

An Investigation in to the Death Memorial Rituals and their Repercussions

Dr.A.Sajeen, Thoothoor



Living in a society represented by many cultures and religious beliefs means that memorable events can be celebrated differently. Unlike a heterogeneous society in which people from different castes, communities, cultures and religions live together, the people of Thoothoor region live in a homogeneous society. This necessitates having an analysis of the religious beliefs surrounding death & dying of Roman Catholic Christians and what funeral or burial rituals may be undertaken. Christians trust that they will go to heaven to be with God once they have died and so in some respects a funeral is a time of joy, although also sadness, as the person will be missed by friends and loved ones. It has become customary that the death days are remembered in every catholic family throughout the world. Celebration of mass in memory of a loved one on or near the anniversary of their death is also a part of Roman Catholic Christian tradition. There are also similar memorial services held at different intervals, especially on the 7th, 30th and annual days. Death memorable days are days that can bring up painful memories, they should not be ignored nor do they need to be completely depressing.

Funeral

The funeral is only one part of an elaborate mourning tradition. For thirty days after the funeral has taken place, prayers are offered at the house of the deceased in a practice called *Ayanam*. It is heard that coffee or tea with snacks is also served on this occasion. In addition, favorite foods of the deceased person being honored are also prepared.



It is also customary for another service to be given on the thirtieth day after the death. This is observed along with other deceased if any, not separately but with the daily morning mass. One year after the death, the first year death anniversary is held.

The funeral ceremony will typically be held at the deceased person's church and conducted by the priest. The ceremony may involve hymns, readings and prayer by both the minister and the deceased's family and friends. There is often the opportunity for people to view the deceased and to say their last goodbyes before the deceased is buried. The funeral is a time for feeling sadness and pain, not celebrating. It's common for family and friends to express their grief through loud crying, or even kissing and hugging the deceased. Funerals are a time for families to set aside differences and to come together for consolation. Food and beverages aren't usually welcome at the funeral service as it takes away from grieving the deceased.

Brazil and its funeral

It is wise to make mention about Brazil, the country with the largest Roman Catholic population. The Brazilians believe that 'if you're suffering, I'm suffering'. People show their concern by visiting a bereaved friend or family member regularly, to make them smile, to keep them from being overwhelmed by their suffering.

Pollution

The pollution of death for example, may be confined to those who have actual contact with the corpse, the immediate family of the deceased, certain categories of kinsmen, or all members of the village in which the death has occurred. Keeping this in mind, the attendees of



the burial site have the habit of washing their hands before they depart the burial ground. In Thoothoor region either tap water or bottled drinking water is used for that purpose. The widely accepted practice is that people take a complete shower so that the pollution caused by the dead bodies may be wiped out.

It is also understood that the underground water of the surrounding area is polluted because of the accumulation of corpses beneath the earth. In this connection, I can recall an utterance of a former priest of Thoothoor, who, besides expressing his mental agony, said that the water he used had the presence of human fat deposited underground for years and this sorry state of affairs is due to the buried dead bodies. No wonder, the priests' homes are located very near to the cemetery in almost all parishes.

Cellular method:

An alternate method called **Cellular** is adopted in parishes such as Pulluvila, Veli etc. This system will let the coffin be kept in a cell. After that the cell will be closed in such a way that no air would pass inside. Probably, this is done so as to make the decomposition faster. I asked my friend, Joel (name changed), “How many cells can be made in this way in a parish?” “It can be about 150 or 200 depending upon the availability of spaces”, he replied. Further I asked, “How long will the corpse be kept there?” He told that it would be there on the same spot until the arrival of a new coffin. It is understood that when a new one comes, the old one will be pushed inside. When time passes, decaying takes place. One cell is allotted to each family. This method has got a lot of other advantages too. This can also save spaces.



Ban in Thoothoor parish:

It is a historic moment in Thoothoor parish on 8th December 2019 when the parish priest, Rev.Fr.John Dall made a major announcement in connection with death memorial banquets and celebration through which the people of Thoothoor remember the departed family member or other significant member.



