

**PRAYING OUR GOODBYES:
THE VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED AND THE FUNERAL OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL**

“My brothers and sisters, we believe that all ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death.” (Invitation to Prayer, Vigil for the Deceased. OCF #71).

Steve Massoud died on August 21, 2011. Faithfully serving the parish community of Our Lady of Guadalupe at St. James Church for twenty years as its music director, Steve lost his mêlée with terminal brain cancer and died in his home, cared for by his beloved wife Kathy, several aides and the service of Hospice. Both Steve and Kathy instructed two of my three children to play piano in their elementary school years and gave all of their students the opportunity to perform at the end of their piano school year, always ended by a stunning piano performance by the talented Massouds. Additionally, Steve and I ministered pastoral music together at weddings and funerals when someone would hire me as a cantor for those services. We shared many lively conversations about ministry, family life and our own interests as composers and musicians and I thoroughly enjoyed the company of this very dear man, a faithful husband and beautiful father to his daughter Marianna. So when Kathy called to say that Steve’s life had turned the page into its final chapter, I listened widely.

“We want Steve to be ‘waked’ in the church,” Kathy told me, “But I have no idea what to do or how to make that happen. We want music and prayer and offer people an opportunity to remember Steve. Right now, Steve can still speak a bit and wants to be involved in the planning. Your own music and recordings helped us so much throughout the years, during Steve’s illness and even before that began. I’d like to prepare this so as we move forward in the days ahead and with so much to do, this planning is done. We wondered if you would help us.”

In the General Introduction of the Order of Christian Funerals, a section called Family and Friends states:

If pastoral and personal consideration allow, the period before death may be an appropriate time to plan the funeral rites with the family and even with the family member who is dying. Although planning the funeral rites with the family and even with the family member who is dying. Although planning the funeral before death should be approached with sensitivity and care, it can have the effect of helping the one who is dying and the family facing the reality of death with Christian hope. It can also help relieve the family of numerous details after the death and may allow them to benefit more fully from the celebration of the funeral rites. (OCF (p. 5, # 17)

Without knowing that any of this language exists, Kathy and Steve hit the nail squarely on its proverbial head. Whenever possible, proactive planning with a pastoral team of liturgical

ministers who know the dying person and their family allows the sojourn of dying and death to become a very life-giving source of healing and consolation. Who do *you* know in your parish who may not be well and benefit from a ‘house call’? Does this responsibility lie solely with the pastor? Absolutely not. Visiting the sick is a corporal work of mercy, particularly if we belong to a pastoral staff. We think that we do our work when the presider blesses and dismisses the Extraordinary Ministers of Communion at the end of a Sunday Mass to bring Eucharist to the sick and Viaticum to the dying. That Sending Forth should catapult us from our pews to go and seek the sick and visit them because *this work belongs to all Christians*. Perhaps it may be time to rethink our ministries. Are we musicians or are we *pastoral* musicians? Are we educators or *religious* educators? Those words make a big difference in how we contextualize our work. Might it be time to check in from time to time with the sick and the dying in our communities? If our parishioners do not have customary conversations with their pastoral staff, why in the world would we expect them to broach the subject of their own funeral liturgies, much less know what the possibilities that they contain, with any reasonable amount of comfort? If we fail to outreach, who will? Christ has no body but ours. Might it be time for us to be *proactive* rather than *reactive* as the Body of Christ? Liturgy (letourgia) means *work*, a public service of duty and discipleship that propels us beyond the boundaries and walls of our churches and into the homes and hospital rooms of the people who suffer – the sick and the dying. The experience and privilege of serving the sick and dying can be transformative to *us*, the ministers. They change us if we allow grace to enter the experience.

I told Kathy that she and Steve described a rite called the Vigil for the Deceased as part of the three ritual movements within the Order of Christian Funerals – the Vigil, the Funeral and the Committal. The Vigil for the Deceased gives the community an opportunity to keep watch with the family of the deceased person, to find consolation in Christ’s presence through sacred scripture, music and find comfort in one another’s common hope that God will welcome the deceased person into heaven (Order of Christian Burial, p. 23, #56).

