

Burying Our Dead

Political Funerals in Northern Ireland - 3rd April, 1992

INTRODUCTION

The following quotations appeared in our newspapers in Northern Ireland in 1992:

‘The horrifying murder of a young mother marks a ‘terrifying descent down the spiral of hatred-, the Bishop of Down and Connor said today...

Mourners, who included Protestant churchmen, Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and new West Belfast MP Dr Joe Hendron, heard Bishop Walsh describe Mrs Hanna as a ‘loving wife, a cherished daughter, and sister and devoted mother...Her family’, he said, were ‘united in forgiveness’ by the many expressions of love which they had received from Protestant families.

‘One realises that it is unrepresentative elements that are holding entire communities to ransom and tightening the grip of fear on homes, shops and streets’ (*Belfast Telegraph* 1 May 1992).

‘The joint funeral of two IRA men was at the centre of a series of angry disputes today, with hundreds of mourners eventually walking out of a Tyrone Church after a priest urged republican leaders to call off their campaign of violence.

Requiem mass for Barry O'Donnell and Sean O'Farrell was earlier delayed for almost two hours while relatives of the dead men and Sinn Fein members argued first with police officers and then with ... (clergy)... over the funeral's paramilitary-style trappings' (*Belfast Telegraph* 20 February 1992).

‘Violence flared at the funeral of UVF murder victim Conor Maguire, when mourners were attacked by a 200-strong loyalist mob as the cortege made its way to Milltown Cemetery...

Earlier a priest conducting the requiem Mass slammed police for turning his church into a “fortress”.

Fr Samuel Kerr told hundreds of mourners that police had broken their word about not coming into the church grounds during the funeral' (*Belfast Telegraph* 2 May 1992).

‘Mourners at the funeral of murdered Belfast teenager Andrew Johnston today heard the Government branded ‘guilty before the people of Northern Ireland’. Speaking before the funeral ...(the pastor) ... who was delivering the address, said he would be calling on the Government ‘to take its place in the dock’ (*Belfast Telegraph* 20 February 1992).

The ‘Political’ (or ‘Troubles’ related) funeral is a major aspect of Northern Irish society. Hardly a week goes by without some clergy having to take a funeral in the full glare of publicity. Such funerals are acutely difficult occasions, not only because they are often widely reported and what is said and done taken out of context, but also because of the unspoken messages that can unintentionally be conveyed to the various communities on this island and abroad.

These funerals are highly significant occasions, when the Churches relate to the wider society in the full glare of publicity, and when they are also seen in some way to represent the communities from which they come.

Our intention in this document is to look at some of the questions raised by such funerals. There are no simple answers, but we hope that by airing some of the difficulties all those involved in such funerals will be able to ensure that, at the very least, their words and actions do nothing further to divide and embitter. Can such funerals offer possibilities of reconciliation to an already deeply divided community? How can clergy help those involved to cope with the community's anger and fears while at the same time dealing with their own anger and fears? How can they become more sensitive to the effects of their messages on the other community?

One of the main areas of misunderstanding for us in Ireland is the different emphasis that our traditions put on funerals. In traditional Catholic theology, a funeral is a time to plead for mercy and to pray for the dead person, and therefore the celebration of a funeral Mass in no way suggests approval for the actions of the deceased. In Protestant practice, however, a funeral service is, in significant part, an act of thanksgiving for the person's life. Protestants, as a result, are scandalized by paramilitary funerals, seeing them as a statement of ecclesiastical approval for paramilitary action. (For the purpose of this document, 'Protestant' includes Church of Ireland). The most helpful funerals, from whatever tradition, are those that affirm most clearly the transcendent God and the hope of the resurrection. They need to be conducted in a way that recognises the pain of all those involved, and to be placed sensitively within the context of continuing pastoral care of the bereaved family.

