

# Boston College

## Touchstones for Preaching Transcript of Special Touchstone: Funerals presented by Rev. Thomas J. Scirghi, S.J., Th.D.

"Touchstones for Preaching" is a resource of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, produced in partnership with The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Center.

### I. Challenges When Preaching at a Funeral

#### Mystery of Death

I start off by quoting T. S. Eliot, one of my favorite lines from Eliot : "Man cannot bear too much reality." I think as priests, as deacons, we know this in different ways. "Ma n cannot bear too much reality." In dealing honestly with the Funeral R ite and funeral preaching, I think we have to appreciate this; so, how we deal with it, the euphemisms , we come with this, and to admit our own humility here, our own powerlessness that arises from the funeral. I think, too, of the Buddha's four noble truths. The first one: life is dukkha , life is suffering. Th at's the first noble truth. So it's not to be pessimistic or cynical, but I think to accept this, to accept this reality. I think the f uneral preaching, the Funeral Rite, forces us to confront the reality of death. It is the on e certainty. People will say, "W ell, the re are two certainties, death and taxes. " We Jesuits have found a way around taxes; we're working on death. But the reality of death and suffering here —its grief, sadness, the heart break that it causes— of course that it causes a radical change in one's l ife. Its sheer meaninglessness. How could th is happen? Why? The paradox : w e know it's a certainty, but not now, not yet, not to this person who I knew and loved so much. It does force us to ask the question , "Does life make any sense at all?"

# Boston College

the hospital chaplain. So they would invite me to visit their family members, and I was happy to do that, and I never explained until later why I was there. But I can remember vividly leaning over in to a bed—over these people with traumatic brain injury—and how the nerves are damaged and they send confused signals to the brain and it forces the body into this gnarled position here. The family members showed such great faith as I would bring Communion to them and share the Word that we had broken open at Sunday Mass earlier and then gave Communion.

But [I] thought, Lord, if only I could heal this person now. Is that too proud of me? If only we had a miracle this afternoon here. What it would do to the faith of these people. You know what I'm saying? You know, like Jesus did for that little girl there who everyone thought was dead, "Talitha cum – little girl, get up." Or the son of the widow, a maimed young man, "I bid you get up." Oh, Lord, work a miracle today here! But, nothing happened.

I have to confess, sometimes I leave the hospital room like the crowd jeering at Jesus on the cross, "He saved others, why can't he save himself? He raised others, why can't he heal this person?" We have to confront this powerlessness in all humility here, and then from this discover our role here, our role with the Church, with these people in suffering unto death.

## Preaching is Revelatory

Preaching is revelatory. In teaching preaching at the Jesuit School of Theology, one question I hear regularly is, "Can I refer to myself in the homily?" What about using the first person singular pronoun, I? Well just as a rule of thumb, I say limit it to twice in any one homily. Twice, otherwise it becomes too self-referential. But keep in mind that speech itself is revelatory—I don't care what you're talking about—we will learn something about you from what you're saying and the way you say it. I'm sure first impressions were made as soon as I opened my mouth here. I don't want to hear them, but I'm sure they were made. So whether you're talking about your immortal soul or the Red Sox, we are going to learn something about you.

So if speech is revelatory, so too is preaching revelatory. Preaching will reveal the faith of the preacher. I really believe this. Preaching reveals the faith of the preacher. So when it comes to funeral preaching, "Preacher, what do you really believe here? How strongly do you believe this?" And I say this because of something else I learned from teaching in my presiding course. We call it celebrational style. It's preparing Jesuits and other seminarians for ordination. It's a practical class on the Rites, how to preside at Mass, how to preside at a funeral, preside at confession, etc. We go through all those Rites. The two Rites my students have the most difficulty with are Penance and the Funeral. So, we have to ask, "Do we believe what, for instance, we pray in the Creed?" You know, "I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen." This is the moment. This is the opportunity to profess my faith in what we say every Sunday. The funeral sermon, the funeral homily, gives us that opportunity.

Am I aware of an ongoing presence here? Nothing spooky here, but a belief, a belief in life everlasting, a presence in absence. I think you would know what I mean when I say that I still know of my mother's presence after she died in 2003. In some ways that presence is felt stronger by me than the presence of all of you sitting so close to me—that kind of presence. I wonder if it's the same kind of presence the Apostles knew after the resurrection when Jesus reappeared to them, and then after the ascension. After the ascension, did they know his presence in an even stronger way than when he walked with them and ate with them? We believe in this ongoing presence here. Do we accept that while death affects and changes relationships, it does not destroy our relationships? The relationship endures in a changed way. We'll say more about this a little later. The relationship, though, endures. Again—the communion of saints—we will be joined together again.

# Boston College

A very practical question —I ask this of all my preaching students— is the homily Catholic, is it Christian, or is it good pop psychology, or is it just an entertainment? A lot of people will settle for the pop psychology. It's barely Christian, nothing transcendent, nothing of the Paschal Mystery in it, but it made us feel good; and a lot of people will appreciate that. Don't be fooled by it. One question I ask my students when they're done preaching in class: "Was this Catholic and why?" So what do we learn about the tradition here? What do we learn from the Scripture here? Is it Catholic? When I say, "What did we learn from this?" here's a point about preaching in general.

