

What Every Catholic Needs to Know About Funerals.

“The funeral Mass is a final opportunity to commend the deceased to God’s mercy, and that’s why it must be done with reverence.” -Brian Fraga OSV Newsweekly 9/28/2011

It is one of the most important events a Catholic community celebrates in a person’s life, but one so often misunderstood and increasingly ignored.

The funeral Mass.

The funeral liturgy in a church setting is a final opportunity to commend the deceased to God’s mercy, and to reflect on how the person’s life mirrored the love and teachings of Jesus Christ, who promises that one day, the Christian will rise again and live with him in the New Jerusalem. Forever.

“In order to pray for the repose of the person’s soul, and to pray for the family, the best way to do so is the Mass, because it’s in the Mass that we read from the Gospels, that we encounter the Lord Jesus and his mercy,” said Father Roger Landry, a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass.

Proper Treatment of Cremains

Previously banned for centuries because of its connotations with ancient pagan burial customs, cremation is becoming more popular in Catholic burial rites.

The Church allowed cremations in 1963, with the understanding that the body would be cremated after the funeral Mass. The Church subsequently relaxed its rules in 1997 to allow cremains to be blessed during the funeral.

Under present canon law, cremains must receive a proper burial in consecrated ground, or be placed inside a cremain niche in a mausoleum. Scattering the ashes at sea or keeping them on a fireplace mantel are prohibited for Catholics.

“We would never keep someone’s casket in the living room, or dismember someone and scatter them out to sea from a plane. We would recoil because there would be something grotesque about that,” said Father Roger Landry, who encourages his flock at St. Anthony de Padua Church in New Bedford, Mass., to have a full-body burial.

“It’s important for us as Catholics to be countercultural in the way we are buried,” Father Landry said. “To be buried as Christ was buried is a value of great importance for the Church. A lot of times Catholics today are being infected with a pagan spirit that we are our soul, rather than a body/soul unity. The early Christians never cremated their dead, never, because that’s what the pagans did. Now it’s happening again.”

The Cremation Association of North America reported that cremations accounted for about 40 percent of deaths in 2010, and estimated that figure could increase to more than half by 2025. Reasons vary for why people seek cremation. It is less expensive than full-body burial while some people are attracted to the idea of cremation being compatible with an ecological worldview.

While the Church now allows for cremations, Father Landry is worried that its increasing popularity reveals that Catholics have lost an appreciation for the sacramental concreteness of the faith. “I try to stress to Catholics that a full-body burial is something worth paying for,” he said.

“The Mass is the source of hope for those who have seen a loved one die, in that the family can see that their loved one might not die, but live forever. It’s one of the greatest means by which the Christian community comes together to support a grieving family,” Father Landry told Our Sunday Visitor.

Ancient rite

From the very beginnings of Christianity, borrowing from ancient Jewish burial practices, the dead were shown respect, and their bodies anointed and buried — as was Jesus’ body after the crucifixion — with great care in anticipation of the final resurrection.

Writing in the third century, St. Jerome spoke of the “ancient Christian tradition” of the faithful singing hymns and psalms while the body of St. Paul the Hermit was carried to his grave.

St. Augustine made references to the Eucharist being offered at the last solemn rites of his mother, St. Monica, in 387.

St. Gregory of Nyssa also gave a detailed description of the funeral liturgy, complete with Eucharistic offering, of his sister, St. Macrina the Younger, in 379.

“If we look at the history of how Christians treated the body; the whole custom of funerals goes back to the beginnings of Christianity. It incorporates Jewish burial practice. The expectations of a bodily resurrection led the Christians to treat the body with reverence,” said Father Richard Hilgartner, executive director of the Secretariat of Divine Worship for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“In the early centuries of Christianity, there was a clear sense that pagan mourning practices were really considered not appropriate for the Christian, because grief and sorrow were not an end to themselves, but were to be considered transitory or temporary. The preaching at death had to deal with the promise of the resurrection,” Father Hilgartner said.

Rich in symbolism

The ancient traditions are seen today in the Catholic Church’s liturgy, where from the beginning of the funeral Mass the casket — or, increasingly, cremains — is covered with a white linen, known as the pall, which evokes the white baptismal gown. The casket is also blessed with holy water, another reminder of the person’s baptism, the day they were first given the promise of eternal life.

“The connection between baptism and the funeral Mass is very strong,” Father Landry said.

