

# Creative Responses Bring Consolation to the Grieving

Robert Valle

Janice died in March of this year at the age of 103. The last decade of her life was enriched when she moved out of state to live with her daughter. Janice received loving care in her daughter's home, until due to increasing dementia, she required care in a facility. Her daughter accompanied Janice faithfully to the very end of a long life. After Janice died, the family simply desired to bring her home to the parish where she married her husband, reared their children, and lived their Christian discipleship deeply through a shared faith life of prayer and action with others.

Another family in the same parish experienced a sudden tragedy when husband and father, Phil, died unexpectedly. His wife, together with their children who were now young adults, longed to share their grief with their extended family and parishioners who came forward to be communal consolers in acts of deep presence. The local parish also encountered another loss. John died at the age of sixty-six from complications due to COVID-19. His family, in addition to enduring his death without the ability to console and comfort him in person, or to witness his crossing the threshold, now faced funeral preparations with additional restrictions.

For these Christian families, their parishes, and many others who experienced death during the COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions in place to promote public health and safety closed the doors of our churches, disrupted the movements of mourning that many take for granted, and required pastoral ministers to move beyond the usual preparations of accompaniment to initiate creative acts of presence. The rhythms that create space for those who grieve to gather, prepare the funeral rites, celebrate the Eucharist, bury their loved ones, and begin to move forward and incorporate their grief into daily life were drastically altered. Some families endured additional turmoil when their loved one died from COVID-19. These faithful often died alone, away from the embrace and touch of family and loved ones.

## ACTING AS A WELCOMING PRESENCE

The *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) guides parishes in the pastoral ways of accompanying mourners through the rites



A place of remembrance allows for communal acknowledgment and grief. A list of those who have died during the past year may be placed at the setting.

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of the “vigil for the deceased, the funeral liturgy, and the rite of committal” (11). It reminds and challenges communities to realize and embody that theirs is a “ministry of consolation” (9). The faith community’s role as consoler is embodied throughout these funeral rites by acts of compassion and communal presence, grounded in prayer, in a deep sharing of God’s Word, and in the Eucharist.

The community’s response and presence to the grieving households play an even greater role during this pandemic and the months that will follow it. Speaking with family members via phone, meeting through visual media of some sort (or if possible, in person), is crucial to accompaniment during the early phases of the grieving process. As pastoral ministers begin to gather in an appropriate manner with the grieving, it is important to express that the parish itself also grieves the inability to be present in the ways many are accustomed, but that every effort

will be made to be a consoling and guiding presence to the family. Parish representatives need to allow even more time to be a welcoming presence to the family in the immediate days following the death of their loved one to discern the possibilities for prayer and ritual within the mandated restrictions. Many of the practices of health and safety are manifestations of profound care and concern for others and present an opportunity to engage in even deeper acts of solidarity. These authentic acts of hospitality are a living out of the Gospel mandate given to us to care for one another.

Ministers of care will find it beneficial to reacquaint themselves with the Prayers for the Mourners (OCF, 399). These prayers, though they do not address the circumstances of the pandemic, still speak directly to the loss that family members experience. When verbalized in a communal setting, they proclaim an acknowledgment of the separation, the grief, and the loss that is magnified during this time of the pandemic and its ramifications in the mourning process. Incorporate these prayers frequently into conversations with the family. Begin shared gatherings for funeral preparations with one of these prayers. It will sanctify the time and the conversation, clothing the grief in sacramental, hope-filled language. Remember to use the same prayers within the liturgical rites, bridging the moments

of accompaniment and conversation with the communal prayer and liturgy of the Church.

### OFFERING A GREATER HOSPITALITY

Some parishes have slowly reintroduced the celebration of funeral liturgies even as so many areas of our nation still experience or are returning to some form of restrictions and regulations: limited seating capacities within churches, attendance registration to facilitate contact tracing, physical distancing, and requirements to wear masks. Even if the community is able to celebrate the Eucharist with smaller numbers of attendees, much will still be missing. The communal movement in processions, gestures of touch, and singing will all be limited in some manner or even absent. When movement and gesture are absent, devote more to the spirit of embodied presence. When assembly singing and perhaps even singing by a cantor or leader of song is absent, devote more creativity to the music that will fill the space with sounds of comfort and resurrection, so that it may have a greater impact. Appropriate music wedded to sacred silence can comfort grief and proclaim hope. Ministers need to exercise even greater hospitality and understanding toward the mourners so that these missing elements will be replaced by a deeper, comforting presence.

