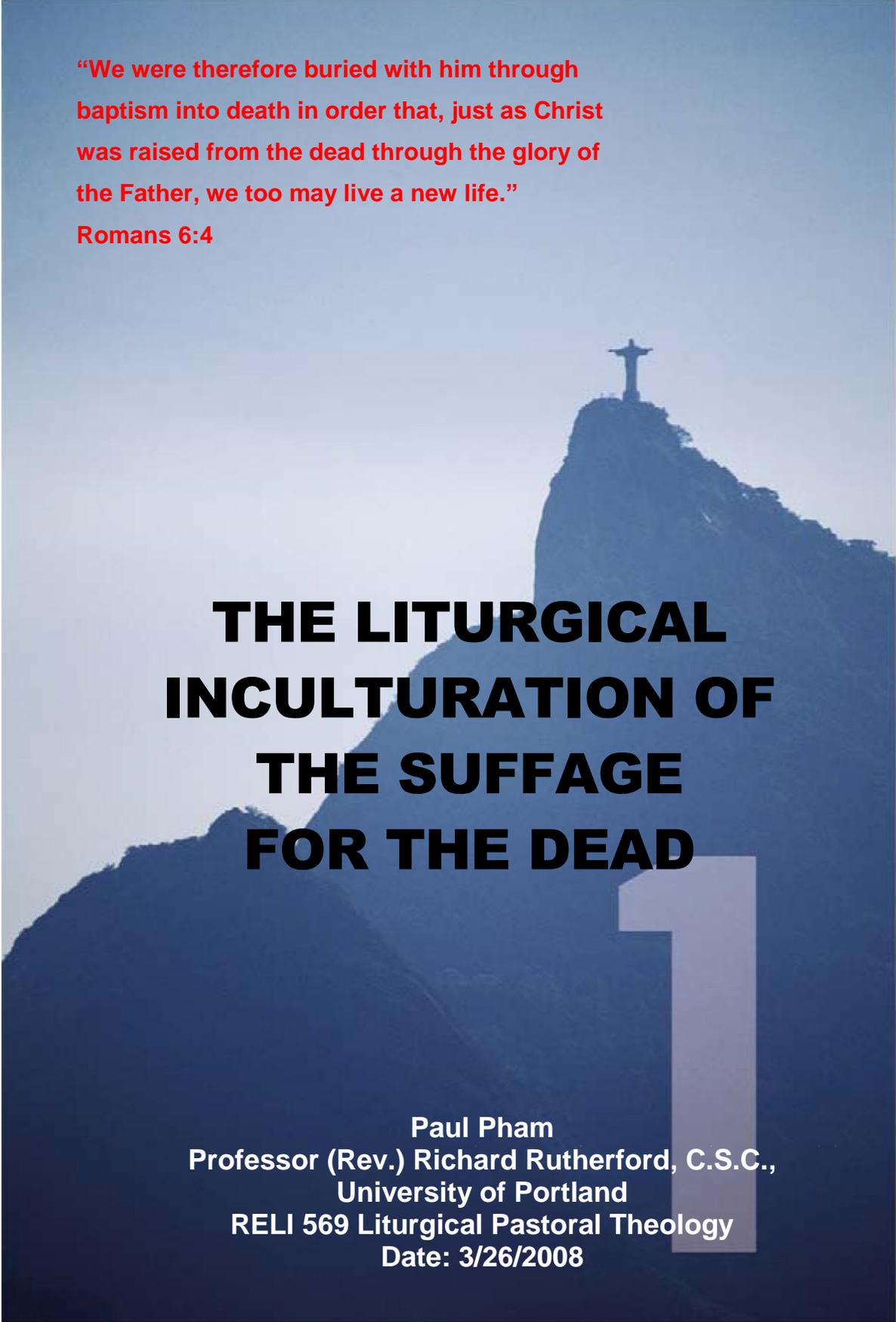


“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Romans 6:4



THE LITURGICAL INCULTURATION OF THE SUFFAGE FOR THE DEAD

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1 INTRODUCTION

In December 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a directory on popular piety and the liturgy.¹ The publication of this document marks a significant shift in the Church's evaluation of what the Directory calls "popular piety." As is generally recognized, there was at Vatican II little discussion of popular piety as such. Rather the Council's concern was with what it called devotional practices. These, it declares, are to be highly recommended according to Rev. Peter Phan, a theologian at Georgetown University, "provided they conform to the laws and norms of the church." Moreover, "such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them."²

