The Rhetorical Form of a Christian Funeral Oration

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The General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals states that ‘a brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy . . . ; but there is never to be a eulogy’.¹ The Introduction goes on to say some helpful things about such a homily, but it does not define either homily or eulogy. This, it would seem, has lead to considerable confusion about what constitutes a suitable address at a Christian funeral.

²The English Oxford Dictionary defines a homily as ‘a religious discourse addressed to a congregation; a sermon; esp. a practical discourse with a view to the spiritual edification of the hearers, rather than for the development of a doctrine or theme . . . ’.³ It defines a eulogy as ‘a speech or writing in commendation of the character and services of a person, or the qualities of a thing; esp. a set oration in honour of a deceased person’.⁴ The inadequacies of each should be apparent.

Homily is a very general form of discourse specified by its religious nature and by its purpose being edification rather than doctrinal exposition. The Catholic tradition recognises it as an integral part of the liturgy and ties it intimately to the readings. Although ‘the homilist should keep in mind . . . the needs of the particular community’⁵ there is little to tie it strictly to a funeral service. Eulogy, on the other hand has everything to do with the fact of the death of a particular person and with our way of dealing with it. It would therefore seem an appropriate form of discourse at a funeral. The problem, of course, is that there is nothing strictly Christian or liturgical about it. [353]

Rhetorical Form

A way out of this dilemma is to use the Ancient Greek notion of rhetorical form.⁶ The idea is that, if the right person is speaking in character at the right time and is attuned to the facts of the situation and to the feelings of the audience and if that person’s reasoning is sound, a purposive speech will fall into a kind of natural form. Plato captures this well in a discussion about speech making.

Since the function of oratory is in fact to influence men’s souls, the intending orator must know what types of soul there are. Now these are of a determinate number, and their variety results in a variety of individuals. To the types of soul thus discriminated there corresponds a determinate number of types of discourse. Hence a certain type of hearer will be easy to persuade by a certain type of speech to take such and such action for such and such reason, while another type will be hard to persuade. All this the orator must fully understand, and next he must watch it actually occurring, exemplified in men’s conduct, and must cultivate a keenness of perception in following it, if he is going to get any advantage out of the previous instruction that he was given in school. And when he is competent to say what type of man is susceptible to what kind of discourse; when, further, he can, on catching sight of so-and-so, tell himself, “That is the man, that character now actually before me is the one I heard about in school, and in order to persuade him of so-and-so I have to apply these arguments in this fashion”; and

when, on top of all this, he has further grasped the right occasions for speaking and for keeping quiet, and has come to recognize the right and the wrong time for the brachylogy [abbreviated construction], the pathetic passage, the exacerbation [delivery of jibes], and all the rest of his accomplishments--then and not till then has he well and truly achieved the art. But if in his speaking or teaching or writing he fails in any of these requirements, he may tell you that he has the art of speech, but one mustn’t believe all one is told.  

In other words, due to a complex range of factors, including the speaker’s skill, keenness of perception and emotional attunement to the situation and the audience, a speech either succeeds or fails. We say of a speech either that it ‘hits the mark’ or that ‘something is missing’. A [354] speech is not just a collection of things that are to be said. It has to be alive, to have soul. When this happens the speech achieves its purpose and can be said to have found its appropriate form.

Aristotle on the Elements of a Speech

Aristotle, as was his want, made a more systematic and detailed analysis of what it was that made a given speech successful or not. He defines rhetoric as ‘the faculty of observing in any case the available means of persuasion’. (Rhetoric I, 2; 1355b27) A speech, in other words, is purposive, and the purpose will help to define the kind of speech that it is. It is also directed at a particular audience, who should therefore be well understood by the speaker. Rhetoric is distinguished from logic or the sciences in that it does not go into long detailed arguments but rather uses what people already believe in order to take them a step further. Aristotle distinguishes three modes of persuasion. (I, 2) The first is the character of the speaker.  

People will more readily believe someone in whom they have confidence, and this may be founded on authority, good sense, virtue, good will or learning. (II, 1) The second is emotion. ‘Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements’. (II, 1; 1378a21) A speaker who is readily able to read the feelings of an audience and then to change them will be more likely to succeed at persuasion. The third mode of persuasion is the argument that is presented. Aristotle is adamant that it must be built on a good knowledge of the facts. In addition it will begin with and argue from the general beliefs (commonplaces) of the audience. (II, 22)

A speaker has also to be alert to the appropriate style of language for an occasion. ‘It is not enough to know what we ought to say; we must also say it as we ought; much help is thus afforded towards producing the right impression of a speech’. (III, 1; 1403b15) Finally a suitable arrangement of the speech is necessary both to carry the argument and to make it memorable. There are other elements that Aristotle suggests, but they need not detain us here.

