O Death, Where is Thy Sting? Preplanning Funerals

This is the third in a series of bulletin articles covering topics related to a peaceful journey home to God.

Thinking about our mortality can be daunting. It is an unpleasant to confront the uncertainty and finality of our own passing, but as Christians we believe that this life is preparation for eternal life with the Lord, and that Heaven is our true home. Preplanning one's own funeral is a way to confront our future in the House of the Father.

Our ancestors were much more conscious of death than we are. Lives were frequently shorter, for even children died, and dying family members were cared for at home. Now, the departure of loved ones often takes place in hospital or a nursing home, and with the increasing preference for cremation, there is no body to view. People "pass on," but the survivors have only a vague idea of what that means. Planning for death allows us to think deeply about our beliefs and to draw closer to Jesus and our Heavenly Father, and actively prepare the way, like John the Baptist, for our own hour. This can take us to a more intimate place of faith.

There are practical reasons as well for planning our own funerals. In doing so, we will have a voice on that day in the presence of our loved ones through Scripture, song, and perhaps even our own obituary. Unfortunately today, many of our loved ones are unchurched or members of different faith traditions and do not know Catholic liturgy or sacred music. They may be unaware of your favorite hymns or verses. By settling the details of our funeral Mass before our final moments, we have the opportunity to provide Christian witness to those we love and enhance their faith lives. We can inspire them by our own example.

Funeral costs can vary widely depending on choices made. By preplanning (and prepaying) for a funeral, burial plot, and method of preparing our earthly bodies, we take care of costs at the current level and are not subject to inevitable rising prices. We have our choice of where and how our bodies will rest. This also spares our grieving loved ones from having to make difficult decisions at a vulnerable moment or bearing the hardship of expenses. Our preplanning becomes an act of selfless love.

So how to begin? A good place to start may be our parish's Bereavement Ministry. You can call the church office to set up an appointment. An experienced team member can help you consider your own level of readiness to proceed with scripture and song, and answer questions you have related to the liturgy. You can contact various funeral homes to learn about prices and facilities, and find a place that will be in accordance with the environment you desire. Visits to cemeteries will help you find your final resting place, and you can follow up with inquiries regarding pricing and maintenance of graves or crypts.

Jesus has assured us that He goes before us to prepare a dwelling place in our Father's house. We do not know the hour of his coming, but we can light our lamps in anticipation.