As an attempt to understand the theology of "popular piety" and liturgical inculturation of the suffrage for the dead, the study to follow presents chapter seven of the Directory by an analysis of what the Directory says about what it terms "Suffrage for the Dead." The empirical, hermeneutical and critical methods³ will be employed to illustrate both its strengths and weaknesses. The study will also discuss the Directory's treatment of one of the pious practices that has profound implications for Asian/Vietnamese Catholics, namely, the cult of the dead. Finally, some suggestions will be made as to how popular religion should be viewed from the Vietnamese Catholics perspective.⁴

¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site. 15-Sept-08
<http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html#Chapter%20Seven>.

² Ibid.

³ Richard Rutherford, CSC., Lawrence Boadt, CSP. and Mary Dombeck, *Rites of Death and Dying*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 67-101.

Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 23-99.

⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Popular Religion and Liturgical Inculturation: Perspectives and Challenges from Asia*, (New York: Orbis Book, 2004), 65-91.

2 EMPIRICAL FORMULA

The Directory is divided into two parts, principles and guidelines, with a helpful Introduction. It quotes Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (1988) in which the pope raised the question of the role of popular piety and its relationship to the liturgy. According to the pope, "The pious exercises of the Christian people and other forms of devotion can be accepted and recommended provided that they do not become substitutes for the liturgy or integrated into the liturgical celebrations. An authentic pastoral promotion of the liturgy will know how to build on the riches of popular piety, purify them and direct them towards the liturgy as an offering of the people." This is, in a nutshell, the theology that informs the Directory's guidelines.⁵

Most importantly, the Directory enumerates the theological principles that should govern the practice of popular piety, in particular its relationship to the liturgy. First, the liturgy enjoys preeminence over all other forms of prayer, including popular piety, because it is necessary, whereas others are optional. Secondly, though optional, popular piety should be highly appreciated. Thirdly, while valuable, popular piety must be renewed and, when necessary, corrected according to biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological principles. Fourthly, popular piety, though distinct from the liturgy, must be harmonized with it, for example: the Code of Canon Law, canon 1176 states: "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine".⁶ Fifthly, in this harmonization, "formula proper to pious exercises should not be commingled with

⁵ Peter C. Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead*," (Paper Presented at The East Asian Pastoral Institute, November, 2004).

⁶ Code of Canon Law. Vatican Web Site. 15-Sept-08 < http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P4A.HTM >. John Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press), 1409.

Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead*."

Richard Rutherford, CSC., *Honoring the Dead Catholics and Cremation Today*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), 3-26.

the liturgical actions"; "a superimposing of pious and devotional practices on the liturgy ... must be avoided"; "precedence must always be given to Sunday, Solemnities, and to the liturgical seasons and days"; "attempts to impose forms of 'liturgical celebrations' on them (pious practices) are always to be avoided" according to canon 1176 and 1184.⁷

The Directory is a timely and helpful document. It rightly retrieves the important role of popular piety for Christian life. It reintroduces many pious practices, most of which are unknown to Catholics of the post-Vatican II era according to Rev. Peter Phan of Georgetown University. Most importantly, it lays down the theological principles governing the practice of popular piety and its relationship to the liturgy, which is its overriding concern. On the other hand, its principles when applied strictly and indiscriminately, causes pastoral difficulties and lessens the effectiveness of pious practices for both individuals and communities. A close analysis of what the Directory says about what it terms "Suffrage for the Dead" (Chapter Seven) will illustrate both its strengths and weaknesses.⁸

2.1 Suffrage for the Dead

2.1.1 The Resurrection of the Dead

The Directory insists that the Christian faith in the resurrection of the dead is the context in which to understand the meaning of death and the suffrage for the dead. It acknowledges that death can be seen both as a natural "end of earthly life" and as "the wages for sin" (249).⁹ As either, death is an existential enigma, states the Directory, recalling the teaching of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*): "It is in regard to death that the human condition is most shrouded in doubt" (18).¹⁰ However, according to the Directory, in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

⁹ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site.