Kathy and Steve met with me in their home. One of Steve’s caregivers worked past her shift simply to listen to what we discussed. The Vigil for the Deceased as well as the Funeral Mass richly revealed all of what the Massouds hoped to capture in the spirit of people who live a sacramental life. Prepared with a musical repertoire, Steve and Kathy asked for opinions about prayers and readings and where to appropriately place their favorite music choices so that it served the liturgy. We sang through some of the music together on the grand piano in the living room that my children studied on and we wept at the prayerful beauty of the music that can sometimes become redundant for pastoral musicians who issue this music over and over again. When death comes, music takes on a whole new significance, and the Massouds knew it and stuck to their proverbial guns. ‘Familiar and meaningful’ were the two words that kept resounding in the room. At the end of our time together, Steve, Kathy and I prayed together. Steve was asleep when I returned on a second visit with first editions of the worship aids of the

liturgies, waiting to go to print with Kathy and Steve's approval. My initial visit was the last time that I saw him.

The benefit of proactive pastoral planning by the Massouds disclosed itself to a full church at both liturgies, with robust singing, sensitively and beautifully executed by the parish music director and other fine musicians who knew Steve Massoud as a teacher, a colleague and a living symbol of life lived within Christ. Kathy and Steve chose Romans 6: 3-9 as a scripture reading at the funeral because of its reference to the newness of life that initiates us as sacraments of God when baptism initiates us into Christian life - Steve's life. The pastor's homily at the Vigil for the Deceased and the Mass of Christian Burial deepened our understanding of our own participation within the paschal mystery. Kathy delivered a magnificent testament to Steve in her own eulogy (such strength!), allowing her proactive liturgical planning to do its work and console her in her grief, giving her the fortitude that she needed to walk through the days after Steve died with courage and grace. Family members and several friends also eulogized Steve at the Vigil and remembered him with insight, warmth, humor and deep reverence as a man who followed the path to holiness in his roles as a husband, a father, a son and brother and as a pastoral musician and music teacher.

As I sat in my pew with my family on the evening of the Vigil and with colleagues at the Mass of Christian Burial, I thanked God for the wisdom of the Church "as a tender Mother, not simply to commend the dead to God but also to raise high the hope of its children and to give witness to its own faith in the future resurrection of the baptized with Christ" (OCF, Decree, xi). The Vigil for the Deceased, particularly at its best when proactively planned ahead of time with a qualified ordained or lay ecclesial minister, allows us to gather, pray, sing, listen, sit in deep silence, reflect, proclaim and remember. Generous in its options of prayers and readings to meet the needs of a particular person and family, the Vigil for the Deceased accommodates every kind of circumstances and provides a level of comfort for all participants who may or may not fully actively participate in the life of the church on a regular basis and for those people who may unfamiliar with Catholic ritual. The Mass of Christian Burial, when preceded by the Vigil for the Deceased, mirrors the Resurrection. We die, we vigil and grieve and we rise.

Steve, may the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city; the new and eternal Jerusalem. Well done, good and faithful servant. Rest in peace.

A note about worship aids: Worship resources should contain the ritual prayers and music that assist people to worship. They serve as an invaluable source of hospitality to a worshipping community and provide a necessary resource to facilitate full-bodied participation of the assembly. They also present the opportunity for the family members to write a note of thanks, to provide times, locations and directions to all of the liturgies and the usual collation at the end of all rites. Music licenses may be purchased on line and PDF and Gif files serve as the images that may be downloaded to implement music from all major publishers. They do take a bit of time

and effort to create but well worth the effort when you see how their effect on a worshipping assembly.

Further reading

Order of Christian Funerals: The Roman Ritual, © 1989 Catholic Book Publishing CO. New York

And You Visit Me: Sacramental Ministry to the Sick and the Dying by Charles W. Gusmer, ©1984, 1989, Pueblo Publishing Company, Inc. © 1990 The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., Collegeville, Minnesota.

The Death of the Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals by Richard Rutherford with Tony Barr, ©1990 by the Order of St. Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Divine Worship and Human Healing *Liturgical theology at the Margins of Life and Death* by Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., ©2009 by the Order of St. Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota.

