News



An infant's funeral takes place at St. Anthony Shrine in Boston. (Julianne Gauron)

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At most funerals, the family of the deceased is there to mourn their loved one. At funerals of the Lazarus Ministry in Boston, there is no one. For over a decade, the Franciscan friars of the St. Anthony Shrine have been providing funerals for those who have no known family to grieve for them.

"It's about the dignity of the human person," said Franciscan Fr. Thomas Conway, director of the shrine.

St. Anthony Shrine is not a parish, and it doesn't celebrate funerals other than for deceased friars. The Lazarus Ministry is the exception. Conway sees the ministry as an example of Jesus' teaching about how the last shall be first.

The ministry might get a call from a social worker at a nearby hospital, a homeless shelter or Boston's medical examiner if no living relatives, even distant ones, can be found for the deceased. The shrine responds.

Usually before a funeral, the priest will talk to the family and learn about the deceased. Often at a Lazarus Ministry funeral, not much is known about the person. Instead, the friars will preach about compassion for those who are the most suffering. "St. Francis embraced the leper," said Conway.

The front pew at funerals is left for the family, and for Conway, seeing that pew empty at a Lazarus Ministry funeral is emblematic of the immense loneliness of homelessness.

But it isn't always empty. He recalled a funeral where several men in sweatshirts and jeans filed in to sit there. They were friends of the deceased, wearing the best clothes they owned. The hospital staff, social workers and shelter employees who knew the person often come, too.

"Occasionally, I am the only person who knew the deceased at the funeral," said Mary Ann Ponti, director of outreach and community engagement at St. Anthony Shrine. She has spent 18 years working with homeless people in Boston. The shrine also has a food pantry, a health clinic for homeless women, and a ministry for parents whose children have died.

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There are also regular Lazarus Ministry funeral attendees who come to pray for all of the dead.

"This person represents all homeless people, and it's a time for us to reflect on what that means. There but for the grace of God go I — we could be in that person's

shoes," said Conway.

The deceased may have been separated from community and family in life, but for Conway, the funerals are a way of bringing them back in death.

"One of the nice things about Catholic funerals is it's the same ritual our ancestors went through," he said. "We're making a connection between them, and the faith community, and their ancestors." (The shrine does not know or ask about the religious affiliation of the deceased.)

While many of the funerals are for adults, some of them are for infants, often stillbirths.

"Although we generally do not know the stories of how these little ones came to be here, we do know that life can bring situations of deep pain, fear and desperation, sometimes ending in an abandoned stillbirth," Ponti said. "Whatever the circumstances, these children were created in love by God, and today we entrust them to him."

The Arch Street Band, the group of professional musicians who play at the Shrine Masses, also play at each funeral. Dolan Funeral Home provides services free of charge.

"It's about a display of dignity for this person," said Ponti.

Students from several local Catholic high schools often act as pallbearers.

"For many of these kids, it's their first time at a funeral, and they're often blown away," said Conway. "You can really see the impact it has on the students."

For Conway, being able to provide funerals for those with no one else to bury them is a positive facet of the shrine's non-parochial status.

"Parish priests have a lot of work, and they don't have the capacity to do more," he said.