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Keeping Vigil: Liturgical Praxis and Healing Ritual

By Samantha Wegner

This article is peer reviewed

Part 1

This article is presented in two parts. In this first instalment, the human act of caring for the dead is placed in socio-cultural context. The meaning of Christian vigil is defined and a brief history of the Christian vigil for the dead is charted from the early Church through to the current Order of Christian Funerals. The second instalment investigates the liturgical theology of the rite, its nexus with modern multidisciplinary death studies and asks some critical questions about the ecological and ethical questions raised for Christians by their care for the dead and by the performance of the Vigil in contemporary Australia.

Preface

Jesus of Nazareth, knowing he was to die and leave his closest bereft, gave precise instructions for his memorialisation. He knew that in death, he and his memory would be transformed. He offered a way to those closest to him, what he knew to be the best way, to make himself ever present to them through ritual.

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' (Luke 22:19-20, NRSV)

When we ritualise the death of a Christian we are of course, participating in this paschal mystery. In order that this participation is full, conscious and active,¹ we too need to plan for death.

Introduction

The paschal mystery is the essence of the Christian faith, it is the mystery around which we wrap our ever evolving, rational minds, and to which we bow our physical bodies in the liturgy. The mystery of the life, mission and death of Jesus of Nazareth and his resurrection and recognition as Jesus the Christ, is the seemingly absurd proposition on which our hope rests. The first Easter Vigil is the time and space in which the embryonic Church began to grapple with the problems of this particular death and began to take the first steps towards making cosmic, universal, ethical, spiritual and religious meaning from it. Catholic liturgical practices surrounding death then, are perhaps the most profound expressions of our understanding of ourselves as an 'Easter people'. In facing death, we are facing the universal human experience of ultimate mystery, and also a particular moment in our lives as Christians. The first Easter Vigil is the vigil upon which all other Christian vigils are based, and towards which, all the Church's thankful and hopeful liturgical action points. This research focuses on the human act of keeping vigil for the dead, ritualised within the

1. Vatican II Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (hereafter SC), Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963. Accessed September 5, 2021.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.; This quotation from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is the touchstone for liturgy done well in the post-conciliar period.

Catholic Christian liturgy in the *Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers*, and most particularly the *Vigil for the Deceased* (hereafter the Vigil), from the *Order of Christian Funerals* (hereafter OCF).² The research is concerned not only with the Vigil as liturgical action and ecclesial necessity, but also with its potential as an ethical and healing act of worship, a panacea for all the participants.

Elizabeth Harrington notes that 'Vigils are not very common in Australia, which is a pity. Many of the personal things that are added on to the public funeral liturgy belong at the vigil'.³ This research hopes to open a discussion in relation to some of the local, social, economic, logistical, theological and ecclesial factors which may be influencing the underperformance of the Vigil, and the possibilities provided by improved 'death literacy', (broadly defined as a willingness to engage with discussions and planning around death, both our own, and of others close to us) and 'home death care' (in this context, caring for the body of the deceased at home or in a non-commercial space), to work in concert with liturgical awareness, to improve the performance and efficacy of the Vigil.

Following Ernest Becker's thesis that humanity does inevitably deny death in most respects of their existence,⁴ and acknowledging that this is done for logical biological and social reasons, a fundamental part of the Christian life is to overcome the fear which feeds that denial, and embrace the fullness of eternal life. In respect of the Vigil, it could be argued that the human unwillingness to engage with the existential questions raised by our mortality, leads to an unwillingness to address the body of the deceased, and as a consequence, results in the handing over of many of the elements of care of the body after death to commercial providers. In doing this, we are forfeiting the opportunity to spend a prolonged period of this liminal time in an intimate Christian liturgical experience of gathering, praying, remembering, lamenting and beginning the process of healing from loss. Thus, Christians mourning the death of another Christian, and indeed all who mourn for a Christian who has died, by eschewing the Vigil, may be missing the opportunity to intimately ritualise this time and to move deeper into the eschatological mystery.

2. Catholic Church, and Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Order of Christian Funerals: Including Appendix 2: Cremation* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1998).

3. Elizabeth Harrington, 'More About Funerals', Liturgy Lines, Liturgy Brisbane, 6 September 2015. <https://www.liturgybrisbane.net.au/learn/liturgy-lines/more-about-funerals-6th-september-2015/?search=funerals>

4. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, (1973) 2011), 22-23.

Becker's foundational work has been taken up more recently by scholars across a number of fields including clinical psychology, sociology and studies of religion. Foremost among these in recent years are Professors Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski beginning with their Terror Management Theory and subsequent experiments demonstrating the relationship between self-esteem and death anxiety.

See: Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon, 'The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory' in, *Public Self and Private Self*, ed. Roy F. Baumeister (New York, NY: Springer New York, 1986).

This work went on to inform the work of many other scholars and whilst there is not space in the present paper to investigate the work of these scholars subsequent to Becker, further research is planned in which these scholars are brought into conversation with liturgical theology and praxis in relation to the Christian rites surrounding death. Australian psychologists Professor Ross Menzies and Dr Rachel Menzies have recently released an accessible overview of much of the scholarly work in the field in:

Rachel E. Menzies and Ross G. Menzies, *Mortals: How the Fear of Death Shaped Human Society* (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2021).