Are you familiar with St. Augustine's threefold purpose for preaching? Isn't it good I'm here today? Okay, alright! St. Augustine, in his book, *De Doctrina Christiana*, *On Christian Doctrine*, part four talks about preaching and may be the first preaching manual in history. Augustine there says there's a threefold purpose for preaching: to teach, to delight, and to move. Again, to teach, delight, and move. A word about each.

Like teach, he certainly doesn't mean to turn the pulpit into a professor's podium. It's not a lecture. It's not a class per se, but that the assembly should learn something new about the Scripture and the tradition. To teach, in that sense, to learn something new about the Scripture and the tradition.

Second, to delight, and here he does not mean to entertain, get them laughing; rather to inspire. To delight means to inspire. If you've ever had the occasion when someone comes up to you after Mass and says, "That was a great homily there. I felt like you were talking right to me. What you said spoke to me where I am today." So, a good homily should inspire.

And, third, to move... to move. Where do you want people to go from this, spiritually speaking? What can they do here? With a funeral homily, obviously, to deepen one's faith in the promise of Jesus Christ through the Paschal Mystery, for instance. So one way I evaluate my homily after I've written it up before delivering it— is there something here that's teaching, that's delighting, and that's moving?

## Sacramental or Sentimental

Another distinction I like to make is —and pardon me, you may find this trite —the difference between sacramental and sentimental. Sacramental and sentimental. The sentimental focuses on our feelings; it strives to make us feel good, but that's it. I have [there is] nothing wrong with having people feel good from preaching, but if that's all that happens I think something's missing —then it's sentimental. It needs to be sacramental, and by that I mean rooted in our tradition and touching the transcendent. So again, we have learned about our tradition here —where we come from —and we are reminded of where we are going here. I don't think it's a matter of either /or, that people cannot enjoy that. No. Augustine was a masterful preacher. People came to him. They were entertained and enlightened and certainly moved. We can do both.

## Diligent Striving for an Ideal

Another technical point I use in class... With all sacramental celebration, it is a matter of assiduous supposing. Let me write that on the board here. (Can you see this back here? Can you read this? Now? Okay.) Assiduous supposing. Another way of saying it is diligent striving. With all of our sacramental worship and preaching, it is a matter of diligent striving for an ideal. I read this first with Kenneth Stevenson's book on marriage, *On Marriage*. So you think what happens there in marriage with a young couple, that they are vowing to honor each other, love each other, for the rest of their lives in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. That's a great presumption here. Or, I like to think of it, when Jesuits make their first vows. If that isn't a matter of assiduous supposing, at 22 years old, just out of college, professing —before Jesus Christ, his mother, the virgin queen, right, the whole heavenly court —vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, to live my life in the Society [of

# Boston College

Jesus]. That's pretty grandiose, but then you have to read the last line: "And with the grace of God, I will achieve this." So all of us have made this assiduous supposing here. I think with the funeral, as well, we remember the promise God has made to us, and as we commit our friend, our brother or sister to God, we are asking—in a way pleading—for God to keep his promise that we will enjoy eternal life with God, that we will be fulfilled here. We suppose this in good faith. Through funeral preaching we want to keep this alive as well. It is something beyond us, but we have good reason to believe it.

## Peer Pressure

I think it's most difficult to speak in front of our own peers. For me, it's the Jesuit community. I love them—don't get me wrong—but when I'm there in front of the Jesuit community, I get very, very tense. Another group is with my own age group. At least several years ago I was just ordained, and we had a group of young adults come from New York City. I was at a retreat house in New York City with a group of young adults and they were my age, way back when. These were post-college, 25 to 40, and I was leading the retreat, the weekend retreat. And I've done this so many times before, but it's the first time with my peers and I was nervous; I was really nervous. So I started the retreat Friday night like I always do, telling them that they should be relaxed, that on this retreat I want them to be relaxed. If they get nothing else out of this retreat, they should be relaxed. Do you see a problem? Don't you know afterwards a woman came up to me and said, "Father, may I ask you something?" Well, please. "Do you realize you gave that whole talk on relaxation with a clenched fist?" I didn't. I was just so nervous, my nervousness was eking out here. So you know, it's one thing to tell them, "I want you to relax," but what they saw was tensed up.

Rule of thumb here: the ear follows the eye. The ear follows the eye; so I don't care what you're saying, the way you are is going to communicate loudly. So, if I want to convey relax, I have to appear relaxed. But see, this was in front of my peers then. Now certainly, yes, in a Jesuit audience I am most nervous then, most anxious. I'd imagine it's the same if you were speaking in front of a group of priests and deacons there.

Now one question I would ask my students when they tell me this: "I'm really nervous about preaching in class before them because they know me." I ask them, "Well how do you feel when you're listening to one of your brothers preach?" "Oh, I'm happy. I want to support them." "Well why can't you presume that then?" One fellow honestly did say, "Oh yeah, I'm criticizing him as he's speaking." I said, "Well, cut it out. Just stop it." "But what do you think when one of your peers is speaking? Are you criticizing him or wishing the best?" "I tend to wish the best, if for nothing else I don't want to be bored." So please, say something interesting that I may learn from, but more than that—yes—inspire me. Inspire me, I could use it.

