

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Winter Fall

Every year after Christmas there seems to be a sudden shudder of departures from our community, a clutch of funerals. Perhaps it's the cold snap; perhaps a mysterious surrender of people who've been "hanging on to life", who suddenly feel that with the passing of Christmas they can let go. Perhaps it's nothing more than the simple congestion that follows on two extended holidays: the cemetery and Crematorium get overwhelmed. But it can truly be a time of winter bereavement for a whole community, when whole weeks can be taken up with funeral duties. It's been a bit like that this year.

### Funerals Are Changing

Some funerals are transacted with a palpable sense of religious loyalty and observance. But these are getting suddenly rarer. Nowadays a funeral is often a distressing ritual for a parish priest. He may know the dead person intimately, as a frequent or daily mass-goer, who embodied the classic characteristics of a good Catholic: a careful morality, a warm family love, a lively prayerfulness, and a joy in supporting and belonging to the Church. All too frequently, the funeral is a clear sign that the inheritance has failed to be passed on. The first generation forty- and fifty-year olds have ceased to practice their faith. Often they have long forgotten how to follow the Mass: they remain silent, failing the responses, unable even to say *Amen* to a prayer for their father or mother, unable to kneel for the Eucharistic Prayer, unused to the sign of the cross when they are blessed. Their children are even further from the land, looking on with complete alienation from the ceremony and the words; and the little ones are totally on foreign soil; most have been left with minders for the occasion, so surely are they excluded from what's to be done. From a family of forty or fifty souls, one or two may squeeze through the ranks to come to communion; the singing will be done by such parish trustees as come along. It is not a good situation, and let the preaching be as positive as it may be, priests can come to feel that they are improperly off their turf. We are offering

sympathy to visitors, when we should be sharing the sacraments with our family.

### St Hugh's In 2006

In our parish roughly 400 people come to Mass each Sunday. In terms of Lincoln churches we are still gigantic; many small chapels count their regulars on two fingers. But we are burying up to 40 per year. On paper this could mean that in ten years' time the community will be dead. In fact, many of those we are asked to bury or cremate are not members of the weekly congregation at all. They're people I've never seen, or have met in hospital at the last moments of their life, or even after their death. I have to say that to produce a decent funeral for them is a miracle of careful questioning, research, and good luck, seconded by the sturdy faith of the people who actually form the congregation and keep the parish alive, and underpinned by the Church's legacy of liturgical lore and wisdom about death. Why all these total strangers so confidently expect a priest to answer the phone and rush to the hospital, to be available to do the work of assembling a makeshift communion with a total stranger and his or her family, to open a commodious and warm church, to drive to the cemetery, and to surround the occasion with the ceremony and meaning of a community they have signally ignored for several decades is one of the great mysteries of life.

### A New Year's Message

It would be a salutary thing, if just the people who've asked for this service in recent weeks could look into their hearts and ask whether they've worked out the implications of their neglect of their religion. The facts are rather stark; if they don't find a way to be Catholics on Sundays, rather than occasional customers, there may be little option for them in the near future, but to conduct funerals of their own: because there will be no church, and no priest, and no liturgy, no baptism, no communion, and we shall all be on our own. You need people to be a Church. You need a

Church to hold a funeral as we know it.

*Fr Philip*