Over the last several years eulogies have become increasingly popular within celebrations of Christian funerals in our Catholic Church in Canada. Initially, eulogies were an element found only in Protestant worship. Increasingly, however, Catholic families are requesting that eulogies also have a place within the Catholic liturgies for their deceased loved ones. These requests have been dealt with in a host of ways throughout our country. In some places eulogies are restricted to the vigil of prayer or some moment other than the funeral Mass. In some places they are permitted or even planned within the funeral Mass. In the latter case they are placed at varying points in the liturgy, at the opening, or before the commendation at the very end. Only very rarely do they take the place of a homily, which indeed would be improper.

In the *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)*, issued by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1990, the directive regarding eulogies is quite clear. The General Introduction states: “A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy” (*OCF*, no. 27). A brief testimonial to the deceased is permitted, however, during the vigil service. Within each of the eleven forms of the vigils for the deceased in the *OCF*, a ritual note between the concluding prayer and the concluding rite states: “A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased.” There is no such practice foreseen within the funeral Mass.

The directives found in the *OCF* have not been unanimously accepted and a large variety of practices continue. In view of these inconsistencies, and to try to further the discussion, I would like to offer the following thoughts. In doing so, I wish to point out two main priorities at the crux of this discussion.

**The complementary focuses of funeral rites: remembrance and celebration**

*Remembering the deceased*
On the one hand is the desire, and indeed the need, both pastorally and liturgically, to be attentive to the reality of the deceased person’s life and relationships. The family and the community rightfully requires this.

**Proclaiming and celebrating our faith**

On the other hand, the Church wishes that the proclamation and celebration of its faith be central to these funeral liturgies. “Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just” (*OCF*, no. 5).

The opening note of the Introduction to the *Ordo Exsequiarum* (the 1969 Latin funeral rites) states this focus thus: “At the funerals of its children the Church confidently celebrates Christ’s paschal mystery. Its intention is that those who by baptism were made one body with the dead and risen Christ may with him pass from death to life”. In celebrating this mystery, the Church wishes to pray for the dead, to offer the eucharistic sacrifice for them, and to extend the consolation of hope to those who remain, family and community alike.

These two focuses of our funeral rites – the remembrance of the deceased and the celebration of faith – are, however, ultimately not to be competitive but complementary. How then do we prepare and celebrate funerals with families of the deceased so as to satisfactorily and appropriately respect both these dimensions?

**Funerals: a celebration of faith for the family and for the community**

Our funeral celebrations are to be a celebration that unites the family and friends of the deceased, the parish community of faith and indeed the whole Church. In them, we give praise and thanks to God for the gift of everlasting life offered to all through the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection as we prayerfully entrust the destiny of the dearly departed into God’s loving, merciful hands. Remembering and honouring the deceased, we turn to God, the source of all life. We give thanks to God for the gifts of faith and love present in the person’s life. We pray that through Christ’s redeeming love the person will receive eternal salvation. We pray for one another, that each may be given the strength and consolation of Christian faith, hope and mutual support of charity at this time of grief and farewell. We reaffirm our desire to walk and
live together in Christian faith, to live each day God gives us with Christ as our Way, Truth and Life on our journey to our everlasting home. We pray for God's loving grace in all things, the grace of life in Jesus forever, He who has conquered death forever.

Clearly, the primary focus of our celebration of Christian funerals must be an act of prayer and thanksgiving for Christ's victory over sin and death. The proclamation of the paschal mystery is at the very heart of our celebration. It is a celebration of life – the life of the risen Christ present in the person deceased, present in the family and friends and in the faith community gathered around them, and present in the Church as a whole.

The personal circumstances of the deceased person's life and death are given their final meaning and hope in and through Christ. The journey of grieving and moving on with hope and love by the family and friends finds its source and meaning in and through Christ. The Christian community as a whole is renewed in and through Christ as it observes and commemorates this passage from life to death and unto everlasting life.