So while we are nervous, yes, in front of our own peers, still what you have to say at the funeral may just inspire people. Beware of trying to rise to the occasion: "I must sound brilliant. I must be witty." If you are, that's great. What do you believe? How do you want this person to be remembered?

I think for a Jesuit it's always a temptation. Again, I was newly ordained helping out in this one parish on Staten Island, New York, and I show up one Sunday there; I go there on occasion. The two eucharistic ministers greet me and say, "Oh Father Tom! Oh, we're happy to see you. We like it when you preach, because, well, our pastor is good and all, but he's so intelligent. So we like it when you come here." "Thank you. It's good to be here, too." But, to avoid that temptation, [that] I must impress them. No, I don't think Jesus... pardon me... I don't think Jesus ever worried about that.

What do you remember about the deceased here? How should this person be remembered? What do you have to say to help us remember this, how his life modeled the teaching and work of Jesus Christ?

# Boston College

So somewhere between canonizing the person, going over the top —the best priest I ever knew, the best person I ever knew —no, no, or eulogizing, just talking about the information you were able to gather down here; but somewhere in the middle —to homilize, to homilize here.

## The Preacher and the Congregation

Where do you stand with the congregation? Where does the preacher stand with the congregation? In Aristotle's Rhetoric he said there are three points for any public speaking act: you have the audience, you have the speaker, and you have the message. For preaching, the U.S. Catholic Bishops in their little pamphlet, "Fulfilled in Your Hearing," used that same triangle: the audience/the assembly, the speaker/the preacher, the message/the homily. You have those three.

So just to think of yourselves, the congregation/ the preacher —where do you stand vis-à-vis them? Over them to explain it all? Certainly not under them. You ever hear those—they're so wimpy about it, they're so self-conscious. "I really shouldn't be speaking here. I don't know what to say. Any one of you could do this better. I don't know why I'm here." Well then, just sit down. Get out of the way. Stop apologizing. You are authorized by your ordination, man, and so we trust you.

Where do we stand as preacher with the congregation? And, may I suggest very simply that we accompany, that we accompany —not to explain these eternal truths, but to accompany —to walk with, to walk with the congregation, to help articulate our experience, the fear of death, the meaninglessness we talked about before, and our hopes of the eternal promise of Jesus Christ. So, the preacher accompanies the congregation. Accompanie s. You know, the technical term for what we do in the funeral is *ordo exsequiarum*, right, *exsequor*—to be, to follow to the end; literally to follow to the end. And our word funeral, from the Latin, *funus*, refer[s] to the procession itself. So, it's another synecdoche, where the one part speaks about the whole.

So the funeral really has to do with the whole procession, and as I mentioned before, from viatica, the food for the journey there that they used for the vigil, the funeral Mass or the funeral liturgy, and then the final committal. All this is a journey. It's all one liturgy. We'll talk about the difficulty of that in an urban society later, but ideally it's all a journey. I find when teaching I have to make my students aware of this. It's something like when you're teaching the Easter Triduum. It's all—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the vigil on Holy Saturday—it's all one liturgy, right? It only makes sense to understand it that way. So too with the funeral. So it means, literally, to follow to the end. So what we do as the preacher is to accompany, to accompany those on this final journey here.

## What We Are Doing When Preaching

A word about preaching in general and then specifically for the funeral preaching. What are we doing here? What are we doing in preaching? Not to define it, but two brief explanations.

What are we doing in preaching? The Dominican, Catherine Hilbert, teaching at Notre Dame University, she describes preaching as "naming grace." Naming grace. She has a very good book on this published by Continuum, *Naming Grace*. Grace, very simply, is the presence of God. So how do we know the presence of God here and now in this particular situation? The preacher is charged with that—to name grace, to find the presence of God, to locate it for us here from every occasion, from festival to funeral. Certainly I find it easy to do with an infant baptism. Ah, the little bambino is truly a gift from God. For a wedding, naming grace here as these two profess their love for each other. And then in the funeral—where is God here? So, to name grace.

Another explanation of preaching is from Fred Craddock, a New Testament scholar now retired from Emory University. He says, in preaching we tell people what they want to say, not what they want to hear. In preaching we tell people what they want to say. It is by dint of our preparation for

# Boston College

ordination —prayer and study, study of the Scripture and the tradition, and our understanding of the human condition —that we enable people to say what they want to say here. We are able to articulate this —their fears, their hopes, their questions, and concerns. So in general, the preacher is naming grace and telling people what they want to say.