The research will investigate the Catholic Christian ritualising of the period between the moment of death and the funeral liturgy or if there is no funeral liturgy, the interment of the body. In its current form the OCF provides for this period of time with the various rites under the heading *Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers*, and these rites are anecdotally, the most underutilised of the Catholic liturgical celebrations surrounding death.⁵ In the emotionally charged atmosphere immediately after death, it is proposed that the ritual space provided by the *Vigil for the Deceased*, for gathering, prayer, care of the body of the deceased, remembrance and grief, offers a ritual container in which to hold the mourners while farewelling the deceased. In addition, there are some ecological implications related to the care of bodies after death which need to be considered as a part of the Christian responsibility to care for our common home.⁶ It is proposed that the participation in this ritual offers a space for ethical human healing, an opportunity for the Body of Christ to come together to pray for the deceased and for those who mourn, and a ritual format which is flexible enough to accommodate the types of remembrance which have currency in our approaches to memorialising death in Australia today.

What is the Vigil?

Burial of the dead and indeed, rituals surrounding the immediate aftermath of death are estimated by some anthropologists to date to the Palaeolithic period.⁷ Whilst it is very difficult to assess the type and extent of mortuary practice from the Palaeolithic archaeological record, the human action of intentional burial is perhaps more reliably inferred from the bone placement of a group of Neanderthal skeletons found in the 'Shanidar 4' cave in Iraq.⁸ This act of intentional burial of humans by their community has become the archaeological marker of what we now recognise to be our earliest modern humans. Riel-Salvatore and Clark, recognise that although intentional burial can only be implicit in the Palaeolithic archaeological record, this action is 'deeply embedded in the controversy of the origins of modern humans',⁹ both in terms of determination of relative cognitive capacities, and for what it can tell us about the social characteristics of these populations.

So, the question of what we do with our dead, and the way in which we do it, is of such central importance to who we are as humans, that we can rightly assume that continuing questions in relation to these practices will both illuminate as well as determine, our trajectory as a species. The period of time covered by the Vigil is sometimes referred to as the wake. The term wake derives historically from the period during which the mourners

5. Elizabeth Harrington, 'Funeral Vigil', Liturgy Lines, 7 November 1999, <https://www.liturgybrisbane.net.au/resources/liturgy-lines/funeral-vigil/?search=funeral%20vigil>

6. Francis. '*Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*', 24 May 2015 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html. Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si* addresses the Christian responsibilities in relation to the ecological concerns of the 21st century.

7. Emma Pomeroy, Paul Bennett, Chris O. Hunt, Tim Reynolds, Lucy Farr, Marine Frouin, James Holman, Ross Lane, Charles French, and Graeme Barker. 'New Neanderthal Remains Associated with the 'Flower Burial' at Shanidar Cave.' *Antiquity* 94, no. 373 (2020): 11–26. doi:10.15184/aqy.2019.207.

8. Ibid, 23.

9. Julien Riel-Salvatore, and Geoffrey A. Clark. 'Grave Markers: Middle and Early Upper Paleolithic Burials and the Use of Chronotypology in Contemporary Paleolithic Research.' *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 4 (2001): 449. Accessed November 3, 2020. doi:10.1086/321801.

remained awake and attentive for any signs of life in the deceased, as well as to guard the corpse and attend to its washing and shrouding or dressing.¹⁰

Dealing with the death of a member of the community is described by Malinowski as a disintegrating experience, and the 'development of practices surrounding disposal of the corpse served to reintegrate the community by allowing members to assert some manner of control over the society's relationship with death and the dead'.¹¹ These practices and rituals surrounding the care of and disposition of the body, and the time period in which these events occur, have become important in all societies, but as Moore and Williamson note 'These practices were subject to an infinite degree of variation, but in all cases they served a similar underlying purpose: bringing what was once an incomprehensible horror within the realm of an ordered understanding of the role of death in the human experience'.¹²

This investigation will follow Ernest Becker's thesis from his seminal text *The Denial of Death*, that humanity does inevitably deny death in most respects of their existence,¹³ in order to avoid the incomprehensible horror noted above. Becker identifies the human behaviours that death anxiety generates during the course of life as 'hero projects'.¹⁴ Hero projects describe all of the ways that humans mark their existence, both in the physical world and in the social body. These range widely across cultures but can be exemplified by the legacy of a public career, particularly in the realm of politics, the building of structures and leaving behind a large number of children. We can see that these so called 'hero projects' exist on a continuum. The building of a house can be for basic shelter, but the building of a palace or pyramid functions as a method by which the commissioner seeks to remain physically present in the world after death. Similarly in modern society, a successful career can make an enormous contribution to the wider society or can slip into workaholism, self-interest and avoidance of social responsibilities. Becker asks the question, where do we all sit on this continuum? He proposes that we remain vigilant in examining our attitudes to our own mortality, so that we might avoid the tendency to ignore it. He suggests constructively interrogating the hero projects by which we might attempt to outrun it.

In the same way that death anxieties drive hero projects, they can produce a terror of that most tangible evidence of human mortality, the dead human body.¹⁵ The ways in which we ritualise human interactions with the dead human body, or corpse, illuminate in more precise ways our abilities to deal with human mortality. By the term ritualising, reference is made to the ways in which biological or psychological imperatives drive human behaviours, which then become settled into agreed upon forms of human activity, variously becoming

10. Patricia Lysaght, 'Wakes and Visitation.' In *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*, edited by Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck, 1001-984. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009. doi: 10.4135/9781412972031.n324

11. Bronislaw Malinowski and Robert Redfield. *Magic, Science and Religion: And Other Essays*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984. This material is referenced in: Calvin Conzelus Moore, and John B. Williamson. 'The Universal Fear of Death and the Cultural Response.' In *Handbook of Death & Dying*, 3-13. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2003. doi:10.4135/9781412914291.n1.

