



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## “Deconstructing” Christ



### The God we never knew despite all He ever said

“Ego autem dico vobis ...”

**T**here is often such a tremendous disparity between what we *read* in the Gospels ... and what we *hear* in *homilies-as-conjectures* at Mass (“Now, this is what *I* think Christ is telling us here ...”) and what we read in the “deconstructed” literature of New Age Catholicism. Things that Christ appears to state very clearly somehow acquire a cognitive opacity such that what He *appears to say* and what we are told He really *means* are often quite opposite, or at least open to debate and can be construed quite otherwise.

Pride, appropriately enough, often appears to motivate this effort. “How *clever* can I prove myself to be”, a priest may ask himself, “in manipulating the words of Christ to endorse a social or political agendum to which I *personally* subscribe and that I wish to foster within the congregation --- even if it undermines or contradicts genuine Church teaching?”

Of even greater concern to us is this: such gratuitous “hermeneutics” or *personal* interpretations suggest a good deal more than the vanity or pride within those who utter them. Something far greater is at risk, and it can be summarized as this:

The conflict in meaning that we confront --- the *apparent and obvious* meaning, and its “elucidation” or deconstruction into meanings *other than* (and sometimes even opposite to) the obvious, implies two extremely important and deeply disturbing assumptions: On the one hand, either *Christ* does not know what He is really saying, or, on the other, *we* are unable to grasp

what He is saying, *despite its being perfectly clear to us*. In this case either Christ is a fool or we are fools. In our presumably “unlearned” state, then, we need “professionals” to elucidate the true meaning of anything that Christ utters, and this, of course, takes many years of training and the accumulation of multiple academic degrees.

And this is to say that ... much to Christ’s Heavenly Father’s consternation ... what Christ is saying **is actually** “*Hidden from the simple and unlearned, and revealed only to the schooled and wise*”.<sup>1</sup> And they, in turn, will reveal it to us, given our pronounced inability to understand the obvious. Take, for example, the following:

"Enter ye in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there are who go in thereat. How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it!" (St. Mat. 7.13-14)

To those of us who are “unlearned”, Christ seems to be saying --- and very clearly --- that the way to Hell is easy **and a lot of people end up going there**; while, on the other hand, the way to Heaven is difficult **and not many people make it**.

Now, the clear and apparent meaning, of course, makes life a good deal more difficult for us. After all, *many* will go to Hell and *few* will go to Heaven --- *if we take Christ at His word*. Jesus warns us of this, or at least *appears* to be warning us to take our lives on earth --- what we do and do not do --- seriously, given what appears to be the likelihood of Hell and the uncertainty of Heaven.

What are our options, then? We can either,

- Call Christ a liar to His face
- Accuse Him of being delusional
- Or call into question the veracity, the authenticity, of Sacred Scripture itself since the obvious meaning does not accord with, is not amenable to, what we ourselves would *prefer* to understand of God.

In fact, **the god we choose** to fabricate and believe in, has inverted the matter entirely: *few or none go to Hell and many, if not all, go to Heaven*. Any funeral Mass will attest to this common, however deeply mistaken, assumption. Our dead, we are assured, are *already* in Heaven smiling benevolently down upon us, and playing basketball, surfing, or golfing on endless courts, seas, or greens. Our **priests** tell us this universally and our **eulogists** provide unique glimpses into the beatitude of our deceased in Heaven (**that eulogies are strictly prohibited in the Catholic Church is quite beside the point**. We have them at every funeral Mass anyway --- no matter what the Church teaches.<sup>2</sup>)

That some of them were cruel, malicious, perverse, brutal, selfish, miserly, indifferent to God in this life, or not believing in Him at all, has no bearing on the matter of death and the circumstances of life beyond it. If the casket makes it into the Church the dead shoot right up to Heaven ... regardless of what they have done or failed to do, saint and sinner alike. If “all dogs go to Heaven”, then, *a fortiori* (that is to say, *all the more*), so do men. *All* men. Good, bad, or indifferent.