The Ministry of Parish Nurses

The ministry of parish nurses locates its historical roots in early the Christian church (Romans 16:1-2). They serve as conduits of health in physical, mental and spiritual dimensions for a faith community. This triptych mirrors a Trinitarian model of agapic care and incorporates the Christian dimension of holistic or 'holy' wellness that presumes self-care and care of others as an outcome of God's love and desire for wellness for all of creation.

Parish nurses address health situations in the light of faith and contribute their particular gifts within a faith community by actively using their professional skills to meet the needs of people who struggle with short hospital stays, assist an increasing aging population, support people with chronic illness and conditions and serve as health care navigators for a wide host of population and concerns. Parish nurses integrate their skills with those of a pastoral staff to assimilate necessary and desired tools that assist a parish community with the myriad of needs that surface within any given population.

With the assistance of the pastoral staff, parish nurses may train caregivers to provide emotional, spiritual and practical support for parish communities. Parish nurses may be members of a parish staff or parishioners who volunteer their professional skills on behalf of their community. Within the health care dilemmas that people consistently and increasingly face, the light of Christ manifests itself in very tangible ways within parish nurse ministry.

The sick, the elderly and those who care for them can often feel overwhelmed and isolated. Often, the most economically challenged will sacrifice medicine for food, heat and other basic needs. Addictions and lack of exercise often put people at risk when they lack good mentors to encourage better attention to health concerns and cause illnesses like diabetes, hypertension, joint

disorders and clinical depression. Seasonal influenza and other viruses may cause a backlash of poor health for people in fragile physical condition. Parish nurses offer consistent and systematic accountability within an environment of Christian hospitality and professional assistance for people in their faith communities. This particular ministry tenders a proactive approach to wellness. Through regular contact with parish nurses, a faith community assumes a posturing of preventive measures in behalf of wellness.

Three ways to begin parish nurse ministry

1. Explain parish nurse ministry in a series of bulletin articles or inserts. Websites that offer assistance include <http://www.parishnurses.org>, <http://allnurses.com/parish-nursing/> and <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/work/health/parish-nurse/>.
2. Initiate a meeting of nurses in your parish. Extend the invitation to other parishioners who work within health care. Physicians, pharmacists, caregivers, social workers, physical therapists, mental health professionals and a myriad of health care providers worship in your parish community. Encourage them to proffer their time and skills on behalf of their community.
3. Begin by offering weekly blood pressure checks after the Saturday vigil liturgy and one Sunday morning liturgy. Set aside a quiet space in the church or parish hall to protect people's privacy. Ask your local hospital to provide basic medical equipment (BP cuffs) and a wallet record. Prompt parishioners to bring their weekly record when they visit their primary care physician.

Potential outcomes

When I directed parish ministries, the weekly blood pressure clinic quickly birthed a robust parish nurse ministry. Parish nurses divided the responsibilities and assigned duties according to volunteers' particular talent, experience and interest. A nurse manager in geriatrics maintained a rotating schedule of nurses for weekend blood pressure and glucose checks. Another professional who taught nursing to undergraduates in the local university assumed responsibility for parish educational health events, such as advance directives and a stress seminar in the wake of 9/11. A hospital pharmacist answered questions about medications on a regular basis. He procured the hospital system's health van to visit the parish for a day to give free flu shots and test glucose and blood pressure levels. A member of the parish nurse ministry who ran the blood lab in the local hospital system organized a blood drive in the parish school hall. One retired nurse offered a weekly weight control clinic and successful seminars on healthy eating habits, including offering menu and food samples to parishioners. Another parish nurse ran a weekly AA group in the church hall. Parish nurses worked with the neighborhood elder care agencies to better assess the needs of the local community. We partnered with the local interfaith council to train non-professional volunteers how to provide care giving services for the elderly who lived alone and needed assistance with cooking, bathing and shopping. Parish nurses partnered with the

bereavement ministry and ministers of the sick to provide presence, prayer and practicum through the stages of sickness, death and its aftermath for the living.