Specifically for funeral preaching, it is a reorientation for those shaken by death. A reorientation. A reorientation for those shaken by death. How am I supposed to understand this? I take this from an article by Robert Howard. I put this in your short bibliography, a recent article he did on funeral preaching. Think... for so many of our sacraments, they involve a reorientation, a turning around, a thinking in a new way; seeing and hearing in a new way. In my Diocese of Oakland we just opened a new cathedral; it was dedicated last September. The architect designed it with this reorientation in mind. You approach the cathedral building from the street and you walk up what we call the "Pilgrim's Path." You get through the front door and there's the baptismal font. But to get through the nave to the sanctuary you have to go to the baptismal font and then you turn this way. What the architect had in mind was this reorientation through our baptism. Our path is redirected. So with the Sacraments, what we do, in one way, is to reorient our path. Think of John the Baptist calling out to people, "Turn back O man, O woman. Repent and be saved."

So, with funeral preaching, I suggest that we reorient our way of thinking about death and eternal life. It is also, as I mentioned earlier, a matter of bearing witness, bearing witness for the deceased. The one who cannot speak for him or herself anymore, we bear witness for them.

I suggest, too, that the homily offers a promise rather than an explanation. I think so many homilies suffer because they explain or they attempt to explain to us. This is just as an aside. I was listening to a deacon preaching in my sister's parish in South Carolina, and it was the Gospel passage where Jesus says, "You have heard it said that if you take another man's wife, that is adultery, but if you just look lustfully, that is just as bad as adultery." We had that passage. So the deacon, he prepared this well, and he said, "So here we have God's rules plain and simple. We just have to follow God's rules."

I'm thinking to myself, is it that simple? Is it that simple? What about me? It's one thing to kill someone—that's murder. But if you thought bad thoughts about someone—that's murder. Guys, can I ask you, have you ever thought evil thoughts about somebody, one of your brother deacons or priests? Don't raise your hands; you're looking at a murder rap! Have you ever looked lustfully at someone? Again, don't raise your hands. That's as bad as adultery. I don't think it was all that simple. I am wary of trying to explain everything that Jesus was talking about. We can explain certain things through our exegesis, but there is a great challenge there. I think especially with funeral preaching, do we try to explain too much as a salve to assuage people here?

## Begin with Listening

As all of us know good preachers, good preaching begins with listening; with listening. I'm wary when some of my students are preparing to preach and say, "Oh, I think I have a good story for this." I can talk about this. Preaching doesn't begin with what I can say about the Scripture. Preaching begins with what the Scripture says to me, as well as the occasion here. So I need to listen. I need to listen. Now let's be right up front about this. I think funeral preaching presents a great problem for preachers in that we have the shortest amount of preparation time, right? For Sunday we have enough time, I think. Well, it's never enough time; we have more time. For the other sacraments we have a good lead time, but often with funeral preaching you have a couple of days. We want to talk about that this afternoon, too.

Still, good preaching begins with listening, with listening... so to the Scripture as well as to the people involved. I found it, I don't know if you would agree with me. When I was first ordained I worked at a Jesuit parish on Long Island. It was a great opportunity for me just to engage in parish work and

# Boston College

sacramental ministry. Do you do this in your own parishes? Do you have duty days? So that Wednesday might be Jack's day, Thursday might be Tom's day, something like that. So it was Thursday. The funeral was Thursday, so I was scheduled to preside at the funeral. Fine. But, I would ask the fellow who had Wednesday if I could take the wake. And of course he said, "I never argue with anyone who wants to take work from me, please." So, I would go to the wake and this way I could meet the family because I didn't know them at all. Meet the family and learn something, learn something about the deceased and also about the family there. Always concerned I would never repeat anything there, anything personal they said, but just to give me an idea. Was it a tragic death? Was it a happy death in the sense the person lived a good, long life? Now, we can celebrate her. Something like that. Maybe an anecdote or something.

Oh, my first funeral was a textbook case. Again, older woman, lived a good life, everyone was happy there. The second one, though, I'll never forget. The husband saw me after. He was in his fifties. He was angry. His wife, and mother of two, died of cancer. How could God let this happen? How could God let this happen here? You know what do you do—you listen. You don't defend God, we listen. I went back to the rectory that night, and the good thing about a Jesuit community is we have a few people around and you always have an expert; always an expert. So I just poured this out. I said, "Guys, I'm new at this. What do you say in this situation? I know it's not brand new, but what do you say?" Well, we had Father Connie Deese, a diocesan priest from Long Island that taught philosophy at the local seminary there. He stayed with us, and right away he said, "Two things, Tom. Suffering is never wasted. It's okay to be angry with God." Thank you. I went to my room, and I wrote up this homily. To tell you the truth, I don't remember what I said. But, after the homily, after the funeral, the husband came up to me and he said, "You listened to me. You really listened to me." That was it. That's what I mean, brothers, about listening here. We honor people by listening to them, and then, as Fred Craddock would say, to tell them what they want to say. The average person cannot say this, but we can and we should. You listened to me here.

You know, it does strike me strange, by the way, that phrase "It's okay to be angry with God." I sometimes think it's a throwaway line. Yet, whenever I use it in preaching, inevitably someone will come up to me and say, "I never knew that. I always felt guilty about it, especially after someone died. Thank you." God is bigger than all of us. God can handle it the way parents handle when their little children get angry with them. They're not threatened by that. If anything, they appreciate that anger. At least they're communicating. It's okay to be angry with God. So, my point is to listen here, and then how can we use this here? Isn't it a priestly gesture here, the way the priest offers sacrifice to God? Here, to take these prayers, these pleas, these petitions, as angry as they may sound, and trust that God can make something good with it. So, we can lift all this up to God.