12. Ibid, 4.

13. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 22-23.

14. Ibid, 314.

15. Richard M Ryan, Pelin Kesebir, and Tom Pyszczynski. 'The Role of Death in Life: Existential Aspects of Human Motivation.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), 4-6.

standardised and regulated by rules and laws.¹⁶ These ritualisations have varied enormously over cultures and historical time periods. As the focus of this investigation is the current Catholic Christian Vigil, a reasonable starting point for an historical analysis is the worldview of the ancient Near Eastern peoples, including the Israelites who produced the Hebrew Bible.

The ancient Near Eastern people, among whom the Israelites formed a distinct group, had diverse attitudes to death and afterlife, with particular considerations, rituals and texts which pertained to the liminal space between death and interment or disposal of the body. In relation to the afterlife, the Egyptian peoples of the ancient Near East were concerned primarily with the perpetuation of lineages, through the birth of sons, to perpetuate the family lineage and also to as a duty to the ancestors.¹⁷ Walton notes that for the majority of ancient Near Eastern peoples, any concept of the afterlife relied heavily on concepts of continuity with the present world. Walton notes that Egyptian and Mesopotamian ideas of the afterlife (Mesopotamian ideas being those which went on to inform Israelite conceptions of the afterlife) are substantially divergent and that 'it is very difficult to synthesize a consistent picture and hazardous to do so given the nature of the sources'¹⁸. The Egyptians concerned themselves with the disintegration at death of the interior elements of the person (ba – mind/self and ka – essence/personality/vital force) from the body, and the complex processes of mummification and preservation were necessary to reintegrate those elements in the afterlife.

Israelite Mesopotamian ideas, however, diverge from this status-quo model of afterlife, and 'has an expectation for a future that has never before existed, even in the time of the prototypical messiah, David'.¹⁹ This future was not that of Christianity, where the eschaton comes at the end of history, but was for the Israelites, an integral part of the covenant. Walton suggests that the evidence from Mesopotamia and the Levant indicates that these peoples were more concerned with the preservation of the social community (ie: the family, tribe and religious group) than the internal community (the ba and ka) that preoccupied the Egyptians. So too, the Israelites concerned themselves with the continuum of the social community of the living and the dead, but with no particular expectations of attaining presence with God, a 'sociological continuum without theological significance'.²⁰

How do these views of the afterlife impact upon the rituals surrounding death and the care of the body prior to interment? Our concerns are with the ancient Israelite-Christian continuity (and discontinuity) in understanding the current Vigil and its operation. The idea of the cult of the dead as applied to ancient Near Eastern peoples included the immediate funeral rituals and those mortuary rituals which continued over time, including ancestor worship and regular meals to which the dead were invited. In ancient Judaism, the corpse is the source of

16. Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in ritual studies*. 3rd edition. ed: Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International. 2013.; Ronald L. Grimes, *The craft of ritual studies*: New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992. The sociological theory of ritual and ritualization are investigated at length by Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell.

17. John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Second ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 293-4.

Here Walton is quoting from H. C. Brichto, 'Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife— A Biblical Complex,' *HUCA* 44 (1973): 1– 54; see 22– 27 for the connection between 'name' and descendants. See also D. Sheriffs, 'The Human Need for Continuity: Some ANE and OT Perspectives,' *TynBul* 55 (2004): 1– 16.

18. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 294.

19. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 297

20. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 312.

ritual uncleanness par excellence. Hence, the rituals surrounding the care of the body between death and burial are ‘an elaboration of meticulous behavioural rules designed to protect the living from contamination at the same time as they carry out the serious obligation on all Jews to participate in the burial procedures’.²¹ In general, ancient Jewish practices around care for the corpse and interment appear to have been similar to the surrounding cultures, with appropriate burial of the dead being paramount and the law being primarily concerned with aspects of ritual purity associated with contact with the corpse.

The earliest Christians did not depart in any meaningful way from the prevailing cultural practices of the era relating to the preparation of the corpse. The role of women in the rituals immediately surrounding death was paramount, as it was across the ancient world at that time and was, as Kathleen Corley notes ‘a major centre for women’s religious activity’.²² Women in both ancient Rome and Greece ‘customarily washed and anointed the dead (the laying out of the body or prothesis)’²³ as well as being chiefly responsible for ritual lamentations for the dead. In Roman antiquity, with family gathered at the death bed, the final breath of the dying person might be caught by the nearest relative and eyes and mouth closed, after a coin had been deposited in the mouth for the purpose of paying Charon, the ferryman over the river Styx, which was traversed from the world of the living to the world of the dead. This custom was taken from the Greeks.²⁴

Roman funerary customs included the important practice of the *refrigerium*. The *refrigerium* was a funerary banquet, as its name suggests, to ‘refresh’, in this case both the mourners and the deceased person, and was held at the gravesite. The *refrigerium* became over time, associated with the Christian celebration of death but originated as a pagan tradition. Pagan *refrigeria*, ‘as all ancient banquets, were stereotyped as occasions for drunkenness and sexual license’.²⁵ They were often raucous affairs characterised by drinking, overindulgence, and sexual immorality. The earliest Christians did not depart in any meaningful way from the prevailing cultural practices of the era in relation to care of the corpse however, they added the celebration of the eucharist at the tombs and gravesites, to the *refrigerium*.^{26, 27} Early Church authorities eventually discouraged the *refrigerium* in recognition of the tendencies for overindulgence and raucous or licentious behaviour.

