

From My Rectory Window...



One of the wonderful things about being raised in a traditional but not necessarily showy Catholic family was its approach to life in general. We knew what to do and when and how to do it. We were introduced to expected manners from when we were young. If you were playing in the back yard when your uncle Vinny came for a visit, then you stopped playing and went inside just to respectfully greet him or whoever it was with a warm welcome for another member of the family or for close friends. In later days when there was a television (black and white) then the command was pointedly given, “come inside the kitchen to greet aunt this one or uncle that one”. The TV was (horrors! akin to cruelty today!) turned off and we took our place in the parlor to hear all about how our visitors were doing. There was no discussion as to “But I really like that show!” it was simply life. Visitors were welcomed as Christ Himself with a great show of hospitality. There were quickly arranged refreshments seemingly appearing out of nowhere. In our house it was espresso coffee with Anisette etc. cookies, cakes if there were any, and later if the visit lasted for a while, an array of cold cuts fresh bread, olives and all manner of homemade condiments and salads. It was something close to a domestic liturgy. No starch and circumstance, but you better believe there was a keen sense of honoring the guest. There was a protocol for going to a wedding, to visiting the sick, or visiting a new baby and the worn out new mother and father. And of course, when someone had passed away from this life, “Refrisce and riposo” (something similar to the “Eternal Rest Prayer”) Mom always said when hearing about the “repose” of one of the fellow countrymen often accompanied by the sign of the Cross. The Faith was such an everyday part of our lives. Then we went to the “Luto”, the wake that is. Everyone came to pay their respects dressed in suitably dark and muted colors out of respect, and to spend time talking about the deceased. In the late 50s we had just about transitioned from the wake conducted in the person’s house to a Funeral Home. There we saw each other and of course the bereaved family. Prayers were said, condolences were extended and all manner of charity was exercised especially if the family was in a bad way financially. Frequently after a long illness, the funds were depleted, but there was always a way to propose this kindness to preserve the dignity of the bereaved. Many meals were cooked for the family and quietly brought to the house, as there would be many family members to feed. The Parish Priest would come and conduct the Rosary, and other devotional prayers. Everyone knew what to expect and what to do and what not to do. It was very community minded and very Christian. Things were not always so dignified (yes there were funny moments especially when warring family factions would just happen to meet in front of the casket at the same time and then engaged in that undoubtedly ethnic/American sport, “Freestyle Snubbing”). It was real it was “home”. These days sometimes folks don’t know what to do and what to expect at the time of death. The old timers often left their best clothes complete with a fine rosary hanging on a hook in the back of their closet duly labeled. I can still remember my own Mom hanging up the beautiful gown she wore for my First Mass along with a crystal rosary which was a gift to her some 45 years ago. I told her: “but Mom you were a little bigger then and now you are a bit smaller”. Totally undaunted, she quipped back with no prolonged thought, “Ah, that’s alright they’ll fix it”. And they did. Death was as much a part of life as was birth. Nothing to get finicky about, just say your prayers, go to Mass live a holy life, love your neighbor, and La Madonna will take care of everything else. Simple, but totally trusting in the mercy and providence of God. We should always make proper arrangements for an honest to goodness Catholic wake and Funeral Mass with a proper committal. The body is first brought to Church as the liturgy takes for granted that the rites are performed around the casket. Yes, these days cremation is very common, but our tradition is that the newly departed is brought to Church first, just as when they were baptized. Then burial, or cremation etc. takes place with eventual placing in a sacred and blessed place. During the Funeral Mass the Word of God is read and the Gospel preached, along with the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Thus these effective rites offer peaceful consolation even as they send off the deceased with clarity and faith. Funerals are not necessarily “celebrations of a person’s life” (that can be done during the wake with eulogies then or perhaps if there is to be a repast). The Church in its formal Liturgy prays for the repose of souls with an anticipation of eternal life. Our belief is that the soul goes before the Lord, is “judged” and then undergoes a cleansing (Purgatory) as this experience rids us of those things which displease the Lord thus ultimately causing us to become the saints we were always meant to be. Funerals are not so much only sentimental (although there is a proper place for those expressions within reason), Catholic funerals express faith in the Divine Mercy of the Lord. Folks with little faith in the afterlife, often want to get the whole thing over with immediately. But we tradition minded folks will want the whole thing to send us off to the Merciful God. By the way when things are tough, I’m always available to try to assist in making things easier, even if it means a “little help” if you will follow my thought. November is always the month of the Holy Souls, it’s good for us to get to the cemetery and even bring a little holy water just to sprinkle the grave as a shared sign of Faith. I got a chance to sneak out on All Souls Day, and I prayed at my family’s plot and that of friends, and then got down to pray at Msgr. Shenrock’s crypt in St. Joseph’s. Our relationships with those who have passed is not ended, it merely changes. Let us return to a deep reverence for the time-honored tradition of the Church for the Faithful departed, and especially this month get to Mass even a little more often. Praying for the Holy Souls with you and asking their prayers for us in return:

Your Pastor and servant:
Father Pat Papalia