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The FURROW

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Carmel Ryan

Ministry of
Consolation:
*Parish Funeral
Teams*

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Carmel Ryan

Some years ago I suffered a major loss in my life. It left me feeling totally alone, lost, and with no sense of belonging. I eventually found the support that I needed and I became very involved in an organisation called *Beginning Experience* for many years. It gave my life a whole new purpose and meaning. When it was time for me to move on, I decided to set up a bereavement group in my own parish, and I was involved with this group for a long time. It was a very rewarding experience, and such a privilege that people allowed me in to their personal grief. All this changed my life in a way that I never expected, and I often wonder how different my life would be had I not experienced my significant loss.

And now years later, while I still feel called to work with those bereaved, I was rather surprised and humbled when my parish priest approached me to become involved in a *funeral team* that he was planning to set up in our parish.

FORMATION PROCESS

Once the parish priest had organised 6 people who were willing to become involved we joined with other groups from within our diocese to learn and to develop our skills with compassion and sensitivity.

This was a 4 week programme. It was a very gentle programme, very much based on the Scriptures. We were encouraged to look at our fears and anxieties around becoming involved in this ministry. We learned that it is not a counselling service, and that we are not counsellors. Our role is to *accompany* the bereaved family through the funeral process, to reassure them and to help them plan the funeral Mass.

We each received our own copy of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. We became very familiar with this book, its contents and how to use it. It was greatly helpful to all of us.

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The significance of the Pall was explained as the link between our baptism and death.

The final night of the programme was given over to the grieving process. We learned that grief is a loss, it reaches to the heart of what it is to be human. Grief is a healthy reaction to loss.

And we learned how important it is to listen, to listen with our hearts, to be gentle and kind to those mourning their loved ones. We also learned how we need to look at ourselves, our stories, our faith, our family; these are the lens through which we look to others, so that we do not make assumptions. All our losses are companions on our journey.

THE JOURNEY

Pastoral teams for funerals is part of the Ministry of Consolation. When someone close to us dies, it can affect us deeply, and in the midst of our sorrow and distress we need to make arrangements for a funeral. My role then as a member of a funeral team is to support the family during this very sad and painful time, to listen to their needs and to help them plan the funeral of their loved one, to participate in the prayers in the funeral home or their own home and in the Church. I need to stress that the team does not replace the priest, but we work together to minister God's love and compassion to those who suffer such a loss.

For a few weeks a notice was placed in our local newsletter informing the parish of this new ministry, always stressing that we do not replace the priest but work beside him. And then in early September 2016, we were commissioned in our parish Church and thus began a new ministry within our parish.

There were many questions from our parishioners about this new ministry. Was it necessary to have a funeral team? Who was going to be involved? How were people chosen? How is it going to work? Will there be any priest involved? Can we choose our own person to officiate at our funeral? What if my family doesn't like that person? These are just a few of the questions that were asked. What really amazed me was the surprise and curiosity that this new ministry seemed to arouse.

Many times in my younger days, I travelled up the country to funerals of relatives, and the prayers there were always said either by family or by friends and neighbours and all this seemed so natural and right. And in recalling this memory, it helped me to become involved in this special ministry.

A few weeks after our commissioning ceremony we had our first team meeting. This was held in our local convent, all six of us attended with both of the priests of the parish. We were fortunate that we all knew one another, but we really weren't sure what to

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expect and you could say that we were in the dark as to how we would proceed. Our parish priest chaired our first meeting. He congratulated all of us for getting involved and told us how excited he was for this very special ministry to be active in our parish. He was looking forward to working with us in this new ministry.

The first task of this new group was to nominate someone as co-ordinator of the group. She became the contact person to receive the funeral details. The sacristan would contact her with funeral details as soon as they were received in the sacristy. Then we needed to know how we would introduce funeral duty. It was decided to form a rota, the co-ordinator was responsible for this rota and to begin we were paired until we gained confidence.

We invited our funeral director to a few of our meetings. We discussed with him our new role in this beautiful ministry. He was most supportive of us, he, with his wife and his team still continue to be very supportive of us, which is a great asset to our team.

At each meeting we discuss the funerals we were involved in and new ideas are discussed and nurtured. The first idea was to reintroduce the *pall*, something that had not been used in the parish for many years. An explanation of the meaning of the pall was written and used for funerals until we all got used to it. The pall is placed on the altar rails and the funeral undertaker organises family members to place it on the coffin. Many questions were asked about this in the beginning but when explained it was very welcomed. It is always placed on the coffin with great respect and reverence.

The next change we made was that a funeral team member would place the *symbols* on the coffin while they were being explained by the priest, and then that we would remove them just before the coffin was blessed after Mass. And our most recent change is a *candle* which is lit and placed on a small table in front of the altar before Mass. The deceased person's name is written on it and given to the family at the end of Mass. One member of the family walks down the aisle with the lighted candle directly behind the coffin. This is deeply touching for the family and also for the congregation. They bring the candle home as a memento of their deceased loved one's funeral. This is probably the most significant change that we have made at the moment.

ROLE IN THE LITURGY

Each bereaved family is presented with a booklet containing suitable readings for the funeral Mass.