¹⁰ *Gaudium Et Spes*. December 7, 1965. Pastoral Constitution on The Church in The Modern World Promulgated Pham, The Liturgical Inculturation of The Suffrage for The Dead, Page 5

the light of Jesus' death and resurrection and of God's promise to raise the dead, the curse of death has been transformed into a blessing: "Death is the passage to the fullness of true life" and "The death of a Christian is an event of grace, having as it does, a positive value and significance in Christ and through Christ" (249).¹¹ That is why, the Directory notes, paradoxically the Church calls the Christian's day of death his or her dies "birthday". The Christian has already died "in Christ" - sacramentally - in baptism, and physical death seals that "dying with Christ" and "consummates it by incorporating them fully and definitively into Christ the Redeemer" (250).¹²

In an important statement which has extensive ramifications for the cult of the dead, the Directory affirms that eternal life is possible for those who are not Christians: "The Church's prayer of suffrage for the souls of the faithful departed implores eternal life not only for the disciples of Christ who have died in his peace, but for the dead whose faith is known to God" (250).¹³

2.1.2 *Memorial of the Dead in Popular Piety*

The Directory prefaces its discussion of the memorial of the dead in popular piety with its oft-repeated caveat about maintaining a proper relationship between the liturgy and popular devotion, "both in its doctrinal aspect and in harmonizing the liturgical actions and pious exercises" (256).¹⁴

by His Holiness. Pope Paul VI. Vatican Web Site. The Holy See. 16-Sept-08
<http://www.Vatican.va/Archive/Hist_Councils/li_Vatican_Council/Documents/Vat-li_Cons_19651207_Gaudium-Et-Spes_En.Html >.

¹¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site.
Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

2.1.2.1 *Doctrinal Principles*

According to the Directory, the popular cult of the dead must be inspired by the following seven doctrines of the Christian faith: 1. The paschal meaning of death, that is, death as participation in Christ's death and resurrection through baptism; 2. The immortality of the soul; 3. The communion of saints; 4. The resurrection of the body; 5. The glorious coming of Christ; 6. Eternal retribution; and 7. Eternal life (257).¹⁵

In light of these doctrines, the Directory insists that care must be taken that practices of the cult of the dead is not "contrary to the Gospel" and not be seen as "pagan residues" (257).¹⁶ Consequently, the following five dangers should be avoided: divination, interpretation of dreams related to the dead, belief in reincarnation, denial of the immortality of the soul and separation of death from the resurrection, and "the application of spatio-temporal categories to the dead" (258).¹⁷

2.1.2.2 *Pious Practices for the Dead*

After some warnings about the widespread contemporary phenomenon of "hiding death and its signs," especially in cities (259),¹⁸ the Directory ends the chapter with an enumeration of various pious practices of suffrage for the dead: novena for the dead in preparation for All Souls Day and the octave prolonging it; visits to the cemetery ["which should be seen as deriving from the bonds existing between the living and the dead and not from any form

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

of obligation, non-fulfillment of which involves a superstitious fear"] (260);¹⁹ membership in confraternities whose activities include burying the dead, praying for the dead, and support for their families; suffrage for dead by means of almsgiving, works of mercy, fasting, applying indulgences, and recitation of prayers, especially the *De profundis* [Out of the depths, Ps 51] and the *Requiem aeternam* [Eternal Rest] (260).²⁰

3 HERMENEUTICAL MUSINGS

3.1 The Significance of Suffrage for the Dead

The Directory defines suffrage for the dead as "an urgent supplication of God to have mercy on the souls of the dead, to purify them by the fire of His charity, and to bring them to His kingdom of light and life" (251).²¹ It links the practice of suffrage for the dead to the doctrine of purgatory which professes that "no one ... can be received into God's friendship and intimacy without having been purified of the consequences of personal sin" (251).²² The Directory also connects it with the doctrine of the communion of saints insofar as the living members of the church help the souls of the departed achieve their final purification through their suffrage which consists primarily "in the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist, and in other pious exercises, such as prayers for the dead, alms deeds, works of mercy, and the application of indulgences to the souls of the faithful departed" (251).²³