The problem is that we cannot in the same canon --- that is to say, within Sacred Scripture --- find one reference to *all men*, good, bad, or indifferent, attaining to salvation ... which is to say, going to Heaven. Not one. In fact, Sacred Scripture speaks of only one man --- just one --- who is assured of Heaven: the thief on the Cross beside Christ, to whom Christ promised Paradise the day of His own Crucifixion. Even Saint Paul worried! <sup>3</sup>

## **Not Presumption, but also not Despair!**

But neither must we fall into the sin of despair which is the diametric opposite of the sin of presumption! Both are equally wrong and both are gravely sinful. While it is true that many have lived a life deserving of Hell, no one --- not one --- has lived a life *deserving* of Heaven. It is never ones *right* to go to Heaven no matter how exemplary one's life has been. If it is your right to go to Heaven, if you deserve Heaven on your own merits, then you have emptied the Cross of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and made His Resurrection unnecessary. Yet we are told in no uncertain terms that, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh to the Father, but by Me." (St. John 14.6). Now, we must ask ourselves, what could Christ *possibly* mean in uttering this? Let us debate this terribly abstruse utterance; let us “deconstruct” it to see what He is *really* saying in this very puzzling statement.

Indeed.

Until we begin to take Christ at His word, and His word at face value, we may find a home in academia or among the pseudo-literati; we may even have the congregation in stitches, but it is unlikely that we will uncover the too-obvious Christ or walk in the company of the Saints with Him when death ends the charade of our pretension to misunderstanding what He said and why He said it.

## **Ego autem dico vobis**

Are there things Christ said about which we are genuinely unclear? Yes --- but by and large they are few. He speaks with authority, an authority that infuriates the Pharisees because not only does He state the (Mosaic) Law, but *of Himself* supersedes it lest there be any question whence

the authority derives. (from God Himself in His Only begotten Son Who is One with the Father): "You have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thy enemy. **But I say to you** (*Ego autem dico vobis*), Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you." (St. Matthew 5.43-44) The very clarity with which He speaks enraged "the scholars" 2000 years ago as much as it enrages our scholars today. There is little room for equivocation --- and *interpreting* the Law is, after all, a living, an income, as much 2000 years ago as it is today. Simplicity impedes this, obviates it altogether! What would so many scholars possibly do if God spoke to us in a way that even the simple understood? Of course, not to be outdone by the Son of the Living God Who is the very Word of the Father, the scholars convince us that the simple is altogether complex, and the greater its apparent simplicity the greater its complexity --- and our perplexity --- and, for a sum, they alone have the credentials to properly interpret what is so plainly concealed from us in its beautiful simplicity.

When you go to Mass --- that is to say, to the *Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass* --- listen to what Christ says to you plainly in the Gospel reading, no matter how much it may be interpreted to mean something utterly different, totally irrelevant and in the end merely tiresome and prosaic. He has so much to tell you --- Himself! "Qui habet aures audiendi audiat." <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See St. Matthew 11.25: "At that time Jesus answered and said: I confess to thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to the little ones."

<sup>2</sup> At least one Church in America, the *Blessed Sacrament Church* near Fort Mitchell, KY, explains this clearly in a note to their parishioners: <http://www.bssky.org/?page=newsforward&name=bssky.org&article=1931>. Either most Catholic Churches are *clueless* or their priests *disobedient* in permitting this. The article appears in its entirety below.

<sup>3</sup> "But I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway." (1 Corinthians 9:27)  
"With fear and trembling work out your salvation." (Philippians 2:12)

<sup>4</sup> "He who has ear to hear, let him hear." (St. Matthew 11.15)

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## Eulogies Not Permitted at Funerals

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The following is the series of articles that appeared in Blessed Sacrament's Sunday bulletin regarding eulogies at funerals.

### NO EULOGIES AT FUNERALS Part 1

**In** 1989 the Vatican published the revised Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) for the United States. The long-standing prohibition of eulogies at Catholic funerals was again upheld and restated. *"A brief homily based on the readings should always be given at the funeral liturgy, but never any kind of eulogy."* [OCF # 141] In the revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal promulgated by John Paul II in year 2000 (GIRM 2000), *this prohibition of eulogies was again restated: "At the Funeral Mass there should, as a rule, be a short homily, but never a eulogy of any kind."*

The firm belief of the Catholic Church is that the Christian funeral is not a celebration of the life of the person who has died, even though we honor and express gratitude for all God's gifts to that person. *"The funeral liturgy is a celebration of salvation and mercy, of grace and eternal life. It is not meant to be a commemoration (much less a canonization) of the person who has died. Extended remembering of the deceased often results in forgetting the Lord."* (Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk) While the presider is to keep in mind with delicate sensitivity not only the identity of the deceased and the circumstances of the death, but also the grief of the bereaved, the focus of the Christian funeral rite is the saving mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the Paschal Mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. (OCF 27).