All 'political' funerals carry a message and there is nothing clergy can do to avoid that. The way a funeral service is conducted will reveal a stance, whether we like it or not. Whether we permit or ban flag draped coffins, whether we condemn or condone through silence, whether we attempt privacy or accept publicity - all send out signals to a highly politicized community. It is well therefore to be prepared for that, so that our messages can be for healing, rather than for the reinforcing of our existing divisions.

Given all this, it is perhaps well also that clergy attempt to prepare their communities for funerals when they arise, by gradually alerting them to the subtle realities and innuendoes of our society. Clergy are in an excellent position to help their communities look at the violence in society apart from local and immediate incidents. If they do this people will be better able to understand what is happening and to channel their reactions into positive responses when funerals arise within the local community.

This is perhaps best achieved through a process of continuing questioning, and even at times of direct challenge, to community preconceptions.

The cultural reality of life in Ireland, both North and South, is that clergy are community representatives, expected to play a certain role in the community. They therefore have the choice of speaking on behalf of their own section of the community, articulating fear and anger and even prejudice; or they can go beyond this into the realms of real leadership by seeking to challenge community preconceptions in the name of the Risen Lord. They need to be aware of the other community's point of view and sensitivities. This, of course, is a delicate area which can easily lead to isolation and personal rejection - something that our

Lord himself experienced. But sensitively and prayerfully managed it can and does lead to a renewed respect for the deep truth of the Gospel that we all seek to proclaim.

Pastoral Care of the Bereaved

The loss of a loved one is always painful, especially so under the circumstances that prevail in Northern Ireland. Here the whole range of emotions associated with grief are often, at least in the early stages, lived in the public eye. Many people can feel afraid to let go, to cry, to appear undignified. Perhaps the most vital thing that clergy can do is to encourage people to express their grief in the way that is most natural and unpressured for them.

Any Christian approach to bereavement needs, at some point, to take account of the reality of forgiveness. Forgiveness must at times appear impossible. To reach it is a miracle of grace and to many it will only be given after a long pilgrimage of darkness, and sometimes despair. But forgiveness does not exclude anger. Anger is an emotion that many, especially those close to the bereaved, may often conceal: many do not even admit it to themselves. They somehow regard it as unbecoming, as unChristian; they fear losing control if they allow it to surface.

This suppression of anger is often seen in Northern Ireland. Relatives of the deceased are often reported as saying that they forgive the killers, or that they hold them no ill-will, or that they want no retaliation. Pastors need to be aware that those who genuinely express such thoughts so soon after a murder may well feel the complete opposite a few weeks later, such are the changing emotions of grief. It is important at times of intense grief for people to feel free to be angry - with murderers, with the Government, with the Church, with God - for it is a vital part of the grieving process.

The story of the road to Emmaus is an example of Our Lord listening to the actual feelings the disciples had at that moment. These were feelings of despair that their hope of a political messiah who would free Israel was not going to be realised. Only after they had expressed these feelings were they able to listen to the Lord as he opened their hearts to the Scriptures, and only then were they free to recognise him as the Risen Saviour.

Those with experience of bereavement counselling all say that, at some time, anger needs to be acknowledged and dealt with - although not necessarily publicly. Anger repressed, even for the best of motives, has a tendency to return at a later date and in a more destructive form. At the same time the bereaved must be given freedom to express forgiveness, as well as any emotion that they need to express and with which they need to cope.

All this poses deep pastoral problems for clergy dealing with the family of a murder victim. On the one hand individuals most directly involved need to be reassured that anger is a natural part of their grief, and then to express it in such a way that it does not add further poison to our society. On the other hand the wider community also needs to acknowledge its feelings of anger, face them and then work through them creatively and constructively. If it fails to do this anger can all too easily fester and express itself in destructive and murderous ways. Not least, the clergy to whom the funeral is entrusted need to recognise their own feelings before they can hope to deal with those of the bereaved or the wider community.

Grieving takes a long time. Together with all its associated emotions, it is a confused process that can take years to work through. This does not make the pastoral task any easier. It is certainly not completed when the funeral is over.