This theory can be rearranged into eight questions that ought to be asked by any person who proposes to speak publicly.

1. Who is my audience?
2. What is the purpose of this speech?
3. What is my character as a speaker? How do I feel in all this? How best I feel?
4. What arguments do I have to present? How do they begin from what people already believe? How will I ensure that the various arguments form a coherent whole?
5. What emotions are present and in what way do I intend to change them?
6. What is the best design or arrangement for this speech?
7. What is an appropriate style of language for this speech and what devices do I have at my disposal to make the speech interesting and attractive?
The Specific Elements of a Christian Funeral Oration

Answers to each of these questions as they apply to a Christian funeral oration can be found in the General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) and also in the 1969 Introduction to the Ordo Exsequiarum (OE), which is reprinted in the Order. Often the statements in these documents apply more generally to the whole funeral service, but with care the relevant ideas can be applied to the homily.

The audience of a funeral oration is easily specified. It is ‘the family and community ... in their needs, sorrows, fears, and hopes’. (OCF 22) By family is meant those who are most touched with grief at the death of one they love. The community is the Christian community to which the family belongs and all those who gather in sympathy with them. The sympathisers are, however, to be seen as one audience with the family because theirs is the ministry of consolation (OCF 9) and because ‘if one member suffers in the body of Christ which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member’. (1 Cor 12:26; OCF 8) It is a time when the sympathisers can be present to the intimacies of the family. Other people may be present--funeral directors (OE 16), passers-by, members of the press--but for the purposes of the homily they should be regarded as transparent. The only important distinction to be brought to the audience is in dealing sensitively with those who are not Catholics or who have been away from the church for some time. (OCF 12; OE 18)

The purpose of a funeral oration is threefold. Firstly, it is to console and comfort those who mourn. (OCF 4, 7, 31) Secondly, it is to raise their hopes and to bring them ‘to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased’. (OCF 27)

Thirdly, it is ‘to [356] pay last respects to the deceased by a final farewell’. (OE 3)

‘The mass is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral’ (OCF 5), and so a priest will generally be the main speaker. His essential character is, therefore, threefold as president or celebrant at the liturgy, minister of comfort and teacher of faith. (OCF 14) As celebrant, minister and teacher he is not formally one of the mourners, although he may be grieving too. To bring comfort he needs both a respectful distance from and a compassionate involvement in the grief of the family. In order to teach he needs the freedom to be able to draw people on from where they are at the beginning of the funeral service, but also an intimate knowledge of what is most on their minds.

The principal argument of a funeral homily is that of the Paschal Mystery. ‘In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity’. (OCF 1; see also 2, 8, 27) Other arguments such as the efficacy of the communion of saints (OCF 6) and the presence of the compassionate love of God (OCF 27) may be used, but it is the Paschal Mystery that provides the basis both for consolation and for hope. The supporting argument of the funeral homily is found in careful attention to ‘the life of the deceased and the circumstances of death’. (OCF 16; OE 18) A funeral oration is not done in the abstract. It applies immediately to the situation and lives of those who hear it, and so it must acknowledge the relevant facts. The Order goes so far as to state that by acting ‘with attentiveness to each situation’ (OCF 13) the priest can bring reconciliation to differences and tensions in the bereaved family. These arguments will be cogent because they express the fundamental Christian faith proclaimed in the readings that the family have chosen (OCF 17) and because they take up the life and death of the deceased and join it with the life and death of Christ. Likewise, their coherency will come from the Paschal Mystery itself and from the life and person of the deceased.

A funeral is a time of profound emotion, and a speaker needs to be attuned to this. The mourners feel the ‘anguish of grief’. (OCF 8) They may even be faced with fear of their own deaths. (OCF 25) Sometimes family relationships or the circumstances of death lead to feelings of great confusion. (OCF 13) The goal of the speaker is to acknowledge and accept these feelings along with the ‘reality of death’ (OCF 8) and then to transform them into that hope that is the basis of Christian

11Here I disagree with Liam Swords, Funeral Homilies (Dublin, The Columba Press, 1985), Preface. ‘Death is a private affair. A funeral is a public occasion. Grief is borne only by the immediate family and close friends, that little band of bereaved clustered round the remains’.

12Strictly this is the role of the Rite of Final Commendation, but as part of the process of consolation it can come into the homily as well.
consolation. (OCF 8) When the circumstances are right that hope may even turn to joy for the life of the deceased and for the ultimate possibilities of Christian life.

The Order says little about the arrangement of a funeral oration, but much is suggested by the above considerations. A simple structure of two parts seems adequate. It can be constructed around a series of dualities: the death and the eternal life of the deceased; the death and resurrection of Jesus; grief and anguish turned to hope and joy. A suitable model for this structure is found in the early Christian hymn repeated in Philippians 2: 6-11.

