

Wake services differ among ethnic groups

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — The Irish are often noted for displaying a boisterous, upbeat philosophy in commemorating a departed soul.

Although some truth can be found in such observations, Irish-Catholic wakes don't really fit the stereotype, according to James Ryan, president of Farrell-Ryan Funeral Home.

"That stereotype of drinking and carrying on doesn't really exist," observed Ryan, who said about half of the funerals at his facility are for Irish Catholics. "The Irish are very serious about their practice (of funerals). As for those stories about fighting and carrying a bottle of Jack Daniels (whiskey) around, that's just not true."

Ryan speculated that the myth of drunken Irish wakes may have evolved "from the way we celebrate St.



This copperplate engraving by artists Jan and Lucas van Duetecom, — from the collection of the Bibliotheque Royale de Belgique — depicts the burial ceremonies conducted in Brussels, Belgium, for Emperor Charles V in 1558.

Patrick's Day in this country."

Even so, he acknowledged that the Irish do maintain a certain positive attitude toward death. "It seems to me that the Irish try to make death a celebration of life. That goes with the strong Catholic belief about the after-life," Ryan commented.

Although "there's not a lot of difference as far as the Mass goes, because the Mass and liturgy are the same for all (Catholics)," calling hours often point out differences among ethnic groups, according to Edwin Sulewski, owner of Schauman-Sulewski Funeral Home, 2100 St. Paul St.

"We have several German funerals, and most German people are rather low-key and conservative," he said. "Germans come and pay their respects and then go on their way, as opposed to the Polish and Italians who generally come and spend a couple of hours with the family."

Joseph Tomasso, director at Farrell-Ryan, 51 Ridge Road W., recalled the atmosphere of many funerals within his Italian family.

"Italians are very respectful; very sober," said Tomasso. "Normally people come into funeral homes and there's quite a bit of joking and laughing, but generally it's not that way (with Italians). Older Italians still wear black to show respect and will say a 15-day rosary for repose of the soul."

"The Italian funeral processions often go by the family's house for one final goodbye, although some of the other (ethnic backgrounds) have begun asking us to do this," Tomasso added.

Father Andrew Grzela, pastor of St. Stanislaus Church, a predominately Polish parish located at 1124 Hudson Ave., noted that Poles, like Italians, emphasize the rosary in their funeral traditions.

"The Polish people like to use the rosary in funeral prayer; other than that, there's nothing else special (about Polish funerals)," he said.

Yackiw Funeral Home, 1270 Norton St., handles many Ukrainian Catholic funerals and is the site of services called *panachydas*. Taking place at funeral homes on the evenings before or

the mornings of funeral Masses, *panachydas* consist of prayer recitation by the priest and sung responses from the congregation.

Sometimes parishioners at St. Michael's Church, 869 Clinton Ave. N., make special funeral arrangements reflecting their Latin American heritage.

"Some families still prefer to have the wake in their home, where people are able to come all day and night to view the body," said Sister Kay Schwenger, RSM, pastoral associate at St. Michael's.

"Spanish families also don't consider the funeral ceremony to be complete until the body is actually lowered into the ground and dirt is placed over it," Sister Schwenger noted. "That's not the way it's done in America, so there have been times when we've asked the cemeteries to do this."

While various ethnic funeral traditions continue in this country, they don't stand out as much as in past generations, according to Father Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the Diocese of Rochester's Office of Liturgy.

"My experience has been that there is less and less ethnic symbolism at funerals," remarked Father Mull. "We tend to become Americanized."

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