History has much to reveal to us in relation to funerary practices around burial, as many lasting monuments and their inscriptions survive. There is not nearly so much in the archaeological record in relation to the activities and ritualisation of time between death and the celebration of the funeral. This is an area which generates little documentation or lasting ephemera and as we have seen, was largely the work of women and thereby in the ancient world, undocumented. Looking further, it is of interest in relation to later liturgical practice, to determine what sacred scripture can tell us about the Vigil. How does this motif operate in the biblical canon? Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have examples of vigiling which can illuminate our modern approaches to liturgical Vigil.

21. Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 95.

22. Kathleen E. Corley, *Maranatha: Women's Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 22.

23. Corley, *Maranatha*, 23-32.

24. Corley, *Maranatha*, 28.

25. Corley, *Maranatha*, 29.

26. Jeff W. Childers, ‘Refrigerium’ in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity : Second Edition*, edited by Everett Ferguson, et al., Taylor & Francis Group, 1997. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=1460792>.

27 Corley, *Maranatha*, 56.

It was God who first kept vigil over his chosen people in their flight from Egypt 'At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. That was for the Lord a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout their generations' (Exodus 12:41-42). So here we see that liturgical vigils celebrated both for the purpose of keeping in right relation with God and community in Eucharistic worship, as well as in vigiling for the dead, are modelled on the God of deliverance's own vigil for his covenant people, the Israelites. This vigil of the Lord for his people constitutes a part of the narrative of the institution of the Passover. The Passover is then taken up by the authors of the Gospels in their passion narratives, during which they tell the story of the institution of another commemorative meal by Jesus. Keeping watch becomes the essence of the Christian's idea of themselves as Easter people.

The first Easter Vigil and its resolution is the eye of the storm of the passion narratives in all four Gospels, Matthew 26:30–27:66, Mark 14:26–15:47, Luke 22:39–23:56, and John 18:1–19:42.²⁸ Corley sees these passion-resurrection texts as displaying a legacy of the female lament tradition of antiquity and its function in 'funerary rituals, eucharistic meals and mortuary laments'.²⁹ Saul Olyan investigates a comprehensive range of examples of mourning behaviour and ritual from biblical sources.³⁰ The four types of biblical mourning he identifies are mourning over the dead, petitionary mourning, non-petitionary mourning at a time of calamity, and mourning by a person afflicted with skin disease. It is an unusual typology to identify from biblical texts however, Olyan argues that 'mourning over the dead is the form of mourning upon which all other types are modelled, and that all mourning shares debasement in common'.³¹ Interestingly, Olyan identifies the relative proximity of ritual rejoicing to ritual mourning (ie: how many rituals of purification need to be undergone in order to bring a mourner back to a state of ritual purity, such that a ritual stance of rejoicing can again be taken) to be a key identifying factor in categorising biblical mourning. Olyan argues that 'The mixing of mourning and rejoicing is both emblem and cause of the ritual order's destruction'.³² The ritually impure state of mourning, therefore is not to be mixed with the stance of rejoicing (exemplified in temple sacrifice), which requires the participant to be in a ritually pure state. The ritual order is at risk of destruction by such mixing, and when biblical texts contain such mixing of ritual states, they are emblematic of the breakdown of the ritual order.³³

This contentious issue of the mixing of mourning and rejoicing, key to the laws of the Israelite covenant and exemplified in purity laws, becomes key to understanding the Christian attitudes to death that go on to form the rituals that will eventually become the OCF. We shall go on now, to investigate the manner in which the ritual texts have developed and evolved.

28. George W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Passion Narratives' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 5. ed., David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 173.; Also, a comprehensive work of scholarship on the passion narratives, their historicity, tradition and theology is: Raymond E. Brown *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary Passion Narratives in the Four on the Gospels* (Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday), 1994.

29. Corley, *Maranatha*, foreword John Dominic Crossan, xi.

30. Saul M Olyan, *Biblical Mourning: Ritual and Social Dimensions*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

31. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 137.

32. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 137.

33. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 145. Olyan uses the examples of Jer. 41: 4–5 and Amos 8: 3 as they describe ritual behaviour in relation to the destruction of a temple.

The Ritual structure – a journey through forms and reforms

The funeral Vigil, along with Eucharist and Baptism, is a preeminent example of the paschal mystery in liturgical expression. Odo Casel identifies all liturgical action in the Church as ‘sacred mystery rites’³⁴, in that all of the liturgy is an experience of the Paschal mystery. This idea of sacred mystery has implications for the liturgical performance of the funeral Vigil and its function as a key reflection of the primal mystery of Jesus Christ, the Paschal mystery. The way the Rite has been crafted over millennia in differing cultural milieus, has sought to express the Paschal Mystery in its encounter with ultimate human biological mystery, death.

