

### Insights in Liturgy

# Catholic Funeral Music Today

By FATHER BENEDICT EHMANN

The former severe restrictions on Catholic funeral music have been lifted. The funeral liturgy was, until recently, quite overcast with a gloomy legacy from the Middle Ages, heavy with the dread of death and the forebodings of judgment. Older Catholics will remember the black vestments and the casket pall; the proscribing of flowers for the altar; the grim accents of the *Dies Irae* and the *Libera Me*; the omission of the *Alleluia*; and the exclusion of instrumental music except to support the singing.

All this is changed now. And within ten years! Catholics are now used to what amounts to an almost complete reversal of 700 years of the funeral ritual. The gospel of resurrection and hope was proclaimed in the old funeral rite; but it was so lapped over with sombre funereal regalia that it could hardly resonate with joy in the hearts of the worshipping mourners. But now all these impediments to Christian joy have been divested from the new liturgy. We now have white vestments and casket pall (or purple, if so desired). Flowers may now adorn the altar. The *Alleluia* greeting now ushers in the Gospel. The sign of peace is given. Instrumental preludes and interludes may now grace the silences. The bereaved are rallied (always sensitively, let us hope) into congregational singing.

No longer is the organist (or soloist) to preempt all the singing. The funeral congregation is to be given its part in the *Alleluia*, the

**Holy, Holy, the eucharistic acclamation, and the doxology Amen,** just as on Sundays (and, ideally, on weekdays). But this is just the ideal, and it seems fearfully hard to effect: it. Very often the mourners seem quite incapable of rallying themselves to sing. Many of them and of the rest of the congregation of friends and sympathizers are often, either infrequent churchgoers, or they are from parishes where the singing and responding are minimal. As a result, funeral Mass celebrants often are frustrated by the heavy silence of the people in the pews.

Does it seem a losing battle? It needn't be. Yet there is one indispensable key to success, and I'm afraid many parishes will not buy it. The key to success is a competent leader of the responses and hymns: not the organist, certainly not the celebrant, but a separate person within view of the congregation. Failing such a leader of song, all efforts to rally congregational singing, not only at funerals but at any liturgy, end in failure.

In some churches the funeral director brings the mourners to their places before the service begins, leaving only the pall-bearers and the coffin at the church door. The celebrant comes to the front pew and greets the mourners with words of consolation, and an invitation to join him in the responses and hymns. The ministers go with cross and Easter candle to the back, and lead the casket procession to the front, while the congregation sings the entrance hymn. Then, in full view of all the people, and close to the mourners,

the priest sprinkles baptismal water on the casket and covers it with the pall. There are two attractive verses set to music by Fr. Carey Landry, which are appropriate for just this moment of the water, the candle and the robe, so reminiscent of the long-ago Baptism when the departed began his journey with Jesus to the Father.

This manner of entrance would make for a more orderly, gracious arrangement than what we now have when most of the mourners wait out of sight and sound in the vestibule or in the weather outside, and then plod without a song to their seats behind the casket. But when they are already together in the pews, and with the support of friends and parishioners (who, we hope, come in goodly number with their prayer and comfort), the bereaved family can draw strength for their own faith-response to the death-and-resurrection mystery of the Mass. I am happy that the Vaughan Williams' hymn *For All the Saints* has become such a favorite for the funeral Entrance Hymn: there is hardly a better one. Some fine alternates are: *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, *The Church's One Foundation*, *Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones*, *The Strife is O'er*.

From all of this we are not to conclude that every minute of the funeral Mass is to be filled with music. Not at all. There is need for silences too. Nor are we declaring that the music be only congregational. There is need for preludes and interludes of instrumental music, and also for appropriate choir and solo

singing. Who is to determine this "mix" of all the music components? The bereaved family should be allowed some choice from the approved and available repertoire, consulting with the organist or other representative of the liturgy committee, early enough to avoid last-minute hurry and haphazard selection.

A fine paragraph from our diocesan book of *Liturgy Resources* (Music, p. 59) may be allowed to bring

these random suggestions about funeral music to a close:

"At a funeral, we need to counterbalance the sadness of the participants with music that clearly points to the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection with Him. We need to avoid doing wild, bouncy, happy-go-lucky music because this is not reflective of the people. The music used should help the worshippers come out of their grief and give them a sense of joy."

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