

An Overview of Catholic Funeral Rites USCCB



"At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist." (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 4)

The Catholic funeral rite is divided into several stations, or parts, each with its own purpose.

For this reason we recommend following the complete structure and making use of each station.

Vigil Service (Wake)

"At the vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ's presence" (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 56). The Vigil Service usually takes place during the period of visitation and viewing at the funeral home. It is a time to remember the life of the deceased and to commend him/her to God. In prayer we ask God to console us in our grief and give us strength to support one another. The Vigil Service can take the form of a Service of the Word with readings from Sacred Scripture accompanied by reflection and prayers. It can also take the form of one of the prayers of the Office for the Dead from the *Liturgy of the Hours*. The clergy and your funeral director can assist in planning such a service. It is most appropriate, when family and friends are gathered together for visitation, to offer time for recalling the life of the deceased. For this reason, eulogies are usually encouraged to be done at the funeral home during visitation or at the Vigil Service.

Funeral Liturgy

The funeral liturgy is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the funeral liturgy at a Mass. When Mass cannot be celebrated, a funeral liturgy outside Mass can be celebrated at the church or in the funeral home. At the funeral liturgy, the Church gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery. The funeral liturgy, therefore, is an act of worship, and not merely an expression of grief.

Rite of Committal (Burial or Interment)

The Rite of Committal, the conclusion of the funeral rite, is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member. It should normally be celebrated at the place of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment. In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection. The Rite of Committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer, but see God face-to-face.

Informational pamphlets on Funeral Planning are available in the brochure racks at both parishes.

If pastoral and personal consideration allow, the period before death may be an appropriate time to plan the funeral rites with the family and even with the family member who is dying. Although planning the funeral before death should be approached with sensitivity and care, it can have the effect of helping the one who is dying and the family face the reality of death with Christian hope. It can also help relieve the family of numerous details after the death and may allow them to benefit more fully from the celebration of the funeral rites. (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 17)

Since in baptism the body was marked with the seal of the trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honor the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest. Any customs associated with the preparation of the body of the deceased should always be marked with dignity and reverence and never with the despair of those who have no hope. Preparation of the body should include prayer, especially at those intimate moments reserved for family members. For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead; cremation is permitted, unless it is evident that cremation was chosen for anti-Christian motives (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 19)

Homily

A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well. Through the homily members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God. Laypersons who preside at the funeral rites give an instruction on the readings. (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 27)

Music

(30) Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.

Music continued

(31) Since music can evoke strong feelings, the music for the celebration of the funeral rites should be chosen with great care. The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ's victory over death and in the Christian's share in that victory.

(32) Music should be provided for the vigil and funeral liturgy and, whenever possible, for the funeral processions and the rite of committal. The specific notes that precede each of these rites suggest places in the rites where music is appropriate. Many musical settings used in the parish community during the liturgical year may be suitable for use at funerals. Efforts should be made to develop and expand the parish's repertoire for use at funerals.

(33) An organist or other instrumentalist, a cantor, and, whenever possible, even a choir should assist the assembly's full participation in singing the songs, responses, and acclamations of these rites.

(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 30-33)

Symbols

- **Easter Candle and Other Candles** The Easter candle reminds the faithful of Christ's undying presence among them, of his victory over sin and death, and of their share in that victory by virtue of their initiation. It recalls the Easter Vigil, the night when the Church awaits the Lord's resurrection and when new light for the living and the dead is rekindled.
- **Holy Water** Blessed or holy water reminds the assembly of the saving waters of baptism. In the rite of reception of the body at the church, its use calls to mind the deceased's baptism and initiation into the community of faith. In the rite of final commendation the gesture of sprinkling may also signify farewell.
- **Incense** Incense is used during the funeral rites as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased, which through baptism became the temple of the Holy Spirit. Incense is also used as a sign of community's prayers for the deceased rising to the throne of God and as a sign of farewell.

(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 35-37)

Other Symbols

If it is the custom in the local community, a pall may be placed over the coffin when it is received at the church. A reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased, the pall is a sign of the Christian dignity of the person. The use of a pall also signifies that all are equal in the eyes of God (see James 2:1-9)

A Book of the Gospels or a Bible may be placed on the coffin as a sign that Christians live by the word of God and that fidelity to that word leads to eternal life.

