

# Words in Remembrance

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One of the most surprising rubrics in the Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) for the United States is this: “A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased.” It is rare for the liturgy to permit someone other than the priest or deacon to address the assembly in words of his or her own choosing. This rubric offers no explicit guidelines concerning the length or content of the talk. Furthermore, the permission appears on two separate occasions – during the Vigil for the Deceased (OCF 80), even in the version that includes the reception of the body at the church (OCF 96); and during the Funeral Liturgy (OCF 170), even if it takes place outside of mass (OCF 197). These are not presented as alternatives; they permit two separate addresses to the mourners. In the United States, the introductory paragraphs to the Vigil reinforce the possibility. There, the wording is slightly different: “a member of the family or a friend of the deceased may speak in remembrance of the deceased” (62). It thus foresees the unexpected possibility that the “friend” may be unknown to the family. Accordingly, in five places the OCF permits one mourner to address the rest.

The possibility is clear in the *editio typica* as well, though it appears in Latin only once, and hence for only one occasion. In the course of the funeral mass, after communion, during the final commendation, the rubric says this: “*Conferentia Episcopalis permittere potest ut, iuxta loci consuetudinem, post pausam silentii addantur verba salutationis a propinquis defuncti proferenda*” (*Ordo exsequiarum* [OE] 46). (“An Episcopal Conference may permit that, according to the custom of the place, after a period of silence, words of greeting, offered by the relatives of the deceased, may be delivered.”) This sentence explains a different purpose for the talk; it is called “words of greeting” to be offered by relatives of the deceased. Rather than words “in remembrance of the deceased,” words of gratitude seem to be implied, words with which the family greets the rest of the assembly, perhaps thanking them for their participation.

Who are the *propinqui*? The word occurs in several other places in the missal. In one of the solemn blessings for a wedding, they are paired with the couple, suggesting that the word refers to this gathering of their family and friends.<sup>1</sup> In one of the masses for the dead, *propinquorum* is grouped with *fratrum* and *benefactorum* – apparently distinguishing them from members of the family and benefactors – in the title of that mass and in all three of its

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<sup>1</sup> *Missale Romanum* [MR], editio typica tertia (2002), “*In celebration matrimonii*” C, p. 1037.

presidential prayers.<sup>2</sup> Another grouping of the same three words occurs in a petition from one of the sample prayers of the faithful in masses for the dead.<sup>3</sup> The missal uses the more common Latin word *amici* when it means “friends”.<sup>4</sup> The *propinqui*, then, are probably relatives or very close personal friends. The word never appears in the singular in the entire missal. So when the OE says that words of greeting may be offered by them, it probably means the immediate family or close friends in mourning, and the plural form does not necessarily mean that more than one speaker may take the floor, though one might be tempted to argue otherwise. However, the permission to speak more proximately comes within the limits of what the Conference of Bishops allows, and in the United States, “a member” – in the singular – is explicitly named.

Over the years since the publication of the *editio typica* (1969), many anecdotes have surfaced, telling of how this speech has created more problems than it has resolved. The speaker went on too long. The content was inappropriate. Members of the family were embarrassed. Multiple speakers took turns. Audio and video presentations were broadcast. And so on. On other occasions the speech has sounded exactly the right note. It has allowed a voice for the family to present an insight into the life of the deceased, and to inspire the gathered faithful with a word of courage and hope in the midst of loss. Still, the results have been uneven. Whenever the *editio typica* of the funeral rites is next revised, one has to wonder if paragraph 46 will be changed.

The suspicion is grounded in a revision to a relevant paragraph in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM). There, the issue pertains to the priest who presides for the liturgy. In addition to speaking the parts of the mass that are scripted out for him, he has the freedom to use his own words of instruction at different times of the celebration. Prior to 2002, the GIRM described his responsibilities in this way:

It is also up to the priest in the exercise of his office of presiding over the assembly to pronounce the instructions and words of introduction and conclusion that are provided in the rites themselves. By their very nature these introductions do not need to be expressed verbatim in the form in which they are given in the Missal; at least in certain cases it will be advisable to adapt them somewhat to the concrete situation of the community.<sup>5</sup>

**This paragraph was revised with the third edition of the *Missale Romanum*. Now it reads this way:**

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<sup>2</sup>MR “*Pro defunctis fratribus, propinquis, et benefactoribus*”, p. 1225.

