and entry into eternal life. The pastor of the local parish and his staff may decide mechanical issues

such as whether or not your remarks will be delivered during the vigil service or the funeral service or which place in the sanctuary may be used to give your talk. It is probable that you will be asked to observe a certain time limit. In some cases, the speaker may be required to show his or her prepared remarks to the priest or presiding minister. (Sharing this information can help develop a more cohesive celebration.)

While some of this might sound confusing, such is not the case. Remember funerals occur on a regular basis in almost every parish, and you can be sure that a workable plan for funerals is in place. Many parishes have bereavement committees, funeral coordinators, and lay ministers that will be happy to answer any questions you might have. The priest, as well as the parish musician, are well versed in the proceedings and are likewise available for questions. It is your responsibility to be well prepared to speak, in advance of the celebration, so that you will be able to deliver your remarks with confidence.