“Right off the bat in the funeral Mass you see how the symbolism is rooted in the Eucharist, which is a source of life, a source of strength and nourishment, but also an offering of thanksgiving,” Father Hilgartner said. “While it may not have the same joy and jubilation, even at the funeral Mass, when the community of God gathers together in sorrow, part of the consolation is in the gathering to offer praise to God and an offer of thanksgiving, being focused not just on the deceased but on Jesus.”

It is also worth noting that the priest celebrating the Mass approaches the casket wearing white vestments.

Liturgical elements

Meanwhile, even before the coffin is brought into the church, the music already begins. Songs that correspond to consolation and the liturgy’s focus on the Eucharist and eternal life are most appropriate,

though most parishes give the family an opportunity to select hymns and sacred music that move them. Some examples of often-used songs include “Be Not Afraid,” “I am the Bread of Life” and “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say.”

“Many like to have the ‘Ave Maria’ sung where we’re asking Mary to pray for our loved one at the moment of death, and for us now,” Father Landry said.

“What’s appropriate is what flows from the liturgy. To just pick a song because it was somebody’s favorite song misses the point,” Father Hilgartner added.

Though there is a central selection of about 35 suggested readings, Scripture passages can come from virtually the entire Bible (see sidebar, Page 12).

“Here in New Bedford, when fishermen die, it is not uncommon at all to have the Gospel reading of Jesus walking on the water to Peter, with the connection to the stormy waters of life on earth and how we’re called by the Lord to seek permission to come to him across stormy seas to the other shore,” Father Landry said.

Family members, or those designated to take care of the funeral arrangements, are encouraged to meet with the priest and parish staff ahead of time to select the music and the readings they feel best correspond to the deceased’s life.

“If there is a reading that touches their heart and reminds them of the person, then it is a perfect reading for them,” Msgr. Ritchie said.

“I’ve discovered in the last 12 years that very often the family wants to be involved in choosing the Sacred Scriptures. As a pastor, I’m very happy to give the family a reason to go through God’s Word that he has given us,” Father Landry said. “It’s a very moving time when I walk the families through the readings. Oftentimes they cry when they’re reading the Scriptures because suddenly the meaning of the words hits them. It really does open them up to exactly what Jesus is telling them through his holy word in that moment.”

Setting the Tone

Joking about someone’s past indiscretions or reflecting about the person’s love for peanut butter are not appropriate topics for remembering someone during a funeral Mass.

“It should be something serious, not frivolous, and not used for entertainment on the part of the people there. Funny bits are not appropriate,” said Msgr. Robert T. Ritchie, the rector of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City.

Some priests allow mourners to offer a few words of remembrance at the end of a funeral, but oftentimes with conditions.

“Many priests have basically said it’s not worth it to have words of remembrance,” Father Roger Landry of Fall River, Mass., said.

“There are family members, who for example, are given an opportunity to speak three to five minutes, but go longer than that. In other places, some pastors will review the words prior to the person giving them, to make sure they would be appropriate for the Mass. That’s what I do.”

Father Landry said he once had to tell a young woman that she could not talk about how her late grandmother accepted her lesbian lifestyle. Another person had planned to joke about the deceased's alcoholism.

"That is obviously inappropriate to be said in Church," Father Landry said.

Though it is an understandable sentiment, Father Richard Hilgartner of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship said pastors also have to guard against people presuming the deceased are in heaven.

"The challenge I think is that we believe when one dies there is this process of purification and of judgment. We can't presume this person is already in heaven. Of course, we're always praying to God to welcome this person into heaven. That's not about being mean or judgmental, but this the reality of who we are, and this process of preparation and cleansing to meet God in heaven."

Msgr. Ritchie said the words of remembrance should primarily focus on the person's faith and the love he or she had for Jesus Christ.

"Sometimes, they're wonderful and will bring tears of joy to people," he said.

Father Landry added that he gives a brief catechesis to anyone who wishes to offer words of remembrance.

"Anything said in church must have a relationship to building people up in the faith," he said.

Eulogizing the dead

A sensitive topic that inevitably arises in Catholic funerals is that of the eulogy.

A eulogy — understood as a speech extolling the person's virtues, life and oftentimes elevating the deceased to virtual sainthood by declaring them to be in heaven — is not allowed in Catholic funerals because it does not comport with the liturgy's focus on Jesus' saving actions and praying for the repose of the soul.

