

FIRST CHAPTER SAMPLE

# **P**LANNING **MY O**WN **F**UNERAL?

**Stephen Joseph Wolf**



*Planning My Own Funeral?*

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## PRAYER FROM THE PREFACES

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God,  
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
In him, who rose from the dead,  
our hope of resurrection dawned.  
The sadness of death gives way  
to the bright promise of [eternal life].  
Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended.  
When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death  
we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven...  
...[Our Lord Jesus Christ] gave his life  
that we might live to you alone for ever...  
...In him the world is saved, [humanity] is reborn,  
and the dead rise again to life...  
...By your power you bring us to birth.  
By your providence you rule our lives.  
By your command you free us at last from sin  
as we return to the dust from which we came.  
Through the saving death of your Son  
we rise at your word to the glory of the resurrection...  
...Death is the just reward for our sins,  
yet, when at last we die,  
your loving kindness calls us back to life  
in company with Christ, whose victory is redemption.  
Our hearts are joyful, for we have seen [our] salvation,  
and now with the angels and saints  
we praise you for ever [and ever].  
Amen.

## POSSIBLE GROUP GROUND RULES

Faith Sharing is:

**Regular:** I will do my best to make all sessions.

**Voluntary:** No one is required to share. The tone is invitational. Verbal participation is encouraged but not demanded.

**Not Interrupted:** When someone is sharing, everyone listens before commenting or speaking. Side conversations are avoided; one person at a time.

**Not Contradicted:** The sharing is based on the person's own experience, so conclusions or critiques of what is shared are not appropriate. Avoid trying to take away feelings with comments like, *You shouldn't feel that way.*

**Done In "I" Language:** beginning with *I think* or *I feel* rather than *Mary said* or *Joe thinks*.

**Confidential:** What is said in the group stays in the group.

(These ground rules are drawn from Joye Gros' *Theological Reflection*, Loyola Press, 2002. Groups are free to alter them as they wish.)

---

I agree with the group ground rules. (Signature and Date)

# PLANNING MY OWN FUNERAL?

*\* Note: Some of these parts will come easy.*

*Take your time with those that do not.*

<b>Week 1 - VIGIL</b>	<b>3</b>
A Hebrew View	6
Finding God in Death?	7
In Other Words	8
* Some Thoughts On My Dying	11
* Family Tree	12
* A Testament of Life	13
* Burial Instructions	17
* Vigil for the Deceased	18
* Vigil Readings & Song	19
<b>Week 2 - READINGS</b>	<b>21</b>
Funeral Homily for Helen, a Reader	24
First Reading (list)	27
Responsorial Psalm (list)	28
Second Reading (list)	29
Gospel Reading (list)	31
* People in the Funeral Liturgy	33
* Funeral Songs and Readings	34
<b>Week 3 - EUCHARIST</b>	<b>37</b>
Symbols	41
Funeral Homily for Michael, a Father	44
Music (a list)	47
<b>Week 4 - LEFT BEHIND</b>	<b>51</b>
Thoughts On Grieving	57
Funeral Homily for Tommy, a Son	59
* Blessing By An Elder	62
To My Family	67

## Now Thank We All Our God

**Now** thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done,  
In whom this world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms  
Has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.

**Oh**, may our bounteous God  
Through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts  
And blessed peace to cheer us;  
To keep us in God's grace  
And guide us when perplexed  
And free us from all ills  
In this world and the next.

**All** praise and thanks to God  
Our Abba now be given,  
With Son and Spirit too  
Who reign in highest heaven:  
The one eternal God,  
Whom heaven and earth adore!  
For thus it was, is now,  
And shall be evermore.

# 1

## VIGIL

Opening Prayer: Prayer From the Prefaces  
(see page *iii*) all together.

Song (page 2): Now Thank We All Our God

Review together Possible Group Ground Rules.  
(see page *iv*.)