Early Christianity – The Apostolic era

The earliest Christians were liturgically still attached to Jewish temple worship, and indeed the earliest Christians remained hopeful that all of Israel would join in their New Covenant. Over successive generations, and ultimately with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, a definitive split was made with the cultic practices of ancient Israel.³⁵ The writings of the New Testament in addition to the *Didache* (or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) are the main sources of information in relation to the liturgical practices of this first century of Christianity. The *Didache* appears to date from the second century but according to Metzger, contains older traditions.³⁶ The Jewish funerary rite, *Tzidduk Ha-din* or ‘Justification of Judgement’ dates from the ninth century, but is also believed to be reflective of Jewish liturgical practice in the early Christian era.³⁷

Bradshaw refers to the ‘continuing enigma’ of the discovery, dating, attribution and inferred influence of the early Church literature, or Church orders. It is beyond the scope of this article to pursue these investigations, suffice to say that it is from these ancient orders that our limited understanding of early Christian liturgy is based. The *Didache* noted above is the earliest and is followed in the East by the *Didascalia* (c. 230 CE, Syria), the *Apostolic Church Order*, (300 CE, Egypt) the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 380 CE, Syria) and in the West by the *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215 CE, possibly Rome).³⁸

It seems reasonable to assume in relation to the rituals surrounding death, that there was a mix of these Jewish liturgical traditions, Eucharistic celebrations and other customs obtained from the variety of prevailing pagan cultures.³⁹ In the New Testament texts which do speak of death, themes of paradise, peace, eternal rest, light and refreshment, as well as the bosom of Abraham, the first resurrection and the heavenly Jerusalem, all appear in relation to death and the afterlife, frequently as described by Jesus.⁴⁰ While they are not necessarily indicative of liturgical practice at that time, these are the New Testament themes which go on to inform the creation of Christian funeral liturgy. Perhaps the most significant shift during this period is the move from expectation of the imminent return of Christ, and its accompanying joyful liturgical acclamation ‘Maranatha’ (Aramaic, meaning Come, Lord,

34. Theodore Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy; an Account and Some Reflections* (2nd ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 24-25.

35. Marcel Metzger, *History of the Liturgy: The Major Stages* (Collegeville, Mn.: Liturgical Press, 1997), 16.

36. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 17.

37. Paul P. J. Sheppy, *Death Liturgy and Ritual. Volume 1: Liturgy, Worship, and Society* (Aldershot U.K.; Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 2003, 87.

38. Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1992), 84.

39. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 21-22; Josef A Jungmann and Francis A. Brunner, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960).

40. Bernard Botte, ‘The earliest formulas of prayers for the dead’ in *Temple of the Holy Spirit: Sickness and Death of the Christian in the Liturgy: The Twenty-first Liturgical Conference Saint-Serge*, ed. Matthew J.O’Connell (New York: Pueblo Pub., 1983), 19-26.

come) to a lessening of that expectation and the necessary changes to eschatological thinking which resulted from the delayed Parousia.

The Church of the Martyrs

'Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him.' (Acts 8:2). This is the sum of knowledge that we have in relation to the rituals surrounding the death of Stephen, the first martyr of the Church. The Church of the Martyrs refers to the period after the death of the Apostles but prior to the conversion of Constantine,⁴¹ for the purposes of investigating the funeral Vigil as practiced by Christians, this period offers up a similar scarcity of documented liturgy to the Apostolic era.

While specifics relating to the liturgies for the dead are largely undocumented, evolving eucharistic celebrations are certainly documented, and there are suggestions that those celebrations were likely to have accompanied the funeral meals celebrated at the graveside (*refrigerium*), which were later documented in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴² Tertullian does speak of an 'appointed office' for the dead in his work *de Anima*, but no detail in relation to the liturgy is given.⁴³ Rowell identifies an apocryphal narrative of the funeral of Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, by Bishop Serapion which suggests that the prescribed singing of psalms is intended to contrast with the pagan customs of weeping and lamentation, particularly that provided by professional mourners.⁴⁴ Cyprian insists that in addition to mourning, a note of joy must accompany the death of a Christian, 'Let us show that this is what we believe so that we may not mourn the death even of our dear ones, and when the day of our own summons come, without hesitation but with gladness we may come to the Lord at His call'.⁴⁵

Also, important to consider in this era, annual remembrances of the death of the Martyrs of the Church were represented in liturgical celebrations. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the first record of a meeting for a martyr's anniversary.⁴⁶ The *Didascalia* also mentions ritual remembrances on the anniversaries of other deceased members of the community, interestingly this is in the context of a rebuke to the Jewish purity laws related to cemeteries and corpses;

You...shall be assembled even in the cemeteries, and read the holy Scriptures, and without observance [of ritual purity] complete your services and intercessions to God and offer an acceptable eucharist, the likeness of the body of the kingdom of Christ, in your cemeteries and on the departures of them that sleep among you.....
On this account then do you approach without restraint to those who rest, and you shall not declare them unclean...(26, 243-244).⁴⁷

What is interesting in terms of the Christian rituals involving the corpse, is this insistence that Jewish purity laws do not determine the manner in which the liturgical celebrations are carried out. Mourning and rejoicing are no longer segregated, they are actively brought into communion.

41. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 31-63.

42. Jungmann and Brunner, *The Early Liturgy*, 140-141; Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 47-55; Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Alcuin Club Collections 80. London: SPCK), 2004.

