

Death in an Irish Village

– *the resilience of ritual*

Salvador Ryan

In my childhood, the rituals surrounding death in the homes of rural Ireland had a certain texture and feel to them and with that came a heightened religious sensitivity. There were some things that just had to be done, not because a book instructed that it be so, but because these rituals were passed down through the generations, the old instructing the young. They were ‘owned’ by the people and thus their performance was simply second nature. This ownership of ritual, largely by the lay faithful, in a domestic setting, and the elements which constitute what I like to term ‘tangible religion’¹ is perhaps a key to their endurance in many parts of the country to this day. Perhaps there is something to be learned or, indeed, re-learned here.

Of course growing up in a rural Irish village – Moneygall, County Offaly – such as I did, the experience of visiting the houses of bereaved neighbours, viewing the deceased, joining in the communal prayers, and offering one’s sympathy to family members and relatives was a constant: it was simply what close-knit communities did. Not only did this give me an appreciation of the communal nature of Irish rituals surrounding death, but it also played a significant part in normalising death as an integral part of life.

For a young, impressionable child, the sight of seemingly interminable crowds of people descending on a dwelling house for the ‘removal’ – locals and those from further afield – filing their way into the room in which the deceased person had been laid out, offering their condolences to the bereaved, touching the hands of the ‘corpse’, rosary beads entwined around ice-cold fingers, and / or kissing the person’s brow, was deeply formative. And then there were the casual remarks such as, ‘She looks herself – what age would she be again?’, or ‘He’s in a better place now – sure you wouldn’t want him to be still suffering’, or, again, ‘He looks

¹ Salvador Ryan, ‘The Quest for Tangible Religion: a view from the pews’, *The Furrow* (July/August, 2004).

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fierce young-lookin’, and, maybe later, in reporting on what had been seen: ‘She was a lovely corpse’. There was usually a hushed silence (or some respectful whispers) in the room in which the person was laid out, flanked by wax candles on a white-clothed table which also offered holy water for sprinkling; however, one could always clearly hear, by contrast, loud guffaws of laughter and merriment coming from other rooms such as the kitchen or, sometimes, bedrooms cleared for the occasion; these were the sounds of people reminiscing on the life of the deceased, or of meeting relatives and friends whom they hadn’t seen since the last funeral, while downing cups of tea, glasses of whiskey or brandy and the invariably rich fare of sandwiches and home-made baking, which were furnished in endless supply by members of the community who approached each funeral as a challenge to make sure that no-one went hungry: ‘Go on! Eat up! Sure, they’ll only be left. We’ve ten more apple tarts abroad in the scullery’.

The cacophony would subside only when a firm ‘Shhhhhh!!’ was passed along the human chain, all the way from the sitting room, in which the deceased lay, through the hallway and into the kitchen. It would take a little time for the din to drop, but when it did, one could glean the reason: ‘... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death’. The Rosary had begun, each decade customarily recited by a different member of the family, but not always; sometimes, with little or no pre-arrangement, the ‘giving out’ of the decade was left to the spontaneity of the individuals in the room. As soon as one decade ended, another would be automatically picked up, relay-like, and the ‘rosary-runner’ would set off again at breakneck speed. Rosaries at removals were never ponderous affairs; there was something innately understood about pressing on; sometimes this was a very practical consideration as a family member might not have recited these prayers in a while, or, on account of emotion or the overwhelming nature of the occasion, might experience a bout of nerves which propelled them to try to reach the end of the prayer as quickly as possible at each utterance. Meanwhile, the chain of responders to the Rosary wound itself through the house and out both doors – front and back – those outside often adding their mumbling voices to the sounds of crows cawing in the nearby trees. The repetition of the Hail Marys became mantra-like as the uproarious chatter of the house was now profoundly stilled and focused. It is an experience that is impossible adequately to put into words, but one which, once observed, can be utterly moving and even deeply consoling.

It is here too, in the homes of the people, that one soon began to hear of strange and wonderful folk beliefs, customs and rituals

associated with the process of dying and death. I have stood in houses where a family were waiting for their loved one to die, and have heard one of the family members report having been suddenly woken in the middle of the night by the sound of 'three knocks' on the front door of the house when, in fact, there was no-one there. This did not need to be explained to many people in rural Ireland; it was relatively well-known that these three knocks heralded the death of one of the family, and it was taken from this that their loved one's passing was now very near. This warning did not come to all, of course; it was said that the three knocks followed only certain families. Likewise, in the day or two before a person's death, it was often reported that they claimed to see other family members, who had died before them, return to the room. This was another sign that death was not far off. When it did eventually occur, it was customary in some households immediately to stop any clocks in the room.