<sup>3</sup>MR “*In missis defunctorum*”, p. 1268.

<sup>4</sup>For example, there is a mass “*Pro familiaribus et amicis*” among those for various needs and occasions. MR p. 1142.

<sup>5</sup>GIRM 1975, 11.

It is also up to the priest, in the exercise of his office of presiding over the gathered assembly, to offer certain explanations that are foreseen in the rite itself. Where it is indicated in the rubrics, the celebrant is permitted to adapt them somewhat in order that they respond to the understanding of those participating. However, he should always take care to keep to the sense of the text given in the Missal and to express them succinctly.<sup>6</sup>

**The earlier version admitted that the nature of these introductions removed the need to read them verbatim from the Sacramentary. One thinks, for example, of the introduction to Passion (Palm) Sunday, which explains the purpose of the ritual. The adaptation of such texts was encouraged. However, in the later version, the priest is reminded that the free choice of words is restricted to “where it is indicated in the rubrics,” and that the purpose of the adaptation is to “respond to the understanding of those participating.” He is admonished to “keep to the sense of the text” and – apparently to correct a prevailing inappropriate pattern – “to express [these explanations] succinctly.”**

**The same advice could be given to those preparing remarks at a funeral. The talk should respond to the understanding of those participating, and it should be expressed succinctly.**

**The very existence of this speech by the *propinquis* is probably a pastoral compensation for the restraint urged upon the priest concerning his homily. “A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy” (OCF 27).<sup>7</sup> The implicit liturgical principle is sound. The homily should proclaim the paschal mystery, not the biography of the deceased. It should lift people’s spirits with the message of eternal life, to which the Church’s teaching is anchored, as the various scriptures of the funeral lectionary make clear. Still, a skilled homilist can hardly ignore the virtuous features of the life of the one who has died. Remembrance of the deceased can appropriately enter the homily, as long as it remains a subtext for the larger message: Christ is risen from the dead, he will come again, and he will raise up those who have fallen asleep in death. Even so, the funeral homily should not be a canonization of the deceased. The entire liturgy does not presume too much. It prays that God will render a merciful judgment on the one who has died.<sup>8</sup>**

**If words in remembrance are to be shared, the Vigil service may offer the better context. In the United States, the main prayer that happens during a wake service is still usually the**

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<sup>6</sup> GIRM 2002, 31.

<sup>7</sup> This is a fair rendering of the instruction from the *Ordo exequiarum*: “*Post Evangelium brevis habeatur homilia, secluso tamen genere elogii funebris*” (41).

<sup>8</sup> Some well-intentioned liturgists have redubbed the funeral mass the “mass of the resurrection,” in order to sound a stronger note of hope for the mourners and to brighten the perceived gloom of the previous generation’s black-vested requiem masses. But this renaming has two problems. One is that it presumes to judge the deceased before Christ has the opportunity to do so; the other is that “mass of the resurrection” better describes what takes place on Easter Sunday morning.

rosary. This tradition has been handed down by generations of Catholics, although it has never been part of the official funeral liturgy. It provided a way for Catholics to offer in common a prayer that many say in private, and to do so at a significant gathering in memory of a loved one who has died. In place of the rosary, however, the OCF has another service in mind. It is, after all, a liturgical book, and its interests concern the flow of liturgical prayer. Consequently it recommends a liturgy of the word, or even part of the office of the dead from the liturgy of the hours (54). In this context the U. S. edition of the OCF first allows someone to speak in memory of the deceased. At the Vigil service, after the readings, the petitions, the Lord's Prayer and a concluding prayer, someone may speak before the minister gives the final blessing. This provision is not foreseen in the OE, but it fits the flow of this liturgy, and is less disruptive than it would be during a funeral mass.

