



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Students from Christ the King elementary school listen to Edwin Sulewski as he explains the various aspects of the funeral service.

Christ the King students take course on death

By Karen M. Franz

Death is a subject many of us push to the outer recesses of our minds. We shy from symbols — lilies, coffins, hearses — that shatter our conscious illusion that we and our loved ones are somehow protected from the only certainty in life.

Yet an eighth-grade class at Christ the King School chose to confront those symbols — and the fears they evoke — by including a class on death and dying in their religion program. The two-month mini-course was conducted by Ed Sulewski of Schauman Funeral Home and Christ the King teacher Marcia Miller.

Through film strips, discussion, and field trips to the funeral home and Mt. Hope Cemetery, the class considered the emotions experienced when a loved one dies, the customs associated with death and the Christian perspective on life after death.

Miller's class discussed their experiences late last month and concluded that they had made a good decision in accepting Sulewski's offer to teach the course.

"I thought the whole course made me take a different look at dying," Gaetana Trovato explained. "At first, I was scared ... I feel better (about death) now; I'm not that scared."

Gaetana's classmate, Sandy Supple, agreed. "It showed a better understanding of death and ... it showed me not to be afraid because if somebody does die, you know that they'll still be with you," she said.

One of the concerns commonly voiced by students in Miller's class was that they did not know how to act when they or friends experienced a death in the family.

As Kate Dillon put it, "When a person dies you don't know what to say, and he (Sulewski) told us it's OK not to say anything, and how to help a person when somebody in his family dies."

"We learned about what goes on at a funeral and that it's OK to cry, to show your feelings," Vienna Carvalho added.

But the course material did not merely ease the social tension of funerals. As part of the trip to Schauman Funeral Home, students saw a body laid out in one of the viewing rooms. That experience forced the students to confront an image some had never encountered before or to relive painful experiences from the past.

"The worst part was the room with the dead body in there," Steve Andiloro said. "It was the first time I'd ever seen one (a corpse) and it really got to me, bad, even though I didn't know him."

"The (hardest) thing for me was that it reminded me of when I went to my own grandfather's funeral," Diane Vercurysse recalled, "and it made me feel sad."

For Dillon, learning about the various stages of grieving brought an understanding of her own feelings at

a trying time. "When he (Sulewski) was going through the different steps of grieving, I remembered when my brother died and I was going through some of them. I kind of felt guilty."

Though seeing a corpse was not pleasant, Sandy Supple noted that "It's easier to cope with the death of a stranger than someone close. We saw a stranger, and it's easier to cope."

"My grandfather died when I was little, and I remember everyone crying," she added. "But if we could just remember those memories, they would still be with us."

A major point of the course elaborated on that theme. "I learned that death's not really the end of somebody's life, it's the beginning of their new life with God in heaven," Aimee Moriarty noted.

Toward the end of the course, Christ the King pastor, Father Donald E. McCarthy, visited the class to discuss the role of the Church at the time of death. His presentation also assuaged some of the fears class members had experienced about death.

"Father McCarthy said he had watched people die and that they just fell asleep," Michelle Pecor said, noting that his description made her feel less afraid of death.

Father McCarthy also discussed the role of wakes in the grieving process. "Father McCarthy said when you don't see a person for the last time, something's wrong," Dillon said. "A wake lets you see the person one last time and helps you deal with it."