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

3.2 Liturgical Celebrations for the Dead

The Directory presents the rite of Christian funerals as composed of three parts. First, prayer vigil, during which the Christian community gathers to pray for the deceased, listens to the Scripture, comforts the bereaved, and expresses solidarity with those in sorrow. Second, the celebration of the funeral Mass, which is "the true Christian refrigerium for the deceased" (252).²⁴ The Directory cautions that the homily should avoid "any form of funerary eulogy" (252).²⁵ Third, the rite of committal, the funeral cortege, and burial. The Directory urges that "every stage of the rite of exequies should be conducted with the greatest dignity and religious sensibility," with the utmost respect for the body of the deceased; decorous and ostentation-free funeral furnishings; and a proper use of the cross, the paschal candle, the holy water, and incense (253).²⁶

With regard to the disposal of the corpse, the Directory expresses a strong preference for burial in the ground since this recalls the earth from which humans come and to which they return and the burial of Christ himself (254).²⁷ Nevertheless, it notes that cremation is permissible, provided that "such choice was not motivated by anything contrary to the Christian doctrine," according to canon 1176 and 1184.²⁸ It also exhorts that the ashes be buried and not kept in the home.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Code of Canon Law. Vatican Web Site.15-Sept-08.
Beal, James, and Thomas eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*,
Phan, "Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead."

Other liturgical celebrations for the dead include the offering of Mass on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day following their deaths as well as on their anniversaries. The Directory also mentions November 2, All Souls Day, on which "the Church incessantly offers the holy sacrifice of the Mass for the souls of all the faithful departed and prays the Liturgy of the Hours for them" (255).²⁹ Suffrage for the dead is done every day during the celebration of the Mass and at Vespers. The Directory appropriately reminds those who have made offerings for Mass intention that the Church prays for all the faithful departed, "so as to avoid possessive or particular ideas that related the Mass only to one's 'own' dead" (255).³⁰

4 CRITICAL IMPLICATIONS

As has been mentioned above, the Directory's guidelines for the suffrage for the dead are prefaced by a presentation on the theological meaning of death and the liturgy of funerals. Curiously, for a document purportedly concerned with popular devotion, Directory devotes its attention to the theology of death and the liturgical celebration of funerals and comparatively little on the practices of popular piety toward the dead. Anyone looking for a full and detailed treatment of this latter theme will be sorely disappointed according to Rev. Peter Phan of Georgetown University.³¹

As he argues below, the Directory's narrow focus on suffrage for the dead, while concentrating on what the Church does for the dead, neglects many aspects of the cult in honor of the dead. The latter aspect, as the history of the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy has amply demonstrated, is a culturally important and

²⁹ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site.
Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

³⁰ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site.
Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

³¹ Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

theologically challenging part of the popular piety toward the dead. A few reflections, then, on the strengths and weaknesses of this chapter are in order. In the process, indications will be given as to how the Directory's treatment of popular piety toward the dead can be expanded and enriched.

4.1 Suffrage for the Dead and the Paschal Mystery

On the positive side, the Directory helpfully recalls the intimate connection between the death of a Christian and the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. Such connection is strongly affirmed by the 1969 Order of Christian Funerals Order of Christian Funerals as detailed by Rev. Richard Rutherford, a theologian at the University of Portland.³² This is succinctly expressed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope" (1680).³³ This notion of death as the last "Passover" of the Christian into the eternal life inaugurated by Christ, participation into which is already realized—albeit not yet fully—in the sacramental celebrations, in particular baptism and Eucharist, overcomes the partial and mutually antithetical understanding of death as either the natural end of biological life or the penalty of sin, which the Directory mentions (249).³⁴

Another positive contribution of the Directory is its reminder that suffrage for the dead is not done only by means of the offering of the Eucharist, prayers, and the application of indulgences for the dead but also by support

³² Richard Rutherford, CSC., with Tony Barr, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 121-153.

Richard Rutherford, CSC., *The Order of Christian Funerals, An Invitation to Pastoral Care*, Series Editor, Edward Foley, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 23-54.