The style of language that is used will in part be determined by the capabilities of the speaker and by the education of the hearers. The Order, however, suggests that ‘the funeral rites should be celebrated in an atmosphere of simple beauty’ (OCF 21) and also points to the rich imagery of the Psalms (OCF 25), which express many feelings in words that are both elegant and familiar.

The final question about the kind of speech that is to be given is really a check that the speaker understands clearly what is being done in this particular speech. The inadequacy of ‘a homily, not a eulogy’ has already been pointed out. The Christian funeral oration may well be called a homily because of its liturgical context and because of the way in which it draws matter from the readings. But it is quite different from an ordinary homily and ought to be recognised as specifically different from, say, a Sunday homily. It ought at least be called a funeral homily.

A Schema for a Christian Funeral Oration

In the light of the above, one can propose the following as a schema for the Christian funeral oration or homily.

Jane is dead.
She was a fine person and a good friend.
We are saddened by her going, and we will miss her.
She died [how] and [in what circumstances].
But we believe in the Resurrection.

We believe she is with God.
We believe that we will one day be with her.
In faith we unite in joy and sorrow to mourn her going.

The two parts are obvious. In the first part we acknowledge the death, identify the person by telling of the life that she had led, recognise our grief and account for the particular circumstances of death. By explicitly acknowledging the death the preacher allows the community to accept it as common knowledge. Similarly, when the circumstances of death are tragic, for instance, a suicide, the preacher can remove the personal burdens of the family by a few careful words that allow the whole community to share the load. The second part begins with common faith in the resurrection, which it first applies to the deceased and then applies to all the mourners. It concludes with a call for a change of feeling from sorrow to hope and even to joy.

A schema is not yet a form in the sense that we used the term at the beginning of this paper. The particular facts, the right feelings, due reference to the readings of the mass and an appropriate mode of expression need to be present. However, a schema can be a helpful guide to matter and arrangement. Clearly, if the preacher either gets lost in sorrow and forgets to mention the Paschal Mystery or waxes elegantly about the resurrection and omits any reference to the particular circumstances of the life and the death of the person, the oration must fail.

Variations on a Theme

A schema is not a geometric shape that can be applied without thoughtfulness. The following could be appropriate in certain circumstances.

Ambrose! What can we say of him?
He is dead.
And that brings a great sadness.
But we remember him as a great companion and a firm friend, a man of keen judgment and quiet manner.
We hope and trust that he is in heaven by the power of the risen Lord and that we shall see him there one day.

No cause of death is given. This would be appropriate, if the person was old, and death had come gently and mercifully. Nor is joy expressed. In this case that would be appropriate at a vigil.
service when the feelings of the family were still too raw to be taken that far. Alternatively, expressions of joy might well be left out of a funeral homily following a particularly tragic death.

The twofold structure of the funeral homily allows for other possibilities. Sometimes the priest who celebrates the mass may not know much of the life or even the circumstances of death of the person. In such cases the first part, which looks at the life of the deceased, might be delivered by another person and the second part, which applies the Gospel, might be delivered by the priest. The integrity of the funeral rites would be preserved by the careful interrelation of the two parts. The first part of the funeral homily could be given early in the mass, for instance, at the conclusion of the Placing of Christian symbols.\(^{14}\)

Another circumstance arises when the deceased is a person of public consequence, so that custom demands some kind of a eulogy by a person other than the celebrant. This could be placed in the Rite of Final Commendation, where it would take on the tone of a farewell and, indeed, of Christian farewell, which looks to a final meeting in eternal life. This speech would be separate from the homily, which, of course, it would follow. That the farewell had already been made less painful by reflection on the resurrection would change an otherwise pagan eulogy into a Christian form of address.\(^{15}\)

**Conclusion**

The delivery of a funeral homily is a most significant event. This oration takes the Gospel to people who are extremely vulnerable in their grief and hence utterly open to receiving the Word, if it is properly presented to them and if, thereby, it meets them in their moment of need. It is not easy to do, but the suggestion of this article is that there are things that can be learnt about doing it and that it is worth learning them.

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\(^{14}\)Interestingly there is a model for this in St Ambrose’s two orations for his brother Satyrus in 378, although they were delivered seven days apart. See *Funeral Orations* pp. 159-259.

\(^{15}\)Margaret Smith, *Let these Bones Live: A Pastoral Guide to the Order of Christian Funerals* (Melbourne: Diocesan Liturgical Centre, 1992), p. 147, suggests a eulogy before the Rite of Commendation. I suggest that they be clearly integrated so as not to give the impression that this address is simply grafted on. In this case the speaker should be clearly instructed by whoever is responsible for the liturgy of the context into which the address will fit. See also Reginald H Fuller, ‘Lectionary for Funerals’, *Worship* 56 (Jan, 1892): 36-38.