If the Church prohibits eulogies at funerals, *how is it that we often have one, two, three or more speakers appear after communion to deliver a five, ten, fifteen, up to thirty minute long eulogy/eulogies???* Although what usually happens at funerals is not at all what the Church envisions, the alleged justification comes in a statement made in the Order of Christian Funerals: "A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins." (OCF # 170) If such a person does speak at all, the ritual envisions it happening *at the very end of the Mass while the priest and ministers are already standing at the coffin about to begin the Final Commendation. The words are to be very brief,*

***highlighting an aspect of the deceased's life of faith. In short, what often happens at the end of the Funeral Mass is not what the Church permits.*** Even here at Blessed Sacrament we give the family or friend very specific guidelines about what is proper and how it is to be done. Our experience, however, is that our guidance is rarely followed.

Next week I will again write some more about this issue. It is one that is becoming increasingly problematic in the celebration of Catholic funerals. It is an issue that causes me great concern here at Blessed Sacrament and needs to be addressed.

## **NO EULOGIES Part 2**

Last week I wrote about the Catholic Church's long standing prohibition of eulogies at funerals. The focus of the Catholic Funeral Mass is not on the life of the deceased, but on the saving mercy of God that brings the deceased into eternal life. I also noted last week that the current funeral ritual of the Church does permit a family member or friend to say a few words of remembrance at the funeral, but ***does not permit that person to deliver a eulogy.*** What's the difference between "a few words of remembrance" and a eulogy?

The guidelines that most parishes - Blessed Sacrament included - provide to the families of the deceased explain the details of the difference. Eulogies recount for the assembly some or all of the great events of a person's life. Words of remembrance do not attempt to give a biography of the deceased. As is the case with the entire funeral liturgy, this is a time to share and emphasize faith. Eulogies, by nature, tend to be lengthy discourses about the deceased. ***Words of remembrance are brief - usually two to three minutes. These brief words are meant to share one or two examples of insight into the faith life of the deceased.***

These words come at the end of the liturgy when people are psychologically and spiritually prepared to bring things to a conclusion. To prolong or extend the conclusion of the liturgy is upsetting to people. Most people find the prayers and rituals of the funeral Mass very comforting and healing. Prolonged and emotional words spoken at the end of the Mass tend to undo all the healing that has occurred during the Mass. Furthermore, because of tight schedules coordinated with cemeteries and funeral directors and because of the flow of daily activities here at Blessed Sacrament, things need to be kept moving - Not rushed, but not delayed either.

Next week I will write about some of the specific problems that have occurred as a result of the growing phenomenon of eulogies at funerals. Some of these problems seem to be occurring in all parishes; others are specific to Blessed Sacrament. The time has come, I believe, to deal with the issue directly. More about that next week.

### NO EULOGIES Part 3

Two weeks ago I wrote about that fact that the Catholic Church has never and still does not permit eulogies at a funeral liturgy. This is because the focus of the Catholic Funeral Mass is not on the life of the deceased, but on the saving mercy of God that brings the deceased into eternal life. Last week I wrote about the "loophole" in our current funeral ritual that permits a friend or member of the family to say "a few words" of faith remembrance at the time of the final commendation. In an effort to keep these few words of remembrance in accord with the vision of the ritual, we have for three years provided the families of the deceased with some specific guidelines. These guidelines were designed to help them construct their words in line with the Church's desire that their remembrance be a short, but insightful glimpse into the faith life of the deceased.

We specifically request that *only one person share the words of remembrance*. However, more often than not, two or more persons simply present themselves in the sanctuary after communion - usually with no prior notice to the Church. We have sometimes had up to five people speaking at the end of Mass.

We request that the words of remembrance be brief, no more than three minutes. *Instead the speakers often go for fifteen to thirty minutes. The length is usually due to the fact that the speaker(s) is/are ignoring the fact that they should not be giving a eulogy but only share an example or two of the way the deceased lived his/her faith.* Many times these extended eulogies are delivered by someone who anticipated that he/she would be able to be composed at the time, but in fact become very emotional and have great difficulty in delivering their words. This situation becomes very uncomfortable for the assembly and often results in more grief for the bereaved at a time in the liturgy when they had been lifted a little beyond grief through the Eucharistic celebration.