³³ Constitution on The Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium. December 4, 1963. Pope Paul VI.. Vatican Web Site.
Phan, "Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead."

³⁴ Ibid.

for the bereaved, almsgiving, and works of mercy (251, 260).³⁵ In this way the social and charity dimension is fostered in the cult of the dead which often runs the risk of selfish concern for the dead members of one's family and a one-sided emphasis on the beyond.

4.2 Suffrage for the Dead or Cult in Honor of the Ancestors

It has been pointed out above that the scope of the Directory's treatment of popular piety toward the dead is unduly narrowed by the rubric of suffrage for the dead. To be sure, the various pious practices mentioned by the Directory in no. 260³⁶ (e.g., novena, octave, visit to the cemetery, application of indulgences, etc.) are part of what people do for the dead but they do not broach one essential aspect of popular piety toward the dead, namely, the cult in honor of the dead, in particular, the ancestors.

This omission is unfortunate according to Rev. Peter Phan since it is precisely the cult of ancestors that has been the greatest obstacle for conversion to Christianity in those Asian countries influenced by the Confucian tradition as well as in African countries with a strong tradition of ancestor worship. The absence of a treatment of the cult of ancestors is no doubt a result of the Directory's almost exclusive focus on Western pious practices for the dead. Tellingly, the Directory, when alluding to the customs and usages connected with the "cult of the dead," places the expression in quotation marks and goes on warning that "great caution must be used in examining and evaluating these customs. Care should be taken to ensure that they cannot be interpreted as pagan residues" (257).

³⁷

Furthermore, in terms of the relationship between the liturgy and popular devotion, the Christian reception of the cult of ancestors in Africa and Asia offers the most instructive examples of how these two forms of worship

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

can be fruitfully integrated into each other. According to Rev. Peter Phan, the Directory fails to take advantage of existing liturgical adaptations to achieve its main objective, namely, to "harmonize" popular piety and the liturgy without falling into the doctrinal pitfalls it repeatedly warns against (258).³⁸

The following is briefly to illustrate by way of one example, namely, the cult of ancestors in Vietnam, how popular piety toward the dead goes far beyond the Directory's category of suffrage for the dead and, more importantly, how it can enrich the liturgy itself. Whether the introduction of the cult of worship into the Eucharist belongs to the category of garden-variety "legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples" (SC, 38) or that of "an even more radical adaptation of the liturgy" (SC, 40), for which special ecclesiastical approval is required, is a moot point. The fact is that certain practices of the popular devotion to the dead are now an integral part of the liturgy, and more specifically, of the Eucharistic celebration.

4.3 The Vietnamese Context

Vietnam, along with other Asian countries such as Korea and Japan, has been heavily influenced by China, especially its Confucian culture.³⁹ This influence is most visible in certain funerary rites and especially in the cult of ancestors. The Chinese Rites Controversy and Rome's ensuing prohibitions against the cult of ancestors affected Vietnamese Catholicism profoundly. In 1964 the Vietnamese Bishops Conference applied to Rome for permission to implement the 1939 decree of Propaganda Fide permitting ancestor veneration. On June 14, 1964 the Vietnamese bishops issued a letter "The Veneration of Ancestors, National Heroes, and War Dead" spelling out the concrete norms to apply Propaganda Fide's instruction. In general, the bishops distinguished three kinds of acts, attitudes, and rituals: those that are clearly secular, patriotic, and social expressions of piety toward the ancestors, national heroes, and war dead; those that are clearly religious in nature and contrary to Catholic belief, smack of superstition, and are performed in places reserved for worship; and those that are of an ambiguous nature. The first kinds are not only permissible but are to be encouraged and promoted; the second are prohibited; and the third need to be

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Peter C. Phan, *In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 122-129.

examined according to the common local opinion: if they are generally thought to be of a nonreligious nature, they are permissible. If doubt concerning their nature persists, it is permissible to act according to one's conscience. If possible, explanations of one's intention should be given with due tact, or one can participate in a passive manner.⁴⁰

On April 12, 1974 the Vietnamese bishops issued another communication in which they specified a list of activities, attitudes, and rituals deemed permissible:

"1. An ancestral altar dedicated to the veneration of the ancestors may be placed under the altar dedicated to God, provided that nothing smacking of superstition such as the 'white soul' [the white cloth representing the dead] is placed there.

