

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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The Hundred Days

Fred Peck

My wife is Vietnamese — and Roman Catholic. Because she is more pious than I, most of the time we attend Catholic mass in Vietnamese, a language I don't know. I've learned to love the spontaneous prayers chanted by the elders from the pews before services; the spirited hymn singing; and the jam-packed, standing-room-only mass. I also enjoy being the tallest person in church. Tet (New Year's) services are the best, with drums to call the spirits of ancestors, and red envelopes with money given to all the children.

I know the order of the mass of course, and I prep myself on the lessons, and I never feel lost in the service — except for the homily. So I've learned to preach to myself. I try to have three points, but since I am retired I often settle for two or even one. I can say I haven't heard a really bad sermon since I began this practice.

I've learned a great deal about Asian life and culture from my wife, especially about death. Death is very important, because that is how you become an ancestor. We have been married many years and have experienced the death of her mother and, recently, a younger brother, as well as many friends. In each case we've observed the practice called the Hundred Days.

Many Asian societies mark the Hundred Days after a family member dies. Vietnamese Catholics weave in Christian understandings of death, and there are hints of purgatory. But mainly it's a time of intense reflection on the departed, with regular family prayers, wearing of mourning clothes, and maybe a mini-altar of pictures and even favorite foods and drink.

During this period, the spirit of the departed is restless and moves about the house. He or she may appear to those left behind. Those grieving at home feel the presence of one clearly distressed at having moved into some new and strange way of being. It seems mostly to be about longing, the living reaching out and the departed reaching back.

At the end of the Hundred Days, family and friends come together for a celebration and meal that lasts many hours. A priest may come by and offer blessings. The departed loved one is declared free to embrace death and settle into his or her final resting. Likewise, those left behind can move on and stop dwelling so much on death: a spiritual “enough, already!”

Like all couples of retirement age we wonder how life will be for the other when one of us is gone. There are always health problems, so that adds to the concern. Each of us of course plans to outlive the other. So when my wife dies, I will observe the Hundred Days. I will honor her with the services and rituals she observed for others.

At the day of passing, grief will have its sudden and certain launch. Then our family will mark calendars and agree to come together a hundred days thence. On that day we will set our beloved free to become an ancestor, and I will begin again the wait for my time.



Fred Peck retired in 2007 after forty-one years in ordained ministry. He served in two parishes and was on a seminary faculty. Then for twenty-five years he directed foundations for higher education and for health care in California and the Pacific Northwest. He and Kim-Lien Peck live in Vancouver, Washington. He can be reached at pecksmesssage@gmail.com.