Reader: A reading from the book of Wisdom:

Wisdom 3:1-6, 9

The souls of the just are in the hand of God,  
And no torment shall touch them.  
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;  
And their passing away was thought an affliction  
And their going forth from us, utter destruction.  
But they are in peace.  
For if before men, indeed, they be punished,  
Yet is their hope full of immortality;  
Chastised a little,  
They shall be greatly blessed,  
Because God tried them  
And found them worthy of himself.  
As gold in the furnace, he proved them,  
And as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself.  
Those who trust in him shall understand truth,  
And the faithful shall abide with him in love:  
Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones,  
And his care is with his elect.

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

*Then group members take turns reading the background:*

An old mentor enjoyed exclaiming, “*Have you lost your mind?*” Just thinking about asking people to spend four weeks to plan their own funerals, brought this old mentor haunting me, “*Have I lost my mind?*”

Then people in the parish began telling me this craziness is the good kind. When I made arrangements for my own funeral, which I expect to happen some time in the next fifty years, surprise, I began to sense God’s peaceful presence, and I began to feel a bit more alive.

Perhaps the philosophers are correct, and all our fears are rooted in our fear of dying. If this is your greatest fear, then this may be the best spiritual exercise for you to make this year. The consensus of the faith sharing groups who took this journey in the Fall of 2004 was that they laughed more than ever before.

In his *Rule* for monks, at #47 of his 72 *tools* of the spiritual craft, Saint Benedict advises

***keep daily your death before you.***

From studies of the initiation rituals of primitive cultures we learn that one of the five vital lessons that every culture needs each young person entering adulthood to absorb is that *you are going to die*.

Perhaps it is the very fear we have of death and burial, funerals and funeral homes, mourning and grieving, and the pain that accompanies separation, perhaps this fear is the most important reason for us to enter such a process, and *be not afraid*.

Since all of my direct ancestors have now *gone before us marked with the sign of faith*, for me to attend a funeral is for me to attend all of their funerals.

## A HEBREW VIEW

Weep for the mourners, not for the departed; the departed is at peace while the mourners are left in their sorrow.

Life is a passing shadow - the shadow of a bird in flight. The bird flies away and there is neither bird nor shadow.

Do not act as though you expect to live eternally. Live as though this day were your last. Let each day be spent in repentance and good deeds.

The wicked are considered dead even during their lifetime; the righteous are considered alive even after they have died.

The righteous need no monuments; their good deeds are their memorials.

When a person enters the world, his hands are clenched as though eager to grasp everything in sight. But when he departs this world, his hands are open wide as though to indicate: "See! I take nothing with me."

The soul which God gave you was pure; return it to God in the same state.

One good deed leads to another, as every evil deed leads to more wrongdoing. Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the whole life of the world to come. It is not in our power to explain the well-being of the wicked or the tribulations of the righteous. Just as we praise God in time of joy, we should acknowledge God in time of sorrow.

Whatever God does, God does for the best.

## FINDING GOD IN DEATH?

We overcome death by finding God in it.

In itself, death is an incurable weakness of corporeal beings, complicated in our world, by the influence of an original fall. It is the sum and type of all the forces that diminish us, and against which we must fight without being able to hope for a personal, direct and immediate victory. Now the great victory of the Creator and Redeemer in the christian vision, is to have transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor. God must, in some way or other, make room for himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us. And in order to assimilate us in him, we must break the molecules of our being so as to recast and re-model us. The function of death is to provide the necessary entrance into our inmost selves. It will make us undergo the required dissociation. It will put us into the state organically needed if the divine fire is to descend upon us. And in that way its fatal power to decompose and dissolve will be harnessed to the most sublime operations of life. What was by nature empty and void, a return to bits and pieces, can, in any human existence, become fullness and unity in God.

From *The Divine Milieu*, Pierry Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.  
Harper and Row, 1965.

## *IN OTHER WORDS:*

Solomon said to his son, “Be not afraid.”

Proverbs 3:25

Gabriel said to Mary, “Be not afraid.”

Luke 1:30

The angel of the Lord said to Joseph, “Be not afraid.”