2. Burning incense and lighting candles on the ancestral altar, and prostrating with joined hands in front of the altar or the repository of the ancestors are gestures of filial piety and veneration, hence permissible.

3. On death anniversaries it is permissible to present the dead person with 'offerings of commemorative cult' according to local customs, provided that one eliminates things smacking of superstition such as burning paper money. It is also recommended that the offerings be reduced or changed to express more clearly their true meaning of respect and gratitude to the ancestors, for instance, flowers, fruits, incense, and lights.

4. During the marriage rites, the bride and groom are permitted to perform the 'ceremony of veneration toward the ancestors' in front of the ancestral altar or the repository of the ancestors. These rituals are expressions of gratitude toward, recognition of, and self-presentation to the ancestors.

5. During the funerary rites, it is permissible to perform prostrations with joined hands before the corpse as well as to hold burning incense sticks in joined hands according to local custom, as a way to express veneration for the dead person, just as the Church permits the use of candles, incense, and inclination before the corpse.

⁴⁰ See the Vietnamese text in *Sacerdos* 43 (July 1965), 489-92.

6. It is permissible to participate in the ceremonies venerating the 'lord of the place,' who is usually called the 'titulary genius,' in the village community building, to express gratitude toward those whom history shows have earned the gratitude of the people, or the benefactors of the village, and not to express a superstitious belief in evil spirits and harmful ghosts."⁴¹

4.3.1 *The Cult of Ancestors in the Vietnamese Mass*

In addition to the permission of these rituals of ancestor veneration outside of the liturgy, the Vietnamese bishops have introduced two properly liturgical innovations.⁴² The first is an expansion of the prayer for the dead in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass. In the second Eucharistic Prayer, instead of the simple formula "Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again," the Vietnamese memento of the dead reads: "Remember also the faithful, our brothers and sisters, who rest in peace in the expectation of the resurrection, and the dead who can only trust in your mercy. Remember in particular our ancestors, our parents and our friends who have left this world..."⁴³ Obviously, the explicit mention of "ancestors" is an attempt at inculturating ancestor veneration into the liturgy, with significant theological implications which will be detailed below.

The second liturgical innovation is the Masses for the celebration of the lunar New Year or Tet. For the Vietnamese New Year is the most important cultural and religious feast, the equivalent of New Year, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas rolled into one. It symbolizes the total renewal of all things. All debts should be paid, all bad feelings set aside, and everything should be clean and new. On New Year's Eve, especially at midnight, there are various rituals to perform, the main of which is to "welcome the ancestors" to the home. Culturally,

⁴¹ See the Vietnamese text in *Sacerdos* 156 (1974), 878-80.

⁴² Peter De Vo, "A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration Among Catholics in Vietnam," (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1999), 22–29, 35.

⁴³ Phan, "Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead."

Vietnamese New Year is the celebration of the family: all members of the family are supposed to return to the ancestral home to show gratitude to their ancestors and to renew the family bond. Religiously, it is the occasion for the most solemn celebration of the cult of ancestors. Members of the family gather before the ancestral altar with the pictures of the dead ancestors displayed on it, make deep bows, burn incense, make offerings, and pray for their protection. Catholics say their prayers in front of the altar.

Vietnamese New Year is celebrated for at least three days: the first is reserved for the cult of ancestors and the living parents, the second for close relatives, and the third for the dead. Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit missionary to Vietnam, had attempted to Christianize Vietnamese New Year by suggesting that its three days be dedicated to the Trinity: "The first day in memory of the benefits of creation and conservation, which is dedicated to God the Father; the second in thanksgiving for the inestimable benefit of redemption, which is dedicated to God the Son; and the third in humble gratitude to the Holy Spirit for the grace of being called to be a Christian"⁴⁴ In the 17th century and until even as recently as the 20th, as long as the monarchy lasted, on the first day of the year the emperor offered in the name of the nation the Nam Giao (south gate) sacrifice to Heaven, which de Rhodes interpreted as a "sacrifice offered to the heavenly King."⁴⁵

