



Theological Reflection
Regarding the Pastoral Letter of
The Most Rev. Robert C. Morlino
On the Practice of the Commemoration of the Departed
In the Sacred Liturgy of the Church

25 February 2011

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the re-presentation of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for the forgiveness of our sins, so that we may be found worthy of the Eternal Life prepared for us. This is the unwavering doctrine of the Catholic Church, and it only follows that the Funeral Mass, given the circumstances of its celebration, carries with it a uniquely intense focus on the mystery of God's endless Mercy. The Funeral Mass celebrates the mystery of the Divine Mercy of God, infinitely Just and infinitely Merciful. The greatest act of charity that can be given to Catholics who pass from this life, within the confines of the Church, is the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is the ultimate supplication of mercy to Almighty God for the soul of one who has departed from our midst. It only follows in reason that everything about the offering of this Most Precious Sacrifice must be in accord with this petition of His Mercy.

The Church urges the maximum participation of the faithful in the Holy Mass, which unmistakably calls for their uniting themselves with the Sacrifice being offered on the Altar for the deceased person. It is to the greater benefit of the faithful to be able to do so with undistracted attention and utmost focus. Anything, therefore, that distracts from this focus is a grievance to those present as well as a grave injustice toward the deceased for whom the Mass, Mystery of God's Mercy, is being offered. For this reason, all aspects of the liturgy must be cared for with utmost sensitivity: the colors used at the liturgy, the readings chosen, the prayers to be said, the sacred music and songs that will accompany, the lighting and the incense to be used, the homily spoken by the priest or deacon, and so forth. Everything that impacts our senses will affect our perception of the sacrament. The faithful must be guided then, through sensory perception, to the understanding of the Mass as the petition to God the Father for His Mercy, granted to us through the Sacrifice of His Son on the Cross.

Anything that would distract from this understanding of what is taking place in the church where the funeral Mass is being celebrated must be considered out of place, and lacking true charity and consideration for the departed soul. This is the reason why the GIRM clearly states that by no means should there be a eulogy given at a funeral Mass,

“At the Funeral Mass there should, as a rule, be a short homily, but never a eulogy of any kind.”[GIRM 2000] “A brief homily based on the readings should always be given at the funeral liturgy, but never any kind of eulogy.” [OCF # 141] Contrary to common sentiment, the funeral liturgy focuses on the Mystery of Salvation carried out by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and not on the person who has passed away. The departed loved one is precisely the focus of that Mercy and Salvation prayed for at the Mass. Distracting from the focus of the Mass means distracting from the Prayer offered for the deceased. Although the celebrant must be sensitive toward the family and friends of the person who has passed away, this does not need to take the form of a change in the liturgy established by Her who has the right and responsibility to do so: Mother Church.

The “Commemoration of the Departed,” which the rubrics permit before the Final Commendation and farewell, has not been defined or modeled in an authoritative way. The rubrics provide that the celebrant is standing near the casket during such “Commemorations.” This would imply the brevity of such commemorations, so that surely not more than one “commemorator,” would be permitted. However, the urgent problem is that the commemoration defaults often to some sort of eulogy, which is always prohibited. Thus currently, “commemorations” have often included the drinking habits, use of irreverent language, or “romantic” escapades of the deceased, which is prohibited in any and all commemorations and eulogies. “Commemorations,” have repeatedly become *de facto* eulogies, which are always prohibited.

Even when the eulogies that are given tend to speak marvels about the person who has gone from our presence, they will most certainly detract from the *great urgency* the faithful should feel to plead to the Almighty for the bestowal of His Mercy and Salvation upon the soul of our loved one.

This does not mean that eulogies/commemorations, in and of themselves, are wrong or always out of place. The church is not opposed to “good words” (which is what *eulogy* means) about a loved one. However, there is a proper place and time for the verbal expression of fond and appropriate memories of one who has gone from this life. It is quite fitting for there to be a eulogy at other times such as at the funeral home during the wake (but outside the liturgy of the vigil service itself), while family and friends gather precisely in remembrance of the loved one who has passed away. A eulogy would also be appropriate at the graveside, weather permitting. At the customary funeral luncheon, when all are gathered in fellowship, a eulogy could be tastefully placed. A written eulogy would also be acceptable in the parish bulletin or in a worship guide made for the occasion of the funeral Mass itself. Any of these settings do not share the same intense focus of the Funeral Mass, and therefore are suitable places for a eulogy.

The focus of the Funeral Mass itself must always remain the celebration, not of the life of the deceased, but of the Mercy and Salvation bestowed upon us by the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Anything that distracts from that focus should be considered an injustice to the deceased, in need of the Mercy of God, as well as to the faithful, in need of the

guidance of pastors toward full participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass - that is, undistracted prayer, as well as the offering of self for the repose of the soul of the departed loved one.

Thus I have issued a Pastoral Letter to priests and deacons, asking that “commemorations of the departed” not be spoken at any time during the funeral liturgy in the Diocese of Madison. I have also asked the priests and deacons of the diocese to refrain from inviting such “commemorations” during the Sacred Liturgy.

With grateful respect, I am,

Faithfully in Christ,

+ Robert C. Morlino
The Most Rev. Robert C. Morlino
Bishop of Madison