A cross may be placed on the coffin as a reminder that the Christian is marked by the cross in baptism and through Jesus' suffering on the cross is brought to the victory of his resurrection.

Fresh flowers, used in moderation, can enhance the setting of the funeral rites.

Only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgy. Any other symbols, for example, national flags, or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the funeral liturgy.

Reception at the Church

Any national flags or the flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged are to be removed from the coffin at the entrance of the church. They may be replaced after the coffin has been taken from the church.

(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 38 & 132)

Funeral Liturgy

At the funeral liturgy the community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery. Through the Holy Spirit the community is joined together in faith as one believer through baptism shares in Christ's death and resurrection and can look to the day when all the elect will be raised up and united in the kingdom of light and peace.

Structure and Content of the Funeral Liturgy

Service Reception at the Church

The rite of reception takes place at the beginning of the funeral liturgy, usually at the entrance of the church. It begins with a greeting of the family and others who have accompanied the coffin to the door of the church. The minister sprinkles the coffin with holy water in remembrance of the deceased person's initiation and first acceptance into the community of faith. If it is the custom in the local community, a funeral pall, a reminder of the garment given at baptism and therefore signifying life in Christ, may then be placed on the coffin by family members, friends, or the minister. The entrance procession follows. The minister precedes the coffin and the mourners into the church. If the Easter candle is used on this occasion, it may be placed beforehand near the position the coffin will occupy at the conclusion of the procession. (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 129 and 133)

Liturgy of the Eucharist

143 At the funeral Mass, the community, having been spiritually renewed at the table of God's word, turns for spiritual nourishment to the table of the eucharist. The community with the priest offers to the Father the sacrifice of the New Covenant and shares in the one bread and the one cup. In partaking of the body of Christ, all are given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

144 The liturgy of the eucharist takes place in the usual manner at the funeral Mass. Members of the family or friends of the deceased should bring the gifts to the altar. Instrumental music or a song (for example, Psalm 18:1-6, Psalm 63, Psalm 66:13-20, or Psalm 138) may accompany the procession with the gifts.

(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 143-144)

Liturgy Final Commendation and Farewell

145 At the conclusion of the funeral liturgy, the rite of final commendation and farewell is celebrated, unless it is to be celebrated later at the place of committal.

146 The final commendation is a final farewell by the members of the community, an act of respect for one of their members, whom they entrust to the tender and merciful embrace of God. This act of last farewell also acknowledges the reality of separation and affirms that the community and the deceased, baptized into one Body, share the same destiny, resurrection on the last day. On that day the one Shepherd will call each by name and gather the faithful together in the new and eternal Jerusalem.

147 ...A prayer of commendation concludes the rite. In this prayer the community calls upon God's mercy, commends the deceased into God's hands, and affirms its belief that those who have died in Christ will share in Christ's victory over death.

Procession to the Place of Committal

148 At the conclusion of the funeral liturgy, the procession is formed and the body is accompanied to the place of committal. This final procession of the funeral rite mirrors the journey of human life as a pilgrimage to God's kingdom of peace and light, the new and eternal Jerusalem.

(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 145-146, 147, 148)

Article 2 ~ Christian Funerals

The Christian's Last Passover

1681 The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope. The Christian who dies in Christ Jesus is "away from the body and at home with the Lord."

1682 For the Christian the day of death inaugurates, at the end of his sacramental life, the fulfillment of his new birth begun at Baptism, the definitive "conformity" to "the image of the Son" conferred by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and participation in the feast of the Kingdom which was anticipated in the Eucharist - even if final purifications are still necessary for him in order to be clothed with the nuptial garment.

1683 The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey's end, in order to surrender him "into the Father's hands." She offers to the Father, in Christ, the child of his grace, and she commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory. This offering is fully celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice; the blessings before and after Mass are sacramentals.

The Celebration of Funerals

1684 The Christian funeral is a liturgical celebration of the Church. The ministry of the Church in this instance aims at expressing efficacious communion with the deceased, at the participation in that communion of the community gathered for the funeral, and at the proclamation of eternal life to the community.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

