



Las Exequias: Prayers for the Dead

“Padre, can you come to La Laguna for the “exequias” (funeral prayers) tomorrow morning at eight?” At only 36 years of age, a heart attack had taken Mayru’s life. The roughly-crafted casket was in the middle of the front room, the only decorations being a couple flowers in a jar on top. An ornate curtain from the funeral home was draped behind the casket to give some dignity to the otherwise shabby surroundings. The family was obviously poor, even by Venezuelan standards, as evidenced by the patches of plaster flaking off the walls and scraps of laminate metal sheets wired to rough-hew beams that made up the roof. Covering even the couple hundred dollars for the most basic funeral services would be impossible for the family without the generosity of neighbors chipping in, but that’s the way poor Venezuelans get by. Forty or fifty people were gathered outside. Some men were loading a pick-up with shovels, concrete blocks, and other materials they would use to line and cover the grave. At the conclusion of the prayers, the casket would be loaded in the pick-up and the rest would follow to the cemetery in an old bus. For a few minutes I was the only person in the room but soon Mayru’s mother came in, draping herself over the casket and sobbing quietly. It’s not supposed to be this way, children dying before their parents. She would have preferred to go first. A handful of folks followed her in, and we began the prayers. It was brief, only 20 minutes or so, but it was important to those there in the room as well as those waiting outside to know that Mayru had been properly entrusted to God.

The way people show their respects for the deceased and console family members vary from one culture to another. In Minnesota it is customary to observe a public mourning period of three or four days. During that time the immediate family gathers to grieve and share memories. Neighbors stop by for short visits bringing hot dishes, trays of vegetables and enough desserts to tide the family over for several days. After meeting with the funeral director to select a casket, compose an obituary, and make necessary arrangements, they work out the particulars of the church service with the pastor, and return home to busy themselves with the details of the visitation, Mass, burial, and luncheon. On the day of the funeral, having returned from the cemetery and said goodbye to the last luncheon guest, the public phase of their mourning is complete.

Traditions are different here in Venezuela. Until recently, embalming was rare and beyond what most people could afford. Families prepared the body of their deceased at home. The visitation took place there as well. To minimize the unpleasant odor of decomposition, especially given Venezuela’s hot climate, the casket remained closed with a small window on the top for viewing the deceased. A quick burial was preferred, most commonly the day after death. As a result, the major period of public mourning took place after rather than before the burial. For the next week, neighbors would join the family each evening to pray the rosary and join in a series of litanies, prayers and hymns, followed by coffee and refreshments. Then the official public mourning period ended with a Mass offered for the intention of the deceased. Although embalming is common today, the way people have traditionally grieved and shown respects for their dead has remained the same.

Shortly after returning home, the doorbell rang. “Padre, can you come for an exequias?” I got my bike and followed them. A large number of people had gathered in the home’s open-air patio to entrust 75 year old Carmen to God’s care. Campo Rojo is one of the most active barrios of our parish, and everyone joined in the prayers. Later that day a call came for a third exequias, this one in Los Sabanales. Antonio had died just two days short of his 80th birthday. He had been a regular attendee at Mass prior to church closings due to covid-19, “the fellow with the cane,” his neighbors reminded me. Yes, always the cane and a ready smile. Although he lived over a half-mile from church, he had walked there and back home with neighbors every Sunday.

St. Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:55): “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Rosary prayer services began the following evening in all three homes, lead by teams of parishioners in each barrio, and continued each evening for the remainder of the week. Each culture has their particular ways of supporting the living and commemorating the dead, but all have the same goal in common...to remind us of the victory of Jesus over death and alleviating death’s sting.

Points to consider

What has been your experience attending and planning funerals? Did they help you in the grieving process?

These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.