

# GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

## INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Funeral Rites in the *Order of Christian Funerals* (1989) are celebrations that enable the Christian community to mourn as well as to hope by focusing on the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. These guidelines are offered to assist in effectively preparing the funeral rites with individuals and families.

**Understanding Death - A Christian Perspective:** Death and passing on to eternal life are mysteries at the center of the Church's belief. Although American culture generally recoils from death and tries to deny it, "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, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity." (Order of Christian Funerals, #1)

**Celebration of the Church:** Christian funerals are not private observances, but celebrations of the whole Body of Christ, in which, "Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just." (Order of Christian Funerals, #5) Therefore these rites are celebrated with appropriate choices of music, readings, gestures, and decorations that are consistent with a Catholic understanding of death. "The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis." (Order of Christian Funerals, #7)

## ENTITLEMENT TO THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH AT THE TIME OF DEATH

Every Catholic, unless specifically excluded by the norms of law, is entitled to the Church's ministry at the time of death.

1. In coordination with the pastoral staff, the family of the deceased and the funeral director chosen by the family arrange the place and set the time for the Funeral Mass and the Rite of Committal.
2. The Funeral Mass is ordinarily the central element of Catholic funerals. The Funeral Mass is a prayer for God's mercy for the deceased and a solace for the living, including the entire faith community.
3. Catechumens may be given Catholic Funeral Rites.
4. Catholic Funeral Rites, including the Funeral Mass, are permitted for a deceased baptized non-Catholic who might reasonably be presumed to desire or prefer the Catholic rite. Such a decision would be appropriate when non-Catholics worship regularly in the Catholic Church or identify with the Catholic Church more than any other.

5. To foster and respect family bonds, non-Catholic members of Catholic families may be interred in a Catholic cemetery. Clergy of other communions may conduct the cemetery rites according to their tradition, if the family so desires or if it was the expressed wish of the deceased.
6. The Church encourages the burial of Catholics in Catholic cemeteries (Canon 1180.1). Burial in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery is a sign of baptismal commitment and gives witness, even in death, to faith in Christ's resurrection.
7. A child who dies before baptism, or a stillborn or miscarried child may be given Catholic Funeral Rites if the parents intended to have the child baptized. The remains of fetuses or stillborns should always receive reverent Christian burial if this is at all possible. These remains may be placed either in specific individual graves or in a common burial area.
8. The Order for Christian Funerals provides a complete funeral liturgy for children who have died (OCF #234-342). The various texts for a baptized child or a child who died before baptism make these rites fully adaptable to various situations, and offer consolation for those suffering the extraordinary grief which comes with the death of a child.
9. There is no objection to Catholics making prior arrangements to donate their bodies or parts of them, after certain death, to advance medical science. Upon eventual disposition of the body or its parts, there should be reasonable assurance that the remains will be disposed of in a proper, reverential manner. The family of such a donor should be encouraged to celebrate a Mass as soon as possible after death. Whatever remains of the body after an organ transplant or medical research should be given appropriate burial. The rite of final committal with final commendation (OCF #224-233) offers a model for concluding prayers for the donor and the donor's family.

## **MINISTRIES IN THE RITES OF THE ORDER FOR CHRISTIAN FUNERALS**

In keeping with the norms found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, priests and deacons are to share the responsibility for planning and implementation of the Order with qualified lay ministers.

1. Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the funeral liturgy is especially entrusted to pastors and associate pastors. When no priest is available, deacons, as minister of the word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a layperson presides (OCF, n. 14).
2. The service of all appropriate liturgical ministers is recommended in the celebration of the various liturgies of the Order of Christian Funerals. Lay ministers may serve as readers, musicians, ushers, pallbearers and, according to existing norms, as special ministers of the eucharist (OCF #15).
3. The preparation of the liturgy can provide consolation for the mourners. However the preparation of the liturgy should never become a burden for the family. The Order of Christian Funerals recommends that family members be involved in some of the liturgical roles, unless they prefer not to be involved (OCF #15) and designate others. Family members are encouraged to:

- act as Readers
  - assist in placing the pall on the casket
  - process into the church with cremated remains
  - inscribe name in Book of the Living / Light Candle
  - bring forward the gifts in the Offertory procession
  - plan the readings and the music with Parish Ministers.
4. Music selected for the Order of Christian Funerals should be appropriate for Christian prayer and conform to liturgical directives. The texts of the music should express the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This is especially important for the Song of Farewell. Popular non-religious songs are not to be used in the liturgy.

### **SCHEDULING THE FUNERAL LITURGIES**

1. While we will do everything we can to accommodate family needs, Funeral arrangements should never be finalized at the Funeral Home until the Parish has been consulted. We always have to consider the scheduled use of the building, the availability of clergy, and the occasional restriction of the Church year (which prohibit the Celebration of a Funeral). Since we want to serve you as best we can this consultation is important.
2. Funeral Masses are not celebrated on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, or on the Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter Season.
3. The Funeral Mass may also be celebrated at the regularly scheduled daily Mass in the parish. Particularly in instances where the deceased does not have a large family or circle of friends, the presence of the daily Mass community is extremely consoling to the mourners. A core group of readers, eucharistic ministers, funeral choir, and servers may emerge from the daily Mass community.

### **PREACHING AND EULOGIES**

1. Only a priest or deacon may preach the homily at the funeral liturgy.
2. A eulogy is not appropriate where a homily is prescribed (OCF #27), although examples from the person's life may be used in the homily. The literary genre of eulogy is not a homiletic form. Rather, the homily is to "illumine the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1688) as proclaimed in the readings.
3. One speaker chosen by the family may offer a five-minute remembrance of the deceased at the Funeral Liturgy before the final commendation, especially if there was no vigil or wake service. The remarks are to be simple, brief, and prepared. Care must be taken to follow this. Ideally, the text should be shared with the priest beforehand. Within the context of a liturgy, the tone should remain one of faith and hope.
4. The Vigil for the Deceased is a more fitting time for individuals to share remembrances of the deceased.

## THE FUNERAL MASS

In the dioceses of the United States, the principal rituals in the *Order of Christian Funerals* are the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Mass, and the Rite of Committal. The Funeral Mass is the central liturgy of the Christian funeral.

1. The Eucharist is the heart of the Paschal reality of Christian death (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1689). In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church most perfectly expresses her communion with those who have died. The celebration of the Eucharist at the funeral is an opportunity for the community of the faithful, and for the family, to “learn to live in communion with the one who has ‘fallen asleep in the Lord,’ by communicating the Body of Christ of which he is a living member and, then, by praying for him and with him” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1689)
2. The Introductory Rites of the Funeral Mass presume a greeting of the mourners who accompany the body to the doors of the church. They are greeted by the priest and liturgical ministers, and other persons who have gathered at the church to await the procession from the funeral home or family home.
3. It is not ordinarily permitted to seat the family members who accompany the body before the body is presented for blessing. Ideally, the Assembly should be seated on both sides of the church and towards the front of the assembly area.

## MUSIC IN THE FUNERAL LITURGY

It is the pastoral responsibility of parishes to provide liturgical music at all Funeral Masses. The same liturgical norms applied to music at any Mass apply to the Funeral Mass.

1. An instrumentalist, a cantor, and even a choir where possible should assist the full participation of the assembly in the songs, responses, and acclamations of the funeral Rites (OCF #33).
2. Certain musical texts are primary and should be sung at the Funeral Mass: the responsorial psalm, the gospel acclamation, the three acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer, the “Lamb of God” litany, and the “Song of Farewell.” These should not be sung by cantor, choir, or soloist alone. Rather, they belong to the assembly.
3. In the *Order of Christian Funerals*, as in all the reformed liturgical books, the cantor/leader of song has an important task. The task of the cantor is to animate and direct the singing of the assembly.
4. The selection of music for the funeral liturgy is often a sensitive issue for bereaved families, parish musicians, and pastoral staff. The choice of music for Christian funerals must be in accord with all the recommendations governing music in liturgy, especially those found in the *Order for Christian Funerals*, *Liturgical Music Today* and *Music in Catholic Worship*.
5. The principle of progressive solemnity, described in *Music in Catholic Worship*, applies to the rites found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. A few things sung well, (cf. #2 above) have priority in funeral liturgies (*Liturgical Music Today*, #33). Many of these may be drawn from the repertoire of the Sunday assembly.
6. The request for “favorite songs” of the deceased often results in inappropriate performances of music incapable of bearing the weight liturgy demands. Popular songs, sentimental ethnic music, or songs from Broadway hits are never to substitute for the music

of the funeral liturgy. **There are three standards of judgment proposed in *Music in Catholic Worship*:** (1) **The liturgical judgment:** is the music's text, form, placement and style congruent with the nature of the liturgy? (*MCW* 30-38) (2) **The musical judgment:** is the music technically, aesthetically and expressively good irrespective of musical idiom or style? (*MCW* 26-29) (3) **The pastoral judgment:** will it help this assembly to pray? (*MCW* 39-41) Such a process may not be as easy to apply as an absolute list of permitted or prohibited music, but is more effective pastorally.

9. Music is preeminent among the signs expressed by the participants in any liturgy. Therefore, recorded music is not to be used within the liturgy to replace the congregation, the choir, the organist, cantor, or other musicians. (*Liturgical Music Today*, #60).

### THE RITE OF COMMITTAL

1. The Rite of Committal is celebrated at the place of burial or interment and never in the church.
2. Military services and certain cultural or social rites are permissible at the cemetery. These other services should be arranged in advance and coordinated in such a way that they do not disrupt or distract from the integrity of the liturgical committal service. Funeral directors are called upon to assist in the coordination of these elements, and to safeguard the integrity of the Church's liturgy at the Rite of Committal.

### CREMATION

While the Church recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed, cremation is permitted as long as it has not been chosen for reasons contrary to Catholic teaching (Canon 1176.3, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2301).

1. It is preferred that the Funeral Mass or the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass be celebrated in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation. (*OCF Appendix Cremation*, #411-438).
2. If cremation has already taken place before the Funeral Liturgy, the Funeral Liturgy is celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased person. The cremated remains of the body are to be placed in a worthy vessel. The funeral urn or ossuary may be carried to its place in the entrance procession or placed on this table sometime before the liturgy begins.
3. Cremated remains should be treated with the same respect given to the remains of a human body, and should be entombed or buried, whether in the ground or at sea. The *scattering* of cremated remains on the ground or on the sea or keeping any portion of them for personal reasons is not the reverent final disposition that the Church directs. It should be noted that burial at sea of cremated remains differs from scattering. An appropriate and worthy container, heavy enough to be sent to its final resting place, may be dropped into the sea.