We have discovered that in today's world there can be a lot of confusion and lack of knowledge about how to prepare for the Mass. We invite members of the family in to the sacristy the evening

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of the removal of the body to the Church to discuss with them what they want for their loved one's funeral Mass. We encourage them to choose what they think is most suitable to them. There are quite a few choices in this booklet, so it's our role to work with them to find what they are most happy with. We also check out the prayers of the faithful with them, determine whether there will be a eulogy and if they will be using symbols. Because of lack of familiarity with all of this, we now present each family with specific guidelines for the funeral Mass. This paper comprises of space for the names of all those who will be involved in their liturgy, their role in it, the readers and the readings they have chosen. This then is given to the priest who is celebrating the Mass. It makes it easy for the family and for the priest. It helps family members in making decisions sooner when one of us is involved, as their role becomes clearer to them.

LEARNING PROCESS

One issue that caused us some confusion was funerals that come in from outside parishes. We weren't sure how to handle them. Was it our role to be involved? We had many discussions around this topic and always wanted to treat them sensitively. Eventually we decided that we were to be involved in any funeral that came in to our Church. It was decided that a letter would be written to all outside parishes and this clarified the situation. Occasionally when someone dies in our local hospital, but not from our area, we are asked to say the Rosary and prayers in the hospital chapel. This happens when the family want to respect and honour the place where their loved one may have spent many years. We are always willing to do this. We have also learned that no two funerals are the same, each funeral is unique and special to that particular family. A real success of our funeral team is the regular monthly meetings, where we can address any problems or issues that may arise in a safe and gentle space. I am really grateful to our parish priests for being so trusting of us, and they are always open to discussing new ideas and always very encouraging and helpful. And I know whenever a family may have a doubt about a funeral team member being involved, they will always reassure that family of the importance of our role in the community.

ANNUAL REUNION

In the month of November each year, all the funeral teams in the diocese are invited to an evening of renewal. It begins with a prayer service, giving us the opportunity to remember those we have prayed for, and with, during the year. This year Bishop Fintan Gavin joined us for our reunion. He spoke to us about the

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importance of funeral teams within each parish. He said in the past that funerals had become 'clericalized' and how pleased he was to see funerals returning to their most natural place, among the laity. He was most encouraging of this beautiful ministry and would like to see more funeral teams within the diocese. It was a very special reunion this year as the ministry of Consolation celebrates 10 years withing the diocese.

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When the time came for me to attend my first funeral, even though I was accompanied by my local priest, I was hugely nervous and wondered how I would be accepted by the public, would I say the prayers without faltering? Would my nervousness be noticed by all? When it was time for me to bless the corpse I was deeply touched by this intimate moment. I have never forgotten it. And I feel that same privilege at each funeral that I attend. A few weeks after this particular funeral, a member of her family thanked me for my role in their funeral liturgy. This surely was acceptance. On our first few funerals we were accompanied by one of our local priests for all of the prayers. As we grew in confidence we then accompanied one another, each one having a partner for support and encouragement. Then the priest joined us for the removal and reception into the Church.

Unfortunately one of our priests became ill and we had just one priest for quite a while, so the time came for us to say the prayers in the funeral home on our own. By this time we were reasonably confident of our role and managed quite well, but always knowing that we had a partner for support and our parish priest was just a call away if we needed him.

Sometimes we had a visiting priest filling in and while most were extremely supportive, some found it a little difficult, but as time went on, they too were very accepting of us.

As far as I am aware in the three years that we are in existence no family has ever totally objected to us. A small few may have had doubts and expressed these to our priests but it was always sorted and we participated in that funeral. Occasionally one particular team member is asked for. While we try to keep to a rota, if it's a very close friend or very special circumstances, then that particular team member steps in.

Sometimes when I walk in to the funeral home , the people standing around move to one side and go silent. When this happens I can feel hugely overwhelmed and nervous, but only just for a moment, and very quickly I realise that I am here to serve, to support, and to be present to this particular family during their very sad time of parting with their loved one.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Having served in this ministry for three years I ask myself: How do I feel? What have I learned? Would I change anything? I feel privileged and honoured to be involved with a family at this very sensitive and delicate time. I have grown in confidence. I know that preparation for every funeral is essential. I realise the importance of team meetings. Our priests are very much part of our team. It is essential to communicate with the priest on duty for each funeral. It carries a responsibility to properly prepare for each funeral, and it also requires commitment from each of us. I am very aware that no two funerals are the same and we as a team must honour and respect the wishes of each family.

And now what would I like to change? At the moment we don't go to the *home* of the deceased just after death. I would like to see this happen to offer our support. I would like also to be able to contact the family a few weeks after the funeral, but we do not always have contact numbers available to us.

My dad died when I was still quite young. His death filled me with a great fear of death and dying. At that time there was nowhere to express one's grief so I carried it for many years. Being involved in this ministry has healed that fear, allowing me now to live my life fully. It has given me a great sense of belonging in my parish once again. While parish bereavement is a private and confidential group, my involvement in funeral ministry has put me very much in the public eye. Because of that I am regularly greeted and acknowledged even by people I barely know. I feel I have found "me" once again and I thank God for the privilege of being involved in this beautiful ministry.

Open to the Spirit. Trusting in the wall of fire, which is the Spirit that is within her, the Church has to change, it has to open itself up, it has to throw open doors to fresh winds if it is to hold on to its membership, give them solid reason to feel that their Christianity and their baptism are an essential, vibrant part of their identity and equip them to take it into their modern world.

– MICHAEL KNOWLES, *The Meeting that Changed the World* (Durham, England: Sacristy Press) p. 311.