

# **Focus: Ordinary and Extraordinary Liturgies: The End Times of 2014**

**Paul Turner**

We no longer have obituaries in our local paper, the *Kansas City Star*; we have “remembrances”. Many remembrances no longer mention “Funerals”; they invite people to a “Celebration of Life.” We no longer see a pile of dirt when mourners gather at a freshly opened grave; it has been covered with plastic green turf. We no longer remain for the lowering of the body after the graveside service; we walk away while the coffin rests above the ground, as if it will ever remain in full view of the living. We no longer have so many tombstones; cremated remains are contained in homes or scattered across the sea.

**Are we trying to hide the reality of death?**

The Catholic Church’s post-Vatican II funeral rites may have contributed to this cultural phenomenon. We put black vestments away and now wear white ones. We hear homilies that not only eulogize but canonize. The paschal candle that proclaims the resurrection of Christ appears to proclaim the resurrection of this particular body. Some parishes even change the title of the service from the Funeral Mass to the Mass of the Resurrection. But that’s what Easter is.

The Prayer over the Offerings at a funeral mass sounds a more cautious tone. One option, for example, prays “for the salvation of your servant N... that he (she) who did not doubt your Son to be a loving Savior, may find in him a merciful Judge.” The implication is that he-or-she lived in such a way that he-or-she is going need that merciful Judge.

Another prayer sheepishly admits that the dearly departed may possibly not have been quite as dear as we’d like to think. It asks that, “should any stain of sin have clung to him (her), or any human fault have affected him (her), it may, by your loving gift, be forgiven and wiped away.”

Yet another prayer doesn’t mince words: “wash away, we pray, in the Blood of Christ, the sins of your departed servant N.” We know that N. was a sinner. Might as well just say it.

There is a lot at stake when we die. The amenities of the material world will lie beyond our reach. It’s hard to think about death. In fact, it’s easier not to think about it at all. Our culture wants us to believe that we’ll live on earth forever, and that we deserve to enjoy absolutely every day of it. But the Catholic funeral rites are more realistic. They admit that we will die, and that our final judgment is sure in its coming, but unknown in its verdict.

At the end of each Church Year the lectionary opens a dossier of biblical citations that mournfully repeat this somber theme: The end is near. Year A is no different, although it avoids passages about the earth’s inexorable free fall into the waiting conflagration at the end of time. What is different is that this is one of

those years when some extra autumnal celebrations crowd out the regular readings and prayers.

Central among these is All Souls Day. The readings and prayers will differ from one church to the next, and even from one mass to the next within the same parish. The very same options at our disposal for a funeral mass and other Masses for the Dead reappear each year on November 2. This year, it will almost be like having a funeral on Sunday. Fresh from the more uplifting celebration of All Saints' Day, we are plunged into the twin realities of certain mortal death and uncertain eternal life. Catholic piety encourages us to pray for the dead because our prayers may help lift them from the torment of purgatory to the bliss of heaven. We can only hope that others will perform the same favor for us.

Earlier in the fall, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross commands our attention. Celebrated in commemoration of the first display of the relics of the true Cross, it serves as a guilt-inducing reminder that Christ died for our sins. We may be tempted to finesse this into another feel-good celebration of the resurrection, but the liturgy will have us focus on the suffering that Christ endured first. Once again, the Prayer over the Offerings lays bare the reality: It prays that the offering Christ made on the Cross to cancel the sins of the whole world may "cleanse us, we pray, of all our sins."

The annual observance of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran also falls on a Sunday this year. This feast unfailingly disorients musicians, clergy and faithful alike. ("Why are we remembering a big church in Rome? What does that have to do with us?") Yet parishes should also annually observe the dedications of their diocesan cathedral and their own parish church. (Do you know what those dates are? Are you celebrating them every year? No? Is it any wonder why the dedication of the Lateran basilica seems so strange?) The building represents the communities of the past that worshiped inside, as well as the community that continues today. Typically, church buildings house some relics of the saints. Every church from St. John Lateran to the one in your neighborhood is, in a way, a cemetery where Christians mourn the dead and rejoice in the promise of eternal life.