Something that was more sad, and then someone turned it around. Another man who was dying and I was invited. I went to the wake and I was going to preach the next day. The daughter-in-law told me that she had been talking with the father right before he died, and she said to him, "Oh, Dad, you know you've always been a rock for us." And he said, in his frailty, "But, I don't feel like a rock. I feel like a lump of dough." Well, this woman was sharp. She turns around and says, "A lump of dough, just like the bread Jesus took." She told me this, and I said, "May I use this tomorrow?" She said, "Oh fine, by all means." But these [are] images that are rooted in our Scripture and our tradition that offer some hope, and I think that come from them. So we get to say what they want to say here and to express their hope in images or symbols.

## Compassionate

As preachers in the funeral we are encouraged to be compassionate and to offer consolation. Number 13 of the instruction says the priest should be sensitive to the needs for reconciliation with family and others. So for one, this might be a time; it's never too late. This might be a time where people



# Boston College

realize we need to be reconciled now. I never had the opportunity to say I'm sorry or to forgive the deceased; so we need to be ready to hear that. We need to be consoling, to express compassion. This is why I said at the beginning that the whole liturgy preaches. So we should exude that compassion, that consolation, from the moment we begin and then put it into words during the homily.

## Trust the Liturgy

A very practical point I would like to make now, and what I say to my students too, is first—let me put it negatively—as preacher and presider, please get out of the way of the liturgy. Get out of the way. Then we should be able to see and hear through you. In fact, in my book *Living Beauty*—and I use this with my students—I say that the good preacher is like an icon. An icon. Now, you know the theology of the icon. I'm thinking of the Orthodox paintings. They're deliberately non-representational. They're not supposed to actually depict any character; they suggest the character. They're two-dimensional not three-dimensional. There are no shadows in the icon; the light source comes from behind the picture. Why is it? The icon is a window into the divine. In a sense, unlike Western painting, we are to look through the icon to the divine on the other side. I would suggest that a good preacher is like an icon. If we notice you there's something wrong. Now we cannot help but notice you, yes; we are incarnational. But the point is, do not get in the way of the message. We should be able to hear and see through you. That's why I would say, too, trust the liturgy, the whole liturgy in preaching. Trust the liturgy.

You know what I'm going to say now. One thing I cannot stomach is the presider who begins, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good Morning. How is everyone today?" And now it becomes the Father Tom Show. I am going to make you feel comfortable because, you know, I don't trust the liturgy. It's just too stodgy. It's too stuffy. Can't we just relate to one another as plain folks? Never mind that I'm dressed up in this medieval dress, and we've just processed in with my whole entourage here. But, I'm just one of you.

I think there's a fundamental distrust of the liturgy. So many a presider or preacher wants to get in the way. He doesn't mean to. I'm going to make this more human, more personal for you. I do think the liturgy itself is beautiful. We breathe personality into it and with preaching; but get out of the way. Not to toot my own horn, but I do hear people on occasion, especially after a wedding or special occasions, "Oh, Father, that was a beautiful liturgy." What I want to say is, "That's the Church's liturgy. Just follow the book." With my students I get a little stronger, but I know we're in polite company. Follow the book. Again, your own personality will breathe new life into it. We cannot help but hear it and see it in a new way.

Beware of changing anything to make it more relevant. So too, especially with the funeral liturgy when there's so many raw feelings and emotions churning there; follow the liturgy. I do believe it's beautiful in its simplicity. There are rooms [is room] for flexibility. By all means, use them. But again, the good preacher, the good presider should be like an icon allowing us to see through you to the divine.

## Mixed Community

One problem that we find in many congregations on any Sunday, but especially for a funeral, is a mixed congregation, the heterogeneous congregation. Gregory of Nyssa once catalogued 36 pairs of opposites you'd find in a congregation; and even more so, even more so for a funeral, like a wedding, where you have people who haven't been to church for a long time and you have non-Catholics and non-Christians there. And yet, the preacher is responsible for having a word for everyone. This is certainly a challenge. A question about this then: what does the Roman Catholic Church have to offer the greater society in an understanding of death and eternal life? So, again, it goes back to what do



# Boston College

we believe? What do we teach? The question again: what does the Roman Catholic Church have to offer the greater society in an understanding of death and eternal life? One thing I'm wary of... let us not apologize for the Catholic Rite. So we have a very mixed group here; we want to be so inclusive that we tone down our Catholic teaching here to make everyone feel at home.