According to the OE, the speech by the *propinquis* forms part of the rite of commendation. The appropriate length and content of this address can be deduced from the logistics. The final commendation and farewell take place following the prayer after communion, or, if there is no mass, after the liturgy of the word. The priest wears either a chasuble or a cope. He stands by the coffin, servers holding holy water and incense near him. He invites the assembly to pray in silence, which all then do. Then, before he sprinkles and incenses the coffin during the song of farewell, someone may offer words of greeting.

The sequence is different in the U. S. translation. There, the priest still goes to a place near the coffin together with the other ministers. But before he says anything, a friend or member of the family speaks. After that, he invites everyone to silent prayer, which follows, and then the song of farewell accompanies the incensation of the coffin; sprinkling is discouraged.

Although there are some discrepancies in the sequence of events, this much is the same: the rubrics envision that the priest is standing at the coffin with the ministers while someone addresses the assembly on behalf of the mourning family. The logistics of this arrangement presume that the words will be brief, so as not to interrupt the flow of the ceremony, nor to prolong the time the ministers are standing by the coffin, ready to continue the service. In practice, even the revised sequence of the OCF is often not observed in the United States. Instead, the speaker addresses the assembly after communion, before the priest leaves his chair, while all are seated.

The family often wants an address at the mass because that is the highlight of the funeral, and it is hard to argue this point. More people will be there. Everyone is expecting some pertinent words to be shared at least by the minister. The words in remembrance will find a heartfelt home in this context.

Still, from the standpoint of the liturgy, if the words in remembrance will consume some time, the Vigil makes a more logical setting for them. The OE does not envision a speech at the Vigil at all, but the OCF permits it. There are so many words and signs at the main funeral liturgy that the remembrance can be lost among them; or worse, it can diminish the stature of the liturgical texts. The liturgy of the word that forms the Vigil more naturally allows a sharing.

Whenever the remembrance takes place, some practical matters should be discussed with the family. Most important is the length of the talk. Brevity is best. In the interests of the liturgy, the parish may place a word count or time limit on the presentation. All will benefit if the presenter writes out what he or she intends to say. Proper content is also essential. The remembrance may include some biographical notes, and it should not veer from the overall direction of the funeral liturgy: an expression of gratitude to God for the gift of life, a recognition of the virtues of the deceased, and a determination to live in accordance with the gospel.<sup>9</sup> The talk does not belong at the ambo, which is reserved for the liturgy of the word. It may be given from a lectern, the cantor stand, or another suitable place.

Some families ask to prepare a video presentation highlighting photographs of the deceased. Again, the appropriateness of this request can be judged in the light of what the liturgy is striving to accomplish. A video may better fill some of the time at the Vigil, rather than draw attention from the purpose of the funeral mass. Besides, the rubric in the OCF is for someone to *speak*, not for a video to be shown.

Some grieving families struggle to convince their priest or pastoral staff to permit a representative to say a few words. Some clergy take affront at the suggestion that their carefully prepared homily would be inadequate to the task. On one hand, the rubrics say someone “may” speak – it is not a requirement, and someone has to judge the appropriateness of it in this particular liturgy. On the other hand, it says someone “may” speak – it is not forbidden, and the mourners are within their rights to request it.

Mourners usually just want the assurance that the deceased will be known and remembered by God. When the homilist communicates familiarity with the deceased, he more convincingly entrusts the lost life into the arms of God’s merciful promises. When the preacher honestly does not know the one who has died, the case for another speaker becomes stronger. If the preacher says, “I never knew N.,” the words will sound as if God never knew N. either. They will hurt more than they will help.

The purpose of the talk can either be words of greeting, as the OE has it, or words in remembrance, as the OCF explains. In either case, they are spoken by someone close to the person who has died. They are placed within the context of liturgical prayer and should not

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, OCF 1-7.

wrestle away its focus. In Catholic liturgy, it is surprising that someone besides an ordained preacher is allowed to speak, but a mourner expressing appreciation and remembrance can communicate faith in the resurrection, comfort to the afflicted, and pastoral care for the deceased.

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