"The present tension at a funeral is the desire to be hopeful and offer consolation while at the same time not presuming anything about the deceased," Father Hilgartner said.

Some pastors will allow for brief "words of remembrance" immediately after holy Communion, but many say the appropriate time and setting for reminiscing and sharing on the person's life is at the wake, not the Mass.

"A eulogy is not liturgical. The Mass should be a concentration on what God is saying about the person and the family, and offering his mercy. It's not a time for the family to interject something before the final commendation, which I don't think is appropriate," said Deacon Henry Libersat of St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Altamonte Springs, Fla.

Deacon Libersat told OSV that he frequently ministers at wakes, for which the Church provides a liturgical prayer service. He said the wake is the right time and place for relatives and friends to speak and share stories of the deceased (see Page 12).

“The wake gives the people an opportunity to reflect more socially. At one of the last wakes I went to, someone got up and had the people laughing in stitches,” he said. “There was healing there. It is very pastoral as far as I’m concerned to encourage that kind of thing.”

However, the general culture’s increasing secularization is challenging the Church in how to convey the theological background and sacramentality of a funeral Mass to mourners who are more likely than ever to be estranged from the Catholic faith or atheistic in their daily lives.

“There is a wide variety of families today who are having funeral Masses. Often, they’re very faithful families where the person who died lived a life of faith and passed it to people who received it in good soil. Those, in many cases, are one of the most beautiful Masses you’ll have at a church,” Father Landry said.

“In other cases, you may have children or grandchildren who are distant from the Church, and other times they can come into church with a consumerist mindset that whatever they would like to have should be the funeral.

“It’s also very hard when you see people who don’t know how to respond to the prayers, such as the Our Father. There’s a certain sadness there, but also I recognize that there is some faith that brought them there, so I try to celebrate the funeral in such a way that hopefully they’re touched and may begin to ask questions and hopefully be brought back to the faith.”

“I would hope the priests would be strengthened in their faith as they preach the resurrection,” said Father Hilgartner, who believes the priest-celebrant of a funeral Mass needs to be “a little detached” from the moment.

“I think the role of priest as celebrant isn’t necessarily about emotional contact. He’s not there to be mourner, but to offer consolation and support for the mourners. In order to maintain their function, there has to be a sense of how to maintain composure.”

Because Catholics are increasingly losing their sense of the sacramental, and the importance of even having a funeral Mass, more pastors today urge faithful Catholics to tell their loved ones, even stipulating it in their wills, to bury them with full Catholic rites.

“If young people making arrangements for their parents or grandparents, if they are being true to what their loved ones would have wanted, it’s almost a certainty that they would have wanted a funeral Mass for themselves,” Msgr. Ritchie said.

“It’s what we do as Catholics.”

Planning Ahead

Most people do not like to think about planning their funeral, which can be a stark reminder of their mortality.

But Rosemary Kazyk, the steward for pastoral care at St. Mary Magdalen parish in Altamonte Springs, Fla., encourages people to at least write down their wishes so their loved ones can know what to do.

Most people don't want to talk about it with family or friends, so the families are left with the question, "What do we do now?"

Kazyk told Our Sunday Visitor that people — no matter their age — should plan what they want in terms of a funeral Mass, and that prearrangements be made with a funeral home.

And you should do it when you're well, because when you're sick, you don't want to talk about those kind of things, she said.

People looking to make funeral arrangements should also arrange a visit with their pastor or the parish lay staff that can guide the families through the process of planning the funeral liturgy. The parish will schedule the funeral Mass at the earliest and most convenient time for the family.

"I like to help people. We plan the liturgy with them. We try to make it as comforting as we can for them," she told OSV. "Someone asked me how I can do this, but it gives me joy knowing that I'm providing comfort to families during a tough time in their lives."

The families can choose the readings and music for the funeral. They also decide the people who will read the Scriptures during the Mass, and who will bring the gifts to the altar before Communion. Oftentimes, the deceased's grandchildren will be selected to bring up the bread and wine.

Depending on the pastor, a family member may be authorized to offer a few words of remembrance at the end of Mass, though many priests advise that the wake is the proper venue for such remarks.

Kazyk said her parish on average holds 70 to 80 funerals a year. Whether the deceased was an elderly person who passed away after a long illness or a young person or child who died suddenly in tragic circumstances, comforting the families can be a challenging task.

