

Homily 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2026

Since today's readings speak so powerfully, as The Parables of The Kingdom continue, about The Last Judgement and the immense compassion and mercy of our loving God let us focus on the Church's great compassion, mercy and therapeutic support offered by the beautiful Liturgical rites associated with sickness and dying. Let's first, lighten the mood.

Paddy, despite his entire family being devoutly Catholic, continued throughout his life to deny the existence of God and of an afterlife. 'It's all a load of pie in the sky!', he would tell the Parish Priest. Eventually, Paddy died and despite the man's atheism the family organised a traditional Catholic Funeral. Paddy's open coffin was laid out in the dining room of his home. He was dressed in a white robe with a beautifully embroidered image of The Sacred Heart on his chest. Rosary beads adorned his joined hands. Family and Friends gathered on 3 nights to recite The Rosary and pray for the repose of Paddy's soul. The Parish Priest arrived to lead the prayers on the first evening. He went over to the open coffin and looked at Paddy in his beautiful funeral robes. The priest couldn't help himself and burst into uncontrollable laughter. 'Fr, what on earth's got into you?', exclaimed his shocked widow. 'Oh, I can't help it Mrs Doyle, Paddy's all dressed up and nowhere to go!'

On a serious note, the Rites associated with dying and death are some of the most beautiful and, with The Sacrament of Reconciliation, the most therapeutic in the Church's Liturgy. On nearing death, the family of the dying person will call for a priest to attend the sick person. On entering the home, the priest will greet the family with, 'Peace be to this home and all who dwell herein!' With only the priest present the dying person will 'confess' their sins and receive Absolution. The family will return and, in line with The Letter of St James follow the instructions, 'If anyone is sick among you, call the elders of The Church and have them anoint you with oil for healing in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Then if the sick person is able he/she receives Holy Communion, The Viaticum (Food for the Journey). Prayers are then said.

In the event of the person's death her/his mortal remains are taken to the family home. The coffin, open, if possible, is set out in a suitable room usually two or three days before The Requiem Mass. (This is more common in Ireland and Scotland, but I am told on good authority that it was practiced here in England too). Family and friends gather round the coffins and recite the Sorrowful Mysteries of The Rosary praying for the 'repose of the soul' of the deceased. After prayers they retire and in a social gathering reminisce about the person's life. On the last evening the coffin is transported to the parish church, and mourners walk behind the hearse, in procession, saying The Rosary. On arrival at the church the coffin is reverently carried by family members to the sanctuary where it is placed surrounded by 4 standing lit candles. There it lies 'in state' till the next morning. After prayers and intercessions and 'Confession', for those who desire it, all retire to return the following morning for The Requiem Mass.

The Requiem Mass begins and the Christian symbols of the dead person's faith journey, a personal Bible and Crucifix, are placed with great solemnity on the coffin lying 'in state' in front of the altar. God's saving word is proclaimed emphasising hope in eternal life and the compassion and mercy of a loving and forgiving Father. Prayers and intercessions are said invoking God's mercy and supporting the bereaved relatives and friends. After Communion the Final Commendation sees the coffin once again sprinkled with holy water, incensed (emphasising the great dignity of the remains of the dead) and prayed over that the deceased may be now 'presented to God, The Most High.' The coffin is then solemnly and reverently carried to the hearse by family members and transported to its 'final resting place'

At the graveside or crematorium, the coffin is sprinkled again with holy water, prayed over with words of hope and gently lowered into the grave by family or transported for cremation. Mourners comfort and support one another and often gather for a meal to honour the deceased. Frequently, prayers or annual remembrance liturgies will be said/ celebrated to support the grieving family.

How stunningly beautiful is that!

The Catholic rites for the dying and the dead are primarily intended as spiritual and sacramental acts, but they can also have significant therapeutic effects in the psychological, social, and even physiological sense. “Therapeutic” here means promoting healing, peace, and integration.

For the dying person

The Church’s rites—including the Anointing of the Sick, Penance, Viaticum, and the Commendation of the Dying—can foster several forms of healing.

1. Reduction of fear and anxiety

- The rites affirm that the person is not facing death alone.
- Scripture, prayers, and familiar rituals can reduce uncertainty and existential distress.
- Many people experience a greater sense of peace when their spiritual concerns are addressed.

2. Reconciliation

- Confession and absolution help resolve feelings of guilt or unfinished moral concerns.
- Forgiveness—both received and extended—can lessen emotional burdens.
- This can contribute to what palliative care specialists sometimes call “spiritual peace.”

3. Preservation of dignity

- The dying person is treated as someone of enduring worth, not merely as a patient.
- The rites emphasise personhood, identity, and belonging to God even as physical abilities decline.

4. Meaning-making

- Suffering is interpreted within the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ rather than as meaningless.
- This framework can help people integrate their life story and approach death with greater acceptance.

For family and loved ones

The rites often have equally profound effects on those gathered.

- They provide permission to express grief openly.
- They offer a structured way to say goodbye.
- They reduce feelings of helplessness by giving family members meaningful ways to participate through prayer, readings, and presence.
- They often facilitate conversations of love, forgiveness, and gratitude that might otherwise never occur.

Research in palliative care and bereavement has found that attending to spiritual needs near the end of life is associated with greater family satisfaction with care and, in many cases, healthier adjustment during bereavement, though individual experiences vary.

For the deceased

From a Catholic perspective, the Funeral Rites—including the Vigil, Funeral Mass, and Rite of Committal—are not understood as psychological therapy for the deceased. Rather, they:

- commend the deceased to God's mercy,
- pray for the repose and purification of their soul,
- proclaim hope in the resurrection.

These are theological effects grounded in Catholic belief rather than empirically measurable therapeutic outcomes.

For the bereaved

The funeral rites serve several well-recognised therapeutic functions.

They create a shared narrative.

The person's life is remembered considering God's promises, helping mourners integrate the loss into an ongoing story rather than experiencing it as meaningless rupture.

They provide ritual containment.

Ritual offers predictable actions and words at a time when emotions are overwhelming. Psychologists recognise that structured rituals can reduce anxiety and help people process transitions.

They strengthen community.

Grief is carried collectively rather than in isolation. The presence of the parish community communicates that mourners are supported.

They encourage continuing bonds.

Catholic teaching affirms that death does not sever communion in Christ. Praying for the dead and remembering them within the communion of saints allows mourners to maintain a transformed relationship with the deceased rather than feeling that all connection has ended.

From a psychological perspective

Many psychologists and palliative care clinicians identify mechanisms by which these rites can promote well-being:

- reduction of uncertainty through familiar ritual;
- increased social support;
- opportunities for emotional expression;
- reconciliation and forgiveness;
- affirmation of meaning and purpose;
- hope that transcends immediate suffering.

These mechanisms are not unique to Catholicism, but the Catholic rites integrate them within a sacramental and theological framework.

A holistic understanding

Catholic tradition sees healing as encompassing body, mind, relationships, and spirit. Thus, even when physical healing is no longer possible, the rites seek what the Church understands as a deeper form of healing: reconciliation with God, peace with oneself and others, acceptance of death, and hope in the resurrection. From a clinical perspective, many of these same practices align with factors known to support emotional adjustment and healthy grieving, while their spiritual significance depends on the beliefs of those participating.