A few years ago I spent the summer... I was teaching in Nepal, the Kingdom of Nepal. I was brought by another Jesuit, a local, to a river there where there were several Hindu funerals where they have the burning of the corpses right by the river there. One after the other they build these funeral pyres, and they burn the corpse. Very different from my experience. This Jesuit knows the people well. He introduced me. None of the Hindu swamis—leaders there—had said, "Oh well, let us change this for Father." They didn't bless themselves for me, nothing like that. They just carried on with the proper Hindu funeral, and I felt included. But I think with Catholics we can be too apologetic. We extend our boundaries so much that we lose or diminish our identity. So when I went to the Hindu funeral or if I go to a Jewish funeral, I don't expect them to change for me. We can be inclusive by inviting people in, and this is what we do. More importantly, again, what does the promise of Jesus Christ have to say about death and eternal life? I think there is a universal message here that welcomes everyone. How well do we believe it? How well can you preach it?

I'm surprised too, in my school, the Graduate Theological Union—it's similar to the Boston Theological Institute but we have palm trees; but it's set up very, very similar though. I'm surprised—when we have a Unitarian school, when those students will come to take my class in sacramental theology. I have to hold my tongue. I'm wondering, "Why?" But... but they're good. I mean, the ones who take it, they're good. They're really interested in sacramental theology; they want to learn. The ones who take it realize—they'll say this—that the Unitarians have lost out here.

To wit, do you remember that very popular book a few years ago, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? Who was the author of that? Thank you. Robert Fulton. Right; yeah. He's a Unitarian minister. I don't know if you know that. So that was a very popular book; it was good. His second book, *The Rituals of Our Lives*, was certainly not as popular. He's a Unitarian minister and pastor of a church, and he writes in the book that he realized his church was missing something for the key moments of the lives of his parishioners, like birth, death, weddings. Sound familiar? So, he wrote up a series of rituals for his church there. I read this and said, "Oh, this is good, but isn't it a shame they lost so much and now are seeking to get it back." So the Unitarians come in to take a class on sacramental theology. We need this. We need this. That's why I think we should be confident in our ritual and in our doctrine, that there is a message here that others want to hear.

Keep in mind another point. Did anyone see the Pew Study? It was published in May. A couple of you have. One thing they talk about there on religious affiliation. "The fastest growing religious group," put that in quotes, in the United States is the unaffiliated. They're not atheist. Some of them believe in God or believe in supernatural beings, a Supreme Being, but they just don't belong to a church. Many of them have left another church, or some of them were never brought up in a church. The reason they leave is, they say, primarily because of doctrine—disagreement with doctrine. But the Pew Study also indicates that this group has the shortest lifespan. People are unaffiliated for a while, but then they leave for different churches. What brings them back to a church? It's ritual. It's ritual—some sort of expression of what is important in our lives. I think the funeral ritual provides an opportunity for that expression. So that's why I would insist, please let us not be apologetic for what we believe. Let us be welcoming and inclusive by all means. And have we got a story to tell you!

Homily vs. Eulogy

The instruction on funeral preaching is clear: there must always be a homily at the funeral. There must never, never be a eulogy. What's the distinction? I like that the hero... I say, you know, when

# Boston College

my students ask me about preaching in general about stories, I say, “Well, you can talk about your Aunt Sophie and all this, but if at the end of the homily, if I know more about your Aunt Sophie than I do Jesus, you’ve failed. So who’s the hero here? We have to talk about the deceased, the deceased as shining a light on Jesus Christ here. That’s a good distinction.

## II. The Theology of the Funeral Rite

I’d like to pick it up now with a brief look at the theology of the Funeral Rite, another topic I was asked to speak about for you today.

### Anthropology of Rites of Passage

Before we get into the theology specifically, a word from anthropology with the universal rites of passage; and we find this throughout history and through different cultures. There are three rites of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation. So whenever we’re moving on to a new stage in life, there’s always this separation from the community in one sense, a liminality or threshold, and keep in mind that’s what our Sacraments are all about. They’re liminal experiences. Some of you have read Joseph Marto’s book, *Doors to the Sacred*. That’s what he’s talking about: his word, hierophanies. They’re passageways. So all sacraments provide us with a threshold or liminal experience, and then incorporation. We come back into the body in a new way, into a corporate body. The purpose of the universal rites of passage are to dramatize a change in social status. So we have a different relationship with the community. As we said before, with death our relationship with the community changes; it’s not destroyed. It is a matter of our faith. So, all sacramental worship follows this threefold pattern of the rites of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation.

### Connection Between Baptism and the Funeral

Consider the basic rites of initiation, especially those of you involved with the RCIA. People are separated from the community, in a manner of speaking; not physically separated but they’re going through this process here, joining with a new group here, their sponsors, and the whole catechumenate. So, they aren’t always separated. Meanwhile, they’re moving towards, towards a new status with the community, not quite there yet—the liminal part. Then finally, they’re incorporated as they’re baptized, confirmed, and communed into the Church. Marriage, we find that too. With the engagement, or rather the betrothal, they are now in a way separated. The couple is separated from the community. They stand out. I think we could do more as the Church to celebrate that betrothal. I’ve seen it in some parishes where a couple will announce their engagement at the Sunday liturgy, and so we have a blessing for the betrothal. They are in a special state now. Then, they move into that liminal state as they’re moving towards marriage. Through their marriage preparation and then, of course, through the wedding, incorporated in a new way, they have a new relationship with the community.