Matthew 1:20

After the great catch, Jesus said to Simon,  
“Be not afraid.”

Luke 5:10

Concerning those who would persecute them,  
Jesus said to the Twelve, “Be not afraid.”

Matthew 10:26; Luke 12:4

When Jesus walked on the water toward the Twelve,  
he said, “Be not afraid.”

Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20

At the Transfiguration, Jesus said to  
Peter, James and John, “Be not afraid.”

Matthew 17:7

After he had risen, Jesus said to Mary and  
Mary Magdalene, “Be not afraid.”

Matthew 28:10

The Lord said to Paul, “Be not afraid.”

Acts 18:9

An angel of God said to Paul, “Be not afraid.”

Acts 27:24

The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.

Hebrews 13:6

Rare is the funeral that is welcomed. They are not fun, and yet they force us to stop the treadmill of daily life and take a good look at ourselves and those we love. How often, I have noticed, is a funeral the setting that our Lord uses to wake up his son or his daughter to an awareness of his or her inheritance as a child of God. How often it is when it seems nothing else will, that a funeral gets a good person to attend to his or her humanity and vocation. Because of this, one well-known speaker on the Church's role in social justice says he would trade everything else the Church does in evangelization for good homilies at funerals (and weddings).

To pray about and plan my own funeral can be a statement to those I love that their faith matters to me.

When I was a deacon in Chicago, I met a four-year-old girl a couple of weeks after she went to Sunday mass for the first time. Her mother shared with me that after the praying, preaching, standing, kneeling, singing, silence and speaking were done, this little girl sat in that pew with her arms crossed. Mother asked daughter, "What's wrong?" and daughter accused mother, "You did not tell me that this guy Jesus was dead." The church had the big and typically Catholic crucifix hanging behind the altar. Was it the corpus, the image of the crucified Jesus that got her attention? Or was it references in the Eucharistic Prayer to his dying that got her, or something in the readings? Something in a song?

Whatever it was, the young mother realized that indeed she had not really talked about Jesus on the cross.

So she did. And then spoke of Christ risen to new life, and the promise that his rising to new life holds for us, when we die, and here today as we seek to do good, love one another, and be fully alive.

This four-year-old girl said then, “OK, but I’m gonna have to think about it.” And so she did. She had heard of Jesus as the good and holy man, the Son of God, worthy of all worship, and her friend. She knew Jesus the way we experience him, as Christ in our midst, even as Christ alive in each other. She first came to know the Risen Lord, and then, in her fifth year of life, began meeting Jesus on the cross.

For most of us, growth as a disciple comes gradually, slowly, over a lifetime. As we reflect on any life, in some way it will teach us about being a disciple. None of us is perfect. As long as we are taking in the breath of life, our God is still shaping each of us into the man or woman God created us to be. Still, if in our living we have loved at all, then we have given some kind of witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

A funeral begins with a death, which is always preceded by a life: a life of one human person created in God’s image, redeemed by God’s Son, and helped every moment of each day by the Holy Spirit.

So, funeral planning begins with *data* about one human being, the details of one human life. We will often find God in those details. You have four weeks to work on the next eight pages.

## Some Thoughts On My Dying

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Baptism \_\_\_\_\_ Place \_\_\_\_\_

Other Sacraments \_\_\_\_\_

### While I am dying,

I very much want someone I love to be with me.

I would be happy to be alone.

I would enjoy someone occasionally reading from:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I would enjoy occasionally some music (video?):

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Remember,  I am ( I am not) an organ donor.