43. Sheppy, *Death Liturgy and Ritual*, 90.

44. Ibid; D. G. Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial*, London: Alcuin/SPCK, 1977, 20-21.

45. Sheppy, *Death Liturgy and Ritual*, 91.

46. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 58.

47. Metzger, 59.

The Church of the Empire through to 1968

313 AD marks the turning point from the Church of the Martyrs to the Church of Empire, a very different proposition to the Christian minorities which existed prior.⁴⁸ This appears to be an unwieldy sweep of history. However, in charting Christian funeral rites, it makes reasonable sense to treat this period from the first detailed records of funeral liturgy, through to the threshold of the present Rite, as a lengthy, gradual codification and movement towards homogenisation of the rites surrounding death.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* (c. 380 CE, Syria) provide the first detailed information in respect of funeral liturgy. Book VI clearly indicates that the Eucharist was celebrated at funerals, after the reading of scriptures and the offering of prayers, and Book VIII offers some prayers for the dead. Deacons were instructed to pray for the forgiveness of the deceased and for them to be received 'into the bosom of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob...'.⁴⁹ There are many variants in the documentation according to the status of the deceased (age, gender, lay or ordained) but there appears to be a basic structure which is followed, comprising an introductory section in the home, followed by a procession to the church, a service of prayers, a procession to the place of burial, and burial. Each of these sections is variously comprised of prayers, psalmody, chants, reading from scripture and ritual gestures.⁵⁰ The introductory section in the home is of particular interest in respect of the conduct of a funeral vigil, and it is reasonable to assume that this time would include preparation of the body for burial whilst conducting prayers, responses, and psalmody. Here we have the beginnings of our documentation of Christian funeral vigil.

The later Syrian document the *Ecclesial Hierarchy* asks those present to pray for 'an ultimate happiness in Christ' and the body of the deceased is kissed by the bishop and congregation, there is anointing with oil and then burial.⁵¹ We can see that the focus on the worship of God and reception of the deceased into communion with God in a heavenly realm are reflective of the Christian stance that death is a transformation or transition, not an ending.

The period between Constantine and the end of the Middle Ages consisted of very many political upheavals in the Church as well as the formulation and distribution of liturgical books throughout Christendom.⁵² After the fall of the Roman Empire, the lands formerly occupied by Rome in the West became a series of smaller territories ruled by local chieftains.⁵³ The Church solidified its power by filling the void left after the civil institutions of the Roman Empire collapsed. Upon the commencement of the rule of Charlemagne in 768, the Churches of East and West continued to move further from each other liturgically and politically, and throughout the medieval period, the clerical monopoly on liturgical activity gradually increased. This was not the case prior to the Middle Ages, and when we come to consider the celebration of the current Vigil and Related Rites from the OCF, we will observe the reversion to a far less strict clerical monopoly.

Charlemagne's interests were in political and religious unification of his Empire and the liturgy was called into service of that aim. Charlemagne requested a Roman sacramentary from Pope Hadrian to serve as the model upon which all sacramentaries throughout

48. Richard P McBrien, *Catholicism* (North Blackburn, Vic. CollinsDove, 1994); Richard P McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (1st ed. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 65.

49. Sheppy, *Death Liturgy and Ritual*, 91.

50. Sheppy, 92-93.

51. Sheppy, 92-93.

52. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 113-121.

53. Metzger, 112.

Charlemagne's empire were modelled.⁵⁴ This became known as the Gregorian Sacramentary, and it is at this point in liturgical history that we begin to see what thereafter became the norm, uniformity over diversity, with all subsequent missals prior to Vatican II reflective of the Gregorian Sacramentary in various ways.

Rutherford explains in relation to the documents from this era,

Orders of funeral service survive from the ninth century. They reveal a pattern of prayerful preparation of the corpse (washing, clothing), vigil or wake with psalms, hymns and Scripture readings, a procession with the body to the church complex for burial to the accompaniment of psalms and prayers. Gradually, the celebration of Mass, associated with Christian death from the beginning, became a formal part of the funeral rites themselves and the church, the focal point of the liturgy.⁵⁵

Metzger observes that by the eighth century the essential aspects and core structure of the liturgy had been established and the innovations which followed were secondary and more in relation to utilisation and understanding of the liturgy than in relation to its structure and core defining features. The historical gap in this article between the turmoil of the Carolingian era and the beginnings of the liturgical reform movement of the 20th century is reflective of the liturgical unity that Metzger refers to as an 'ecclesiological principle',⁵⁶ beginning as early as the 11th century and the liturgical rites for the dead were no exception.

Metzger identifies the rites as consisting of Mass formularies as well as the chanting of antiphons from the Liturgy of the Hours. In addition to the initial funeral rite, where there was an exaggerated emphasis on solemnity of the ritual in performance and aesthetics, there developed also, an emphasis on the repeated celebration of Masses for the Dead. The most famous liturgical addition perhaps was the *Dies irae* in the thirteenth century, positioned before the gospel. Whilst it is outside the scope of this article, it is hopeful that future research further delving into archival material from various traditions to ascertain chronological and regional variants in liturgical practice which undoubtedly occurred during this long period, even amid the broad uniformity, might reveal some interesting material to inform this area of investigation into the Vigil even further.