Neither does this mean the preaching of easy forgiveness. A 1991 report from England found that the relatives of murder victims were angry at clergy who offered forgiveness to those who committed the crime against their loved ones. Clergy would do well to take note: the only people who can, or who indeed have the right, to offer such forgiveness are the relatives and friends. That will take time - maybe years. The woman who said that she was not yet able to forgive her son's murderers, but who prayed regularly to God to forgive her lack of forgiveness was speaking with an authenticity that no outsider should ever presume to disavow (*Irish News* 24 January 1991).

Forgiveness is something that we should take very seriously. Jesus himself enjoined it in the Sermon on the Mount: 'For if you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done' (Mt 6:14ff). He told us in his special prayer to pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. The Lord's Prayer then is a deeply challenging prayer for any Christian individual or community suffering the pain of loss. The Lord also forgave those who were crucifying him, despite the fact that they had not asked for it (Lk 23:34).

Forgiveness is something for each person to reach in his or her own time. It is something that we are enabled to reach only by the God who forgives us: a sign of grace, not an achievement. Forgiveness comes, like a miracle, when it seems least possible, when the darkness and despair seem at their deepest. Forgiveness can free the victim from hatred and bitterness, as well as from the oppressive power of the injustice that has been committed. It thereby frees him or her to lead a full life once again. Forgiveness cannot eradicate the injury, but it can contain it and enable it to be transcended. As John Calvin put it in his *Church Discipline* 'Forgiveness is not the ignoring of the offence, or pretending that it never happened. But it is the expunging of an offence, following on the recognition of its gravity' (cf editorial, *Theology*, March-April, 1992, p. 84). Forgiveness is not something that we can force on people. Nor is it something that the media have any right to enquire after in the immediate aftermath of murder. Forgiveness is something towards which clergy can, with struggle and prayer, be led, together with the bereaved and the wider community of which we are all part.

Much of this process will be initiated at the funeral service, which is a uniquely powerful and poignant occasion. A 'normal' funeral is powerful enough; but in the Northern Irish political funeral, clergy find themselves in a peculiarly responsible situation in which the personal and political are combined into a very emotive and public whole. They are presented with an opportunity for leadership that is quite frightening in its implications. Hence this document.

Paramilitary Funerals

Paramilitary funerals create particular problems for clergy. The bereaved family have the same right to pastoral care and they need it as much as any other. However, there is a genuine worry that, by taking such a funeral, clergy can be seen as in some way condoning the paramilitary actions of the deceased. This is the public message that many, especially

Protestants, would take on seeing press photographs of the minister or priest alongside a paramilitary parade, or a flag-and-beret-draped coffin.

Protestant and Catholic clergy have different dilemmas. For the Protestant it would be impossible to open the church doors to an overtly paramilitary funeral, as members of their own community would see that as tantamount to support for the organisation in question. For the Catholic, funerals are expected to take place in church, and such funerals are not seen as in any way condoning the violence of the organisation to which the deceased may have belonged. However, every care must be taken to ensure that maximum separation of paramilitary and Church is achieved. All clergy, of whatever denomination, can control, to some extent, what happens on Church property, but not what happens outside on the street, (although this control is not always possible to maintain). Difficulties can also arise when, as is often the case in country areas, the burial ground is attached to the church, and a paramilitary group decide to hold a display after the funeral is over: in practical terms there is little that individual clergy can do to stop this.

Many questions are raised by paramilitary funerals, not least those of legitimacy. Any paramilitary display is an act of defiance vis à vis the state: paramilitary ritual is a parody of legitimate state rituals, designed in part to say 'We are the real State'. It seeks to send a message of continuing defiance to the authorities, to give encouragement to paramilitary supporters.

Within each of our communities there is an ambivalence regarding these paramilitary displays. For some in the Catholic community the ambivalence concerns the legitimacy of the Government of Northern Ireland - and even of the Government of the Republic as presently constituted. For some in the Protestant community the ambivalence is somewhat different, stating rather that the State is not doing enough about the cancer of violence in our midst, but making the point in such a way as to undermine that very state.

