

In 1989 the Catholic Church in the United States published a revision of our funeral rites. It assumes that normally the deceased will be buried in the ground, but it admits the possibilities of cremation and burial at sea. But in describing the service at a graveside, the ritual reminds us that when there is a burial service it should include a burial. That is, it implies a criticism of our custom by which we escort the body to the grave, say some prayers, and then leave before the body is committed to the earth. Here's what the ritual says:

"Through (the act of committal) the community of faith proclaims that the grave . . . , once a sign of futility and despair, has been transformed by means of Christ's own death and resurrection into a sign of hope and promise. . . . The rite marks the separation in this life of the mourners from the deceased. . . . (It) is a stark and powerful expression of this separation. When carried out in the midst of the community of faith, the committal can help the mourners to face the end of one relationship with the deceased and to begin a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude, and the hope of resurrection and reunion."

Beautiful words. But I have learned over the last few years that people are still ~~uncomfortable~~^{unhappy} about watching a burial. The liturgy continues to meet resistance from family members, funeral directors, and pastors. We prefer other rituals: we dress up the deceased; we put makeup on them; we line caskets with comfortable bedding, and we cover that mound of dirt at graveside with polyester grass. When St. Paul asks, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" he could find out by attending almost any American funeral. If somebody dies too poor, too lonely, or too young, our culture concedes the victory to death.

The problem Paul addressed in Corinth was not that death is powerful, but that it is bothersome. The Corinthians doubted the resurrection; they thought baptism was as good as it got until Christ returned, so they couldn't figure out why people were still dying and would they miss out on eternal life which the living would be enjoying. Paul says the living and the dead will have life; when the trumpet sounds at the coming of Christ all will arise: the dead will be raised incorruptible and the living will be changed. Death is not bothersome; it's just irrelevant. There is resurrection; this is the mystery Paul reveals. When Christ comes again all will rise with him. Everyone is wanted, dead or alive.

Mortality flaws us. It not only ends our life; it weakens our faith. We want to believe in the happiness of the next life, but our culture makes us possess and achieve the happiness of this life. That makes us happy, but nervous. Perhaps repeating the good news over and over again will heal our flaw: Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.