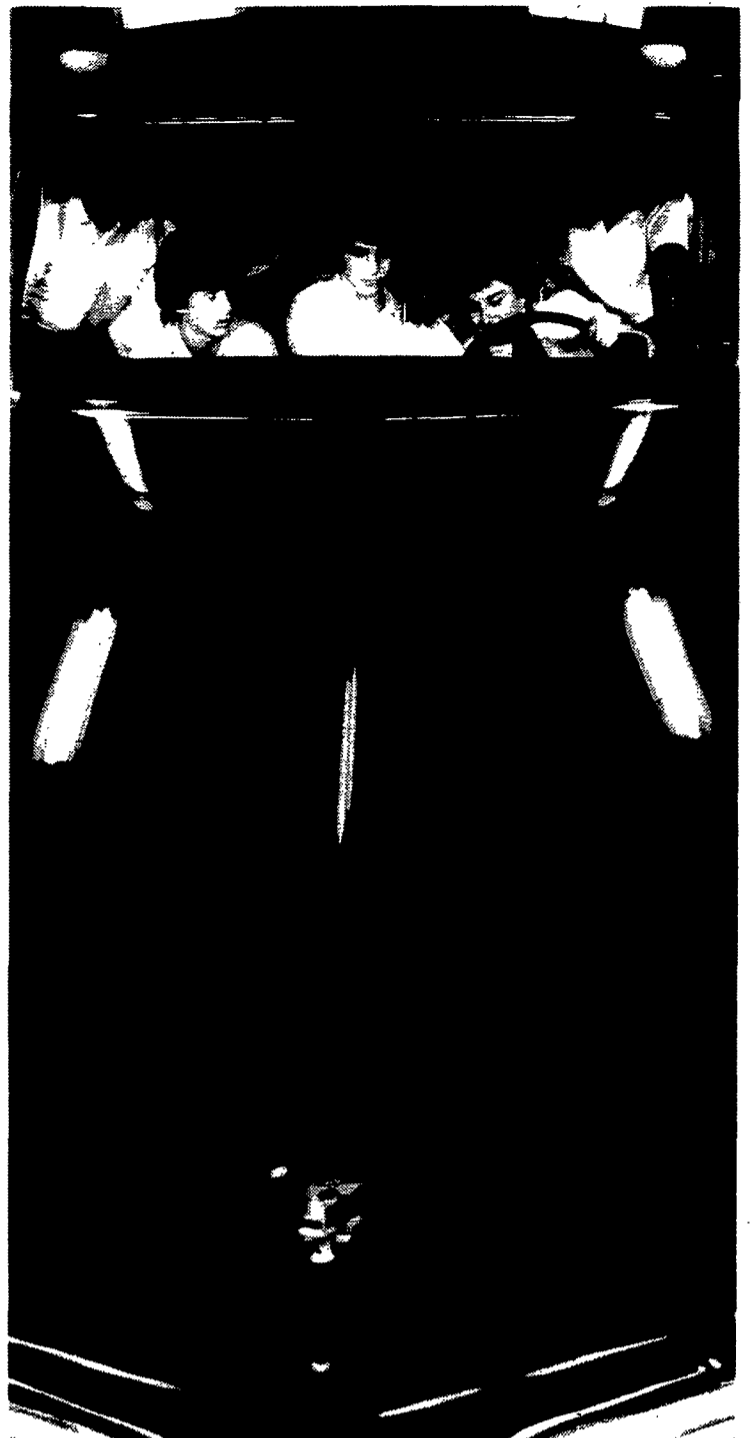
In conjunction with the discussion of wakes, students learned about the technical matters involved in funeral arrangements and about the role of the funeral director.

Kate Dillon expressed a sentiment common to her class in saying, "I always thought that funeral directors were crazy to want to deal with dead bodies." Although she noted she now understands how funeral directors help people, she added, "I still don't know why anybody would want to do it."

Leanne Gramlich expressed a similar idea. "I always thought they (funeral directors) just put the body in the casket and directed the funeral. I found out now that they care about the families ... that they take care of people at the funeral."

In all, the class concluded that the course had been a profitable experience. "It prepared us for when it does happen, so you're not in shock and you know what to expect," Leanne Gramlich said. Steve Andiloro agreed, commenting that the class will make it easier for him the next time he has to go to a wake.

Vienna Carvalho also agreed. "Death will always puzzle me, but now I have a better idea of what it is, and what stages you go through."



Reminiscent of the 50s and 60s, classmates cram into a hearse's front seat as the overflow spill into the back.



During the introductory lecture at Schauman Funeral Home, students examine a small sample of the remains of cremation.



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