Thanksgiving Day, which will gather families to celebrate abundant food, joyful reunion, and happy play, falls at this time of year because of the harvest. As winter draws near, leaves have fallen, and the crops are exhausted. We lift a toast to the fruits of our labor, even as nature all around us is dying.

The scriptures of the Ordinary Time Sundays offer little respite from the growing awareness of death. On the first Sunday after Labor Day this year, Jesus recommends forgiveness as a way of life. On the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time Isaiah cautions that God's ways are not our ways.

Jesus is embroiled in controversies with chief priests and elders in the gospels of the 26th and 27th Sundays. He tells them pointed parables about two unreliable sons and about a poorly tended vineyard. Predictably, these rile up the enemy faction, whose members conspire to advance Jesus' march up Calvary. The second reading for the 26th Sunday is the classic passage from Paul's Letter

to the Corinthians about the self-emptying of God's Son, who became human and accepted death - even death on a cross. It's the same passage we hear every year on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion.

The adversarial parable on the 28th Sunday has a king desperately going to the outskirts of town to find anyone who will come to the wedding. Those first invited have thoughtlessly served up excuses. The lectionary pairs this with Isaiah's vision of the mountain of God where rich food and drink await those who respond to God's call. That passage appears elsewhere in the lectionary as one of the options for the first reading at a funeral mass.

As a kind of last will and testament, Jesus offers his followers a sublime teaching. Sayings he spoke near the end of his own life surface in the lectionary just before the end of the Church year. He teaches about the two great commandments. If there are any instructions we should remember after his death, it is love of God and love of neighbor.

The parable of the talents on the 33rd Sunday strengthens our awareness of the responsibilities that God has entrusted to us. We face a judgment based on how we use them. There is hope for everyone. Even Cyrus, who did not know the Lord, became an instrument of salvation, as Isaiah recalls in the first reading of the 29th Sunday.

Year A's Ordinary Time draws to a close with the great parable about the last judgment, where sheep and goats take up separate eternal quarters based on how they treated the needy. From St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we will hear the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ. It confirms the vision of where we'd like to be, if we could only be gathered at the shepherd's right hand.

Church musicians usually help people through their times of loss with songs of hope. You can especially do so even on Sundays at this time of year. For example, you could program into the Sunday liturgy this fall some of the music you want to have in repertoire for funerals. That way, when mourners most need to be surrounded by the faith of the Church, they can hear it singing.

But our ministry as musicians will perhaps be even more effective if we take some time to reflect on our own mortality before we try to help other people face theirs.

Have you made out your will? Are your own funeral arrangements planned? Do your family and friends know your preferences concerning your medical care during a final illness? Do you text while you drive? Do you drink and drive? Do you wear a seat belt. Do you listen to the flight attendants when they explain to you how to get out of your plane in the event that it crashes into water?

Or do you think you'll live for ever?

You have probably made a real difference in the lives of people you serve. Yet many of the things you've put into place are going to change after you leave your position, retire, or die. We'd like to think that what we've done will last forever. But much of it will be changed. And so will we.

**There's an old monastic custom pertaining to winter wear. Monks wore their cucula over their habit to keep warm. In some monasteries, they started wearing the cucula in choir each year on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14). And they removed them on the former Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross (May 10). The cucula kept them warm from Cross to Cross.**

**I'm amazed at how many years the first day I need to put on a sweater before going outside is September 14. It is not just a garment to keep me warm. It is a reminder of the fragility of my life, the inadequacies of my body, and my dependence on others to fashion garments to keep me warm in the embrace of winter's hoary death.**

**The cross opens this quarter of the Church year. And its shadow stretches to the grave. May it keep us honest, humble, and dependent upon the salvation that comes alone from Christ the Universal King.**

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