

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Father's Funeral Directions

There is no "right time" to write about these subjects, I suppose. But I'm moved to do so because I think everyone ought to give some thought to the business of funerals, and to build up at least a rough idea of the way their funeral ought to be conducted. Otherwise it devolves on the funeral director to tell families what to do at a very fraught and unnerving time. So here are my thoughts about funerals.

Burial or Cremation?

Unless, like that man at London University, we have ourselves stuffed and exhibited in a glass case, we have to choose between burial and cremation. Both go to the same end, one rather faster than the other, and in that sense there may be little to choose; but I think there are factors to be taken into account. This may seem trivial: but *speed* used to be something we avoided at funerals. "Funeral pace" was observed as a cortège moved along the road. Today one would risk being hooted at for causing an obstruction, and hearses are pretty businesslike. Crematoria have this sharp and ugly efficiency in their makeup. Time is money, and a crematorium service is not allowed to take longer than twenty minutes. *Twenty minutes to say a ceremonious goodbye to a human being is simply a bad joke.* You are scarcely settled in your seat when you are being hustled out; it takes four minutes to sing *Crimond* at the beginning, four more to sing *Abide With Me* at the end. That leaves twelve minutes to say who the person was, to read from Scripture, to preach, to pray, and to hear some words of appreciation spoken by a close friend. I am sure you get the point. But if it is easier on the hard-pressed funeral director - and they are still (February) working to clear the backlog from the Christmas break - then that is what he will recommend, unless the bereaved family have some firm ideas about an alternative. It is easy to lay on a hearse and a limousine, to drive from home to the Crematorium, deliver the coffin and see the mourners in, send the hearse to its next appointment, and meet the mourners out twenty minutes later. In the immediate aftermath of death, the bereaved may welcome the thought that the funeral will be "soon over"; but the emptiness which follows having done the funeral inadequately is a bad result.

The Funeral Mass

Nice undertakers tell me that we are uniquely blessed in having the Requiem Mass, and if you have attended many other sorts of funeral you will know what they mean. To come to God in our grief, to be welcomed and made at home by the Church which is never more a

mother than now, is irreplaceable for a Catholic. It draws the sting of death in a personal and intimate way. We are not made homeless, even by the most devastating loss. The Mass shines forth in its true colours, the breaking of bread at Emmaus, when those who are gathered are mourners. Once the Mass has been celebrated, I suppose it's a matter of taste what happens next, but I think there's something right about going to the graveside, and accompanying the body to its proper resting-place, the earth; I do not much like these crematorium curtains and chutes and conveyor-belts which trundle our loved ones, not into eternity, but into the next room, where Harry and George, in their overalls, are at the business end, when they get round to it, with (understandably) the minimum of ceremony.

Think About It

I know a lady who asks all her friends what hymns they want at their funerals, and keeps the answers in a little book. She's a public service! I know you could make a black comedy about the whole subject. But funerals are holy and wholesome realities, and every one of us may hope to have one, all to ourselves. It is good to make sure that it expresses the Christian truths in which we believe in a way we can personally approve; I'd like my funeral to give real comfort and hope to anyone who chances to be there. If you can write a little note, or tell someone how you'd like yours to be, you'll be helping those who love you.

Fr Philip