Some clergy feel that they cannot participate unless the family have specifically asked that there be no paramilitary display. One member of this group was asked to take a high profile loyalist paramilitary funeral, but since the deceased was not a parishioner, and lived well outside the parish boundaries he was able to insist that, if he were to take it, the local Church of Ireland rector would have to give his permission first. Others feel that to refuse to take the funeral is to refuse comfort to the bereaved, and indeed to risk alienating them from the Church. For these clergy it is better to insist that any service be strictly private and home based (not usually an option for Catholics).

A Presbyterian clergyman, who was on the Shankill Road at the height of the Troubles recalls his first UDA funeral. He arrived at the house on the day of the funeral to find a UDA force gathered at the door. He continued with the funeral, making it quite clear to all that he was there to give comfort, strength and hope to the family. In his own way he rose above the threatening environment.

The presence of the security forces at a funeral can also create a very tense, not to say provocative, situation. It needs to be recognised that some presence is often required, no matter how unwelcome it may be in the local community. Incidents such as the attack on the funeral at Milltown Cemetery during Holy Week 1988 bear witness enough to that. There is also the desire of the authorities to prevent any paramilitary displays, just as the Church is concerned to stop such displays on Church property. Over-obvious and heavy handed

policing is entirely counter-productive and increases support for the paramilitaries in the local community. Security Force presence within Church grounds can almost never be justified. Clergy need to take the initiative in negotiating beforehand with the necessary parties. Most have experienced that this consultation is welcomed.

For Catholic clergy funerals have often been occasions of bitter controversy. The IRA has been accused of manipulating families for its own propaganda purposes. The IRA has, in its turn, accused Church authorities of trying to deny the right of a Christian burial to its members.

Only recently have Church authorities given any guidance on how such funerals be conducted. The Catholic Church, for instance, has made it clear that flags and paramilitary trappings are not allowed inside Church grounds or buildings. But there are still questions: what should clergy do when they meet uniformed paramilitary personnel standing guard at the head of the coffin when they make a pre-funeral visit to the wake? Should they walk in front of the funeral procession when the coffin is draped with flag, mask, beret, gloves and dark glasses?

Outside the house, different criteria are in operation, as all actions are completely in the public eye, and there for all to see and (mis)interpret. If the priest is seen in the presence of a coffin draped with paramilitary emblems or leading a paramilitary cortege, Protestants will often conclude that the Catholic Church is, at best, ambivalent in its attitude to IRA violence. As we have seen, Protestant practice has always seen the funeral as in some way an act of thanksgiving for the life of the deceased - a time in which it is not acceptable to think or speak ill of the departed.

However, because of the emphasis in Catholic theology on praying for the dead, priests will see it as their duty to attend such funerals, in part to support the family. Given that the priest who is chief celebrant will often lead the coffin to the graveside where the grave is beside the Church it will be impossible for him to avoid TV coverage. But there may be an argument for other priests to do so if possible. Such a stance will not take away from their primary responsibility which is to minister to the family, while at the same time minimising any impression of clerical tolerance of paramilitary activity.

With this in mind it is probably best that the priest make prior arrangements with the family as to what is or is not acceptable, and then keep to that agreement. There is an extremely strong case to be made for insisting that there be no paramilitary display before, during or after the service.

The address or homily is the most public aspect of the funeral, and it can be a real opportunity for healing. In the case of a paramilitary funeral it is an especially delicate responsibility, with its need to strike a balance between support for the bereaved and disapproval of the acts and affiliations of the deceased. Some people feel that it should always be given by local clergy, even when a relative of the deceased offers to take the ceremony. It is felt that relatives are often too upset, too involved, and too unprepared, and have an inclination towards instant canonization of the deceased. Others feel that, with consultation, a relative or outsider known to the family can add an important dimension to the whole funeral. Complete refusals can cause yet more hurt. Either way it is very helpful for clergy - especially visitors - to consult with colleagues, both for ideas and support.