Of particular interest however, in relation to funeral liturgy, is how this uniformity operated in respect of the Church's pastoral role in the remembrance of the deceased and the comfort of those who mourn. As a core tenet of Jesus' teaching, the comfort of mourners is a sign of the Kingdom (Matt 5:4), and how well that is achieved by the universal Church must be a yardstick by which its success is measured. The liturgical movement of the 20th century, begun by Abbott Prosper Guéranger in his Benedictine monasteries was directed at an increased liturgical piety by reuniting the rites with a fuller understanding of the theologies which underpinned them. Dom Guéranger and his protégé Dom Lambert Beauduin were the prime movers in the debate, and their theories were given the imprimatur of Pius X and ultimately Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* in 1947 gave the papal seal to the movement.⁵⁷

In relation to the funeral liturgy, Reid quotes Beauduin in *La Piété de L'Église (Liturgy: the Life of the Church)* who proposes the following, 'the Restoration of the Liturgy of the Dead to a place of honour, observance of the custom of Vigils and Lauds, giving greater solemnity to

54. Metzger, 116-117.

55. Richard Rutherford, 'Funeral Rites' in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second edition. (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Group in association with the Catholic University of America, 2003), 30-33, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3407704356/GVRL?u=acuni&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=2f58dc61>.

56. Metzger, *History of the Liturgy*, 122.

57. Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy, 1948-1975* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1990), 5-6.

the funeral services, and getting the faithful to assist thereat, thus efficaciously combating the dechristianising of the rite of the dead'.⁵⁸

The Second Vatican Council took a special interest in upholding and advancing the pastoral nature of the liturgy, and the reforms of Vatican II were above all, directed towards this aim. The Council was the forum in which the liturgical movement of the 20th century was actualised.

The current Order of Christian Funerals

The Second Vatican Council gave priority to the reform of the Rite of Funerals because of the 'importance and urgency'⁵⁹ of the creation of a new Rite. Study group 23 was responsible for the reform of the rite,⁶⁰ and they began with a consideration of paragraph 81 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* which suggested that the Rite of Funerals 'should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions of various regions'.⁶¹

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Rite of Funerals had, over the course of time, become too narrowly focussed on the doctrines of judgement and purgatory, at the expense of the theologies of the overarching mercy of God, resurrection, and eternal life in the Trinity.⁶² Considering the importance and urgency noted above, it is perhaps surprising that the funeral liturgy receives only two lines in the document:

81. The rite for the burial of the dead should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This holds good also for the liturgical color to be used.

82. The rite for the burial of infants is to be revised, and a special Mass for the occasion should be provided.⁶³

These lines, however, constitute merely a jumping off point, and it was the flavour of SC in its entirety that was to influence the reform of the Rite. Driscoll examines SC at its fiftieth anniversary and identifies the three core messages in relation to liturgy which SC communicates, the foundational nature of the Pascal Mystery to all liturgy, redemption as communicated through the liturgy, and that which they identify as a leitmotif throughout the entire document, the active participation of all in the liturgy.⁶⁴

58. Alcuin Reid, 'The Twentieth-Century Liturgical Movement.' In *T&T Clark Companion to Liturgy*, edited by Alcuin Reid, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), 2016, 160.; Lambert Beauduin, *Liturgy: The Life of the Church* (1st & 2nd edns, Collegetown: Liturgical Press, 1926 & 1929); 3rd edn (Farnborough: St Michael's Abbey Press, 2002). <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/10.5040/9780567661708.ch-008>.

59. Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy*, 771.

60. Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy*, 579. 'Study group 23 on the sacramentals consisted of rector: P.-M. Gy, secretary: S. Mazzarello; members: J. Mejia, J. Rabau, J. Hofinger, F. Vandenbroucke, and D. Sicard. Subsequently added were A. Chavasse, B. Löwenburg, and K. Ritzer.'

61. Bugnini, 771.

62. Bernard Botte, 'The earliest formulas of prayers for the dead' in *Temple of the Holy Spirit: Sickness and Death of the Christian in the Liturgy: The Twenty-first Liturgical Conference Saint-Serge*, ed. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Pub., 1983), 30.

63. SC, 81-82.

64. Jeremy Driscoll, 'Sacrosanctum Concilium.' In *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb, and Matthew Levering (Oxford University Press, 2017), 26.

The imperatives stated in the opening paragraph of SC are the most useful to guide an analysis of the reform in the context of the Vigil:

1. This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.⁶⁵

The Vigil is the first of three principal ritual moments in the Order of Christian Funerals.⁶⁶ The second being the Funeral Liturgy and third being the Rite of Committal. The introductory material for the Vigil for the Deceased in the OCF, states the following:

55. The vigil may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, parlour or chapel of rest, or in some other suitable place. ... Adaptations of the vigil will often be suggested by the place in which the celebration occurs.⁶⁷

Then the following suggestion is made:

A celebration in the home of the deceased, for example, may be simplified and shortened.⁶⁸

I would argue that, on the contrary, a Vigil conducted at home is an opportunity for an unrushed, full expression of the Rite, with ample opportunity before and after, for personalised remembrances of the deceased and for social interactions of family and friends.