See my  driver license, or: \_\_\_\_\_

## Family Tree

*Spouse* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Father* \_\_\_\_\_

*Place born* \_\_\_\_\_ *date* \_\_\_\_\_

*Mother* \_\_\_\_\_

*Place born* \_\_\_\_\_ *date* \_\_\_\_\_

*Maternal Grandparents* \_\_\_\_\_

*Paternal Grandparents* \_\_\_\_\_

*Children, Stepchildren, Grandchildren* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Brothers, Sisters, Stepbrothers, Stepsisters* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Brothers-in-law, Sisters-in-law* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Other Family Members, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, Special Friend*

\_\_\_\_\_

## A Testament Of Life

Of course, we all know that a human person is never just a set of facts. The Jesuit Priest, Anthony de Mello, S.J., offers a wonderful spiritual exercise, a way for us to reflect on our one particular life:

*I imagine that today I am to die... I ask for time to be alone and write down for my family and friends a sort of testament for which the points that follow could serve as chapter titles:*

1. *These things I have loved in life:*

*Things I tasted,*

*looked at,*

*smelled,*

*heard,*

*touched.*

2. *These experiences I have cherished:*

3. *These ideas have brought me liberation:*
  
4. *These beliefs I have outgrown:*
  
5. *These convictions I have lived by:*
  
6. *These are the things I have lived for:*
  
7. *These insights I have gained in the school of life:*

*insights into God,*

*the world,*

*human nature,*

*Jesus Christ,*

*love,*

*religion,*

*prayer.*

8. *These risks I took, these dangers I have courted:*

9. *These sufferings have seasoned me:*

10. *These lessons life has taught me:*

11. *These influences have shaped my life*  
*(persons, occupations, books, events):*

12. *These scripture texts have lit my path:*

*13. These things I regret about my life:*

*14. These are my life's achievements:*

*15. These persons are enshrined within my heart:*

*16. These are my unfulfilled desires:*

*I choose an ending for this document:*

*a poem - my own or someone else's;*

*or a prayer;*

*a sketch or a picture from a magazine;*

*a scripture text;*

*or anything that I judge would be  
an apt conclusion to my testament.*

## Burial Instructions

I would like for my obituary to be written, if possible,  
(\_ concisely)

by: \_\_\_\_\_

I would prefer if any memorial gifts be made to:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I would like for this mortuary to take care of the body:

\_\_\_\_\_

I prefer to be    \_ embalmed    \_ buried promptly

\_ buried wearing \_\_\_\_\_

\_ buried at this cemetery: \_\_\_\_\_

\_ with this kind of casket: \_\_\_\_\_

\_ cremated, with ashes inurned at this cemetery:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_ epitaph for the tombstone? \_\_\_\_\_

\_ prayer for the memorial card: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Vigil For The Deceased

The vigil is usually held the night before the Funeral Mass. It begins the entire Funeral Liturgy. It can be located at a private home or at a funeral home, and many parishes welcome hosting the vigil in the church or narthex. The vigil is most appropriately held in the presence of the body, with an open casket. The promise of the resurrection makes it possible for us to mourn together in the presence of the body. Often, this can be very helpful for friends and family who were unable to visit the deceased before his or her death, as a powerful opportunity to absorb the reality of the human death of a loved one. The Vigil is the most appropriate time for friends and family to share stories and memories about the one who has died. Our stories become part of our identity, and this helps us to give due honor to our relationships that do not end in death.

*I prefer that visitation with the family be held* \_ in the church and narthex or parish hall. \_ in a funeral home. \_ at home. \_ wherever the family wants it to be.

*Vigil Leader* \_\_\_\_\_

*Vigil Reader* \_\_\_\_\_

*Vigil Song Leader* \_\_\_\_\_

*Please ask this person to be the*

*first to tell a story at the Vigil* \_\_\_\_\_

*Please ask this military branch, fraternal/civic organization, or prayer group (\_\_\_\_\_)* to stand honor guard at the \_vigil \_graveside \_before the funeral.

## Vigil Readings & Song

It is always appropriate that a passage or some passages of Sacred Scripture be read at the Vigil. The Funeral Rite suggests these readings, though others may be chosen. Some people choose only one reading for the vigil.

\_ 1 John 3:1-2 ✠ *We shall see God as God is.*

\_ Psalm 103 ☩ *The Lord is kind and merciful.*

\_ Gospel: John 14:1-6 ♦ *Do not let your hearts be troubled.*

\_ or \_\_\_\_\_

The Vigil may also be a great opportunity for a favorite meaningful song which may not be suitable for the funeral Mass.

