CHAPTER SEVEN

ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERAL LITURGY AND HUMAN FINITUDE: EMPIRICAL EXPLORATIONS OF LIFE, DEATH AND AFTERLIFE IN CONNECTION WITH LITURGICAL MEMORY

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The finitude of our existence profoundly influences human lives, especially when a loved one in our immediate environment dies. Then we have to take leave of a person and that is when the question of life’s finitude obtrudes. If this happens in a ritual setting, the tendency is to fall back on repertoires from a particular interpretive tradition, such as Roman Catholicism. In modern society, however, this pattern appears to be breaking down. Awareness of death and mortality seems to feature less in the minds of modern people (Moller 1996, 15; Littlewood 1993, 69ff.). This has implications for the manner in which they part with their loved ones.

In his publications the French cultural historian Philippe Ariès makes the point that in industrialised societies attitudes towards death have changed: the thought is repressed and does not play a major role in the lives of modern people (Ariès 1980, 785). As a result, Ariès maintains, funerals are no longer all that important: the growing number of cremations indicates that people are less inclined to commemorate their dead, and that determines the character of funerals (Ariès 1974; 1980, 736ff.). Ariès’s observations raise certain questions.

The first is: how conscious are modern people of mortality, especially when faced with the death of a significant other? It could be that certain (transcendent) interpretations of mortality are disappearing, while other (more immanent) interpretations can still rely on solid support. In other words, should Ariès’s thesis not be differentiated into divergent interpretations of mortality? Secondly, does the memory of the dead play a lesser role in funerals in modern European societies, as Ariès avers? Individualised funeral liturgies in fact indicate that the dead are called to mind very personally in liturgy. One example is the prominence of *In memoria* in funeral rites (Van Tongeren 2004; Melloh
1993). A third question is how memories of the dead are influenced by attitudes towards mortality. According to Ariès attitudes towards mortality no longer exist: death is pushed aside and people no longer relate to the deceased in any real way. In Ariès’s view this influences the commemorative nature of modern European funerals.

As a research project the study described in this article forms part of the testing phase of the empirical cycle. Hence we first indicate what concepts have been developed, which we then proceed to test empirically. To this end the study centres on the following main question: what attitudes towards mortality are encountered among present-day participants in funeral rites, and how do they influence their attitudes towards liturgical commemoration? To answer the question the first section deals with ecclesiastic funeral rites and the role of memory in these (1). In the next section we analyse people’s attitudes towards mortality when they are faced with the death of a significant other (2). In the third section we report on our empirical study of participants in funeral rites in the Netherlands with a view to our main research question (3). The fourth section contains some conclusions and a brief discussion (4).

1 Remembrance and Hope in Catholic Funeral Rites

What happens when a loved one dies? People may ponder on the death of the deceased or on their own death. Below we deal with funeral liturgy from the point of view of the other person’s death. How do people deal with the loss they experience in their social network? What role does the memory of the loved one play in this regard? What forms does it assume? And what place does it occupy in funeral liturgy? In this section we try to answer these questions. Our approach is based on a concept of collective memory, in which we distinguish between two forms (1.1). Then we look for a place for these two forms of memory in funeral liturgy (1.2). Finally we identify two forms of liturgical commemoration (1.3).

1.1 Temporal, horizontal and vertical dimensions of memory

When a loved one dies people face a broken relationship. The other is no longer there as he used to be. Human life spans a given period of time, and at every point in that time the person is linked to both past and future—what was and what is to come. Memory serves to connect past and future by linking both with the present. Jan Assmann (1992,