In exploring the current liturgical practices of the Vigil, it is useful to reflect upon the dynamism of the funeral rituals of the early Church, which shaped the 'oral core of the passion narrative'⁶⁹ and established in Christian communities, the continuity between the living and the dead.⁷⁰ The cult of the dead and ritual lamentations were a significant part of the religious life of the early Church, particularly of women.⁷¹ Richard Rutherford's *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*⁷² is perhaps the preeminent text exploring both the history and the current reformed rite of the funeral liturgy. In it, Rutherford observes:

In Christian Antiquity, vigils were far more dynamic than one might think today. They were certainly not merely peaceful, reflective occasions for contemplation and growth in holiness. On the contrary, they were highly charged activities

65. SC, 1.

66. OCF, 23.

67. OCF, 23.

68. OCF, 23.

69. Kathleen E. Corley, *Maranatha: Women's Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 1; In relation to the establishment of the passion narrative, see also; John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988).

70. Corley, 1.

71. Corley, 22-23.

72. Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*. Revised edition. Collegeville, Minn.: Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990

involving the whole assembly. In the crucible of the vigil, the assembly forged roots of gospel tradition.⁷³

Rutherford investigates in depth the ideas of Christian community and ecclesial life which the OCF presupposes. The exercise of liturgical ministries in the Vigil makes it most unique in the stable of Catholic liturgical rites. The OCF provides that:

14. Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass⁷⁴

However:

When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a lay person presides⁷⁵

And:

15. Family members should be encouraged to take an active part in these ministries, but they should not be asked to assume any role that in their grief or sense of loss may be too burdensome⁷⁶

The Rite takes two forms, the Vigil for the Deceased and the Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church. In this part of the OCF, in addition to these two ritual forms are included, Related Rites and Prayers to be used in the period soon after death. These three brief rites are Prayers after Death, Gathering in the Presence of the Body and Transfer of the body to the Church or to the Place of Committal. The rituals from the Office for the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours may also be used by lay people in the period after death, having been previously reserved to religious. The Office for the Dead is a much more complex ritual and as a result, is still utilised mostly after the death of a religious.

It is the first form of the Rite, the *Vigil for the Deceased*, on which I will focus my investigations here, as it allows for a celebration in the home and for the preparation of the body before or after the Rite. The structure of the Rite is simple and consists of Introductory Rites, Liturgy of the Word, Prayer of Intercession and Concluding Rite. In this simplicity however, the Vigil provides the opportunity to create a meaningful, personal, intimate and unrushed ritual after the death of a Christian. As with all post-conciliar sacraments and sacramental celebrations, the range of readings from scripture in the Vigil vastly widened and there is a great deal of flexibility in the choice of scripture as well the Greeting, Invitation to Prayer, Opening Prayer and Concluding Prayer and Blessing. Music is left the discretion of the participants. Importantly, it is noted;

67. As needs require, and especially if the funeral liturgy or rite of committal is not to take place for a few days, the vigil may be celebrated more than once and should be adapted to each occasion.⁷⁷

This allowance means that there are opportunities for the gathering of different groups according to need, and that each ritual can be adapted accordingly.

73. Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian*, 8.

74. OCF, 5

75. OCF, 5.

76. OCF, 5.

77. OCF, 944.

Bruce Morrill, in his work *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Death and Life*⁷⁸ offers a reflective case study in which he describes the funeral of a young colleague. He notes of the mourners, 'they struck me as not being at home not only in the space of the funeral parlour, but also that of the church's rites'.⁷⁹ Given the percentages of Catholics who participate in the liturgy, this is hardly surprising.⁸⁰ Rather than considering the situation an intractable problem, it might be regarded as an opportunity to interrogate the way death is approached on a societal level, in order to ensure an authentic and contemporary liturgical experience in the Vigil. Rutherford notes the acknowledgement in secular bereavement literature of the value of 'the way in which the religious community cares for its dead'.⁸¹ There is certainly a sense that the rituals retained by the Church have a significant and appropriate role to play in contemporary approaches to death.

Margaret Smith has produced several works as pastoral guides to the OCF and describes the Vigil as 'the best-kept secret'⁸² of the Christian funeral. Richard Rutherford's pastoral guide to the OCF also acknowledges that 'the funeral liturgy does not stand alone. Rather it participates in the much larger context of pastoral care that accompanies the events of sickness and death in our community'.⁸³ This 'much larger context' is where I see the Vigil as a natural partner to some of the contemporary approaches to home death and grassroots 'death positive' movements.

The second instalment of this article will go on to investigate the liturgical theology of the rite, its nexus with modern multidisciplinary death studies and ask some critical questions about the ecological and ethical questions raised for Christians by their care for the dead and by the performance of the Vigil in contemporary Australia.

78. Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, Minn.: Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press, 2009).

79. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing*, 216.

80. National Centre for Pastoral Research, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016*, copyright December 2020, revised July 2021, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Mass-attendance-in-Australia-2016-Revised-July-2021.pdf>; The percentage of Catholics who attend Mass regularly in Australia was last measured at 11.8%.

81. Rutherford, *The Order of Christian Funerals*, 11.; In this chapter Rutherford refers to the work of Eric Lindemann, one of the founders of American bereavement studies in the 1940s. He refers particularly to Lindemann's 'Symptomology and management of Acute Grief' *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101 (1944) 141-48; and 'Grief and Grief Management: Some reflections' *Journal of Pastoral Care* 30 (1976) 198-207.

82. Margaret Smith, *Facing Death Together: Parish Funerals*. (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 41.; Margaret Smith, *Let these bones live: a pastoral guide to the order of Christian Funerals* (Melbourne: Melbourne : Diocesan Liturgical Centre, 1992), 50.

83. Rutherford, *The Order of Christian Funerals*, 9.