Both address or homily and prayers need to look beyond the immediate victim, to the wider truth that all are victims in this land - both Protestant and Catholic, military and paramilitary, victim and perpetrator. It is not a time for making party-political points. The relatives and friends of the victim are the immediate and most important hearers of the address or homily. Yet there is also a wider audience. Because victims of political killings are representative of their communities, this wider audience is made up both of the victim's community and 'the other side'. This wider context should normally not be ignored. In some circumstances it may be good to raise the questions that many people are likely to have in their minds, such as 'who is going to protect us from killings like this?' or 'have the security forces acted properly in the situation?' Yet ministry in Northern Ireland demands more than simply articulating the fears and anger of one community. We are required to take account also of the fear and anger of the other community, and to subject both to the critique of the Gospel.

Long after the funeral is over, there are still deep wounds, especially in the circumstances that prevail in Northern Ireland today. The family of a dead paramilitary, regardless of their attitude to his or her affiliations, need pastoral care and support as much as (if not even more than) anyone else. They need to see and feel that the Church does not look down on them, but really cares.

Security Force Funerals

From the Protestant point of view, funerals of members of the security forces do not seem to be a problem. But, seen from the other community, such funerals can convey unintended messages. The main danger is that the service is taken in such a way as to suggest to members of the other community that the person being buried is 'one of ours'.

Because of the representative nature of victims, individual grief can very quickly become the grief of a whole community, particularly in tight-knit rural areas. He or she could so easily be you or me. When, as in the case of security force personnel, the victims come overwhelmingly from the Protestant community, it is very easy to convey the impression that the deceased was in some way a defender of that community. 'One of ours' has been killed by 'one of them'.

Of course, this is rarely the intention. But, particularly at times of high communal tension, it is vital to be aware of the possible consequences of our actions and words. All clergy need to remember that calls for tighter security, especially calls for specific actions such as the re-introduction of internment, are basically seen as the voicing of the concerns of one section of the community to the exclusion of the fears of the other. Yet, as we have seen in the previous section, clergy cannot ignore political reality, and preach a purely spiritual message divorced from the practical concerns of the community. If conducting an RUC funeral in a village that has already seen a dozen such funerals over the years it is very natural that questions of community protection be raised. However, if merely stated, with no attempt to relate what is said to the wider inter-communal reality, such calls run the risk of increasing the divisions between our communities.

Anger is a natural reaction to murder. Yet, as we have seen, a grief that gets stuck with its natural anger is never going to be transcended. Bitter outbursts from the pulpit help no-one. Condemnation of evil is a necessary part of Christian leadership, not least on public occasions such as funerals. But condemnation needs to be balanced by a positive vision of hope, by a proclamation of the positive vision of the Kingdom of God. Mere anger serves no

Christian purpose. Anything that could possibly be interpreted as the response of a Protestant chaplain to a Protestant force also helps no-one, least of all the security forces themselves. The onus is on clergy to seek to understand the aspirations and fears of everyone in this land so that unintentionally divisive words can be avoided at all times, and not just at funerals.

The whole area of what to say at a funeral, and how to say it, is extremely sensitive. Some clergy will feel that it is right to centre on the family and their grief: but this is harder where a public service is involved. Others will feel that some political comment is unavoidable: but then every care has to be taken to ensure that what is said cannot be interpreted in a sectarian way. Others will feel that, if political points have to be made, they should be made in a carefully prepared statement or in an equally carefully prepared interview to the press, and that the address/homily is not the place for them. These complex issues need to be taken on board by all who have to speak at funerals: the final decision on how to respond to them lies with individual clergy.

The funerals of members of the security forces are naturally public occasions. It would be impossible in our community for them to be otherwise. But wise clergy need to go beyond expectations, and use the address or homily as an opportunity to heal.

