



Culture Affects Mourning

BY PATRICIA WALSH WARGOCKI

Catholic wake and funeral customs vary as much as the ethnic groups who celebrate them. Country of origin often determines whether mourners bury loved ones or cremate them, hold daytime services or all-night vigils, choose subdued or festive services.

"Catholic wakes fulfill a basic need for families and friends of the deceased to come together to mourn, pray and eat," says Capuchin Father Paul Zaborowski of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Washington, D.C. The shrine has been welcoming immigrants since 1899.

Descendants of Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants have been in his parish for generations. Their funerals tend to be formal and reserved — a viewing at a funeral home or in church, a Mass with traditional American funeral music and hymns, followed by burial services at a local cemetery and a meal at a restaurant or the parish hall. Most ceremonies take place during the day; those present usually wear black and bring Mass cards.

In recent years immigrants from Central America, Haiti and Vietnam have joined the Shrine of the Sacred Heart. Father Zaborowski said that Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans tend to have animated evening funerals. People gather early for a viewing. This is followed by Mass in Spanish, with upbeat drum music that grows in intensity and adds to the ceremony's fervor. Emotions are freely expressed.

These mourners also customarily choose black attire. They bring tropical flowers to Mass and distribute a program with an obituary and pictures of the deceased person with loved ones. After Mass the coffin is opened and the "vigilia" begins — a vigil kept by relatives who stay with the body until midnight. Since burial often takes place in the deceased person's native country, the evening ends with removal of the body for transport. Mourners often take up a collection to help families cover the costs.

Many Haitian funeral Masses feature steel drums and percussion instruments, the priest said. There is much crying and reaching out to one another. Haitians tend to have a morning viewing in church, followed by Mass and a meal at the home of the deceased. Burial is usually in nearby Catholic cemeteries.

Vietnamese funerals offer a striking contrast. Cremation is customary, and mourners gather in church to pray the rosary at the funeral urn. Often there are photos of the deceased and lots of flowers. Women wear crimson or blue, but the men wear black.

Many Vietnamese funerals feature the electric keyboard rather than organ music. Vietnamese songs and the striking of a gong three times at the end of Mass heighten the service's impact. After the funeral, the urns are placed in local cemetery vaults.

Mexican wakes and funerals are familiar to Paulist Father Gilbert Martinez, who served in a Los Angeles parish where 80% of the parishioners were Hispanic, primarily Mexican. He recently became pastor at St. Cyril Church in Tucson, Ariz., where more than 30% of parishioners have Mexican roots.

Mexican funerals are festive, with traditional mariachi music and songs not only at Mass, but at the burial and social gathering afterward, says Father Martinez. Viewings take place in church, with many people staying overnight with the body. Mexican mourners tend to wear black, and everyone brings a flower to place at the casket.

A novena begins on the evening of the burial, and everyone is expected to lead prayers and pray the rosary. The novena's last day features the "levanta cruz" — the raising of an inscribed cross in the home of the deceased person.

While funeral customs vary, there is a unifying element: the need to mark a death by participating in Mass together. Receiving Communion and reciting familiar prayers seem to feed the mourners' spirits and give them the courage to grapple with the loss of a loved one.