

Jerry's Journal



In the Roman Missal (the “prayer book” used by the priest at Mass) there are Mass prayers for a wide variety of occasions, many of which you have likely never heard. For instance, Mass intention prayers include purposes such as post-harvest, hunger, earthquake, civil disturbance (perhaps we should use this one more often these days?) and when that one does not work, there are Mass prayers for an end to storms.

There is one set of Mass prayers, though, that always intrigued me. I never used it because its meaning eluded me. Over the years, when trying to identify Mass prayers that tied into the readings of the day, I would catch a glimpse of that one that left me scratching my head, wondering if, when, and why I would ever use it. Admittedly, the option was tempting. If I used it prematurely it could wreak all kinds of havoc. Yet, there it was, staring at me like a boxer, almost as if to tease me saying: “Come on, try me, take me on and see what happens.”

Which set of Mass prayers is it? *Simply Mass #47* under “Mass and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions.” The title of those prayers reads: “For the Grace of a Happy Death.” The words “happy” and “death” just did not seem to go together. I’d look at it and think, “Why not just pray for a cold, or flu bug, maybe even bronchitis or pneumonia?” These prayers struck me as the pinnacle of paradoxes. How could this even be possible? The mere acceptance of death is challenging enough, the pursuit of it until it seems “happy” seems naïve at the very least, and a type of denial at most.

Then one day out of the blue it happened. I was at the bedside of an elderly woman who was comatose and dying. She was at home with four of her five children present; the last one was on his way but had not yet arrived. He was about one hour away from reaching his destination. There she was in the place where she had crafted and celebrated her life for years, surrounded by the ones she loved, the very ones she had cultivated in that place of life and love. Upon the arrival of her last “child” (I use that term loosely as he was no kid) she was told of his presence. What happened next was chilling but also edifying; a subtle smile seemed to settle on her face and she died very soon after. A happy death: in the one place that was most meaningful to her, but above all surrounded by the ones who were the basis of that meaning, pulsating life and love throughout it.

Despite that supporting scenario it would be years before I would use those prayers. It was at the time of the impending death of Pope, now Saint John Paul II. Parishioners felt a sense of restlessness as they watched CNN for updated reports on the Pontiff’s failing health. In response to the inevitable, impromptu word was spread of having a sort of “pray the pope home” liturgy. Finally, I thought, those prayers that eluded but confounded me for so many years would finally be put to use. I had seen it and now I could finally pray it.

Theologically, the Catholic Church understands and teaches that a happy death is to be in “good moral and religious circumstances, not alienated from God or bitter to family.” However, there is a pastoral level to this teaching which I believe takes precedent; it is a grace, and like all graces, it is a gift, not a report card. In other words, it is not a

verdict qualitatively reflecting the moral status of a life lived. If that were the case then martyrdom, one of the most sanctified but suffered deaths in our tradition, would be void of meaning and purpose.

The grace of a happy death need not be limited to the recipient. Like many priests I remember the media calls following the death of John Paul II; they apparently needed “filler” material for their stories written and broadcast and so I received a call from some local media. I commented that one of the two greatest contributions made by the Pope over his tenure came at the very end: he taught us how to die; that it was okay to suffer and struggle, to be dependent and vulnerable, and to allow the providence of the Divine to be experienced in temporal realms of loved ones, caregivers, and the concerned.

I mention all of this because we are in the month of November, the month dedicated to remembering those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. As the earth begins to lay dormant in its annual respite we are gently reminded of our own mortality as the cycle of life rests in anticipation of rebirth.

Some years ago, I recall attending a conference on prayer. The presenter was making the point as to how the same prayers will mean different things at different points in life, ultimately, seeking a convergence of meaning to the One to whom the prayer is directed. Powerfully and profoundly, she used the example of the Hail Mary, perhaps the second most well-known prayer next to the Our Father. She went on, stating that at some point in our existence there will be an inseparability between the present moment and the one which concludes the Hail Mary: “now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” This hour will be the same hour as the “now moment.” Hopefully, this will be experienced as a natural flow on the continuum of life.

While still in the seminary I remember the late great John Cardinal Dearden, the retired Archbishop of Detroit, commenting on how a significant part of his own prayer life was for the grace to accept his own death. Naively I recall thinking, “What choice have you got?” Now I realize: plenty. Something can die long before the body. Prior to the cessation of breath and blood flow is the suffocation of the soul and spirit. Such people who experience this live and breathe, live and play, perhaps even recreate but never re-create. The boxes are checked, the jobs get done, responsibilities fulfilled, but there is no passion, compassion, love, or joy. Life morphs into a drudgery of obligatory tasks and demands.