### EXTENDED, DEEPER PASTORAL CARE

Some families, however, buried their loved ones without the celebration of the Eucharist or, perhaps due to the early phase of the pandemic, it was not possible for the body to be present. These families may have needed to utilize cremation; others may have decided to meet at gravesides to offer the prayers of commendation. These circumstances beckon parish ministers to engage in even deeper pastoral care (411). Pastors and pastoral ministers should address these challenges. A funeral Mass may be celebrated at a later date with the cremated remains. Or if burial has already taken place, the parish could make preparations to offer the family a time to celebrate the Eucharist—a Mass for the deceased (Memorial Mass)—at a later date when more people are able to gather and more fully participate (46).

Each year, many parishes commemorate the Month of All Souls with a Mass of Remembrance, Evening Prayer, or another initiative to offer consolation to the grieving. This annual time of remembering need not be confined to the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed on November 2, but could be expanded throughout the month, taking into account the Sunday readings that often speak to the end times, and resonate as an annual commemoration of death, grief, hope, and resurrection. Joined with our nation's November celebrations of harvest and thanksgiving, the Christian communal remembering can then include the hope that Christ gathers the faithful departed to himself with the thanksgiving expressed by the community for these beloved ones.

Images placed on an altar of remembrance can connect families and their beloved deceased to the community and the Communion of Saints. Each year many parishes invite families to bring pictures of their loved ones to the church. This act of visual remembrance allows for a time of communal acknowl-

edgment and grief. Give special attention this year to those who were unable to celebrate the funeral liturgy at the time of death due to the restrictions for gathering. A simple but poignant acknowledgment recognizing those who died during the pandemic could be placed on the remembrance altar.

Restrictions for gatherings could extend for several months or more. The pastoral staff may choose to reach out to the grieving by offering an online liturgical service for family members who have returned home. This recognition toward those unable to be at the parish for a liturgical celebration would also benefit the elderly and others whose health is compromised. Pray the Office for the Dead (OCF, part IV), led by a layperson if a priest or deacon is unavailable (371). Discern the use of, and incorporate the Prayers for the Dead (398). Several of the texts offer appropriate words for those who died during the pandemic. Recruit parishioners as leaders of prayer, readers, cantors, and instrumentalists to create an appropriate liturgy, expressing both the grief and hope we hold as Christians.

The days surrounding a person's death and the parish's commemoration during November will not be the end of sadness for family members who experience this loss. The practice of an annual remembrance of a person's death would allow the parish to be present yet again to the grieving. Consider preparations with the family to celebrate the anniversary of death with a Mass. This can always be a part of the Church's pastoral care for the family and its own practice of commending the souls of the deceased to our loving God (OCF, 416). This act will remind the grieving that the community recognizes the pain experienced by the family during the pandemic.

Parishes experienced overwhelming change to liturgical prayer and practice as a result of COVID-19. The uprooted journey of grief and its movements of mourning challenged pastoral ministers to move beyond the usual preparations of accompaniment. But the opportunity to initiate creative acts of presence allowed parishioners and their ministers to enter more deeply into the role of consoler as envisioned in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Revisiting the elements of this order, evaluating pastoral responses during the pandemic, and engaging in deeper presence not only in the days after the death, but in the months that follow will offer the mourners the pastoral care so central to the act of consolation and accompaniment. Regardless of when death comes, grief is natural, yet it has its own rhythms particular to each mourner. As our parishes and the grieving continue to live through this pandemic, remember that God's grace still comforts, still consoles, still heals broken hearts, especially when disciples willingly answer the call to be instruments of consolation and embodied presence. ♦

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ROBERT VALLE is the director of music and liturgy, and coordinator of adult faith formation, for St. Joseph Church in Downers Grove, Illinois.