

CLUNIAN DEATH RITUALS

John Mullaney, June 2020

This work is based upon the *Consuetudines* (Customaries) of Cluny as written by Bernard of Cluny towards the end of the 11th century. In 1121 Reading Abbey began as a Clunian priory, and it appears to have continued to follow the Clunian tradition for many years after it became an independent monastery.

To help understand the complicated ritual, I have broken it down into separate parts, each followed by a few explanatory comments.

The underlying features of all Clunian based death rituals were:

- 1, the central role of the dying monk
- 2, the participation of the whole community
- 3, the public nature of the death rites
- 4, that it was within a liturgical framework.

THE RITUAL

PART 1 – The approach of death:

The ritual starts with the dying monk noting his approaching death. The monk, if in the infirmary, confesses privately to the abbot or prior. However, if he is able, he goes to the chapter house to make a public confession. Members of the community forgive him any transgressions, and this is marked by a great 'Amen' from all.

Comment:

There must be no 'unfinished business', no bitterness, no recriminations within the community. The monk must not, and will not, die alone, either physically or spiritually. He will be surrounded by love and good-will. The liturgy is designed to help this process.

Death is not to be hidden away, not to be in private. The salvation of his soul is the main concern, not just of the dying man, but of every member of the community.

The community will continually chant and sing familiar litanies, antiphons, and psalms. Listening to these, the dying man will be given courage and strength to face his impending death.

Specific psalms are chosen which lead the monk to his reward. These are the 'psalms that direct', the *dirigere* psalms, which today we know as 'diriges'. These were viewed as prayers of faith and hope: not of lament, despair, or regret.

THE RITUAL

PART 2 – Sins are forgiven:

After the absolution the monk returns to the infirmary. He is placed on a bed which is arranged in such a way that his brother monks can stand all around him. The bed itself consists of sackcloth, on which ashes are spread in the shape of a cross. The dying man then asks for the sacrament of anointing with holy oils. This is brought to him by a priest in the community,

accompanied by acolytes carrying holy water, a cross and two candles. The rest of the community follow in solemn procession. Once in the infirmary they surround the bed and chant the seven penitential psalms.

The anointing: This consists of seven separate acts of anointing, namely that of the eyes, ears, lips, nose, hands, feet and groin. Each symbolises the cleansing, and forgiveness, of sins that may have been committed through these senses.

The washing: The priest then washes his hands to rub off the holy oil. This is done either by using bread, or ashes. The water used for this purpose is then either thrown into a prepared fire or into the *sacrarium* (a drain leading from the building directly into the earth outside).

Comment:

Every action of the ritual is full of symbolism. It is a liturgy that spiritually unites the whole community, including all who have already died. For this reason, as many monks as possible, including the youngest, are to be present.

The bed is made of sackcloth and ashes, these symbolise the transitory nature of man: *remember man that thou art dust and into dust thou shalt return*. But the ashes are in the form of a cross. The monk would, of course, know that the cross is not just a symbol of death, as are ashes, but of resurrection. They would afford the monk not just consolation but hope. They are also symbols of protection against the temptations of the devil. It is this fear of final despair, the unforgivable sin, that dictates the need for continual companionship, and for a communal ritual. Combined they offer comfort and hope to the dying man.

Anointing with holy oils is a reminder of the power of God, as expressed in both the Old and New Testaments. God anoints those He favours, but anointing is also a symbol of strength, of sharing in Christ's divinity. The senses, although the means by which man may sin, are also the channels by which man can discover God, praise Him and fulfil his Divine destiny, eternal happiness in the sight of God.

Water is likewise a long-established biblical symbol of purification and, of course, most importantly, it is a reminder of Baptism. Just as Baptism 'washes away' the sin of Adam at the start of his Christian life, so too this liturgical action represents the forgiveness and cleansing afforded by the absolutions, personal and communal, granted to the monk at the start of this ritual.

THE RITUAL.

PART 3 – The road to death:

Holy Communion: For the dying monk to receive the body and blood of Christ, the community follow the 'rite for visiting the sick'. The priest who has administered the anointing returns to the church to fetch the host and consecrated wine. He carries these in a very particular manner, with the host held over the chalice, which he cups in both hands, the whole being covered with a white linen cloth. As he passes members of the community, they genuflect out of respect.

The dying monk prepares to receive communion. His mouth is washed, and he recites the *Confiteor*, the *I confess*. When the priest arrives with the consecrated bread and wine, the monk is again absolved of his sins. The host is placed in the chalice and the monk drinks from the cup.

The cross, which has been brought in procession with the holy oils, is then placed before the monk who adores it, and kisses it. He then kisses the priest and subsequently all the members of the community, including the young boys.

Comment:

The road to death is highly ritualised. It is strictly ordered and reflects the monk's whole life. The text is specific and detailed, right down to the colour of the cloths and number of candles to be used, where they are to be placed, and who should carry them.