Given the central position of Vietnamese New Year, it is not surprising that the Vietnamese bishops have undertaken to solemnize it with eucharistic celebrations. Five Mass formulas have been composed to express the various meanings of Vietnamese New Year and are now in use: the first for the end of the year in to give thanks and ask for forgiveness; the second for New Year's Eve to celebrate the passage into the new year (giao thua); the third

⁴⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 80-81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

for the first day of the new year to praise God and to ask for peace and prosperity; the fourth for the second day to pray for ancestors, grandparents and parents; and the fifth for the third day to pray for the sanctification of labor.⁴⁶

For our present purpose the fourth formula is of special interest. Here are some of its significant prayers:

Collect: Father of mercies, you have commanded us to practice filial piety. Today, on New Year's Day, we have gathered to honor the memory of our ancestors, grandparents and parents. Deign to reward abundantly those who have brought us into this world, nurtured us, and educated us. Help us live in conformity to our duties toward them....

Prayer over the Gifts: Lord, accept our offerings and bestow your graces abundantly upon our ancestors, grandparents and parents, so that we may in our turn inherit their blessings....

Preface: As we look at things in the universe, we clearly see that every being has an origin and principle: birds have their nests, water its source, and the human person coming into this world has a father and mother. Moreover, thanks to your revelation, Father, we recognize that you are the creator of all things that exist and that you are our Father. You have given life to our ancestors, grandparents and parents so that they may transmit it to us. You have also filled them with good things so we may inherit them by knowing you, adoring you, and serving you....

The inclusion of the veneration of ancestors in the Mass, and especially the mention of the term "ancestor" in the Eucharistic Prayer, mark a monumental step in liturgical inculturation in Vietnam. We have traveled a long way from

⁴⁶ See the Vietnamese Roman Missal, 1035-47.

the days of the Chinese Rites Controversy. Theologically, it is important, at least for two reasons. First, in mentioning the ancestors explicitly in the Eucharistic Prayer and in praying for them, the Vietnamese text does not distinguish between Christian ancestors and non-Christian ones (among Vietnamese Christians attending Mass there are many whose ancestors did not receive baptism). In the cult of ancestors, the ancestors are venerated not because they have been saved or were holy but simply because they are ancestors. Simply in virtue of the physical bond with their descendants, the ancestors are bound to protect them, and the descendants to honor them. Furthermore, in describing the cult of ancestors, many Vietnamese bishops have used not only the word “to tien “(forebears) but also “thanh hien” (saint and sage) to refer to those who should receive this cult. Of course, they do not mean to say that these are "saints" in the Christian sense of being officially canonized, but clearly the old objection that the word "saint" should not be used for people like Confucius no longer holds, and of course there is no suggestion that the non-Christian ancestors have been damned simply because they were not Christian.⁴⁷

Secondly, there is in the prayers cited earlier an affirmation that somehow the ancestors act as mediators of the blessings and graces that their descendants receive from God. The descendants are said to "inherit" them from their ancestors. Of course, in these prayers the ancestors are not directly asked to "intercede" with God for their descendants, since these prayers are not addressed to them, in contrast to those said in front of the ancestral altar at home. Theologically, of course, there can be no objection to ask someone, dead or alive, canonized or not, to intercede for oneself or others before God. The old objection that the cult of ancestors, in so far as they are invoked in prayer, is superstitious is a red herring, since no Asian who practices this cult believes that the ancestors are divine, in the strict sense of this term.

4.4 The Challenges of Contemporary Culture

In a helpful aside the Directory notes the phenomenon, widespread in contemporary Western societies, of "hiding death and its signs." It points out how doctors and nurses often hide the fact of imminent death, how tiny apartments do not permit the holding of a vigil for the dead, how traffic congestion prevents funeral corteges, and how

⁴⁷ Phan, *Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*

cemeteries are no longer provided for in urban planning (259) .⁴⁸ On the other hand, today funerals tend to be a very expensive affair, with the cosmetic restoration of the corpse, the use of funeral parlor as a place of worship, and the funeral director as the orchestrator of the funeral rituals. The Directory urges that Christians reject both the "intolerance of the dead" and the "commercialization of the dead" (259).⁴⁹

