

## Preaching to Atheists at a Funeral

by

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I recently preached a funeral homily for a parishioner whose son is an atheist. The rest of the family appeared to be nominally Christian with a smattering of devout Catholics. It is unusual—at least currently—to happen across atheists in the Texas Panhandle which prides itself in being a rodeo buckle in the Bible belt.

At the time of the funeral, I was reading an intriguing book by a former atheist who converted to evangelical Christianity, then to Catholicism: *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* by Holly Ordway.

The book is a philosophical treatment of the dual role of reason and imagination in the work of evangelization. Ordway writes with the precision of a scholar and the wit of a comedienne. Having been an atheist, Ordway manages to make skepticism very, well, believable. She is most effective when describing the way atheists or skeptics hear certain religious words, phrases and concepts. For instance, for an agnostic, the word “God” might be an abstract term for universal goodness in which case talking about how God offers mercy can sound as though the Number Three has a wonderful plan for your life.

The first section of the book examines apologetics from the perspective of rational materialists who view things that cannot be measured as non-existent. Below is an extended excerpt from this section:

*If faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen,” the skeptic hears this definition of faith as an outright admission that Christianity is nothing more than wish-fulfillment.*

*Most people today recognize that vitamins are important for health. Imagine that you’ve been experiencing fatigue. A friend of yours, instead of suggesting vitamins, argues that really the problem is the color of your clothes. You’re wearing the wrong colors on the wrong days of the week. Following a particular system of matching your clothing color with the day of the week will put you back into harmony.*

*Would you try it? It sounds daft. (It is daft). The whole idea is based on claims that are contrary to what you know about science. Now imagine that the physical world is all that there is: that the mind is the same thing as the brain, that there is no such thing as a soul, that ‘miracle’ is another word for ‘coincidence,’ and that your consciousness will simply switch off at death. And then imagine that someone tells you: “A man who died two thousand years ago love and wants you to live forever with him.”*

Her chapter on human longing offered a succinct strategy for establishing and engaging skeptics on their own turf. After exploring the evolutionary paradigm that suggests

that human longing simply serves an underlying survivalist need for social cohesion, she points out that, while it is irrational to conclude that because we want something, (i.e. meaning, purpose, eternal life, it *must* exist), it is equally irrational to conclude that because we want something, it *cannot* exist.

Other chapters deal with such topics as creating meaning, distortions of meaning, language and metaphor, pain and doubt. Ordway's ultimate recommendation is for an apologetic approach that integrates elements of truth, goodness and beauty. She does not offer specific examples of how a homilist might do this in a liturgical setting, but her approach to apologetics led this particular preacher to examine how my public discourse in light of the growing skepticism of a secular society.

As I prepared the funeral homily for my parishioner whose son is an atheist, I took encouragement in her words on the subtle power of narrative and prayed that the words of my homily, the beauty of the liturgy and the comfort and love of friends and family might, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, transform the loss of a skeptical son into a window of hope and new possibility. Below is a copy of the homily.

### **Funeral Homily for Stan Smith**

(Not the actual name of the deceased)

Most folks know that, in the words of Genesis,  
God created Adam and Eve in his image.  
But most folks do not know that He created the two of them  
in two different places.

Eve was created in the garden.  
But Adam was created before the garden.

This means that Adam was created in the outback,  
in the wilderness.

This was Genesis way of communicating to us that,  
the spiritual journey of man  
will always lead him back to the country,  
the place where he first felt the hand of God  
shaping his identity  
and fashioning his soul.

Practically speaking,  
a man hears a bit of God's own voice  
in the call of the dove in the light of dawn;  
the sparkling water in a Texas playa

carries a similar effect to the waters of Baptism;  
driving a truck in rough country  
trapping coyotes,  
being outdoors no matter the season of the year,  
these are spiritual activities for a man,  
similar in effect  
to praying the rosary  
or receiving holy communion.

Stan worked for the Texas Department of Game and Wildlife  
for more than twenty years.  
He had lots of stories!  
And I always looked forward to visiting him.

Stan was kind and friendly and knew no stranger.  
He was generous and genuine  
and enjoyed the blessings that surrounded him.

Trains, pipe smoke, cup of coffee, warm sunshine, and the company of others.  
These were among his favorite things.

He was humble and did not need much to make him happy.  
He was loyal, faithful and loving.  
He and his wife, Betty, were married for 49 years.

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Stan's life was a testament to what it means to be a man  
and, in particular, a man of God.  
He was a husband, father and grandfather.  
And it is with heavy hearts that say good-bye to him today.

Yet, we do so in the assurance that the love  
that Stan lived out in his life  
was rooted in his love of God and God's love for him,  
a love without end.

At the conclusion of this Mass,  
We will commend Stan's soul to God.  
And, in this prayer of commendation,

the Church reminds us that  
someday  
we will greet Stan again when  
*the love of Christ,*  
*which conquers all things,*  
*destroys even death itself.*

Until that time,  
we will live our lives in hope  
and in faith...

faith in the sacrifice of Christ  
who gave his life on the Cross  
for the salvation of the world,  
for the salvation of Stan,  
the for the salvation of us all.