

Revised funeral order addresses pastoral needs

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

As far as Father Louis J. Hohman is concerned, nothing could be more important to the relationship between the church and those outside its community than the way the church bids farewell to its deceased members through the Order of Christian Funerals.

"In terms of the way it attracts people who are not churched, (the order of funerals) is the most important thing we do that involves people who are not churched," remarked Father Hohman, pastor of St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Given final approval for general use by the National Council of Catholic Bishops in October of 1989, the revised Order of Christian Funerals contains the rites and rituals used in Catholic vigils, funerals and burials. The new order also performs an indirect evangelical role by

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showing the church is a community that cares for the specific needs of those who mourn a loved one, Father Hohman said.

That desire to address specifically the needs of the living as well as the dead grew out of the order's first revision in the late 1960s.

Vatican II emphasized the deceased's participation in the life and death of Christ, which led the Congregation for Divine Worship to instruct that the new order arrange "the funeral rites ... in such a way that they would more clearly express the paschal character of Christ's death, and also that the rites for the burial of children would have a proper Mass."

The first revision of the order was designed to communicate God's love and mercy for the deceased, according to experts.

Released in 1970, that order was itself revised in 1985, following extensive pastoral surveys and reviews conducted throughout the world in the early 1980s, according to Monsignor Alan F. Detscher, associate director of the Secretariat for the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The second revision was commissioned in order to find out what specific needs weren't being met by the first revision of the funeral order, Monsignor Detscher noted.

"I think it's a fine revision," Monsignor Detscher told the *Catholic Courier*. "Any minister, priest or deacon involved with a funeral can be very pastorally effective," he added.

What makes the revised order effective is its emphasis on priests' specific needs for certain funeral and burial prayers addressed on behalf of such per-



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sons as children — both baptized and unbaptized — and those who have committed suicide. The new order also provides specific prayers for people who have opted for cremation instead of burial.

In summary, the revised order emphasizes the needs and feelings of the living as well as the dead. Such was not the case, experts note, with the pre-Vatican II order.

In the days before the council, the presiding priest orated the rites in Latin, and the funeral prayers emphasized the necessity of imploring God to have mercy on the soul of the deceased and on the mourners as well. Performed at the end of the Mass, the "Responsory" to "The Absolution," for example, struck a doleful note for all assembled:

Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting

death on that dread day when the heavens shall be moved and the earth, whilst thou shalt come to judge the world by fire. I fear and quake with terror, awaiting the day of accounting and the wrath to come, when the heavens shall be moved and the earth. That day, the day of anger, of calamity, of misery, a day so awful and so bitter, whilst thou shalt come to judge the world by fire ...

"Frankly, (the old rite) was mostly aimed at scaring everybody out of hell, or the hell out of everybody," Father Hohman observed.

The introduction to a 1952 edition of the old rite explained that such language grew out a desire by the Medieval church to instill concern for the afterlife among men who "had grown too preoccupied with this life."

While the old rite was characterized by fire and brimstone, fire of different kind marks the new rite, noted Father Hohman.

"I find more and more people saying it's much warmer (than the former rite)," the pastor related.

The "warmth" to which funeral participants are reacting is most clearly embodied in the oral text, which has undergone tremendous revision since Vatican II. Indeed, it is in the order's words — not in its visual signs — that the rite has been most profoundly changed, said Father Thomas P. Mull, Pastoral Center representative to the Diocesan Liturgical Commission.

"Most of what people see hasn't changed," he observed. The priest acknowledged the significance of certain

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