I’m sorry. Am I making sense here? Okay. I realize also it’s late in the afternoon here, but you’re doing well. I have to say, you’re doing well.

Certainly, we find this with the whole funeral, the whole Rite of Funeral. Viaticum begins the journey. Viaticum, right; so before the person dies, with the food for the journey, the food for the way (which is what viaticum means literally), food for the journey with the last Eucharist the person receives. Some of you know how this connects with the ancient Roman practice—when one died and was going to cross the River Styx into Hades there. You had to pay the ferryman, Charon, to get across there, so two coins would be placed on the eyes of the deceased. That was to pay the ferryman. What we do as Catholics is we give food for the journey, the Eucharist for the last time, and then we send the person on his or her way. So we begin the journey there with viaticum.

# Boston College

We already mentioned before the similarity between baptism and the funeral. So we have the symbols at the funeral which recapitulate —remind us —of what we celebrated at baptism. At the funeral we bring out the Paschal candle, the Easter candle, just as it was lit at baptism. We have the white garment. The pall placed over the casket reminds us of the white garment that we wore when we were baptized. The water sprinkling: we sprinkle the coffin just as we were washed new in baptism. In Resurrection Parish in Aptos near Santa Cruz, California, a brand new church there, and what they have is common in many churches now. You come in and there's the baptismal font there. What they have is a pool, a baptismal pool so that you step down into the pool there for a full immersion. For a funeral, they put an iron grate over the pool, and they put the casket right on top of it. Another reminder, with baptism we are washed clean and brought into relationship with Christ. In the funeral we are brought into a deeper relationship with Christ here. So they really work the symbols well there.

So again, as I said from the start, the whole liturgy preaches. So we should use these symbols well; and gentlemen, as I tell my class too, please do not be stingy with symbols. Be generous. Be generous with symbols. So with the sprinkling, people should get wet. The white garment —as in baptism and the pall, well usually the pall —that's big enough there, but let's not be stingy with our symbols. With incense too, let's see and smell the smoke, and to engage the senses here.

On this too, one student of mine wrote a paper after learning about this —the connection of funeral and baptism. She went through a very difficult time where she knew she was pregnant and there was a lot of trouble, a lot of problems with this pregnancy, but she and her husband decided to have the child. Close to the time of birth they were told that the child probably would not live long. So their pastor told them that he was going to be away for a while, but they could baptize the baby themselves, just in case. So he gave them holy water in a vial. They learned the Baptismal Rite. When the baby was born, they baptized the baby right away; died about four weeks later, so they had the funeral, and she said, "My gosh, the symbols there. Now, I see it. It's so clear." Baptism and the funeral, all that we just mentioned, it became clear to her. So here, too, what I said before about we tell people what they want to say... In this case the ritual could express so well what she believed, that here was her baby brought into this world, a child, a gift from God, which is why she decided not to abort this child. This is a life from God, and now God is receiving this child back. The symbols said more than the preacher could say.

## Paschal Mystery

Another point, I'm getting more theoretical at this point: remember the one theme of all of our Eucharistic liturgy is the Paschal Mystery. If you want to tick me off, and I know you don't, but should you want to tick me off, one thing you could ask as we're planning liturgy —what is the theme for Sunday's liturgy? Gentlemen, there is only one theme: that is the Paschal Mystery. I think it's a good theme. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation— that's a good theme. Let's stick with that! Now on Mother's Day do we salute our mothers, Father's Day our fathers? Of course we do. Of course, but that is not the theme. How is a mother like Jesus Christ, a father remind us of God? Yes that's all good. But there's only one theme, the Paschal Mystery, and especially in the Funeral Rite. In the instruction, "Paschal Mystery" is mentioned eight times. And so, especially with our preaching then, here's our theme: the Paschal Mystery. How did this person's life enliven, enlighten us about that mystery, the Paschal Mystery? How did it shine light on the Paschal Mystery? Am I clear here? Please say yes. Thank you. Thank you. Should I ever hear of another theme I will be back!

Now to take this deeper and to consider... I'm making it clear I hope, there's only one theme here. But the paradox here, and again, our preaching will reveal our faith; that it is through the dying that we rise to new life. It is through losing one self that we gain ourselves. Sound familiar? Yes. And this

# Boston College

is so countercultural, of course. I think good liturgy is also countercultural. We take a prophetic stance here. Culture says one thing, we say something else —that it's in dying that we rise to new life.

Another illustration... Over the years I've worked with Engaged Encounter, preparing engaged couples for marriage in the Church. I enjoyed that work very much. Inevitably, in the course of the weekend —and I'll work with two married couples —in the course of the weekend, someone will ask, "I am afraid that I'll lose my identity in this marriage, giving myself to the other." I think that's a good question; good question. We have to talk about that. Indeed, some people do. But from a Christian standpoint, is it possible that in giving myself to another that I find myself here? That it's not a matter of losing identity? I may lose individualism here, but I may find my identity. I may be fulfilled. Indeed, I would say, "If you don't, if you don't imagine that, then marriage is not for you."