Carefully cultivated and consciously crafted responses throughout life deepen the union between the divine and humanity, also maintaining our connection to those who we have surrendered to death. Memory is the cradle of love and it is what bonds and connects us throughout life, death, and beyond. Love is our destiny and hope as it is the reality within which our loved ones rest. St. Augustine wrote: “Our heart is restless, until it rests in God.” That rest, found only in God’s love, is the bond that is even stronger than death. The scriptures teach us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and that love cannot end because God is eternal. Rather than just stating love is something that God does, 1 John 4:8 holds that God is love. The bond created by love is not simply an action performed by God, but rather, who God is by way of God’s celestial nature, being, and identity.

As is the case with all love, it does not come without a price, and here is where it becomes a challenge. The price of love is grief. The only way to go through life and never grieve is to choose to never love. Hopefully, most people see this as too high of a price to pay. Ironically, it is the same love that strings in the wake of loss that heals in the days, weeks, months, and years to come following its intrusion. Remembering that we were created and destined for this love affords the grief-stricken hope, comfort, and consolation.

Here is where the paradox not only continues but also thickens. Following loss, I have often heard the contention that, in due time, a person will get over his/her grief, or, conversely, getting over it will never happen. Neither assertion is entirely accurate. Grief is not something one does or does not get over, but instead is something one gets through because, upon reemergence, one has a deeper appreciation of the Paschal Mystery. (The Paschal Mystery, to state it in overly simplified terms, is *dying to old and imperfect ways of life in order to rise to new life in Christ.*)

When we are shocked, floored, and dumb-founded by death through the loss of a loved one, the Paschal Mystery is something we experience in a deeper and more profound context. Grief becomes one of life's greatest teachers, perhaps due to the heavy heart it imposes on the person who grieves. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Paschal Lamb, which derives from the Hebrew verb *pasach*, means "to pass over." This alludes to ancient Israel's rescue from slavery in Egypt when God's angel "passed over" the houses of the Israelites while striking the Egyptians.

In the context of our Catholic faith, there is a clear, obvious and inseparable connection which links our dying to experiencing new and eternal life with the Lord. It is only when we learn how to die, in terms of surrendering ourselves to God, that we are free to live and to be one with God for eternity.

Fr. Jerry Slowinski

"Marc" My Words



I'm subtitling this article "Putting in my two cents worth." Here is a bit of trivia about that saying. Over the course of our recorded history, many goods or services have borne a set price of two of a civilization's smallest unit of currency, such as penny candy, two-penny ale, two-penny post, even two-penny rope (an archaic idiom for a flop house.) Sometimes that amount was even the sum paid by someone on a particularly memorable occasion, such as the widow in today's Gospel when she gave two copper coins to the temple, yet by doing so gave all she had, in contrast with far more prosperous donors who proffered only a small portion of their wealth.

Jesus makes note of this when he and his disciples are at the temple watching people

give back to God. He notes that the scribes, who like to go around showing off and being aloof “devour the houses of widows and as a pretext recite lengthy prayers.” The scribes try to justify their selfish actions by reciting long prayers making it seem like it’s God’s will that they take from the most needy, the widows. Then is stark contrast, enter the widow, who gives her all unlike the scribes who take all and give little in return.

Today is Veterans Day. We recognize the “all” that our veterans gave in the service of our country. They gave up their rights, lives, time with family and friends to defend the freedom we enjoy. Veterans, by their service, lived what the widow in today’s Gospel lived out by the actions of her life.

So does this means we have to empty our bank accounts and sell off all our assets to have a place in heaven? Of course not! Jesus is showing his disciples and we are included as “his disciples” that we have to be all in with our faith. What Jesus tells us is that we can’t withhold our love of God by withholding our love of neighbor. We have to give our “two cents” not just in monetary terms but in the way we interact with others out of honesty, faith, and compassion. We must give from the heart even though it might hurt. When we give from our “poverty” like the widow we can experience the love that God gave us in the form of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. That is the ultimate of giving all for another. May we give from our hearts, giving our love, and in return receive the grace that we will recognize as God’s...

Peace, Love, and Blessings,

Deacon Marc