It's tough no matter what, she told OSV.

Planning and Understanding the Catholic Funeral

“Our guide to the Church’s centuries-old customs that help families honor loved ones who have died”
-Michael R. Heinlein OSV Newsweekly 5/7/2017

Many people who attend a Catholic funeral for the first time will often remark how beautiful it is. Steeped in centuries-old custom and ritual as Catholic funeral rites are, that’s understandable.

But the most important aspect about Catholic funerals is that they express the Christian hope in eternal life and the resurrection of the body on the last day. Every component of the Catholic funeral rites should express these fundamental beliefs and hopes. Our funeral rites are not “a celebration of life,” as they are referred to sometimes, but a privileged opportunity to return to God the gift of the deceased, hoping to usher them into paradise with the aid of our prayers. Our love for the departed is expressed after death, above all else, in our prayer for them.

When a loved one dies, those left here to ensure their proper and dignified burial can often get bogged down by all the decisions needing to be made. In that case, we often will miss the opportunity to focus on the faith and hope the Catholic funeral rites express. Bereaved family and friends often will have to make many decisions about their loved one’s funeral, but often may not be fully prepared to do so. Whenever possible, the Church recommends that the family should be involved in planning the funeral rites — from choices of texts and readings to music and liturgical ministers. They may wish to make decisions on some of these components and not on others. They may leave some or all of the decisions up to the parish staff as well.

This guide is meant to explain the Catholic funeral rites and give some guidance on the decisions that will need to be made — in light of Church teachings — at the time of a loved one’s death. It might also be helpful in preparing some notes on our own funeral.

Guiding principles

While death might seem like the end of the road, Christians believe it is just a beginning. “In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, had broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity” (Order of Christian Funerals (OCF), No. 1). This maxim guides the Christian approach to funerals.

There needs to be direct communication with the parish and funeral home. Usually, funeral homes are fully aware of each parish’s expectations and regulations. But it is important to be in communication with the parish directly. Perhaps someone can be appointed within the family to be the point person for this communication, depending on the circumstances.

Burial or cremation?

One of the first decisions that needs to be made is whether the deceased will be buried or cremated. Cremation is allowed, so long as this option isn’t chosen to express anything contrary to Christian hope — particularly the hope in the resurrection of the body. Nonetheless, the Church’s tradition recommends burial over cremation. More and more families are opting for cremation today to decrease funeral

expenses. But the decision should be based in all the facts, so make sure to compare the costs when discussing options with the funeral director.

In either case, a place of burial needs to be chosen. The Church's preference is that Catholics be buried in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery, but other cemeteries may be chosen. The point is that bodies need to be disposed of in a fitting and dignified way, consonant with the human dignity that should be afforded to everyone, made in the image of God as we are.

Cremains must also be buried — they are not to be placed in the home, spread on land or at sea, etc. This need not be only in a cemetery grave. One popular method to afford cremains their proper respect is to use a columbarium — or niches, akin to mausoleums — which cemeteries and parishes in more frequency are constructing to contain cremains.

It is also preferable that Catholic graves be marked in some way. Although, burial at sea is also permitted — so long as the body or cremains are in a sealed container (not spread openly) — and a marker might not be possible in these circumstances.

The choice of burial or cremation also will indicate how much of the remainder of the funeral events take place. If burial of the body is chosen, the funeral is often held within a few days. If cremation is chosen, that time could be extended a bit — although it is preferable to celebrate the funeral as soon as possible and not delay it for too long. Also if cremation is chosen, will there still be a viewing of the body and will the body be brought to church for the funeral Mass, or will the body be cremated shortly after death?

Outline of the Average Catholic Funeral

A. VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED

B. MASS OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL

Introductory rites:

- Greeting, sprinkling of casket or cremains with holy water, placing of the pall (if customary), the entrance procession, placing of Christian symbols (if desired), and opening prayer.

Liturgy of the Word:

- First reading, responsorial psalm, second reading, homily, general intercessions
- Liturgy of the Eucharist continues on as it normally does at any Mass, until after Communion.

Final commendation:

- Prayer and silence, signs of farewell (incensation of casket or cremains and sprinkling with holy water), song of farewell, prayer of commendation, and procession to the place of committal (burial).

C. RITE OF COMMITTAL

- Scripture verse, prayer over place of committal, committal, intercessions, Our Father, concluding prayer, prayer over the people, dismissal.