In being ordained priest or deacon, in joining a religious community, there is a loss there, but hopefully, so much more is gained. Am I right? So, that's the paradox here, that through the dying to one self we are reborn and we reach fulfillment then. We find out what God intends for us, which is much greater than you and I could anticipate on our own. So in the Paschal Mystery we must confront this paradox here, which again, is rather countercultural. We do not believe in the self-made man or woman. God is working through the community for us, to bring us to fulfillment.

Death is more than merely being rescued, but it's given new life. Death and resurrection is more than the Witness Protection Program. I wanted to try that out and see if that line worked. I don't know how that is, you know. It's not just being removed to another place, you know, the same [as] we are. No, it's more than that; it's a fulfillment. It's a fulfillment. Do I believe that? Indeed, confronting death has provided some with a richer appreciation of life. Remember, I said before, what we're about in preaching at the funeral is a reorientation for those shaken by death. So there are some people who have written about this. When they confront death, they have a richer appreciation of life.

One I'm thinking of in particular is the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. I don't know if you're familiar with his book, *Gift of Peace*. I find it very inspiring. By the way, I was teaching at Loyola University in Chicago one summer right after he died. I had a chance to preach at the University church on that next Sunday, and I mentioned Bernardin's name. I had everybody right there. He was so beloved in Chicago. As you know in this book, those of you who are familiar with it, he writes about his bout with cancer. I'll just read just one paragraph here. He writes:

Perhaps the ultimate burden is death itself. It is often preceded by pain and suffering, sometimes extreme hardships. In my case it is primarily a question of a pervasive fatigue that seems to increase day by day, forcing me to spend much of the day and night lying down. But notice that Jesus did not promise to take away our burdens. He promised to help us carry them. And if we let go of ourselves and our own resources and allow the Lord to help us, we will be able to see death, not as an enemy or a threat, but as a friend.

I don't know about you; I'm inspired by this. For me, it's an illustration of that assiduous supposing. I want to be able to think like this. I have to humble myself, though. At my age, mid-fifties, fairly good health, I am not threatened by death. I don't worry about that. I wonder what moved him to say this, to believe this. I find this inspiring. So it inspires my own preaching for those who are dealing with this sort of situation. To be able to call death a friend, very much like Francis of Assisi, death a friend to you. It's a reorientation of the way we imagine death.

I think too, of that other popular book which is based from around here, Cambridge, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, by Mitch Albom, his student. Albom is a student of Morrie, a former student. In it he quotes Morrie as saying, "You know, I just wish my doctors would appreciate that as I am dying and losing my life, I am growing in appreciation of life. I'm not just a patient, an amalgam of symptoms here. I

# Boston College

am actually growing during this time.” I wonder what Morrie was thinking and feeling there, what he believed, to be able to think of death in this way? So there are some who are approaching death and understand it in a new way.

A lovely image I found helpful, found helpful, more theological, is in Elizabeth Johnson's book, *She Who Is*. And she's talking about the resurrection there, and she talks about a caterpillar. She asks, does the caterpillar while it's spinning its cocoon and goes through all of its changes there, does it have any idea that it will become a butterfly? And she offers that image for us, considering death to resurrection. Is it possible that we are reoriented in such a way that this is something that fulfills us? It doesn't end us or destroy us. That through our faith we believe that certainly life is not just ended, but that we are better, more beautiful, and our purpose is fulfilled. I think as preachers—I know as preachers—we need to reveal this truth here. We don't just escape from this. We are fulfilled through the Paschal Mystery.

## Making It Personal

There's something that was mentioned to me during the break... As we're preaching the funeral homily, making it personal, incarnating God's love and Jesus' victory... I do get asked every once in a while, "Can I mention the deceased in the funeral homily?" I'm surprised to be asked that. Why? Why ask it? But I think the instruction is a little confusing. (Visual aid; the Rites book here.) If you look under the Funeral Rite, specifically number 141, does not mention at all the deceased. It says what we should have there, but it doesn't mention the deceased at all. However, look at number 27; number 27 here, that says a homily is, as I said before, always given at a funeral, never a eulogy. The priest should be attentive to the grief of the community and console them. He should dwell on two things: one, God's compassionate love, and on the Paschal Mystery. Did I mention that before? The Paschal Mystery, right. So dwell on that, and an understanding of how the mystery of God's love and of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased. So, I think there, I believe, it's calling for mention of the deceased. Again, an understanding of how the mystery of God's love and of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased. So how did this person's life exemplify, illustrate for us Jesus Christ's teaching and works? It goes on to say, "And this mystery of God's love, how it is active in their lives as well in the lives of the congregation." So we express our gratitude to God for the gift of the deceased. Now here, when we're thinking of "how it's active in their lives," I would include the care of the community for the deceased, the care shown by family, friends, the doctors and nurses and chaplains, etc. So they are all part of this Paschal Mystery here.

Now, spend a few moments reflecting on the questions below:

[Questions on web page]

- What interactions with family and friends can help you plan the homily?
- What are the two most significant insights you have gained about the challenges of preaching a funeral homily?
- What theological point about the Funeral Rite stands out for you?