Once again, we encounter ritual cleansing. The monk's mouth is washed, in preparation for the reception of the consecrated bread and wine; he recites the *Confiteor*, the great prayer of repentance said at Mass and, yet again, he receives absolution for his sins. Yet another act of absolution may seem redundant, the monk having already made his confession and received forgiveness both privately and publicly. These communal acts reinforce the dying man's knowledge that his brothers are helping him on this last stage in his life's pilgrimage. He is aided at every step; the ritual helps concentrate his thoughts on cleansing, that is forgiveness, and ultimate salvation.

Kissing the cross reflects the Good Friday liturgy. He then kisses all his brothers. They are united in an act of faith and worship: once more underlining the communal and public nature of the death ritual.

The intimacy of this act may cause some surprise in the modern culture of a northern European country. However, even today, such actions are the norm in many countries in and around the Mediterranean. The liturgy should also be placed in the context of the 11th and 12th centuries. As the ritual of swearing fealty shows, kissing, even on the lips, was part of the ceremonial. This was not just a secular act, it was underpinned by a solemn religious oath, and the 'kiss' was the expression of its sacred and binding nature before God.

The cross was an integral part of the ritual. The monk had been paced on a bed of sackcloth and ashes in the form of a cross. The cross had been brought with the host and wine to his death bed. The instructions say that a cross should be placed in such a way that it is always visible to the monk. Indeed, even if he sleeps a simple wooden cross is to be placed over his eyes.

THE RITUAL.

PART 4 – To the point of death:

As death approaches, a servant is appointed whose sole function is to attend to the dying monk.

At night, whilst he is asleep, a simple wooden cross is placed on the monk's face. Candles provide light and are kept burning through the hours of darkness; note once more their symbolism, as well as the practicality of keeping them lit.

Those in attendance must sleep lightly so that, should the last moment of death approach, the monk is not without companionship. Should any of the brothers wish to maintain special vigil, then he is encouraged to do so.

If it seems that death is close and if the monk is conscious, the Passion of Jesus, from the Gospels, is read to him, or, if he is not conscious, psalms are sung. The rest of the community is alerted by the clapping of boards. This goes on continuously at the entrance to the cloister and at the main door to the dormitory. At this point the monks are told to run to the infirmary. There are only two occasions when this is allowed: on the impending death of a brother, or when there is a fire.

Whilst running they chant the *Credo*, repeating it if necessary, and continuing to chant it to the point of death. However, if death is prolonged, then the litany of the saints is chanted, with the refrain 'pray for him' (*Ora pro eo*), after the mention of each saint, e.g. *Sancte Luca – Ora pro eo*.

As often as it seems that the brother is on the point of death, the community is summoned as above, and there is to be no diminution in the demands on the community to be present at the deathbed. The 'customary' clearly states that 'the brother ought not to die without everyone present'.

Comment:

The emphasis is on companionship. At no time is the dying monk to be left on his own.

Death is not allowed to come unexpectedly, and belief in the power of prayer is demonstrated throughout the process. The presence of his companions, the continual repetition of litanies and psalms, are there to sustain the dying man, so that he will not lose faith. There is a great fear that the devil will use the moment of death as an opportunity to seize the soul. Contemporary carvings, frescoes, and illustrations, all demonstrate the strongly held belief that impending death can be the cause of a moment of weakness, of loss of faith, of despair, which will allow the forces of evil to claim the monk's soul.

Finally, it is worth emphasising once more the instruction for the necessity that the whole community, or as many as possible, be present at their brother's death. His death is the culmination of a life of preparation for this moment and it has been spent in his community. It is the responsibility of each individual monk, and of all them acting together, to help the dying man fulfil his life's work.

THE RITUAL.

PART 5 – Death and burial:

The ringing of bells announces the monk's death. The liturgical items required for the procession to the grave are solemnly and ritualistically brought together. These are holy water, another cross, a candle, and a thurible with burning incense. The prayers said immediately following death are taken from the burial rites.

The body of the dead monk is sprinkled with holy water. Those who will carry the body, and the shroud in which he is to be wrapped, are similarly blessed. The shroud and the body are then censed.

The body is then transferred to an antechamber allocated for the reception of the dead. Here the corpse is prepared for burial. Special clothing is provided by the Chamberlain, and warm water by the Infirmarian. The body is washed, and the monk is dressed in a woollen shirt and a cowl. A special cloth, known as a 'sudary', made of the same material as the shirt, is wrapped around the head. Night slippers are placed on the monk's feet.

The preparation of the corpse is carried out by monks of the same rank as the dead man. That is, a priest is cared for by fellow priests, deacons by deacons, lay-brothers by lay-brothers, etc.

The body is placed on a bier. This was probably concave, to receive the corpse. It is then carried to the Chapter House. If Office is being sung, the procession waits for a break in the psalms. The board is sounded once, and the monks bow to intone the Lord's Prayer. A candle is to burn until the burial: throughout the night if necessary.

Chanting, in preparation for the inhumation, now begins and is not to be interrupted until the burial. The only exceptions are for Mass and the singing of the regular hours of the Divine Office.

If the monk dies before the alarm for the start of the day, then the burial takes place that same day. If he dies later, then he is to be buried after High Mass the following day. In either case the burial takes place immediately after High Mass.

