

JOURNEY TO ETERNAL REST

Making funeral plans ahead of time brings peace to the family.

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When my dad was diagnosed with blood and bone cancer in his mid-70s, he started making plans for his funeral as soon as he was well enough to leave the hospital. He knew the prognosis was bleak and that he would probably only live another one to three years. Dad was the kind of father who liked to do things for his five children, and having the details and the financials of his funeral completed was one of his last gifts to us.



Fourteen months after his diagnosis, March 2014, I was grieving in the church pew at Dad's funeral, but I was feeling something else besides grief. I felt peace and joy because we were fulfilling Dad's last wishes. Besides the important practice of praying for his soul, carrying out his plans faithfully was the last loving act my siblings and I could do for our dad.

We were mourning him, but it was like he was still with us because every detail of the funeral had his stamp on it. Dad had planned everything—from his beautiful casket and the purple shirt and tie he wanted to wear to how much money we should give the musicians, priests, and altar boys and the catered roast beef and mashed potato lunch held after his funeral.

Like my dad, Gertrude Belle Maguire Helan had thoroughly planned her funeral. Though healthy, she had been periodically fine-tuning her funeral ever since the age of 70—not guessing she would live to 98. Gertrude also never realized the peace the detailed funeral plans, contained in a thick three-ring binder—about which she endured much kidding—would bring her family.

Gertrude's daughter, Jean Burden, from Lovettsville, Virginia, was responsible for carrying out the funeral plans. She told Catholic Digest, "As I was walking behind Mom's casket, she was being carried by eight grandsons, and as I glanced up the path to the entrance to the church, I could see three great-grandson altar servers along with two priests who were so special to her waiting to lead her into the church for her final Mass. I knew in my heart that I was carrying out her wishes."

Jean's daughter, Molly Smith, from Purcellville, Virginia, witnessed how her grandmother's funeral plans made it easier for her mother. "I think it brought my mom peace, because she didn't have to rush around to figure out the church, reception, funeral home, clothing, etc. There were still things to do, but the checklist was already made. Mom didn't have to really think."

Father Joe Kempf, author of two books on grieving the loss of a loved one, *No One Cries the Wrong Way* and *Sometimes Life Is Just Not Fair* (a children's book), agrees that a pre-planned funeral is a great blessing for family members left behind. He told Catholic Digest, "To have prepared the funeral ahead of time not only helps the family to know that what they are doing honors the wishes of their loved one; it also frees them to be about the work of loving each other well at this important time."

Father Kempf recently sat down with a young woman who came with her husband to plan her funeral. She was suffering from ALS (a progressive neurodegenerative disease), which had greatly diminished her ability to speak. "She wanted to be part of planning of her own funeral. Each of us around that table would tell you that—while it was sometimes tearful for us—it was also a holy and beautiful time. When I saw the husband take his wife's hand and observed the look that passed between them, it was so clear that what we were doing was both important and freeing," Father Kempf recalls.

CATHARSIS

Discussing the details of his funeral was cathartic for my dad. He needed to talk about his death. It helped him to deal with the impending reality and be at peace with leaving this earth. Father Kempf says, "As we talk honestly, death usually becomes less frightening, and more of a 'going home' to a love we have already tasted here."

He explains, “It’s not morbid; it’s actually life-giving to talk about dying, funeral preferences, and other end-of-life issues. The experience of death can be transforming not only to the one who is dying, but also to those who journey with them. It is a great and painful grace.”

Even if the topic makes us feel uncomfortable, Father Kempf says offering our loving presence is the greatest gift we can give someone who faces death. “They don’t need someone trying to ‘cheer them up.’ They need us—as we are—with a willingness to be with them as they are.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION & RESOURCES:

I. The importance of the funeral Mass

Catholic Digest talked with Father Caleb Vogel, co-host of Idaho’s Salt & Light Catholic Radio’s program Collar Talk, about what one should keep in mind when planning a funeral. “It’s important to remember that the Mass is for the repose of the Christian soul and not a ‘celebration of life.’ There is nothing wrong with rejoicing in the life of the deceased, but that is not the point of the funeral Mass.”

He went on to say, “The funeral Mass celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus the Savior and calls up the power that comes from Calvary to redeem the soul of the one present in death and raise that soul to eternal life.”

There can be some personal touches at the funeral, but it’s important that they do not interfere with the Mass. Father Vogel recommends saving personal touches for the burial and reception.

“The Rite of Burial is short, so once the priest is done, you can add many personal touches. For example, have people say something about the deceased and then add a shovel of dirt or give a eulogy after the blessing. The Vigil and the funeral dinner are also ideal for a eulogy.”

In my family, we chose to personalize in small ways. When my mother, who was an artist, died, we had several of her paintings on display at the wake and in the lobby of the church. At my father’s wake, the priest gave the eulogy and asked the people present to comment on Dad’s life.

Finally, the most unusual personal touch was that Dad requested to be taken to the cemetery not in a hearse, but in a rollback tow truck. After Dad retired from the Department of Transportation as a road engineer, he managed my eldest brother’s mechanic shop for over 20 years. No one who knew him would question why he made that request!

II. Funeral planning help

Whether a person feels inclined to begin making funeral arrangements ahead of time often has much to do with their state of health and their age. We’re not advocating obtaining a pre-paid packaged funeral from a funeral home; we’re suggesting putting one’s wishes in writing and purchasing ahead of time what one feels comfortable doing.

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER:

1. Cemetery plot. Some people want to be assured of being buried near family members, so they purchase in advance.
2. Headstone.
3. Casket
4. Wake and/or a viewing at the church. Although wakes are typically held at the funeral home, my father requested that his wake be held at the church.
5. Eulogy. Who should write it?
6. Clothes you will be buried in along with any jewellery or religious items.
7. Funeral Mass music. Sacred music is always called for, but it’s fine to have secular music at the lunch or at the graveside, if your priest approves.
8. Readings. Typically your parish will have a guide for choosing the readings.
9. Choice of flowers.
10. Designated participants, including priest, pallbearers, readers, and musicians.
11. Lunch after the burial. Having a lunch is a hospitable tradition. This is especially nice if you have friends and family travelling from a distance.
12. Life insurance or burial policies. Young and healthy persons may want to consider obtaining a life insurance policy or a burial policy.

Walking into the wake and seeing Dad’s beautiful walnut casket I couldn’t help but smile; I knew how pleased my dad would be with the casket. As a special token, the funeral home provided keepsake crosses for the children which were blessed by the priest. A nice token to remember dad by.

By Lori Hadacek Chaplin