In addition to these two pastoral challenges to the Church's care for the dead and their families as well as to the popular piety toward the dead, others may be mentioned. There has been a tendency to simplify the committal service and celebrate it at the Church or the funeral home rather than at the graveside or the crematory, thus truncating the process of mourning by the family and curtailing the need to take a final and definitive leave of the deceased. At times the body is disposed of without ceremony and without the family attending. No funeral is celebrated and only a memorial service is held at a later date. Also there has been an increasing privatization of funerals, with the attendance of close family members only, apart from the parish community and its support, reflecting the contemporary loss of the sense of belonging to a larger community. In reaction to the extraordinary increase in the costs of funerals, some have planned a simple disposal of their corpses with little or no ritualized resources for the living to cope with grief. Even the pre-planning of funerals, though economically and practically helpful, may disassociate death from grief and bereavement.⁵⁰

Furthermore, today death itself has acquired new faces that demand from the Church a complex pastoral approach and perhaps even new funeral rites that would allow the community to cope with these new forms of death in a truly Christian way. Examples of new faces of death include: mass death (e.g., caused by terrorist attacks or natural disasters), death as the result of socially and morally stigmatized diseases (e.g., AIDS and drug addiction),

⁴⁸ Congregation for Divine Worship and The Discipline of The Sacraments Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy Principles and Guidelines, December 2001. Vatican Web Site
Phan, "*Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*"

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

and "problematic" death (e.g., suicide, people who have left the Church, and "public sinners"). The increasing popularity of cremation poses challenges to the current funeral rites that presume burial as the norm.⁵¹

While these new challenges to the liturgy of funerals and the popular piety toward the dead are most prevalent in the West, these begin to emerge also in Asia, given the impact of globalization. With regard to the rituals of the ancestor veneration, it is increasingly difficult, to practice them in full given the frantic rhythm of modern life. Often they are regarded as outmoded and quaint, especially by the young who more often than not lack the requisite knowledge of their cultures to understand the meaning of these rituals. Furthermore, in Asian countries such as Vietnam where Christians are a minority and co-exist with the followers of other religions which have feasts in honor of the dead (e.g., the Buddhist festival of Ullambana, that is, offering of foods to the "hungry ghosts" on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month), it is highly recommended to synchronize the Christian feasts (e.g., All Saints and All Souls) with similar non-Christian festivals according to Rev. Peter Phan.⁵²

To meet the challenges facing the Church in matters of funerals and the cult of the dead, it is imperative that the harmonization of the liturgy and popular devotion go beyond the limited scope of the suffrage for the dead and include such steps as those taken for example by the Vietnamese Mass for the dead. Only in this way can the deepest elements of Asian cultures relating to the cult of the dead, in particular of ancestors, be preserved and celebrated. Only thus can the process of reinforcing the awareness of pain and loss caused by the death of the loved ones, of remembering the deceased, of going through mourning and bereavement, of providing support and comfort to the survivors, and of re-organizing one's life deprived of the company of the beloved—a process enabled by the funeral ritual itself—be achieved.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

5 CONCLUSION

Funerals and the cult of the dead are endowed with psychological, social, and religious significance. Psychologically, they provide the bereaved with the means to cope with their loss and to reorganize their lives without the presence of their loved ones. Socially, they re-affirm the bonds that bind the family, social group, and Church together in moments of profound anguish and crisis. Religiously, they reiterate God's faithful love, the hope in the resurrection, and the comfort of fellow believers. Given the importance of funerals, it is natural that the Church wants to do everything possible to make them meaningful to people in their cultures:

Among all peoples, funerals are always surrounded with special rites, often of great expressive value. To answer the needs of different countries, the Roman ritual offers several forms of funerals. Episcopal Conferences must choose those which correspond best to local customs. They will wish to preserve all that is good in family traditions and local customs, and ensure that funeral rites manifest the Christian faith in the resurrection and bear witness to the true values of the Gospel. It is in this perspective that funeral rituals can incorporate the customs of different cultures and respond as best they can to the needs and traditions of each region.⁵³

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⁵³ Ibid.

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END NOTES: