

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS**

At the center of the Catholic belief about death is the paschal mystery of Christ, that mystery which includes life here and hereafter and our own hope of resurrection. Therefore the actions of a Catholic community when one of its members dies must clearly as possible proclaim this central mystery. Particularly is this true when the community gathers to pray for the deceased and to support with its faith, hope, and love the grieving family and friends. These guidelines are intended to assist in the proclamation of this paschal mystery.

### **TERMINOLOGY**

The Order of Christian Funerals (OCF), the revision and adaptation of the Rite of Funerals, uses "funeral rites" as a general designation of all the liturgical celebrations whereby the assembled community worships God, commends the dead to God's merciful love, and offers support and consolation to the grieving. The first of these rites is the "vigil" or wake service. The "funeral liturgy" is the central celebration, whether as a funeral Mass or a funeral service without Mass. The "rite of committal," usually at graveside, completes the funeral rites.

A variety of terms have been used in recent years, particularly for the funeral Mass. However, "Mass of Christian Burial" gives more prominence to the rite which follows the Mass than to the Mass itself and "Mass of Resurrection" tends to overlook the mourners' natural grief. So too, every Mass is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. The recommended terminology is: the vigil, the funeral Mass or the funeral service, and the rite of committal.

### **MINISTRY**

Offering worship, praying for the deceased, and consoling the family are a primary ministry and responsibility of the Christian community. Therefore, members of our parishes should be actively encouraged and trained to take part in this ministry traditionally called a work of mercy.

Priests, deacons, and laypeople who may preside at funeral rites or minister in them should plan and carry out the rites, keeping in mind the life of the deceased, the circumstances of death, and the spiritual and psychological needs of the family and friends. Whenever possible, the family should be actively involved in planning and encouraged to take liturgical roles. People should also be encouraged to look ahead and to plan for their own funerals as a service to their families. Parish ministers familiar with these guidelines and the Order of Christian Funerals will be able to offer appropriate assistance.

Ministry to the family should not be confined to the funeral rites or end with the liturgical ministry. It is important that parish ministers visit the bereaved. A parish minister may also be present to lead prayer when the family first gathers at the funeral home, when the casket is closed, or before the body is taken to the church.

### **CANONICAL RIGHTS**

These funeral services are a right, not a privilege, of all members of the Church, both the faithful and the catechumens (canons 1176; 1183,1). The Order of Christian Funerals also provides for the celebration of funeral rites for children whose parents intended them to be baptized (canon 1183, 2).

The Bishop may also permit funeral rites for a baptized non-catholic who was not opposed to these rites and whose proper minister is not available (OCF, 18; Canon 1183, 3). In this diocese, no special permission is needed to celebrate a funeral liturgy for a Catholic's spouse who had no church affiliation or who had regularly attended Catholic services. However, if there is a funeral Mass, the priest should not mention the deceased's name in the Eucharistic Prayer since this would be a sign of full communion.

The only persons who are denied ecclesiastical funeral rites and a funeral Mass - provided there was absolutely no sign of repentance before death - are notorious apostates, heretics, and schismatics; those who had chosen cremation for reasons opposed to the Christian faith; notorious sinners whose funeral rites would cause public scandal (canons 1184, 1185). Since this is a penalty, the minister should interpret the law strictly (cf. Canon 18) and must consult the Office of the Bishop before denying funeral rites to anyone (see canon 1184, 2). Even in such cases, a priest, deacon, or lay minister may visit the funeral home and pray informally with the family. Funeral rites are no longer denied to Masons and members of similar societies, suicides, victims of a duel, those invalidly married, or inactive Catholics.

## **1. THE VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED**

The vigil for the deceased (or, as it is often called, the wake service) is normally the first of the funeral rites. At it, the Christian community gathers in prayer to console and support the grieving family and to intercede with God for the deceased. A priest, deacon, or layperson may preside. The family should clearly be a part of the assembly and not be separated from it by being in a different room.

The vigil usually takes place in the funeral home. It is more appropriate that it take place in the Church, but only at a time well before the funeral liturgy; e.g., the afternoon or evening before the funeral. The vigil may not be combined with the funeral liturgy; this would duplicate the liturgy of the word and/or make the funeral liturgy too long (OCF, 55).

According to the official liturgical books, the vigil is either a liturgy of the word or part of the office for the dead from the Liturgy of the Hours. Since many people may be unable to attend the funeral liturgy, it is important that the vigil be a coherent liturgical celebration. It should deal realistically with grief while offering the support of Christian faith, hope, and love. There are models for the vigil in the Order of Christian Funerals, as well as suggestions for alternative readings and prayers. If the vigil takes place in the church, the reception of the body forms the introductory rites. Whether at the funeral home or in the church, a member of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased, either before the blessing or at another appropriate time during the vigil.

The assembly's full participation, whether spoken or sung, is as important in celebrating the vigil as it is in any liturgical action. Participation aids and memorial cards provided by funeral directors should be truly tasteful and have prayers reflective of the Order of Christian Funerals. Recorded music should not replace "live" music (Liturgical Music Today, 60).

If the family requests the rosary, the ministers should respect their wishes. However, the service should still include (the reception of the body, if in Church), a liturgy of the word, with at least an appropriate gospel reading, since the proclamation of the word is the high point and central focus

of the vigil (OCF, 22, 59). The rosary is not advisable when many non-Catholics are present, nor may the rosary take place immediately before the funeral liturgy (see OCF, 55).

## 1. The Vigil Service (51-97)

Reception of the Body (at the church)

### **Introductory Rites**

Greeting  
Opening Song  
Invitation to Prayer

### **Liturgy of the Word**

First Reading  
Responsorial Psalm  
Gospel  
Homily

### **Prayer of Intercession**

Litany  
The Lord's Prayer  
Concluding Prayer

### **Concluding Rite**

[Reflections]  
Blessing

## 2. THE FUNERAL MASS

The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. The funeral Mass includes the reception of the body, if this has not already occurred, the celebration of the liturgy of the word, the liturgy of the eucharist, and the final commendation and farewell.

**Place:** the funeral Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church (canon 1177, 1). The church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in baptism, nourished in the eucharist, and where the community gathers to commend one of its deceased members to the Father. With the bishop's permission, Mass may be celebrated in the home of the deceased or some other place (OCF, 155; canon 1177, 2 and 3). The funeral home is not a suitable place for the funeral Mass, because it is not a place of worship. The funeral Mass is not permitted at cemetery chapels.

**Timing:** Because the funeral Mass is the central celebration, it should be scheduled for a time that permits as many of the Christian community as possible to be present. The funeral liturgy traditionally has been conducted on the morning of burial. In some cases, evening may be more convenient for the family and may provide for fuller community participation. The funeral Mass may be celebrated on all days except Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, solemnities of obligation, and the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter season. On these days, the body

may be brought to the church for a liturgy of the word at a convenient time separate from the liturgy of the day. The funeral Mass should then be offered as soon as possible, at the convenience of the family and parish personnel. (See below, "Memorial Mass/Service.")

**Participation:** Whenever possible, ministers should involve the family in planning the funeral Mass, recommending readings, prayers, music, and liturgical ministers. Ministers should make every effort to encourage full and active participation of the family and the entire assembly in the celebration.

**Music:** Parishes are pastorally responsible to provide liturgical music at all funeral Masses (Liturgical Music Today, 31). A few elements, sung well, should be given priority. Preference should be given to congregational singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the song of farewell at the final commendation, and appropriate entrance and communion songs. An organist or other instrumentalist, a cantor, and whenever possible, a choir should be present to assist the congregation in singing the songs, responses, and acclamations of the funeral Mass. Recorded music should not replace "live" music, nor should favorite songs of the deceased replace liturgically appropriate music. Music should reflect the themes of the selected readings or Christians' hope in the Risen Christ.

**Homily:** A brief homily based on the readings should always be given at the funeral Mass, but never any kind of eulogy (OCF, 141). A member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins, or better yet, at the beginning of the liturgy. (OCF, 197).

**Christian Symbols:** Through the use of various baptismal symbols (e.g. a cross or bible) the community shows the reverence due to the body, the temple of the Spirit.

**Easter candle:** The paschal 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. The Easter candle may be carried before the body in procession and/or be placed near the coffin during the funeral Mass. (OCF, 35) It remains lighted until the liturgy is finished and the body has been removed..

**Holy Water:** Blessed or holy water reminds the assembly of the saving waters of baptism. Holy water is normally used as part of the rites of reception at the church door. If it is not used at the entrance, it may be used during the final commendation; it is not used in both.

**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. It is also a sign of the community's prayers rising to the throne of God. The priest may incense the gifts and the altar, then the body of the deceased, and finally the congregation. If incense is not used during the preparation of the gifts, it may be used during the final commendation; it is not used in both.

**The pall:** This reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased may be placed over the coffin by the family members, friends, or the minister during the rite of reception.

**Other symbols:** A symbol of the Christian life, such as the Book of the Gospels, the Bible, or a cross may be placed on or near the coffin. If one of these symbols is used it is carried in the procession and is placed on or near the coffin by a family member, friend, or the minister at the conclusion of the entrance procession. Only one such symbol should be used.

Only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral Mass. Any other symbols, for example, national flags or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the funeral liturgy (OCF, 38, 132). Fresh flowers, as symbols of the resurrection, can enhance

the setting of the funeral rites. They should be used in moderation and not detract from the proper Christian symbols.

**Liturgical Color:** White vestments are usually worn at the funeral Mass to express Christian hope. Violet and black vestments are also permitted.

**Choice of Texts:** The Church attaches great importance to the reading of the word of God. In the celebration of the liturgy of the word at the funeral Mass, the biblical readings may not be replaced by non-biblical readings. There may be either one or two readings before the gospel reading. It is preferable to have a different lector for each reading. The presiding minister proclaims the readings only when there are no assisting ministers present.

**Final Commendation:** The Order of Christian Funerals gives a short but effective rite for the final commendation at the end of the funeral Mass or funeral service. An ample time of silence follows the invitation to prayer (OCF 172). The coffin may then be sprinkled with holy water and incensed before, during, or after the song of farewell, if not previously done. The song of farewell (OCF, 174) is the most important prayer of the congregation during the final commendation. Every effort should be made to facilitate the congregation's full and active participation during the song of farewell. The formula in Order of Christian Funerals, 174, other responsories given in the ritual (OCF 403), or some other song may be used. This prayer, done well, will give the rite of final commendation its substance or fullness.

**Procession to the Place of Committal:** The presiding minister or deacon invites the congregation to participate in the procession. If a symbol of the Christian life has been placed on the coffin, it is removed at this time. The procession then begins: the ministers precede the coffin, the family and mourners follow. One or more of the texts given in the ritual (OCF 176) or other suitable songs may be sung as the procession leaves the church.

## **2. Funeral Mass (128-203)**

### **Introductory Rites (at the door)**

- Greeting
- Sprinkling with Holy Water
- Placing of the Pall [omitted with cremated remains]
- Opening Song
- Entrance Procession
- Invitation to Prayer

### **Liturgy of the Word**

- First Reading
- Responsorial Psalm
- [Second Reading]
- Gospel
- Homily
- General Intercessions

### **Liturgy of the Eucharist**

- Eucharistic Prayer
- Lord's Prayer
- Communion
- Communion Song

### **Final Commendation**

Invitation to Prayer  
Signs of Farewell  
Song of Farewell  
Prayer of Commendation

## **Procession to the Place of Committal**

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### **FUNERAL SERVICE (WITHOUT MASS)**

In the funeral liturgy without Mass the community gathers to hear the message of Easter hope proclaimed in the liturgy of the word and to commend the deceased to God. As mentioned before, this liturgy may appropriately be called "the funeral service." The funeral service shares the following elements with the funeral Mass: introductory rites, liturgy of the word, the final commendation, and the procession to the place of committal. The readings are those of the Lectionary for Mass, "Masses for the Dead." The policy and guidelines given above apply here. A separate format is provided in the Order of Christian Funerals.

This liturgy may be used for various reasons: (1) when the funeral Mass is not permitted (on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter season); (2) when in some places or circumstances it is not possible to celebrate the funeral Mass before the committal (e.g., if a priest is not available); (3) when for pastoral reasons the presiding minister and the family judge that the funeral liturgy outside Mass is a more suitable form of celebration.

The funeral service is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church, but it may also be celebrated in the home of the deceased, a funeral home, chapel of rest, or cemetery chapel. If the celebration takes place in the parish church, the celebration may also include holy communion from the Sacrament reserved there.

In the choice of music for the funeral service, preference should be given to congregational singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the song of farewell at the final commendation, and appropriate entrance and communion songs. As at Mass, recorded music should not replace "live" music, nor should favorite songs of the deceased replace liturgically appropriate music.

The minister who is a priest or deacon wears an alb with stole. A cope may be used. A lay person who presides may wear an alb.

(OCF, 177-203) *All of the above minus the Liturgy of Eucharist, with the Lord's Prayer*

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### **THE RITE OF COMMITTAL**

This rite is the final act of the faith community in caring for the body of its deceased member. By their presence at this rite the community members help the mourners face the end of one relationship with the deceased and the beginning of a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude, and the hope of resurrection and reunion. The celebration, whenever possible, takes place not in a cemetery chapel but at the open grave, the place of interment, or in the crematorium (OCF, 204). The act of committal takes place either during the rite or at its

conclusion to express the full meaning of the rite: that the grave, once a sign of despair, is now, through Christ's own death and resurrection, a sign of hope and promise (OCF, 209).

This rite has two forms, the rite of committal or the rite of committal with the final commendation. The minister follows this latter form when the final commendation does not take place during the funeral liturgy or when no funeral liturgy precedes the committal rite. (OCF, 205). (See above, on the final commendation.) A hymn or liturgical song may be used at the conclusion of the rite to affirm our hope in God's mercy and in the resurrection of the dead (OCF, 214). The rite allows for some gesture of final leave-taking; e.g., placing flowers or soil on the coffin (OCF, 210).

The minister may expand the rite for pastoral reasons; e.g., if the funeral liturgy has taken place either on a previous day or in a different community (OCF, 211). Should the final disposition of the body be delayed for some time, then there may be two celebrations of the rite of committal, one on the day of the funeral liturgy, the second on the day of the actual burial or interment. Reasons for such a delay could be weather, cremation, or a body donated to science.

In the absence of a priest or deacon, a layperson should lead those present in the rite of committal. The layperson may wear an alb.

The rite has special forms for the committal of ashes and for burial at sea (OCF, 406).

### **3. Rite of Committal** (204-233) (*At the gravesite or columbarium*)

Invitation  
Scripture Verse or Reading  
Prayer over the Place of Committal

**Committal**  
Intercessions  
The Lord's Prayer  
Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People

#### **CHILDREN**

The second part of the Order of Christian Funerals provides rites for funerals of infants (including unbaptized infants whose parents intended to have them baptized) and young children. The Order of Christian Funerals stresses how overwhelming the death of any infant or child can be for the family and points out that the compassionate presence of the community reflects the compassionate presence of Christ. It goes on to suggest that parents who have lost children of their own may have a special ministry to the newly bereaved family (OCF, 239-240).

If children attend the funeral rites, those planning the liturgy should plan with these children in mind, allowing the children when possible to exercise some of the liturgical roles. Depending on the age and number of the children attending, those planning the liturgy should use the recommended adaptations in the Directory for Masses with Children. Such adaptations include having one reading, the Gospel, and taking care that the homilist is a person who can talk with children.

If the child died before being baptized, the ministers does not sprinkle the body with holy water and does not use the pall. In place of these, the Order of Christian Funerals has a brief address by the minister (OCF, 249). The funeral liturgy continues in the usual manner. Before the final

commendation begins, a member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased child (OCF, 309).

The rite of committal has three forms, the third being a rite of final commendation of an infant. This last form is also used for a stillborn or a newborn infant who dies shortly after birth. It is a short rite of prayer with the parents in the hospital or place of birth. It may also be used at the time of the committal of the body. (OCF, 318).

## **MEMORIAL MASS/SERVICE**

The ritual requires a tangible, visual focus. The presence of the body at the funeral Mass or service provides such a focus. When the body is not present, due to donation, cremation, prior burial, or any other reason, a picture of the deceased or some other memento may appropriately be placed near the Easter Candle, the preeminent Christian symbol of the hope of eternal life in Christ.

In general, the same norms apply as in the funeral Mass or service when the body is present. The liturgy begins in the usual way, without the rite of the reception of the body. At the final commendation the Easter Candle and picture or other memento may be incensed, if incense has not already been used. (Blessing with holy water does not seem appropriate.) Some of the texts may need to be adapted.

## **THE PLACE OF BURIAL**

The Christian ideal, flowing from the Gospel, calls for a simple and reverential burial rite and a simple and reverential burial place. Because the bodies of the deceased were temples of the Holy Spirit, they must be treated with reverence and respect. Cemeteries should be visible signs of that reverence and not be ostentatious.

Christian burial should be provided for all Catholics, those able to pay the prevailing rates and those who must rely on government subsidy. The very poor not entitled to subsidy should be buried without charge. In the spirit of ecumenism, Christians of other denominations, who request it, should be allowed burial in Catholic cemeteries as a testament to common belief in Christ and the resurrection.

Many churches now build their own columbarium, where cremated remains may be reverently entombed. See guidelines below, as well as [Guidelines for Cremation and Funerals PDF](#)

## **THE CELEBRATION OF THE FUNERAL LITURGY**

### **IN THE PRESENCE OF THE CREMATED REMAINS**

Effective June 7, 2007

1. It is the policy of the Diocese of Richmond to permit the funeral liturgy to be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains as permitted by the indult received by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops from the Congregation for Divine Worship (Prot.1589/96/L) dated July 30, 1997. Pastors and pastoral ministers are guided in the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy by Appendix 2 for The Order of Christian Funerals as approved for use in the United States.

2. The faithful have the right to the implementation of this indult. Pastors and all pastoral ministers are to respect all requests by the faithful to celebrate the Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains.

3. In the Funeral Mass and other Rites in the presence of the cremated remains, the prayers which reflect the honoring or burying of the body should not to be chosen or should be modified as necessary. (cf. Appendix 2: #428) The prayerful description chosen in the liturgical text to describe the cremated remains in the prayer forms is “earthly remains.” The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. (#417)

4. The ritual (#427) indicates that the cremated remains are to be placed on a suitable table or stand at the place normally occupied by the coffin near the paschal candle. The placing of the pall over the cremated remains is omitted, but sprinkling with holy water and honoring the cremated remains with incense is prescribed. (cf. #433-435, #428)

5. The faith of the Church calls us to hold the deceased and their remains in prayerful and visible memory. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased. (#417).