The Funerals of Innocent Victims

At the end of 1991 a clergyman, when visiting the parents of a young boy who had just been critically injured in a sectarian attack, asked the parents to pray for those who had committed the crime. Like the lady referred to above, they found this impossible, despite their deep faith commitment. To pray for those who persecute and horribly mistreat us takes time and clergy need to be sensitive in deciding when the time is right to raise questions about forgiveness.

A case can be made for including such prayers in the funeral service, as a public act, as a plea from the heart of a grieving congregation. The Church preaches the forgiveness of a loving God, so it needs to pray that God both judges and forgives, and that we all be led to that place where we too can find forgiveness in our hearts. Funerals of innocent victims - those caught in crossfire, or victims of random sectarian attacks - are peculiarly poignant occasions. The normal grief of the family is extended to the neighbourhood, and accentuated by the peculiar futility of it all. Such funerals are very hard for the family, as they are almost forced to express their grief and anger in public.

The role of the minister in circumstances such as these must surely be to encourage the family to express their grief, anger and emptiness as naturally as possible; to seek to shelter them, as far as possible, from the pressures of publicity - especially any attempt by the media to encourage the bereaved to an instant response to their loss. Clergy also need to encourage all those at the funeral service to feel sorrow and sympathy rather than hatred and revenge. They need, in some way, to express the constructive emotions and ideals of all those affected by the tragedy, and to challenge them gently with Gospel hope, so that they can feel affirmed by the service, and not just comforted by it. It is, above all else, a time to seek to win the trust of the bereaved, and convey to them the concern of the loving God we seek to serve.

The Media

The media face the difficult task of how to report on a murder and the subsequent funeral without either intruding into personal grief or further aggravating an already tense

inter-communal situation. The way they do this is often seen by the public as involving 'too much intrusion into the grief of those suffering personal tragedies' (*Belfast Telegraph* 14 May 1992). Questions such as 'How do you feel?' or 'Do you forgive those people who murdered your son?' are examples of such insensitive questioning. The manner in which clergy relate to the media can both protect the family from unwanted attention, and assist the media in getting a fair and balanced picture of the whole situation.

Many clergy find it helpful to have made some kind of agreement with the family at the earliest possible time as to how to treat the media (even though the family may be far from united in their attitudes at this time). Some families have found it helpful to appoint a family spokesperson to deal with the media, thus taking the pressure off those most intimately affected. A brief statement to the effect that the funeral is strictly private, perhaps including a reference to the private nature of the family's grief, has also been found helpful. If the family do not want to limit the media in this way, it is vital that clergy are brief, careful, and well prepared in what they say. Too many are caught unprepared in front of the camera. Involving, or consulting, Church Press Officers, may be helpful.

The media are going to present some image of the situation whatever attitude the clergy take to them. Discussion will almost always be appreciated and respected. By and large media people want to be constructive and sensitive to the needs of the bereaved.

Conclusion

In this document we have concentrated on the role of the officiating clergy: but there are things that can be done by clergy outside the immediate situation, especially those from the other community. Simple acts such as visiting the homes of the bereaved, or attending a funeral, can speak volumes. It can also be immensely helpful for clergy to express the anger of the community in whose name the atrocity was committed - there has all too often been a culpable silence from one side or the other after murders. We in this group do not feel that it is within the power of the clergy to say sorry in anything other than purely personal terms: their representative nature has its limits. No-one, except those who actually committed the crime, can be held directly responsible for it; but we can all help to mitigate the consequences.

At the heart of nearly every 'political' funeral in Northern Ireland today there lies a broken community, one in which there is a real danger of the spiral of sectarian violence being given new impetus and 'justification'. But within this there also lies an opportunity for the redeeming activity of God to be seen at work amidst the brokenness, and for the Church to become the sign of unity and healing that our Lord intended it to be. For each and every person involved in such funerals there lies the imperative to ensure that their actions and words do nothing to contribute to the cycle of violence. Whether we like it or not, clergy have a greater responsibility than most.