What is a Celebration of Life service and how does it differ from a religious funeral?

Celebration of Life services are becoming more and more common, but many people still don’t fully understand what they entail and, particularly in Latino communities, some even wonder if they replace the religious rituals of more traditional funeral services. But do they?

In the traditional sense, a funeral is the spiritually-defined ritual transitioning the deceased from this life to the next, where a celebration-of-life service is more about sharing the story of the departed in a more festive manner. Celebrations of life services are when friends and family of the departed come together to celebrate the distinctive personality and achievements of the deceased and not at all meant to replace the rituals of religious funerals. It’s fair to say that celebrations of life soothe the difficult process of saying goodbye.

In the past 20 or so years the Anglo culture has embraced Celebration of Life services and they have become more common. On the other hand, Hispanics seem to have adhered more to the traditional rituals of religious services. Some older Hispanics even consider Celebration of Life services to be disrespectful or consider them contrary to traditional religious services, while younger Latinx are stuck somewhere in the middle.

For Hispanic families, the difficult decisions that have to be made during this time often fall on the younger female members of the family. For instance, la nieta in her mid 20’s might be the one making the funeral arrangements while consoling and explaining options to her aging abuelita, meanwhile the mother might be charged with contacting and notifying family members. So how does a young granddaughter explain to her abuela that a celebration of life service is an option that she would like to explore and perhaps incorporate into the traditional service without offending her?

One way to broach the subject is to remind the older member of the family that the Catholic religion is rich in rituals, like novenas, more than one type of misa and a very progressive Pope. In fact, there is a particular misa called the Memorial Mass reception which is similar to the celebration of life service in that it is about remembering the life of the dearly departed. La Misa Conmemorativa Católica is a religious mass that takes place in a church when the body of the deceased is not available for any number of reasons, or after the burial, and offers members of the family and friends the opportunity to speak about the deceased. And because the family and friends typically reunite at a home after the misa, this would be an excellent time for a celebration of life service.

It is important to remember that celebrating the life of a departed loved one is also a part of grieving. We cannot think about death without thinking about life, as they are an intertwined part of our existence. When we celebrate the life of a loved one in a setting that is surrounded by thoughtful remembrances, music, food, drink and even laughter, it can soothe the unbearable pain that mourning inevitably brings upon us.

So, do Catholic mourning rituals forbid celebrating the life of the deceased? Not at all. While the homily at a Catholic funeral is a solemn vigil where many holy people will pray, it can also be respectfully followed by a less formal wake, where food and drink are served and is a time to recall the work of grace in a person’s life and death.

Therefore, if the Celebration of Life service is simply another name for a Memorial Mass, then it becomes clear that it is already part of the Latino tradition and not at all disrespectful. In fact, Mexican funerals are often followed by a family reunion or visitation that can go into the night at the funeral home or at the family residence where food and drinks are served and often even mariachis are brought into the home. And it is during this time where the dearly departed is remembered and celebrated with stories about their life, where pictures are shared and laughter becomes comingled with tears. When we are able to lovingly explain to an older grandmother that celebrating a loved one’s life during this mournful time, we can actually bring a sense of relief and a bit of joy to a heart that is broken as we say goodbye.

Today it is not uncommon to find services that include elements of both the traditional religious funeral and the less structured celebration of life. Celebrations of life can be as simple or elaborate as you wish. For instance, you can have a themed service if the deceased was a life-long sports fan, or if their job was in the arts, or a teacher. There are celebrations where younger members of the family make t-shirts with a picture of their loved one and hand them out, a playlist of their favorite music or a video with humorous anecdotes shared by friends & family.

The important thing to remember is that when it comes to designing an end-of-life ceremony, there is no right or wrong answer. The best service is the one that is right for you and your family, and creativity can soothe the soul.

A developing trend in the funeral industry is the personalization of the funeral service where some of the celebration of life ideas mentioned above can be respectfully incorporated by the funeral home. As time goes by, we will likely see less distinction and a coming together of cultures and differing, but equally respectful, experiences.