Many of these problems could be avoided if our request that the words of remembrance be submitted in writing prior to the liturgy were honored. However, only once has this guideline been followed. So generally, the priest has no idea what is going to happen when the person ascends the pulpit. Sometimes the words spoken are not only uncomfortable, but clearly heretical. (I have had to listen to totally pantheistic poems being read from the same pulpit from which the Gospel is proclaimed!) On one occasion a child of the deceased openly proclaimed that he knew that all this "Church stuff" was important to his father, but that he didn't believe in any of it - especially life after death!

On another occasion during this past year, the family of the deceased told us that there would be no words of remembrance. As I was about to begin the final commendation, a relative of the deceased came forward and politely told me to "sit down, because he had a few things to say." He then went on for over twenty minutes with a detailed chronology of the deceased's life.

For over three years I have agonized over this issue. Rather than just forbidding the words spoken in remembrance, I and the bereavement committee have tried to offer assistance and guidelines to insure that the words spoken would be in conformity to the vision of the Church for the funeral liturgy. But after three years of trying, it has become clear that we are never going to be able to accomplish what the Order of Christian Funerals envisions for the "words spoken in remembrance." I have discussed this issue with Bishop Foys. It has also been the subject of discussion at several pastors' meetings in the last couple of years. Our parish Bereavement Committee has also discussed the issue with me at length. I have also spoken with most of the funeral directors who service our parish.

After prayerful and extended consideration of the matter I have decided to follow all the advice being given to me. Therefore, effective January 1, 2006 we will no longer have the "words spoken in remembrance" at any funeral liturgy celebrated here at Blessed Sacrament.. I do not make this decision easily. But as pastor, it is my responsibility to insure the integrity of the liturgy. Ultimately, I have to answer to God for what takes place in our sanctuary. I realize that some parishioners may disagree with me and it may cause some disappointment at the time of a beloved's death. However, there are other and, I believe, better options for sharing those faith memories. I will write about those options next week.

#### **IN PLACE OF THE EULOGY Part 4**

For the last three weeks I have written about eulogies at the Catholic funeral liturgy. *I have stressed the fact that the Church has never permitted the delivery of a eulogy at the liturgical celebration. It still does not permit it because the focus is supposed to be on the saving mystery of Jesus Christ* and how God now extends life in the risen Lord to the deceased. I also wrote about how the Church, in recent years, did allow for a few brief words of remembrance to be spoken during the rite of final commendation at the end of the liturgy. However, rather than follow the guidelines of the Church, family members and friends have usually used this opportunity to deliver extended eulogies. In fact, this custom has so taken on a life of its own that *most families feel obliged to provide for such a eulogy even though it is not permitted.* As a result of the many problems we have experienced which I detailed in last week's article, I last week announced the decision that effective January 1, 2006 we will no longer have the "words spoken in remembrance" at any funeral liturgy celebrated here at Blessed Sacrament. I also indicated last week that there were other more appropriate ways for the family or a friend to share a remembrance of the decease. What are those other options?

The Church's Order of Christian Funerals provides for a Funeral Vigil. This is ordinarily celebrated at the time of what we commonly call the "visitation", "wake", or "lay out" for the deceased. The clergy of Blessed Sacrament strive to be present at the beginning of such a visitation time in order to celebrate the Funeral Vigil. The vigil consists of prayers and scripture readings. The end of the Vigil Service is a very good time for a family member or friend to speak in remembrance of the deceased.



Many families now hold a reception following the funeral liturgy. We host many such receptions here in the Undercroft. Once guests are seated with their food and drink, a family member or friend could deliver some appropriate words of remembrance. This would function almost like the typical "after dinner" speech.

Recently, many funeral homes have begun providing a service by which they will print a small remembrance booklet for the family. These booklets often have a collage of pictures of the deceased on the front. The inside contains the words of remembrance written by the family or friend(s). Many people have commented to me about how they preferred the booklet to words spoken in Church. The booklet is something they can take home for remembrance whereas the spoken words are often forgotten in short order. Putting something in print also relieves the family member or friend from the intense emotion of trying to speak at a very difficult time. My own family composed our own booklet last year when my father died. Each one of us children wrote our own part. Not only do each of us treasure the booklet as a keepsake, but also many friends and extended family members have told me how grateful they are to have it.

<http://www.bssky.org/?page=newsforward&name=bssky.org&article=1931>



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