When burial of the body is chosen, several factors need to be considered. It's most common to choose respectful and appropriate attire, mindful of the respect to be shown toward the body. Consideration

should be given to display some Christian symbols in or near the casket at the time of a wake or to be buried with the deceased — such as a crucifix, rosary or Bible.

The Church advises that, where possible, friends and family should be included in taking part in the preparation of the body.

Mass or not?

The decision that needs to be made at this stage is whether the funeral will take place in the context of Mass or not. It is preferable to celebrate the funeral Mass in the presence of the deceased's body. "The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral" (OCF, No. 5).

Catholic funerals express the Christian's union in Christ's death and our hope to share in his resurrection. It's most fitting that the life of grace inaugurated for the deceased's soul that began in a church at baptism is returned to God in thanksgiving at the Mass.

Christian funerals "offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God" (OCF, No. 5). (See below for more details on how to plan a funeral Mass.)

There are times that a funeral Mass might not be chosen. Perhaps our loved one had been separated from the Church for a long time and a funeral Mass wouldn't seem the most appropriate. Or maybe the burial needs to take place on a day when no priest is available or on a day when the Church prohibits the celebration of a funeral Mass (Holy Thursday, Triduum, solemnities of obligation, Sundays during the seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter).

There could be other pastoral reasons for this as well, which should be considered when meeting with parish staff during the planning stages. These would include the life of the deceased and the circumstances of death. To express our love for the deceased it is recommended that, if a funeral Mass is not chosen, a memorial Mass should be scheduled for the deceased's intention at a later date. A funeral outside of Mass may be officiated by a deacon, priest or bishop — or in some cases, even a lay minister, depending on circumstances.

If Mass is not chosen, a funeral Liturgy of the Word and final commendation of the deceased is celebrated. This doesn't need to be celebrated in the church itself, and the church is perhaps not the most appropriate setting at times. A funeral outside of Mass may be conducted at the funeral home, in a chapel at the cemetery or even at the graveside.

Vigil for the deceased

The death of a friend or family member is, in fact, a social event, often affecting far more people in a community than the deceased's immediate relatives. Wakes, or viewings, are an opportunity for family and friends to come together, console each other and recall the impact the deceased had on them. This usually occurs, in American culture, at the funeral home. The Order of Christian Funerals also provides for the possibility for the vigil to be conducted in the church itself. This, however, would need to be negotiated with parish staff.

Wakes find their origins in the Christian celebration of vigils, often associated with major events or feasts. The vigil for the dead is intended to be dedicated to prayer for the deceased. The Church supplies a liturgical rite for wakes, to be celebrated by a sacred minister of the Church, or it may be celebrated by a lay minister in some cases. This is a combination of readings, a brief homily or reflection, prayers and possibly music.

The wake is also a time to celebrate any popular devotions that might have been particularly significant in the faith life of the deceased — such as the Rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet.

Another option for the wake is to celebrate the Office of the Dead. This comes from the Liturgy of the Hours — the Church's daily prayer, composed of psalms, readings and prayers. This will likely require more preparation and other ministers to celebrate it appropriately, so it is good to discuss any deviations from normative practice with a member of the parish staff.

Sometimes there are additional viewing hours before the funeral itself, or it is one last opportunity for close friends and family to be with their loved one's remains before the funeral.

Remembrances

It is customary to distribute some kind of small remembrance cards during wakes or funerals. It is a good idea to remember that the deceased is best served by our prayers, so a prayer, Scripture passage or holy image would be helpful to incorporate into any such mementos.

Since the Catholic funeral rites do not usually envisage the opportunity for eulogies at the funeral Mass, the vigil is often a fitting time for those wishing to speak a word in memory or in honor of the deceased. Particular parishes and dioceses will likely have guidelines about this, so it is a good idea to ask when communicating with parish staff if anyone hopes to share some words of remembrance.

After burial

First and foremost, we show our love for the dead through our prayer. A centuries-old custom is to celebrate a Mass for the deceased on the one-month anniversary of his or her death, called a Month's Mind Mass. Into the future, it is also customary to arrange for Mass intentions for the deceased, perhaps on their birthday, anniversary or death date. We can also obtain indulgences for them, such as the indulgence available for visiting a cemetery during November, a month the Church traditionally sets aside to pray for the dead.