In fact, mourning reappears on the annual death day of a loved one. In Thoothoor parish, this observance has been in vogue from time immemorial. But its celebration in its present form is a recent origin. Nowhere is such sumptuous food more evident than in our region. Ominously, there has been a bitter competition among the relatives of the deceased for the past 15 years. They are not worried about the money they spend on this special occasion. It is no secret that the rich ones set aside a huge sum for this purpose. The poor ones would spend money according to their financial condition. Different dishes are served especially by the rich.

I interviewed about a hundred people from Thoothoor parish. Their enthusiastic response sent to me a positive signal which led me to go ahead with this study. Many opined that the astounding assertion of the priest about the ban had brought a whiff of fresh air amid the atmosphere polluted with economic constraints. When inquiring about this with Ms.Philomina (name changed), a parishioner whose father's death anniversary was celebrated recently, it was heartening to hear that the family spent about one lakh fifty thousand rupees. It seems that it will become a potent threat to the society in the event of its continuance. Hence, it is imminent that an immediate initiative to prevent such practice is the need of the hour. Appalled by this, I asked, "How did you manage to raise the fund?" I was told that all the seven children, except two who could not afford, shared equally so as to meet the expenses. It is true that the two, because of



poverty, could not contribute their share as others did. The amount of pain, they were to undergo due to their financial constraint knew no bounds. They said that they too wanted to do something in memory of their father. Similarly, so many people sail in the same boat. Why should there be such sorry state of affairs? Many argue that this practice should be abandoned with as it creates bad precedents in the society.

While sharing the repercussions of this act with a lady whose husband died a year ago, it came to my notice that she would go with the grand party. She said that the decision in this regard had been taken before the announcement was made in the church. She continued to say that all preparations in connection with the annual death day got over. I advised her to give up the practice and abide by the rules and regulations of the parish. Later, I observed that she began to change her mind in favour of the decision of the church. An explanation regarding the penalty in case of its violation was also given. People would rather abide by the rules of the parish than turn a deaf ear to them. Instead, the following ways are suggested.

- ❖ Volunteer with a charity or cause your deceased friend or relative make a donation to the charity in his or her name.
- ❖ Reach out to someone else who also is grieving this loss.
- ❖ Do something your loved one would have enjoyed.
- ❖ Write about your loved one; write them a letter or plant a tree in their name.
- ❖ Take the day off work.
- ❖ Ask friends or family members for support.
- ❖ Many cultures celebrate the death anniversary of loved ones by gathering together as families and sharing coffee/tea with simple snacks.
- ❖ Attending mass or having a mass offered for the deceased.

There's no time limit for grief, and anniversary reactions can leave you reeling. Still, the intensity of grief tends to lessen with time. For many people, the idea of being festive on the anniversary of someone's death is hard to imagine and might never happen. Upon inquiry, it has come to the fore that many Thoothoor parishioners are in favour of the ban which would be effective from 1st January 2020. It shall also be the duty of the Parish Council to ensure that no one would violate the rule of one tea or coffee with one piece of snack (ஒரு கடி ஒரு குடி) at its implementation in future. The TFCYM with its industrious youth can have a pivotal role in this as it is a proud moment for the village. It is evident that there has been a spontaneous show of feeling among the youth in the recent past. This trend has very well to be exploited by the stakeholders. The movement has to float thoughts on what ails the society. It requires not only good human beings at its helm but also proactive persons with serious and practical ideas of how to change the society. All the parishioners should stand firmly by this at one accord to execute this programme, for the banquet in its present form would continue to create unprecedented havocs to the existing society. When it is put in to practice, it will be the beginning of the epic movement, providing a safe and dignified environment to the financially backward families. Frequent announcements can help people abandon this evil practice. Abolition of the other social evils shall be the next agenda of the Parish Council. The two priests from Thoothoor, Rev.Fr.John Dall and Rev.Fr.Sosai Antony deserve praises and appreciations for their enthusiasm in taking up this noble cause. Of course, it was a superb piece of information.