Several monks stay with the body resting in the church. They continue chanting the psalms for the dead.

If there is an overnight vigil, it is divided into three sections. The 'right' choir keep the first vigil, the left, the second and the boys and their masters the last.

The funeral proper is announced by the pealing of the church bells. Each member of the community carries a lighted candle. The order is as follows

1. The armarius initiates the rite by intoning the *Kyrie*, adding responses appropriate to the collects (gathering prayers), which have been said by the priest at Mass.
2. The officiating priest censes the body in the shape of the cross, whilst the antiphon *In Paradisum* and psalm 113, *In Exitu Israel* are sung as they process to the cemetery
3. The procession is now led by the priest and the armarius, who follow in order of rank.
4. The bells now start to ring, and continue until the body is buried
5. Those, such as the infirm and sick, who could not initially join the liturgy in the church are given candles, and if they are able, they now join the procession. If they are too ill to walk with the others, they stand in a group to one side, joining in the chanting if they can, with their hoods pulled over their heads.
6. In the cemetery, the community arranges itself as in choir, the right choir to the right of the graves, the left choir to the left.
7. If the grave has not already been blessed with holy water, the armarius now sprinkles and censes it.
8. The body is lowered into the ground and a wooden cover placed over it.
9. The priest uses a spade to scatter earth over the body and recites the *inhumatio defuncti*, the liturgy for the burial of the dead. The armarius, the conversi who carried the processional items and the bier bearers repeat this rite. The rest of the community do not take part in this act, but continue chanting the psalmody based on the Office of the Dead.
10. The bells cease as the priest leaves the grave-side.
11. The priest says the prayer of commendation *Tibi, Domine, commendamus animam famuli tui N...* ('We commend to Thee, O Lord, the soul of this thy servant N.').
12. The candles are extinguished, and Psalm 50 is said for all the dead in the cemetery.
13. The Lord's Prayer is repeated and prayers from the Mass of the Dead are said for all buried in the monastic cemeteries. The priest concludes with the words *requiescat in pace* ('may he rest in peace') to which the whole community replies *Amen*, and all return to the church, singing the seven penitential psalms
14. These psalms are completed in the church with the community prostrated on the floor.
15. The liturgy is concluded with a final absolution by the officiating priest.

Comment:

Whereas wooden clappers had been used to announce the impending death of a brother, bells were rung to announce the event. Bells may be associated with rejoicing. Celebrating the arrival of another soul into heaven would be a cause for joyful thanksgiving. It was believed that bells also served as means to drive away evil spirits.

The choice of psalms reflected this aspect of rejoicing. Their words talk about deliverance from death. This is not salvation from bodily death, but from spiritual death.

The ritual of sewing the monk in his cowl was further developed so that those who had been seeing to the dying man completed the task by each making a final stitch, a symbolic connection between the dead man's soul on its final journey and those left behind.

THE RITUAL.

PART 6 – The aftermath:

The death of a monk was not a conclusion to his life in the community. This was just the start to the commemorative rites, much of which involved the wider secular, as well the immediate religious, communities. The monks themselves were bound by a sense of *fraternitas*, 'brotherhood', which did not end on the death of one of the community. This extended to all the monasteries within the wider Cluniac family. In independent monasteries, such as Reading, it would include its dependent cells and priories, such as Leominster and Cholsey, and even further afield.

The commemorative liturgy was, therefore, very much part of the *Opus Dei*. As such, it is not surprising that the customaries give very specific instructions about how the death of a monk should also benefit the wider secular community. The Benedictine apostolate, the Rule of St Benedict, instructs care for the poor and the traveller as an essential part of monastic life. The death of a monk was no exception. For a whole year his daily food allowance was distributed to the poor. On the day of the funeral, twelve paupers were given a meal consisting of fish, if available, and wine.

At Cluny, and its dependent houses, the poor and pilgrims were cared for by the almoner, who also gave food daily to anyone who came to the abbey. At Reading, a Hospitium was funded by the Abbey and a mini monastic community of laypeople, consisting of thirteen poor men and thirteen poor women, cared for the pilgrims. In addition, on the first of each month, in commemoration of Henry I's death, thirteen paupers were given a meal in the Abbey.

POSTSCRIPT:

Among the most heart-rending stories in these days of Covid-19, is of people dying in hospital, but in isolation, without their loved-ones beside them in their last moments. For those left behind, the trauma may well last for the rest of their lives.

The Cluniac death rites tell a different story, one of companionship and love, where human contact, being surrounded by friends and family, in those last hours and moments, is so important.

Whatever a person's beliefs about the afterlife, death is a leap into the unknown. It is also part of the human condition, an experience we know we will all share. All too often, we try to shelter ourselves, and our children, from its very existence.

Contrast this with what we have seen above. There is acceptance that death is a time of agony and fear. But the love of companions, the physical contact of friends, is an important part of this final rite of passage. This is true both for the deceased and for those of us left to live the rest of our lives, until our moment to die arrives.

If these monks were an inspiration, and consolation, for their contemporaries, perhaps we can learn something from their lives that is of value today.