**Linking faith and personal life through the Word of God at Funeral Masses**

An important way to render the funeral celebration meaningful and personal for the family begins with the selection of Scripture readings. Their meaning is explored through the homily, which breaks open the Word of God proclaimed to all as a message of faith, consolation and hope for them at this time. The priest, parish life director or member of the parish bereavement team who meets the family to plan the funeral should, as part of their pastoral care at this time, genuinely take the steps needed to learn of the life and passing away of the deceased.

This contact with the bereaved is essential to selecting appropriate Scripture readings and to preparing a homily that combines the proclamation of Christian faith and the personal dimension called for in the particular circumstances. The homilist can note in appropriate ways the person's attributes and accomplishments, inviting the family and friends to hold on to the values and lessons of the person's life. The homily should have a narrative style. At a funeral, there is a story to be told – a real person's story – not on its own, but in relation to God: a story of faith, a story of love.

In the introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* the proper approach is described thus:
“Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their lives as well. Through the homily members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God” (OCF, no. 27).

This personal note can also be continued in the prayer of the faithful (general intercessions). The intercessions given in the OCF may be adapted or new intercessions may be composed with the input of the family.

Words of remembrance (eulogies): their purpose and place

The primary focus at the Eucharist of the funeral rite is to be on Christian faith as it touches the life of the family and that of the Christian community, a focus fully manifested in the Scripture readings, in the homily, in the prayers and intercessions, and in the celebration of the Eucharist itself. To avoid detracting from this focus, I believe that eulogies – or more precisely words of remembrance delivered by a family member or friend – should not be part of the funeral Mass.

However, if a family member or friend wishes to offer a remembrance of the deceased, the approved place for such words during the funeral rites is at the vigil for the deceased. They may also be delivered at a time outside of the funeral rites, following the funeral or at some other gathering.

Funerals: creating a meaningful, consoling celebration of the faith

The long-standing dilemma of finding the appropriate place for remembering the deceased within a celebration of the faith can be resolved in a variety of ways. Carefully selected readings and prayers, and a homily that speaks to the life, and life in faith, of the departed and of those who grieve help create a personal touch that the family will find truly consoling. Whenever possible, good pastoral care should be begun before the time of death. By extending
care towards the dying and their families through visitation and the sacraments, a real connection is offered to the community of faith. This can also include preparation for the funeral prior to the death, allowing the dying to express their wishes and the family to prepare.

Then, at the time of the actual preparation of the funeral rite, every effort should be made to be present to the family’s grief, to offer them in any way possible the community’s support, and to gather those elements of the person’s life that are to be acknowledged and celebrated during the funeral rites. A consoling homily linking the life of the departed and the message of faith demands good preparation.

A celebration of the funeral Mass that is simple, warm, authentic and that includes the participation of family and friends through the proclamation of readings, the prayer of the faithful, and the placing of symbols (i.e., pall) will speak volumes to the family and the community.

If celebrations of the funeral Mass are thus made meaningful to family and friends, the request that eulogies, or words of remembrance, not be part of the funeral liturgy will be much more readily accepted. The personal nature of the funeral Mass brought forth through the ways listed above will be both appropriate and complete. With care and with time, this understanding of the appropriate place for words of remembrance will prevail and our funeral liturgies will be the richer for it.

- For further information on leading prayer vigils in the absence of a priest or deacon, see: The Funeral Vigil: When Laypeople Preside
- For helpful information on preparing a funeral liturgy, see: Catholic Funerals and Eulogies, the Pall and the Flag
- For answers to some questions regarding cremation and funerals, see: Catholic and Cremation
  - To order the Order of Christian Funerals;
  - Vigils and Related Rites from the Order of Christian Funerals;
  - related back issues of the National Bulletin on Liturgy (no. 84 – Funeral Liturgies; no. 119 – The Christian Funeral; no. 132 – The Order of Christian Funerals);
please contact the CCCB Publications at: public@cccb.ca.