

Priests Bury the Dead

The couple spoke to me as they were leaving the Saturday Vigil Mass. They were a lovely couple and their twelve-year-old son was with them. He said excitedly, "Father, we're going to get a hamburger at my favorite place and then we're going bowling tonight!" This couple had tried to have children for many years and they spent a lot of money going to different specialists. Finally, they conceived and had a son, but the baby had some complications, including a hole in his heart at birth which took several surgeries to repair. But he was doing great. He was attending our parish school and living the life of a normal twelve-year-old boy.

At nine o'clock that night, a nurse from the hospital emergency room called me and told me to come quickly. I later learned what had happened. While at the bowling alley, the boy had stood up and walked to the lane to bowl. After he bowled his ball down the lane, he turned around, grabbed his chest and fell. The doctors said that he was dead before he hit the ground. His heart had simply burst.

Later that night, I was kneeling in the church with a very heavy heart. I felt so badly for the family and for their suffering. I said, "Jesus, I don't think I have the strength to bury a child right now. I can't do this. Please help me. Please give me the grace to do this funeral and to minister to this family."

I had never seen the Church more packed than it was the day of the funeral. God helped me. He gave me the grace and I made it through the homily. After the consecration and Communion, I remember thinking, "Jesus, it is almost over. Thank you Lord."

The Catholic Rite of Committal at the cemetery is very brief, though it took a long time for all the people to park and make their way to the grave. Once I had blessed the grave and finished the final commendation, the mother looked at me and said, "Father, please open the casket so I can say goodbye." I thought to myself, "Oh no. Please don't do this." But what could I do? How

could I deny the request of a mother burying her only child? So I nodded to the funeral director to go ahead and it was just as I suspected. The mother began to scream and cry, hugging her child in the casket. Her husband was there holding her and crying, and the family was all huddled around. It was a terrible, sad, unforgettable moment in their lives—and in mine.

Emotionally, I could not take it and tears poured down my cheeks. The funeral was officially over, so I just turned away and started walking slowly among the graves, acting as if I were looking for a certain name on a tombstone. I was really trying to compose myself. After a few minutes, I suddenly heard Jesus speak to me very clearly. The Lord has spoken to me many times in my life, but there have been only a few instances where his voice and message were so clear.

Jesus said, “Thank you.”

And I understood in that instant that he was saying, “Thank you for being a priest. Thank you for burying this child for me, and thank you for ministering to his parents.” I knew without any doubt that it was Jesus because his voice totally and immediately restored my emotional and spiritual strength. I went from being heavy-hearted and sad—one of the lowest moments in my life—to being emotionally strong, filled with joy and happiness. I immediately began to thank and praise God, “No Jesus, I should be thanking you. Thank *you*, Jesus, for being my Savior. Thank you for dying for me. Thank you...” But again the Lord communicated to me very clearly and this time he said, “Stop. Be quiet. Right now, I just want you to let *me* thank *you*.”

As I walked through the cemetery my heart was full, and I prayed quietly, “You’re welcome Jesus. You’re welcome. I am so glad that I am a priest.”

This is just what priests do.