

BURY THE DEAD

VASHON ISLAND, WASHINGTON

When you're at a funeral, you're in a different posture, already primed to think about big questions, and so to encounter a merciful God.

— *Marcus Daly*

In the southern part of Puget Sound, there is an island about the size of Manhattan. As there are no roads or bridges leading to the island, the population stays low, hovering around 11,000 people, and most of them seasonal residents.

The island is called Vashon Island, and it holds all the beauty of rural Washington State— snow capped mountains rise in the distance, ferries drift quietly on the water, gulls cry back and forth. And it's here, on an island known for being countercultural even among the more liberal-leaning Pacific Northwest, where you can find Marcus Daly, a man engaged in one of the most countercultural activities in our society today.

Marcus makes coffins. Watching him work you are reminded of St. Benedict's "ora et labora"— let your work be your prayer. Marcus's coffins have stark, clean lines, oak or pine planks fitted together with care and precision. They also have the Tercium burned into them:

Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, Have mercy on us

Marcus didn't always intend to become a coffin maker. Rather, in his youth he had visions of environmental radicalism, of boarding whaling ships and throwing his lot in with "the misanthropic wing of environmentalism". However, when Marcus read Pope John Paul II's message for the 1990 World Day of Peace, and saw how it contextualized the environmental movement within God's will for the interrelated thriving of the whole human family, his worldview started to seem "kind of self-indulgent".

Saint John Paul II's influence didn't stop there. In fact, Marcus says, "Looking back, it seems every time I tried to throw my soul off a precipice, Saint John Paul II was there to talk me down." Eventually, Marcus and his family settled in Vashon Island, where Marcus was going to build simple wooden boats for locals and tourists. However, the funeral of the beloved Pope changed all that:

"I saw John Paul II's coffin in Saint Peter's Square and it was profound. His coffin proclaimed: "naked you came into this world and naked you must go." What more important thing do we need to be reminded of in this time and place? I went to Kelly and said, "We were going to build simple wooden boats, what if we built a different kind of simple wooden vessel for a different kind of journey?"

Recalling his environmental roots, Marcus first started

pitching his simple, streamlined coffins to ecologically minded people. Hoping to bridge the environmental mindset, with a Catholic one, he thought his simple, ecologically friendly coffins would help point to the simplicity of Catholicism.

"That's really great, man," he would hear again and again, "But I'm going to be cremated and my ashes scattered from Mt. Rainier." Clearly, more inroads had to be made into environmentalism before a sacramental view of the body was established.

Undeterred, Marcus decided to take a different approach, and begin carving prayers into his coffins. "I thought, what should I carve? What would speak the most to people away from God?"

At a point in his life when he knew he needed to be looking at himself, as his own failures, Marcus also knew he needed an encounter with the God of Mercy to come to terms with those shortcomings and sins. So it came to him that there were other people who were far away from God and couldn't bear to take that look at their lives without that shelter of His Mercy.

But when you're at a funeral, those questions are just there, looming and unavoidable. What if, Marcus thought, those broken and lost people, in such a vulnerable moment as a funeral, were to see words of Divine Mercy? What if the simple words of a profound prayer were there to speak to a soul most in need of them?

And so Marian Caskets was born. With an increasing concern of secular society's throwaway attitude toward the human body, Marcus challenges that, saying "[O]ur body is integrally important. And our soul is actually shaped by our body. The senses we indulge and those we deny shape our soul."

"Ultimately, I don't think there is any dignity in death," Marcus says. "I think, like every other earthly thing, it is stripped from us as we embark on this final, immense, leg of our journey home. But we do share in the suffering and death of Christ and that is something far more valuable than the dignity to which we cling."

When the coffinmaker is asked how he thinks Catholics, particularly Catholics living in rural areas, can re-evangelize the culture through the Corporal Work of Mercy known as Burying the Dead, Marcus says this:

"Have real funerals. Death is where the rubber meets the road for Christians. Our faith began with a Death. If we hide, sanitize, conveniencize, etc the terrible reality of death, we will stand too far back from it, in ever-increasing fear, to receive the grace from God which allows us to see through death for the lie that it ultimately is."

Marcus Daly

HOLY YEAR