For schoolchildren growing up in Moneygall in the 1980s, attending funerals in the parish was simply something they could not avoid. This was particularly the case when our primary school principal, the late Paddy Maher, was also Director of the church choir. Consequently, whenever there was a funeral Mass, we, fifth- and sixth-class pupils would file down to 'make up' the choir along with some of the regular parishioners. Paddy, who was nearing the end of his teaching career at the time, introduced us to a wealth of liturgical music, including Gregorian chant, which had long faded from the repertoire of other local choirs. The plaintive sound of the *Requiem in aeternam* or the *Kyrie* of the *Missa de Angelis*, as intoned by Paddy, remains with me to this day. That, coupled with the use of incense at funeral Masses, and the poignancy of the rites which were particular to requiem Masses, such as the final commendation and farewell over the coffin – 'May the angels lead you into paradise, may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem; may choirs of angels welcome you, and lead you to the bosom of Abraham; and where Lazarus is poor no longer, may you find eternal rest' – left a deep impression on me. For me, funerals – and the rituals surrounding them – were, for the most part, occasions of quiet reflection and even of deep calm. Their familiarity, and the heightened interconnectedness of a tightly-knit community which they prompted, made them occasions of no little solace. Consolation was even to be had from burials that had to take place under the pouring rain: the older generations got around such inconveniences not simply with resignation but, indeed, with hope: 'happy is the corpse that the rain falls on', a claim that the individual in question would surely attain eternal life.

Familiarity is an important concept here. Because of the close-knit nature of many Irish communities, and their vigorously enduring traditions (most often lay-led) surrounding death, which seem to persist even as other traditions fade, the Irish have gained a reputation for exhibiting a certain ease around death or, indeed, of 'doing death well'. Its familiarity sometimes elicits a matter-of-factness in those (even the dying) who just wish to get on with it. The story is told of the old Irishwoman who was approaching death and, her family having gathered around her, it was suggested that some prayers for the dying be recited. The first daughter took up the prayer book and began to read the prayers aloud but, after a line or two, broke down into sobs, and couldn't continue. The second daughter immediately began to read the prayer from where her sister had trailed off; she, likewise, soon got a lump in her throat, the tears flowed and the prayers remained unfinished. Their dying mother, who had not yet slipped into unconsciousness, was becoming more and more agitated and, at this second lapse into lachrymosity, slowly raised herself in the bed and, snatching the prayer book from her daughter's hands, harrumphed, 'Yerra, give it over here to me and I'll say them meself!'

Older generations of parishioners displayed an even greater familiarity with the community of the dead whose existence often overlapped with the living. As a teenager, I remember very vividly spending hours listening to a wonderful lady called Nora Rice share her seemingly inexhaustible store of local knowledge, folklore and lived experience with me. Nora, who was in her eighties at the time, was a natural storyteller and had superb powers of recall. She also had a deep appreciation for local traditions and customs which were no longer observed. It was from Nora that I first heard that the lighted candles placed at a dying person's bedside were often kept after the person died, as there was believed to be 'a cure' in what remained of the candle. Nora also related to me her own memories of customs concerning the dead, which were observed on the night of All Souls (2 November):

On All Souls night you'd light your candles and put them around the fire and you'd sweep the floor and you'd get the holy water and you'd put it on the table, put a glass of water beside it and the old people used to believe that that was one day all the dead was let out and everyone used to come to their own home and you'd show 'em welcome and you'd have six candles lightin' for all the poor souls around the fire and the floor swept clean, and you'd kneel down and say your rosary and you'd go to bed and you'd leave the candles lightin'. It was a lovely thing. And you wouldn't be seen out that night. Nobody would be seen out.

THE FURROW

You'd be afraid because that was one night the Almighty made for the dead. And the old people used to say 'always do your business in the daytime'; my father used to always say that, Lord have mercy on him: 'go for your messages and do your messages; the day is for the living, the night is for the dead'. And always when you're walkin' (you couldn't do it today, though) walk on the middle of the road because the poor souls was out walkin' as well as you. Take the middle of the road in case you might upset a poor old soul ...

For me, a young boy growing up in a rural village in the 1980s, tales, such as Nora's, of the interpenetration of the lives of the living and the dead, fired my imagination and convinced me that the world was a far more mysterious place than I had previously thought; that perhaps there were lots of things about death, dying, and the afterlives, as it were, of the dead, that could not be fully comprehended; and that, somehow, even counter-intuitively, the not-knowing brought greater comfort than the knowing.

Drainage. Of course the Eucharist can be celebrated in a shed as well as in an incense-filled Cathedral. Nevertheless, the form that the liturgy takes is not an insignificant point. To come away from the Sunday liturgy profoundly irritated or even depressed by what has taken place, is enormously damaging. When there is more than enough of this experience the Church drains away.

– IVAN OLIVER, *A Road to Rome* (Herefordshire: Gracewing)
p. 94.