Before we had an official Rite for the Vigil for the Deceased, Catholics sensed the need for some way of praying at the wake, and so spread the devotional practice of praying the rosary on the evening before the funeral Mass. If there are two evenings of visitation, perhaps the first evening of visitation would be a good time to pray the rosary. Another possibility would be at three o'clock on the afternoon of the Vigil. And some families prefer to pray the rosary in lieu of the Vigil.

You will want to give consideration to the number of people who are familiar with praying the rosary. I have been called to lead the rosary as the only living Catholic in the room; the scripture of the Vigil would have been more helpful for the families.

\_ *I prefer that the rosary be prayed* \_\_\_\_\_ *as part of the Vigil*  
\_ *instead of the Vigil*    \_ *by the family at a time other than the Vigil*

## Reflection

There is not enough time in one faith-sharing session for any of us to answer all of the questions offered in this first week. May we suggest simply using these pages and pages 33, 34 and 67 to begin the process. Complete first the parts that come easier to you, and use the next three weeks to reflect on the others. You may want to use a pencil, and keep handy an eraser.

1. Describe any uncomfortable feelings about planning your own funeral.
2. Do you carry in your memory a funeral that did not go well?
3. What was the most beautiful or healing funeral for you?

## Closing Prayer

*Are there any intercessions from the group?*

*Repeat the "Prayer From the Prefaces" on page iii.*

*Conclude with a Song, on either page 2 or page 21.*

## People in the Funeral Liturgy

- \_ If possible, I wish the funeral to be a Mass celebration.
- \_ For my own reasons, I prefer a simple Liturgy of the Word.

Please involve these people if they are willing and available:

(Pallbearers, greeters, singers, readers and gift bearers do not have to be Catholic.)

*Pallbearers* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Greeters* \_\_\_\_\_

*Song Leader* \_\_\_\_\_

*Singers* \_\_\_\_\_

*Altar Servers* \_\_\_\_\_

*Placing of the Pall (at least 2 people)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Placing of the Christian symbol (see pg. 43)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Reader of First Reading* \_\_\_\_\_

*Responsorial Psalm* \_Cantor, or \_Reader \_\_\_\_\_

*Reader of Second Reading* \_\_\_\_\_

*Reader of Gospel (deacon or priest)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Preaching Homily (deacon or priest)* \_\_\_\_\_

*General Intercessions Reader* \_\_\_\_\_

*Gift Bearers (2 or 3 people)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (3 is a good number)*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Remarks of Remembrance (not required)* \_\_\_\_\_

(It is best to limit remarks to one person at the funeral, with the rest at the Vigil.)

## Funeral Songs and Readings

*Entrance Song (see page 47)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Placing of the Pall and Christian symbol (in silence)*

*First Reading, Old Testament (see page 27)*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Responsorial Psalm (see page 28)*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Second Reading, New Testament (see page 29)*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Gospel Reading (see page 31)*

\_\_\_\_\_

*In the General Intercessions (the Prayers of the Faithful),  
please include  
prayers for:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Offertory Song (see page 47)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Communion Song (see page 47)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Meditation Song? (see page 47)* \_\_\_\_\_

*Incensing Song (Song of Farewell)*

*Recessional Song (see page 47)* \_\_\_\_\_

## To My Family

- If the parish can provide a meal in the parish hall for the family after the funeral, I would be most appreciative.
- Ask a neighbor \_\_\_\_\_ to keep an eye on the house during the funeral.
- You will want to get ten or so original copies of the death certificate. You'll need most of them.
- I encourage you to participate in the parish bereavement group. Everyone grieves in his or her own way and on his or her own timetable. Someone may be able to help you, and you may be able to help someone else.
- I ask you to remember me especially on this year's All Soul's Day (November 2).
- \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- If you change my suggestions, I may haunt you.
- Change anything you want.
- I love you!

---

Signature

---

Date